

Are We Blindly Following Culture?

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May, 1993

Women C.E.O.s?! Women physicians?! Women cabinet members and Supreme Court Justices?! A woman running for Vice-President?! The President's wife playing a fundamental role in the administration?! Surely one of the noteworthy trends of recent American decades has been the movement of women into what had been traditionally male positions. In those same decades there has been increasing interest and pressure to include women in more visible Christian positions, positions that had been, again, traditionally male. Since these two illustrations of increasing female visibility and influence have occurred in parallel, a reasonable question has arisen: Are the calls for greater involvement of women in the church simply an outcome of the cultural changes in women's status? Is not our culture dictating what is occurring in Christ's body?



This is an example of a larger problem with which Christians must constantly contend. We must deal with the interplay of being culturally relevant and yet true to our Creator and Redeemer. On one hand, we recognize that it is reasonable and biblical to try to meet needs and issues of today with the gospel message. On the other hand, we understand the power and attractiveness of evil and know that it abounds in our culture.

Our thesis here is that it is appropriate both biblically and culturally to involve Christian women alongside Christian men in seeking to fulfill the Great Commission. If we are to be Christ's body today, we must utilize every gift of every believer to speak to the world of God's love. To do anything less is to mask divine cooperation between Christians with the darkness of competition between us. The "more excellent way" is love. We support our thesis with three approaches. We note that the argument (isn't this just a cultural push?) is not a new one; we note that the people in the New Testament were not immune to cultural influences, and, finally, we propose a reconciliation by looking for major biblical themes and particularly at how our Lord Jesus responded when gender was involved.

I. *We have heard this argument before, haven't we?*

A congregation makes a major financial and emotional commitment to a social service which offers care to unwed mothers. The church running an adoption agency? The criticisms began but now sound rather lame as hundreds of young women receive cups of cold water and families receive cherished new members.

A congregation decides to employ mass media in their evangelistic approach. The church running television and radio shows? The criticisms began but now appear stale as letters pour in from around the world and some hear the Good News for the very first time.

If we go back 150 years, we see a fascinating example of the same argument. There are amazing parallels between the nineteenth-century debate over slavery and the current debate over gender roles. Of course, no one today wants to be identified with pro-slavery Christians before the Civil War. "Guilty by association" isn't a fair way to play. But the language of the argument sounds very familiar.

Pro-slavery Christians felt that the plain reading of the Bible clearly taught and in fact promoted master-slave roles. Beginning in Genesis 9:20-27 they contended that God instituted slavery and that black Africans were the descendants involved. The Law of Moses continued this theme (Leviticus 25:44-46) of recognizing the legitimacy of slavery. In the New Testament, though the apostles did not approve of the abuses of slavery, they never condemned slavery itself (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25, 4:1; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-19; Philemon). A key verse was 1 Timothy 6:1-4 where, they contended, the teaching about masters and slaves was connected to Jesus himself.

The abolitionists countered with arguments of their own, of course. What made the slavery issue debate so intriguing and applicable to our context here is that both sides used the Bible to justify their positions. Furthermore, the pro-slavery group contended that this was "creeping culturism." Episcopal Bishop John Henry Hopkins in 1864: "The Bible's defense of slavery is very plain. St. Paul was inspired and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ and was only intent on obeying it. And who are we that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God and invent for ourselves a higher law than those Holy Scriptures which are given to us as a light to our feet and a lamp to our path."

Thankfully, this divisive issue is past. It is revealing that, however, integration (even in churches) continues to merit attention.

Other examples of the "influence of culture" argument are available. These include the wisdom and appropriateness of prison ministries, ministries to gays, Christian universities, roles of Christians in politics - even activity buildings owned by the church. Despite initial resistance, these have generally come to be seen as reasonable extensions of Christian

influence, works capable of being used by God to his glory.

II. *The stories, information, and encouragement of "Bible times" did not occur in a vacuum; they occurred in time and space.*

Other than the central message of God's redemptive love in Christ, we need to look carefully at cultural influences on other messages. We do a slick job of deciding that we can ignore instructions about women braiding their hair or wearing jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9) because that was cultural. We also take a fundamental example of Jesus' servanthood (footwashing) and relegate it to culture. These may be perfectly legitimate decisions we are making, but honesty demands that we admit we are making decisions.

This is not the place to deal with Paul's specific comments about women, but we do need to remember that Paul lived in a cultural context. Surely Paul clearly knew of and personally knew many of "God's women." Indeed, eight of the 26 people mentioned in his greetings in Romans 16 are women. One of the greatest thesis statements of Paul about Christianity is Galatians 3:28 where he proclaims the oneness of believers.

But this theological side of Paul was balanced by his practical side. Paul was highly concerned (rightly so) that the gospel be able to be heard and not be covered by other issues. He knew that his world afforded few rights to women and very little respect. It seems to us that this concern for culture caused Paul to give instructions to some specific situations which have a clearly cultural feel to them.

III. *Many Christians are uncomfortable trying to decide when the Scripture is speaking about a specific concern for a given situation and when the Scripture is to be extended to other times and places.* In light of that problem, is it not reasonable to place prime emphasis on major themes, on over-arching ideas communicated from God?

In the pro-slavery/abolitionist argument there was much quibbling over the meaning of individual Bible words. Does this word mean "slave" or "servant"? Does that word mean "buy" or "acquire"? In this gender discussion there is talk of "subordinate helper" vs. "companion," "Head" as authority vs. "head" as source, "have" authority vs. "usurp" authority. Is it possible that we are attempting to push the language beyond its intended purpose?

With reference to the topic at hand we contend that Genesis 1 and 2 speak of the original plan for creation. Here humans (both male and female) have special creation and are given common commands to be fruitful and multiply and a common stewardship of dominion. The creation ideal was spoiled by evil, however, manifesting itself in many ways. One technique of pride was to establish "roles" of males and females. That pattern led to a patriarchal culture seen throughout history and even legalized in many cultures.

Our contention is that this division of people is not part of God's intention. The law of love, the law of gifts for mutual upbuilding and encouragement, the law of God's care for each person no matter what their state, this is what glows from every page.

This theme recurs as we observe Jesus. The Gospels contain several situations that involve women. With Jesus, however, we never see an incidence of humiliation, reproach, or the lewd stereotypes of the day. Jesus was the friend of women, affirming them, treating them unlike other religious leaders of the day. Jesus does not seem to be interested in the roles of women; what he is interested in is their obedience. He desires the same response from them that he desires from males.

How did Jesus handle this patriarchal culture? The culture said, "Don't speak to women and especially Samaritans." Jesus breaks that culture and the woman subsequently goes to the city to speak about Jesus. The culture said, "Women belong in the kitchen." Jesus commends Mary for sitting with him and learning.

How often do we see Jesus using words like hierarchy, authority, control, dominance, lordship, chain-of-command with reference to his followers? When James and John contend for special positions in the kingdom, Jesus clearly criticizes them. Jesus is interested in cooperation, not competition.

It is important to remember that our responsibility as Christ's body is to draw people to God. We understand that all seekers are not alike. By not allowing Christian females to play visible and influential roles, we are seriously limiting the types of "seekers" attracted to God. We are also robbing the church of wonderful and helpful gifts.

This is not just a cultural argument. We believe it is important to look for consistency in the message which begins in God's creative acts and continues through Jesus' teachings and behavior. We believe this shows a pattern of parallel worth of both males and females as God's children. We believe that it is God's will that this parallelism be shown in God's community, Christ's church. The theme of servanthood has as its base "no distinction to be made."

