The Role of Women in Christian Education
by James Plueddemann

As a former missionary I've been intrigued with the American debate over the place of women in the ministry of the church. Some take the position that it is unbiblical to deny leadership and teaching roles to women in the church under any circumstances. Others say that when a church allows a woman to teach, it is denying the inspiration of Scripture. To build the Body of Christ, we must use all our God-given resources. Yet the church is fragmenting itself over the issue of how to use the resources.

I argue that the testimony of the whole body of Scripture leaves room for cultural interpretation on the role of women in the church, and thus we must be sensitive to cultural expectations.

From an interpretation of I Timothy 2:12, and I Corinthians 14:35, we have two options. Either we must require that women never teach men and keep totally silent in every educational situation, or we must understand the passage as a restriction of particular first-century women in their cultural setting. If women are to remain silent in the churches, then we must exclude women from the choir, congregational singing, and from the nursery. If God intended that women never teach men, as a universal ethical moral principle, then we would expect the rest of Scripture to support the restriction. Yet we find many examples of women teaching men. The prophetess Huldah proclaimed the word of God to the king Josiah and the High Priest Hilkiah, while her husband was in charge of the wardrobe (2 Chronicles 34:22). It is quite possible that the apostle Paul was taught by the four unmarried daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). Moses was taught by the prophetess Miriam (Exodus 15:20). Deborah was not only a prophetess but a judge and a general (Judges 4:4). Jesus chose women to be the first to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection to the apostles. There are many more examples.

Thus to make I Timothy 2:12 a universal moral principle, one is forced to deny the plenary inspiration of Scripture. If we hold a plenary view of the inspiration of Scripture, we must not limit the role of women in Christian education except for reasons of cultural appropriateness. The Danvers Statement by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood claims that "some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men." Could it be that the signers of this statement are either weak in their view of plenary inspiration or are culturally naive and ethnocentric?

On the other hand, cultural relativity is no absolute relativity. There are absolute biblical principles of graciousness and cultural sensitivity that make it inappropriate for men or women to teach or assert authority in some cultural situations. If I were to write a book on Muslim ministry, I might write, "it is not good for men to hold Bible studies in the homes of Muslim women." I should not feel that my personhood as a male is being violated just because there are times when it is not appropriate for me to use my spiritual gifts of Bible teaching. There may be some cultural situations where women should graciously decline to use their God-given gifts in teaching for the sake of the gospel.

Some of the most influential people in my life have been my mother and my college professors, Mary LeBar, Lois LeBar and Vivian Bloomquist. Rebekah Price has influenced hundreds of women and men in Christian education publishing and set an example for the profession of Christian Education directors. Roberta Hestenes has sensitized the whole field of Christian education to the use of small groups in the church. The field of evangelical Christian education would be moribund today without the crucial influence of women.

Forces within evangelical Christian education today attempt to polarize us. Some are trying to unbiblically and inappropriately limit the role of women in Christian education. If these forces gain influence, the Body of Christ will suffer. Other forces demand that women play a dominant role no matter what the cultural expectations. The use of gifts by men and women is not the ultimate purpose of ministry. Spiritual gifts for women and men are only a means for edifying the church.

The Body of Christ is facing Satanic attack. Let us put the whole armor of God on the whole Body of Christ. We must grow toward Christlikeness as the whole body is joined and held together by every supporting ligament. We can only build up the Body of Christ as each part does its work in love.

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