

The Ministry of Women

By Adoniram Judson Gordon

This article appeared in the Missionary Review of the World in 1894. Its author was A. J. Gordon, an associate evangelist with Dwight L. Moody, and founder of Gordon College and Seminary. The pastor of one of Boston's largest Baptist churches, he was also chairman of the American Baptist Missionary Union.

The occasion for writing the following article is this: at a recent summer convention [probably 1893] a young lady missionary had been appointed to give an account of her work at one of the public sessions. The scruples of certain of the delegates against a woman's addressing a mixed assembly were found to be so strong, however, that the lady was withdrawn from the programme, and further public participation in the conference confined to its male constituency.

The conscientious regard thus displayed for Paul's alleged injunction of silence in the church on the part of women deserves our highest respect. But with a considerable knowledge of the nature and extent of women's work on the missionary field, the writer has long believed that it is exceedingly important that that work, as now carried on, should either be justified from Scripture, or if that were impossible, that it be so modified as to bring it into harmony with the exact requirements of the Word of God. For while it is true that many Christians believe that women are enjoined from publicly preaching the Gospel, either at home or abroad, it is certainly true that scores of missionary women are at present doing this very thing. They are telling the good news of salvation to heathen men and women publicly and from house to house, to little groups gathered by the wayside, or to large groups assembled in the *zayats*. It is not affirmed that the majority of women missionaries are engaged in this kind of work, but that scores are doing it, and doing it with the

approval of the Boards under which they are serving. If any one should raise the technical objection that because of its informal and colloquial character this is not preaching, we are ready to affirm that it comes much nearer the preaching enjoined in the great commission than does the reading of a theological disquisition from the pulpit on Sunday morning, or the discussion of some ethical or sociological question before a popular audience on Sunday evening.

But the purpose of this article is not to condemn the ministry of missionary women described above, or to suggest its modification, but rather to justify and vindicate both its propriety and authority by a critical examination of Scripture on the question at issue.

In order to reach a right understanding of this subject, it is necessary for us to be reminded that we are living in the dispensation of the Spirit – a dispensation which differs most radically from that of the law which preceded it. As the day of Pentecost ushered in this new economy, so the prophecy of Joel, which Peter rehearsed on that day, outlined its great characteristic features. Let us briefly consider this prophecy:

*And it shall be in the last days, saith God,
I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh;
And your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,*

And your old men shall dream dreams:

*Yea, and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days
Will I pour forth of my Spirit: and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heaven above,
And signs on the earth beneath;
Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke:
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the day of the Lord come,
That great and notable day:
And it shall be, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

(Acts ii. 17-21, R.V.)

It will be observed that four classes are here named as being brought into equal privileges under the outpoured Spirit:

1. *Jew and Gentile*: "All flesh" seems to be equivalent to "every one who" or "whosoever" named in the twenty-first verse. Paul expounds on this phrase to mean both Jew and Gentile (Rom. x. 12, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek... For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.")
2. *Male and female*: "And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."
3. *Old and young*: "Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."
4. *Bondsmen and Bondswomen* (vide R.V. margin): "And on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days will I pour forth My Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

Now, evidently these several classes are not mentioned without a definite

intention and significance; for Paul, in referring back to the great baptism through which the church of the New Covenant was ushered in, says "For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether *Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free*" (1 Cor. xii. 13, R.V.) Here he enumerates two classes named in Joel's prophecy; and in another passage he mentions three "for as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ; there can be neither *Jew nor Greek*; [there can be neither *slave nor free*;] there can be neither *male nor female*; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. iii. 28, R.V.)

We often hear this phrase, "neither male nor female," quoted as though it were a rhetorical figure; but we insist that the inference is just, that if the Gentile came into vastly higher privileges under grace than under the law, so did the woman; for both are spoken of in the same category. Here, then, we take our starting-point for the discussion. This prophecy of Joel, realized at Pentecost, is the *Magna Charta* of the Christian Church. It gives to woman a status in the Spirit hitherto unknown. And, as in civil legislation, no law can be enacted which conflicts with the constitution, so in Scripture we shall expect to find no text which denies to woman her divinely appointed rights in the New Dispensation.

"*Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.*" Here is woman's equal warrant with man's for telling out the Gospel of the grace of God. So it seems, at least, for this word "prophesy" in the New Testament "signifies not merely to foretell future events, but to communicate religious truth in general under a Divine inspiration" (*vide Hackett* on "Acts", p.49). [And] the spirit of prophecy was henceforth to rest, not upon the favored few, but upon the many, without regard to race, or age, or sex. All that we can gather from the New Testament use of this word

leads us to believe that it embraces that faithful witnessing for Christ, that fervent telling out of the Gospel under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, which was found in the early Church, and is found just as truly among the faithful today.

If, now, we turn to the history of the primitive Church, we find the practice corresponding to the prophecy. In the instance of Philip's household, we read: "Now this man had four daughters which did prophesy" (Acts xxi. 9); and in connection with the Church in Corinth we read: "Every woman praying and prophesying with her head unveiled" (1 Cor. xi. 5).

Having touched thus briefly on the positive side of this question, we now proceed to consider the alleged prohibition of women's participation in the public meetings of the Church, found in the writings of Paul.

We shall examine, first, the crucial text contained in 1 Tim. ii 8-11:

I desire therefore that the men pray in every place, lifting up holy hands without wrath and disputing. In like manner, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly raiment; but (which becometh women professing godliness) through good works. Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. But permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness, etc (R.V.).

This passage has generally been regarded as perhaps the strongest and most decisive, for the silence of women in the Church. It would be very startling, therefore, were it shown that it really contains an exhortation to the orderly and decorous participation of women in public prayer. Yet, such is the

conclusion of some of the best exegetes.

By general consent the force of *boulomai*, "I will," is carried over from the eighth verse into the ninth: "*I will that women*" (*vide* Alford). And what is it that the apostle will have women do? The words, "*in like manner*," furnish a very suggestive hint toward one answer, and a very suggestive hindrance to another and common answer. Is it meant that he would have the men pray in every place, and women, "*in like manner*," to be silent? But where would be the similarity of conduct in the two instances? Or does the intended likeness lie between the men's "lifting up holy hands", and the women's adorning themselves in modest apparel? So unlikely is either one of these conclusions from the apostle's language, that, as Alford concedes, "Chrysostom and most commentators supply, 'to pray,' in order to complete the sense." If they are right in so construing the passage – and we believe the *hosautos* "in like manner," compels them to this course – then the meaning is unquestionable, "I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, etc. In like manner I will that women pray in modest apparel, etc."

In one of the most incisive and clearly reasoned pieces of exegesis with which we are acquainted, Wiesinger, the eminent commentator, thus interprets the passage, and as it seems to us, clearly justifies his conclusions. We have not space to transfer his argument to these pages, but we may, in a few words, give a summary of it, mostly in his own language. He says: "1. In the words "*in every place*" it is chiefly to be observed that it is public prayer and not secret prayer that is spoken of. "2. The *proseuchesthai*, 'to pray', is to be supplied in verse 9, and to be connected with '*modest apparel*', so that this special injunction as to the conduct of women in prayer

corresponds to that given to men in the words *'Lifting up holy hands'*. This verse, then from the beginning refers to prayer: and what is said of the women in verses 9 and 10 is to be understood as referring primarily to public prayer.

"3. The transition in verse 11 from *gunaikas* to *gune* shows that the apostle now passes on to something new – viz., the relation of the married woman to her husband. She is to be in quietness rather than drawing attention to herself by public appearance; to learn rather than to teach; to be in subjection rather than in authority."

In a word, our commentator finds no evidence from this passage that women were forbidden to pray in public assemblies of the Church: though reasoning back from the twelfth verse to those before, he considers that they may have been enjoined from public teaching. The latter question we shall consider further on.

The interpretation just given has strong presumption in its favour, from the likeness of the passage to another which we now consider:

Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman praying or prophesying with her head unveiled dishonoureth her head. (1Cor. xi.4-5)

By common consent, the reference is here to public worship; and the decorous manner of taking part therein is pointed out first for the man and then for the woman. "Every woman praying or prophesying." Bengel's terse comment: "*Therefore women were not excluded from these duties,*" is natural and reasonable. It is quite incredible, on the contrary, that the apostle should give himself the trouble to prune a custom which he desired to uproot, or that he should spend his breath in condemning a forbidden *method* of

doing a forbidden thing. This passage is strikingly like the one just considered, in that the proper order of doing having been prescribed first for the man, and then for the woman, it is impossible to conclude that the thing to be done is then enjoined only upon the one party and forbidden to the other. If the "in like manner" has proved such a barrier to commentators against finding an injunction for the silence of women in 1 Tim. ii.9, the unlike manner pointed out in this passage is not less difficult to be surmounted by those who hold that women are forbidden to participate in public worship. As the first passage has shown to give sanction to woman's praying in public, this one points not less strongly to her habit of both praying and prophesying in public.

We turn now to the only remaining passage which has been urged as decisive for the silence of women – viz., 1 Cor. xiv. 34-35:

Let the women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but let them be in subjection, as also saith the law. And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church.

Here, again, the conduct of women in the Church should be studied in relation to that of men if we would rightly understand the apostle's teaching. Let us observe, then, that the injunction to silence is three times served in this chapter by the use of the same Greek word, *sigato*, twice on men and once on women, and that in every case the silence commanded is conditional, not absolute.

"*Let him keep silence in the church*" (verse 28), it is said to one speaking with tongues, but on the condition that "there be no interpreter." "*Let the first keep silence*" (verse 30), it is said of the prophets, "speaking by two or three"; but on the condition

that "a revelation be made to another sitting by."

"*Let the women keep silence in the church,*" it is said again, but it is evidently on the condition of their interrupting the service with questions, since it is added "for it is not permitted them to speak...and if they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home." This last clause takes the injunction clearly out of all reference to praying or prophesying, and shows – what the whole chapter indicates – that the apostle is here dealing with the various forms of disorder and confusion in the church; not that he is repressing the decorous exercise of spiritual gifts, either by men or women. If he were forbidding women to pray or to prophesy in public, as some argue, what could be more irrelevant or meaningless [than] his direction concerning the case, "If they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home."

In *fine*, we may reasonably insist that this text, as well as the others discussed above, be considered in the light of the entire New Testament teaching – the teaching of prophecy, the teaching of practice, and the teaching of contemporary history – if we would find the true meaning.

Dr. Jacob, in his admirable work, *The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament*, considering the question after this broad method, thus candidly and, it seems to us, justly, sums up the whole question: "A due consideration of this ministry of gifts in the earliest days of Christianity – those times of high and sanctified spiritual freedom – both shows and justifies the custom of the public ministrations of women at that time in the Church. The very ground and title of this ministry being the acknowledged possession of some gift, and such gifts being bestowed on women as well as men, the former as well as the latter were allowed to use them in Christian assemblies.

This seems to me quite evident from Paul's words in 1 Cor. xi. 5 where he strongly condemns the practice of women praying or prophesying with head unveiled, without expressing the least objection to this public ministrations on their part, but only finding fault with what was considered an unseemly attire for women thus publicly engaged. The injunction contained in the same epistle (1 Cor. xiv.34), 'Let your women keep silence,' etc. refers, as the context shows, not to prophesying or praying in the congregation, but to making remarks and asking questions about the words of others."

On the whole, we may conclude, without overconfidence, that there is no Scripture which prohibits women from praying or prophesying in the public assemblies of the Church; that on the contrary, they seem to be exhorted to the first exercise by the word of the apostle (1 Tim. ii.9); while for the prophesying they have the threefold warrant of inspired prediction (Acts ii.17), of primitive practice (Acts xxi.9), and of apostolic provision (1 Cor. xi.5).

As to the question of teaching, a difficulty arises which is not easy to solve. If the apostle, in his words to Timothy, absolutely forbids a woman to teach and expound spiritual truth, then the remarkable instance of a woman doing this very thing at once occurs to the mind (Acts xviii.26) – an instance of private teaching possibly, but endorsed and made conspicuously public by its insertion in the New Testament.

In view of this example, some have held that the statement in 1 Tim. ii.9, with the entire paragraph to which it belongs, refers to the married woman's domestic relations, to her subjection to the teaching of her husband as against her dogmatic lording it over him. This is the view of Canon Garratt, in his excellent

observations on the *Ministry of Women*.

It may be said against the conclusion which we have reached concerning the position of women, that the plain reading of the New Testament makes a different impression on the mind. That may be so on two grounds; first, on that of traditional bias; and second, on that of unfair translation. Concerning the latter point, it would seem as though the translators of our common version wrought, at every point where this question occurs, under the shadow of Paul's imperative. "Let your women keep silence in the churches."

Let us take two illustrations from names found in that constellation of Christian women mentioned in Rom. xvi:

"I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea." So, according to the King James [Version], writes Paul. But the same word *diakonos*, here translated "servant", is rendered "minister" when applied to Paul and Apollos (1 Cor. iii.5), and "deacon" when used of other male officers of the Church (1 Tim.iii.10, 12, 13). Why discriminate against Phoebe simply because she is a woman? The word "servant" is correct for the general unofficial use of the term, as in Matt. xxii.10; but if Phoebe were really a functionary of the Church, as we have a right to conclude, let her have the honour to which she is entitled. If "Phoebe, a minister of the Church at Cenchrea," sounds too bold, let the word be transliterated and read "Phoebe, a deacon" – a *deacon*, too, without the insipid termination "ess", of which there is no more need than that we should say "teacheress" or "doctress". It is wonderful how much there is in a name! "Phoebe, a *servant*", might suggest to an ordinary reader nothing more than the modern church drudge, who prepares sandwiches and coffee for

an ecclesiastical sociable. To Canon Garratt, with his genial and enlightened view of women's position in apostolic times, "Phoebe, a deacon", suggests a useful co-laborer of Paul, "travelling about on missionary and other labors of love."

Again, we read in the same chapter of Romans, "*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my helpers in Christ Jesus.*" Notice the order here: the woman's name put first, as elsewhere (Acts xviii.18; 2 Tim. iv.19). But when we turn to that very suggestive passage in Acts xviii.26, we find the order reversed, and the man's name put first: "Whom, when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him and expounded unto him the way of the Lord more perfectly." Yet this is conceded to be wrong, according to the best manuscripts. Evidently to some transcriber or critic, the startling question presented itself: "Did not Paul say, 'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man'?" But, here a woman is actually taking the lead as theological teacher to Apollos, an eminent minister of the Gospel, and so far setting her authority as to tell him that he is not thoroughly qualified for his work! This will never do: ["if the [woman] cannot be silent, she must at least be thrust into the background." And so the order is changed, and the man's name has stood first for generations of readers. The Revised Version has rectified the error, and the woman's name now leads.

But how natural is this story, and how perfectly accordant with the subsequent Christian history! We can readily imagine that, after listening to this Alexandrian orator, Priscilla would say to her husband: "Yes, he is eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures, but do you not see that he lacks the secret of power?" And so they took him and instructed him concerning the baptism of the Holy Ghost, with the result that he who before had been mighty in the

Scriptures, now “mightily convinced the Jews.” How often has this scene been reproduced; as, e.g., in the instance of Catherine of Siena instructing the corrupt clergy of her day in the things of the Spirit till they exclaimed in wonder, “Never man spake like this woman”; of Madame Guyon, who by her teaching made new men of scores of accomplished but unspiritual preachers of her time; of the humble woman of whom the evangelist Moody tells, who on hearing some of his early sermons admonished him of his need of the secret of power, and brought him under unspeakable obligation by teaching him of the same. It is evident that the Holy Spirit made this woman Priscilla a teacher of teachers, and that her theological chair has had many worthy incumbents through the subsequent Christian ages.

To follow still further the list of women workers mentioned in Rom. xvi, we read: “Salute Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who labour in the Lord. Salute Persis the beloved, which laboured much in the Lord” (verse 12). What was the work *in the Lord* which these so worthily wrought? Put with this quotation another: “Help those women which *laboured with me in the Gospel*,” (Phil. iv.3). Did they “labour in the Lord” under sacred bonds to give no public witness for the Lord?

“Ah! but there is that word of Paul to Timothy, ‘Let the women learn in silence,’” says the plaintiff.

No! It is not there. Here again we complain of an invidious translation. Rightly the Revised Version gives it: “Let a woman learn *in quietness*” (*hesuchia*), an admonition not at all inconsistent with decorous praying and witnessing in the Christian assembly. When men are admonished, the King James translators gave the right rendering to the same word: “That with quietness they work and eat their own bread”

(2 Thess. iii.12), an injunction which no reader would construe to mean that they should refrain from speaking during their labour and their eating.

As a woman is named among the deacons in this chapter, so it is more than probable that one is mentioned among the apostles. “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles” (verse 7). Is Junia a feminine name? So it has been commonly held. But the *en tois apostolois*, with which it stands connected, has led some to conclude that it is Junias, the name of a man. This is not impossible. Yet Chrysostom, who, as a Greek Father, ought to be taken as a high authority, makes this frank and unequivocal comment on the passage; “*How great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be counted worthy of the name of an apostle!*”

These are illustrations which might be considerably enlarged, of the shadow which Paul’s supposed law of silence for women has cast upon the work of the early translators – a shadow which was even thrown back into the Old Testament, so that we read in the Common Version: “the Lord gave the word; great was the company of those that published it” (Psalm lxviii.11); while the Revised correctly gives it: “The Lord giveth the word: the women that publish the tidings are a great host.”

Whether we are right or wrong in our general conclusions, there are some very interesting lessons suggested by this subject:

Especially, the value of experience as an interpreter of Scripture. The final exegesis is not always to be found in the lexicon and grammar. The Spirit is in the Word; and the Spirit is also in the Church, the body of regenerate and sanctified believers. To follow the voice of the Church apart from that of the written Word has never

proved safe; but, on the other hand, it may be that we need to be admonished not to ignore the teaching of the deepest spiritual life of the Church in forming our conclusions concerning the meaning of Scripture. It cannot be denied that in every great spiritual awakening in the history of Protestantism the impulse for Christian women to pray and witness for Christ in the public assembly has been found irrepressible. It was so in the beginnings of the Society of Friends. It was so in the great evangelical revival associated with the names of Wesley and Whitefield. It has been so in that powerful renaissance of primitive Methodism known as the Salvation Army. It has been increasingly so in this era of modern evangelism in which we are living. Observing this fact, and observing also the great blessing which has attended the ministry of consecrated women in heralding the Gospel, many thoughtful men have been led to examine the Word of God anew, to learn if it be really so that the Scriptures silence the testimony which the Spirit so signally blesses. To many it has been both a relief and a surprise to discover how little authority there is in the Word for repressing the witness of women in the public assembly, or for forbidding her to herald the Gospel to the unsaved. If this be so, it may be well for the plaintiffs in this case to beware lest, in silencing the voice of consecrated women, they may be resisting the Holy Ghost. The conjunction of these two admonitions of the apostle is significant: “Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings” (1 Thess. v.19-20).

The famous Edward Irving speaks thus pointedly on this subject: “Who am I that I should despise the gift of God, because it is in a woman, whom the Holy Ghost despiseth not?... That women have with men an equal distribution of spiritual gifts is not only manifest from the fact (Acts ii; xviii.26; xxi.9; 1 Cor. xi.3, etc.), but

from the very words of the prophecy of Joel itself, which may well rebuke those vain and thoughtless people who make light of the Lord's work, because it appeareth among women. *I wish men would themselves be subject to the Word of God, before they lord it over women's equal rights in the great outpouring of the Spirit*" (Works, v.555).

As is demanded, we have preferred to forego all appeals to reason and sentiment in settling the question, and to rest it solely on a literal interpretation of Scripture. Yet we cannot refrain from questioning whether the spiritual intuition of the Church has not been far in advance of its exegesis in dealing with the subject. We will not refer to the usage prevailing in many of our most spiritual and evangelical churches, but will cite some conspicuous public instances.

When before the Exeter Hall Missionary Conference in 1888, Secretary Murdoch described the work of Mrs. Ingalls, of Burma, declaring that, though not assuming ecclesiastical functions, yet by force of character on the one hand, and by the exigencies of the field on the other, she had come to be a virtual bishop over nearly a score of churches, training the native ministry in theology and homiletics, guiding the churches in the selection of pastors, and superintending the discipline of the congregations, the story evoked only applause, without a murmur of dissent from the distinguished body of missionary leaders who heard it.

We vividly remember, in the early days of woman's work in the foreign field, how that brilliant missionary to China, Miss Adele Fielde, was recalled by her Board because of repeated complaints of the senior missionaries that in her work she was transcending her sphere as a woman. "It is reported that you have taken

upon you to preach," was the charge read by the chairman: "Is it so?"

She replied by describing the vastness and destitution of her field – village after village, hamlet after hamlet, yet unreached by the Gospel – and then how, with a native woman, she had gone into the surrounding country, gathered groups of men, women and children – whoever would come – and told out the story of the Cross to them. "If this is preaching I plead guilty to the charge," she said.

"And have you ever been ordained to preach?" asked her examiner.

"No," she replied with great dignity and emphasis – "no; *but I believe I have been foreordained.*" O woman! you have answered discreetly; and if any shall ask for your foreordination credentials, put your finger on the words of the prophet: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy," and the whole Church will vote to send you back unhampered to your work, as happily the Board did in this instance.

How slow are we to understand what is written! Simon Peter, who on the Day of Pentecost had rehearsed the great prophecy of the new dispensation, and announced that its fulfillment had begun, was yet so holden of tradition that it took a special vision of the sheet descending from heaven to convince him that in the body of Christ "there can be neither Jew nor Gentile." And it has required another vision of a multitude of missionary women, let down by the Holy Spirit among the heathen, and publishing the Gospel to every tribe and kindred and people, to convince us that in the same body, "there can be no male or female." It is evident, however, that this extraordinary spectacle of ministering women has brought doubts to some conservative men as to 'whereunto this thing may grow.' Yet, as believers in the sure word of

prophecy, all has happened exactly according to the foreordained pattern, from the opening chapter of the new dispensation, when in the upper room "these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren," to the closing chapter, now fulfilling, when "the women that publish the tidings are a great host."

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