REMEMBERING OUR FOREMOTHERS: DOES IT MATTER?

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Why should we highlight women in Bible times and throughout Christian history? Wouldn't it be more timely to focus on women in the church today, by discussing their present aspirations? Aren't twentieth-century movements what will influence not only the contemporary church, but also its future course?

Learning from the Past

There are at least three answers to those questions. First, and most obvious, we cannot begin to understand the modern world unless we have an appreciation of how present-day society relates to the sweep of human history. Our twentieth-century Christian concerns have not sprung from a vacuum, but reflect reactions to doctrinal positions and denominational practices that themselves have been the result of historical process. Thus we cannot properly evaluate current trends and tensions unless we have some understanding of their origin and development over past centuries.

For example, today increasing pressure mounts to expand lay involvement in the church. As we consider the sharp divide that has emerged in many denominations between ordained clergy and the laity, we ask: What can we learn from both Old Testament and New Testament about such a ministry division? What was the first Christians' understanding of ministry? Studying early church structure and practice will help us assess the validity of continuing a sharp distinction between clergy and laity. It may also lead to a reappraisal of our contemporary definitions of "lay" and "clergy."

Learning from our historical past means reclaiming the many and varied biblical examples of God's faithful female servants. Although all too many so-called "Bible-believing Christians" have no memory of women like Judge Deborah, Prophetess Huldah, or Pastor Phoebe, for God, there are no "forgotten women." "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17). Therefore it is we who are spiritually impoverished if we overlook the many positive female role models God caused to be recorded in our inerrant Scripture. Of the women who offered Jesus her lavish devotion, he said: "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:9). How tragic that some who profess to be Christ's disciples have forgotten her and her other biblical sisters.

An awareness of our historical past also reinforces the connectional nature of the church. The fact that the Book of Acts is open-ended points us to the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit in empowering Christians to serve Christ. The history of God's people as the visible Body of believers is not a collection of dry facts, but the record of how living individuals have sought to obey God in their day. Our own faith is strengthened when we realize that we too are part of "the great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) — God's men and women down through the ages.

So the first answer to "Remembering our foremothers: does it matter?" is "Yes, it does, because we are instructed, edified, and challenged by the lives of all past believers." God's children can learn especially valuable lessons from studying how both men and women served their Lord in Bible times and in the earliest years of the church. As direct followers of Jesus and his disciples, the first generations of Christians would have had the clearest understanding of every aspect of new life in Christ.

Questioning Human Tradition

Therefore, secondly, a study of our Christian heritage will help resolve that area of severe tension in the contemporary church: the place of women. On the one hand is the earnest desire of many Christian women (Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox) to participate more fully in the work of the church, and on the other hand is the quenching of that desire by some who would restrict women's spheres of service.
As more women explore their modern educational and career opportunities, and then seek to pursue these within the context of serving Christ, these women are puzzled to find that some denominations or parachurch organizations close certain areas of theological education and Christian ministry to them simply because they are women. These women question why their secular options are increasing while in many instances their church-related opportunities are static or decreasing. Their question can cause severe tension with those who favor continuing or even widening restrictions on women's use of their spiritual gifts.

But such questioning must be taken seriously; it has solid historical precedent. The constant self-examination of the church has always been part of a corporate working out of our salvation (in line with Paul's exhortation in Philippians 2:12 and the diligent study of the Berean Christians in Acts 17:10-12).

Questioning theology and traditions of the medieval church led to the Protestant Reformation. Questioning monarchy as the only "God-ordained" expression of political authority led to Christians' acceptance of democratic forms of human government. Questioning complacent or even dead orthodoxy led to the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Questioning the church's lack of inclusiveness to its calling to be as Christ to the world led to the tremendous surge in Christian missionary outreach and Christian-related social reform movements in the nineteenth century.

At the heart of each of these questioning periods was the desire of believers to return to a truly scriptural understanding of God's ideal for society and the church. So today it is also legitimate for people to question if women's opportunities to serve their Savior have always been as narrowly defined as they are in some modern communions. Yet, sadly — and despite the many scriptural female role models — I have heard it said that women who "dare" to question leadership by males only are impertinent at best and heretical at worst.

A woman friend wrote me these poignant words: "I am finding much personal joy in worship at the daily service of a church near my office. They let me read the Bible sometimes when other readers aren't there. I love reading the Bible aloud to those who want to hear it, and, sad to say, could never do so in the worship service of my denomination." Why? Because in that denomination, public reading of the Bible is considered authoritative and thus the province of men only.

Yet Jesus commanded his followers to take the Good News to all peoples (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). We need all the Christian ambassadors we can get! Those who favor continuing gender restrictions on Christian service must face the case histories in Scripture and in the first centuries of Christianity that show a wide freedom of women to use their gifts in ministry. Any discussion of women's freedom to serve as they believe God calls them to do must take into account the highly visible women teachers, leaders, and martyrs in the early church.

So as questioning women examine the historical record with its many examples of how the Holy Spirit empowered women of faith, they can rightly ask: "Is the Lord's hand shortened? Cannot God use us, as he did them, to help proclaim God's Word today?"

**Upholding Truth**

Thirdly, the basic and most important answer to "Why remember our foremothers?" is that we who believe that Scripture is the true record of God's dealing with humanity must also desire to preserve a true record of our historical past. Jesus said, "I am the truth," and promised that his Spirit would guide his followers into all truth (John 14:6, 16:13). Christians should always be dedicated to knowing and upholding truth.

But this must mean upholding the entirety of the scriptural record, including all the biblical female role models appropriate to be emulated by men and women alike. Upholding truth must also mean discovering and celebrating God's female servants down through the centuries — women like Perpetua, Theodora, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Susanna Wesley, Elizabeth Fry, Mary Slessor, and Catherine and Evangeline Booth.

We must abhor any revisionist readings of God's Word. We must also shrink from any unbalanced recording of church history.

I am by no means implying that downplaying or ignoring women has been some deliberate plot, such as the politically-based distortions of secular history that we saw in communist countries. But I am emphasizing the sad fact that over the centuries, and for a variety of complex reasons, we have lost sight of women's service of God and women's significant contributions to the cause of Christ.

However, continuing to overlook the great heritage of our foremothers, both in the Bible and in church history, not only deprives the contemporary church of the example of all who comprise that "great cloud of witnesses" but also invites the charge of ecclesiastical discrimination against women. Inequitable treatment of historical fact, however unconscious, can create a false view of women's avenues of service and promote a narrow female "role" that is extra-biblical. Sadly, failure to recognize the equal place of women in "the priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:4,5) has even misled some sincere Christians to declare that women who desire to serve in wider roles are out of the mainstream of orthodox practice. But in fact these women are simply being true to their scriptural call as "ambassadors of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17-21), as they emulate biblical foremothers like Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38-42), Mary Magdalene (John 20:17,18), Philip's daughters (Acts 21:8,9), or the women Paul commended in Romans 16:1-15, not to mention the many women in service and leadership in the Old Testament as well. These biblical female case histories are not "exceptions" to some supposed rule of male leadership: Their names are commended in our trustworthy Scripture, and God's truth cannot have "exceptions."
Bringing Healing and Restoring Unity

Finally, studying and celebrating past women of faith will help bring wholeness and completeness within the church. Women who have felt the pain of exclusion will begin to experience the healing process of full acceptance once they are included as equal members of the Body of Christ. For the first time, other women will be freed to use their gifts in ministry when they discover how former daughters of God were mightily used to proclaim the Good News in word and deed. Men will rejoice that God raised up partners in mission in other centuries, and will themselves now be free to join hands with their Christian sisters today. In a fragmented world, the visible unity of believers as they serve together will be both a compelling testimony to the reality of new life in Christ and a powerful force in spreading the Gospel.

So the ultimate answer to the question “Why remember our foremothers — does that truly matter?” is “Yes, it does, because truth always matters.” Knowing truth sets us all free to serve (John 8:31,32). Grounding our actions on truth makes us all strong to serve (Galatians 5:1).

Over the centuries, the true record of women of faith has become obscured. Isn’t it time to set that record straight?

OUR SISTER, PHOEBE

Linda Montgomery

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess (diakonos) of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper (prostatis) of many and of myself as well (Romans 16:1,2 RSV).

I was having a discussion the other evening with a family in our church about the subject of women deacons. I said, “Well, Phoebe, of course, was a deacon.”

Someone said, “Really? Are you sure? Not everyone believes that she was.”

“She was a deacon,” I said. It’s in Romans 16.”

Diakonos means “servant.” Phoebe was a prominent woman who distinguished herself by the services she rendered to her church and to Paul himself.

The word prostatis is usually translated “helper” or “patroness” for Phoebe. Yet in the literature of the time it had the connotation of “leading officer,” “president,” “governor,” or “superintendent.”

In Romans 16:1, the Greek word diakonos is translated, “deaconess” in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, “servant” in the New International Version, “servant” in the King James Version, and “dear Christian woman” in the Living Bible Paraphrased.

The very same word, diakonos is translated “deacon” in Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:8, and I Timothy 3:12, in each reference, in all four versions of the Bible cited above. These verses refer to church leadership. Note that I Timothy 3:12 could have been a warning against polygamy. In I Timothy 3:11, “the women likewise” may mean either “wives of deacons” or “women deacons.”

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons (diakonos).”

(Phil. 1:1 RSV)

“Deacons (diakonos) likewise must be serious, not double-tongued…” (I Tim. 3:8 RSV)

“Let deacons (diakonos) be the husband of one wife…”

(I Tim. 3:12 RSV)

To be consistent, should not the word diakonos be consistently translated “servant” or translated “deacon”? Why a change in translation for Phoebe, but not elsewhere?

Phoebe’s story begins with her name, which means, “moon.” She was probably named in honor of the goddess Artemis, who was widely worshipped in the Greek world, including in Corinth and the nearby seaport of Cenchreae where she lived. Probably, Phoebe had grown up as a devotee of this moon-goddess of fertility, the patroness of maidens, the helper of women in childbirth, and the giver of a gentle death to women.

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