

# How Far Does Grace Go?

## *The Biblical View of Women In Faith and Ministry*

By William J. Carter

I must admit that my seminary professors did their best to turn me into a Bible scholar, but they failed. None of them seemed to be surprised. I suppose they knew it was a hopeless task from the start. However, while I was pastor at Brainerd the people there did make me into a Bible student. Neither they nor I expected any higher accomplishment, so we were content with the result. Since then I have read more Bible, written more Bible Studies, preached more expository sermons and studied the word with more intensity and far more interest than in all my previous years combined. As a part of that process I discovered one immutable law: **most people quote the parts of the Bible that support what they already believe.** Even those who declare that the Bible is the literal word of God and that they believe every word of it, generally prize only those passages that bolster their presumptions.

And the biggest problem is that those of us who maintain a holistic, logical approach to the Bible have let the Pharisees take over the scriptural landscape. Part of the reason may be that we really don't care whether we can prove EVERYTHING by a Bible quotation (and that is a valid perspective) and part of it is that we just don't take time to check the Scriptures to see whether the Pharisees are actually right or just blowing in the wind of their own prejudices. Perhaps it is time to take the Bible seriously, and make those who want to use it to deny full privileges to certain Christians take it seriously as well.. After all, **it is our Bible, too.** Today I want to explore in it the place of women in the church in the Apostolic Age, as recorded in the New Testament, and the implications for our own day.

It is all a matter of how far we think grace extends. If grace is universally poured out on those who believe in Jesus Christ and accept him for their savior, **THEN ALL WHO HAVE BEEN SAVED BY HIS GRACE HAVE THE SAME PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.** If, on the other hand grace is sexually oriented, and given only to those who are of the male sex, then it would be sacrilege to allow women to participate fully in the faith. Is grace partial or full? Does it have the same power in all who accept Jesus as their savior, or is it a crippled force among certain members of the faith? We must be sure of our foundation in this matter before we commit ourselves to either position.

Traditionally some denominations and individuals have claimed that women receive only partial grace because of some isolated passages in the New Testament, particularly I Timothy 2:11-12. (I will read this passage, and all others in this study, from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the version authorized, published and recommended by the Southern Baptists ) The text as rendered by the Holman Bible translators reads, "A woman should learn in silence with full submission. I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, instead she is to be silent." That is also the approximate rendering of the New Revised Standard Ver-

sion and the New International Version. However the King James Version reads a little differently. Verse 12 says, “But, I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to **usurp** authority over the man, but to be in silence.” How did “usurp” get in there? What could that possibly mean?

It turns out that in the original Greek text the word “*authentio*” is inserted before authority. (I am no Greek scholar, but I know some and read others..) Since the word occurs no place else in the New Testament and is not widely understood, most translators just leave it out. But, it does have a specific meaning. It means to dominate or overwhelm. So what Paul may have been saying is that women have all the rights of men, but they are warned not to take advantage of them just because they can. It may be fine for them to have authority, but not when they unfairly take it from the men who have gained it by faithful service. (Is this a warning to “pushy” women to take it easy.) But what about that keeping silence bit?

The meaning of that also seems to be in some dispute. The Greek here is “*hesuchia*,” which can be translated as “meditatively” or “with full attention.” In other contexts it means to learn without argument. Perhaps Paul was warning women that they had every right to learn all spiritual matters, but should not call attention to themselves by engaging in debate with men in a society which frowned on even a hint of female independence. Learning in silence may be just a way of growing in the faith without arousing the enmity of the Pharisees, and the Greeks and the Romans. All of them considered women no better than servants, and banished them to the back of the house when company came. (Some of the last two paragraphs is based on J.T. Bristow’s book: *What Paul Really Said About Women*) That is why the story of Mary and Martha is so amazing. Jesus seemed to favor the one who learned about the faith at his feet over the one who did the things that women are supposed to do around the house. And what about that passage in John 4 where he speaks at length with a woman of Samaria about one of the most cherished foundations of the faith he brought? In verses 23 and 24 he says “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship Him. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Before Jesus such a theological discussion with a woman, much less a Samaritan woman, would have been unthinkable. In fact the apostles are amazed when they return, but they do not question him. There is a revolution in thinking about women already present in the time of Jesus on earth.

If there is some doubt about the meaning of this passage in Timothy, the best way to resolve it is to look at the other Scriptures that refer to Christian women. What do they say about the place of women in the faith?

To begin with the gospels, there is a passage in Luke 8:1-3 that boggles the mind. “Soon afterward He was traveling from one town and village to another, preaching and telling the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and **also some women** who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses; Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, Susannah, and **many others** who were supporting them from their possessions.” Could it be possible that

these women were capable of traveling alongside the Apostles themselves, and were valued on the same level? Or were they just camp followers who provided various kinds of comfort to Jesus and his companions? Who in this audience will point a finger at this hallowed company and accuse them of using women for their own convenience? At the very least the women were economic supporters, and who is to deny that they were also disciples in the fullest sense? They heard every sermon and participated in many discussions along the way. They stood before the crowds witnessing to their faith in Jesus. And there were a lot of them, too many to mention by name. Some were well known women, whose husbands apparently did not prevent them from leaving their home to walk with Jesus. That was a real eye opener. Women having independence in that age must have been a shocker. Yet it is never questioned in any of these passages. For the first time in history women are shown to be individuals who can make their own decisions. Perhaps that is why Jesus made a point of removing the legal requirement of stoning from the woman taken in adultery in John 8.. He knew that women had their trials but that they were **fundamentally worthy**. Anybody can make a mistake. Just don't do it again. Being a woman does not bring additional burdens of morality. It is the same for all. (See I Cor. 7 for a fuller discussion of this matter.)

By some perverted logic Mary Magdalene has often been identified as a prostitute. If she was the Scripture does not mention it. She was, in fact a treasured member of the entourage of Jesus throughout his life, as were other women, some of whom are mentioned again in Mark 15:40,41. At the Crucifixion “ there were **also some women** looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When He was in Galilee they would follow him and minister to him. “ (Matthew also comments on these faithful women in 27:55. John adds the names of Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister, and Mary, the wife of Clopas in 19:25.) They followed him to the cross, and beyond. Some were there on the morning of the resurrection. Women were the first to see Jesus, and the ones who told the craven Apostles that he had risen. How could this be? No other religious figure in the ancient world is represented with female followers. Why Jesus?

And women gathered with the Apostles on the night before Pentecost. Acts 1:12. “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olive Grove, which is near Jerusalem - a Sabbath's journey away. When they arrived they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these were continually in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” **The presence of the women is simply taken for granted.** They obviously belonged in that tight little band of praying disciples. Although this is the first time in history (and perhaps the only one) in which women are included in the founding of a major faith, there they were. And there is not a word said about any of it being inappropriate. The apostles certainly accepted them as equals in spite of their own religious background, which denied women a place in the sanctuary, allowing them to sit only in the balconies if they were allowed to

worship at all. Something new and startling had happened.

What had happened was that women had been brought into the body of worshipers and servants of Jesus Christ. And they were there to stay. The next day there was a great outpouring of the spirit and many came to the Lord. Peter stood up and chose a passage from Joel to characterize the event, “And it will be in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my spirit on all humanity; then your **sons and daughters** will prophesy and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams. I will pour out my spirit on my **male and female slaves** in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-19) It appears that there is no difference between males and females in receiving the Holy Spirit, whatever their status.. A short while later it is recorded in Acts 5:14. that “Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers - crowds of both men and women.” Why make such a big point of the sexual identity of converts?

Obviously because they were equal, in every sense. One of the sticking points for some people seems to be accepting women as preachers. From the above passage we know that they were accepted as **prophets** in the apostolic church. And in an often misunderstood passage Paul tells the Corinthians that “Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonors his head. But every woman who **prays or prophesies** with her head uncovered dishonors her head.”(11:5) What we miss is that **it is assumed that women will pray and prophesy** in public worship in the Apostolic Church. And what does it mean to prophesy? God, through Paul, defines it in I Cor. 14:1,3, “Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and above all that you may prophesy. . . .**The person who prophesies speaks to people for edification, encouragement and consolation.**” If that is not preaching I do not know what you would call it. And Paul removes all doubt about the equality of women by saying in later in chapter 11, “ however, **in the Lord**, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man so man comes through women, and all things come from God.” (11:11,12) Amen and amen!

But what about position in the church? Can women ever be ordained or hold office? In Romans 16:1-2 Paul says, “I commend to you Phoebe, who is a **servant** in the church at Cenchræ. So you should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever matter she may require your help. For indeed she has been a benefactor of many, and of me also.” In a side note the Holman Bible acknowledges that “servant” is the same Greek word translated elsewhere in the New Testament as “Deacon.” I think we ought to make copies of that passage and send one to every church who receives a woman as pastor. If you can’t help them, then for goodness sake don’t hurt them. Some object that this is the only time a woman deacon is mentioned. But if there was one there are probably others, and anyway, **one** is infinitely more than there had ever been before.

In that same chapter Paul commends a number of prominent leaders of the early church. That list includes ten women, almost a third of the total. One of these is Junia, who, along with Andronicus, is even said to be “outstanding among the Apostles.” (16:7) And that in a society that had never before considered any

woman as worthy of praise except as a handmaiden. Especially in religious circles. The first convert in Europe was a woman, Lydia, who set up a church in her house. One of the great leaders of the early church was Priscilla, who even helped her husband Aquila set straight one of the best preachers in the whole church, Apollos (Acts 18). Nympha is identified as the leader of a church that meets in her house in Col. 4:15. And in a plaintive passage in Philippians 4:2-3 Paul begs, "I urge Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I also ask you, true partner (*who?*) to **help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life.**" Sounds like missionaries and church leaders to me. What about you?

Where does Paul get his authority to give women such a good name and praise them as fellow workers? It all began on the first missionary journey. He tells about it in his letter to the Galatians (the people of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium?). He complains that they have abandoned his message to follow other leaders (such as Peter and James and John, who were slow to accept the idea that the law was no longer the route to salvation) and reminds them that he received from the Lord the revelation that the works of the law lead nowhere. He summarizes the new meaning of being saved in Gal. 3:23-29. "Before this faith came, we were confined under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith was revealed. The law then was our guardian until Christ, so that we could be justified by faith. But since that faith came we are no longer under a guardian, for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ. . . and heirs according to the promise."

**Your are all one.** That is the message Paul received from God. When we are saved we all become exactly equal. In fact it could be said that one of the ways we know whether our salvation is real is whether we feel that we are one with all races, all human conditions, and both sexes. **If we do not accept any of these as full participants in Christ's grace, and in the kingdom's work, then we may have a way to go before full salvation enters our life.** If you receive a woman as the chair of your church council or the director of your evangelistic ministry or as pastor, your first duty is not to question her qualifications, but to examine your own salvation. If it is genuine, and your heart is right, you will receive her with gladness and welcome her ministry and her gifts in your body of Christ.

I do not know what that passage in Timothy means. It certainly seems out of step with the body of the New Testament. Perhaps Timothy was having a bad time, maybe there were women in that church who were not living up to the standards of the faith, maybe someone in recent times mistranslated the text, but I do believe the Lord has done all that could be done in that age, and continued to reveal to us in this age, that all Christians are servants of a risen Lord and all are fully heirs of the kingdom of God. I believe that is the word of God, and that in that word I must conduct my life and my ministry, accepting all others who profess and practice the faith as co-ministers and equals in all Christian contexts.