

Women in the Church
Reclaiming the Ideal
By Carroll Osburn

Women in the Church: The Present Quandary

At the outset not much can be said with certainty on the matter but it can be said with confidence that the topic of women in the church is complex, volatile and unavoidable.

Prejudices on two extremes have resulted in heated discussions of women, particularly in churches. Diverse views are held with almost fanatical zeal. The mere mention of the topic evokes deep seated feelings and emotions all across the spectrum of thought. Many turn to the Bible, but with different presuppositions, agendas, and traditional arguments. On both extremes, the complex matter of women in the church has become a matter of belief upon which fellowship hinges. For others, it is a matter of opinion to be researched and discussed. Unfortunately, if one seeks middle ground on this issue, one should be prepared to dive for cover, as shots will be fired from both directions. No more volatile topic exists in the church today.

In recent years I have received numerous letters and phone calls from people who sincerely want to re-examine scriptures carefully in search of truth, but who are uncertain about how to sort out what is truly biblical and what is cultural. The topic of women in the church is not solely a religious issue; it is rooted deeply in the culture in which we live. Whether one likes it or not, changes are occurring regarding women in our culture and the impact of those changes on churches are significant. Frankly, some of these changes are scary. Fearing these changes, some staunchly hold on to the patriarchal model inherited from the past. They tend to regard anyone who thinks otherwise as radicals who merely let contemporary culture override their biblical mooring. Now, for obvious reasons the voice of radical feminists is not at all strong in conservative churches. Still, some feel forced to choose between patriarchalism and feminism, reluctantly opt for the latter and leave the church. However, many are caught in the middle who see problems with patriarchalism on one hand, yet who do not want to be identified with radical feminism on the other. What options exist for them? “Women in the Church” is a complex topic. It is an agonizingly unavoidable topic.

I fear that the way we are now addressing the matter can only lead to extremism, chaos and hardening of attitudes. If we are to investigate the matter afresh, we must find a more productive approach.

The way this question is asked will have much to say about religious identity and how the church is to interact with contemporary culture. To ask what *roles* women can have in the church and its worship is, I think, to ask the wrong question. It is true that the role of women in the church and its public worship are important topics. But what compels me to enter the explosive mind field of “Women in the Church” does not have to do so much with women handing out communion trays in worship, for instance. I am more concerned with wide spread problems of abuse and inequity in our society and, more than I care to admit, in our churches. I am particularly bothered by any view of women that demeans, depreciates, and exploits women as merely tools for man’s enjoyment in service. The question is not “What *roles* can women have in the church?” but “*How shall we view women?*”

Although the question of women in the church does not seem to be at the heart of the Christian message, it does surface some very diverse feelings. It is to be expected that some readers will hope to learn quickly in these pages whether I am their ally or their enemy and, having “pigeon-holed” me, find the remainder useless, because I would either confirm their hopes or annoy them greatly. In a way, I feel much like Sisyphus, a mythical king of Corinth who attempted repeatedly to “roll the stone of conservatism to the top of the mountain of consensus, only to have it come crashing back down.” Couching the question in terms of extreme views only hinders objectivity and conversation. We need to move beyond the impasse created by extremism.

What I would really like to see is more gracious, objective, and balanced discussion of the topic of women in the church. My modest tasks in this book are: 1) To couch the question in a more productive way so that genuine communication can take place, and 2.) To apply my biblical understandings to church life. Accordingly, while the role of women in Christian worship and administration should be discussed, that discussion can occur only after several significant matters have received clarification-matters concerning not the “*role of women*” but the “*view of women*”.

1. *Approaching the Topic Productively*

Discussion of women in the church must avoid several pitfalls-pitfalls such as traditionalism and extremism. To avoid pitfalls, I offer the following suggestions:

First we need to understand the various views of women that exist and how they came to be. These views did not come about in a religious vacuum apart from society. All of them have been shaped to a great extent by culture. How women are to be viewed is not a peculiarly religious topic, but is basically a human dilemma that must be examined in a wider context.

Second, we need to avoid extremes and concentrate on realistic options. The question of women in the church should be couched in terms of median views rather than in terms of the extreme views of *patriarchalism* and radical *feminism*, which will be discussed and dismissed in chapter 2. Neither the extreme views of radical feminists nor the “Archie Bunkers” of this world provide an adequate view of women. Moderate views do exist, however, that will provide adequate understandings of *women-evangelical feminism* and *hierarchal complementarianism*. Now don’t be too bothered by these terms. Every field has terms that require a little extra effort to understand, but which make work in that field much easier. Both of these views will be discussed in detail in chapter three. Both have much in common, but there are important differences. It is vital to understand both of these views accurately.

Third, we must cultivate a willingness to rethink the problem. Intellectual honesty often challenges old traditions. Long-standing presuppositions that become identified with “eternal truth” must be dethroned and reclassified as mere presuppositions. Long-standing arguments that, with the passing of time, have hardened into “sacred truth” must now be dethroned and reclassified as mere arguments. Long-standing practices that have become almost like “the unchangeable law of the Medes and Persians” must now be dethroned and reclassified as cultural preferences. Rethinking means that some change might result. So, we must have an honest willingness to change our views and modify our behavior if necessary.

Fourth, we need to clarify the role and function of the Bible. Instead of rummaging through the Bible to find texts that might support our preconceived notions, we must re-examine the biblical text-and we must do so rigorously. Women in the church is a serious topic and deserves serious study. Now, I am not at all suggesting erudite excursions into intellectual black holes, vortices of endless regression into which scholars sometime drift, never to be seen again. I am suggesting patient exegesis (getting out of the Bible what the writer meant) as the basis for responsible implementation in contemporary life of ancient biblical principles and values.