

FMC Statement on Women in Ministry

August 1, 1995

Statement adopted by the 1995 General Conference of the Free Methodist Church of North America

The General Conference of 1974 passed a resolution “giving women equal status with men in the ministry of the church” (General Conference Minutes, p. 388). According to the General Conference report in the Light & Life magazine, the vote was unanimous. That vote, in the minds of many, settled the issue and they turned their attention to other concerns.

During the intervening twenty years, the denomination’s position has not changed. However, outside the denomination, the voices opposing women in ministry and limiting the leadership roles of women in the local church have become more assertive. Some of those voices are respected evangelical leaders (e.g., refer to J. I. Packer below) who seem to be ignorant of Wesleyan/holiness church history, inferring that anyone who differs from them is playing fast and loose with Scripture. This is confusing to many.

On the other hand, within the denomination there is growing concern over the fact that, though women officially have access to full ordination and any role in the church, few women are in leadership positions. At a time when women are entering formerly male-dominated professions in increasing numbers and providing community leadership, the percentage of women among Free Methodist pastors, especially senior pastors, and in church and conference leadership roles, is not growing as would be expected.

Given these concerns, the Study Commission on Doctrine believes it is time to articulate anew the church’s position on women in ministry. In the following pages we will examine the historical support for ordaining women, the appropriate principles of biblical interpretation, and the Scriptural bases for releasing the daughters of God in leadership and ministry.

Our History

Writing in Christianity Today, J. I. Packer claimed that the call for the ordination of women is a modern concern resulting in part from social changes since World War I. He also stated that “Bible-based evangelical communities of all denominational stripes within Protestantism, agree in opposing this trend” (Packer, p. 18). Packer apparently has no awareness of Wesleyan/Holiness history or the status of women within Wesleyan/holiness denominations. The Salvation Army, the Anderson Church of God, and the Church of the Nazarene, all founded in the last decades of the nineteenth century, have ordained women since their beginnings (Dayton, pp. 94, 97-98).

Believing it is God who must place the call on any minister, they have accepted that God could choose to call women as well as men. Since its founding, women, called and empowered by the Holy Spirit, have ministered in the Free Methodist Church.

As early as 1861, when the church was just one year old, the minutes of the Genesee Convention report the discussion of women preaching (see Richardson, p. 53). Bishop B.T. Roberts believed strongly in the equality of men and women. He argued that women should be working shoulder to shoulder with men in building the kingdom of God. He tried to lead the denomination toward the ordination of women.

The General Conference of 1874 established a class of ministers called Evangelists. They were persons called of God to preach the Gospel and promote revival but not called to a pastoral charge. Both “brothers and sisters” could be licensed as Evangelists. Thus, women were licensed and ministered as lay preachers in the church.

To the General Conference of 1890, “B.T. Roberts offered the following Resolution. That the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the provision which it makes, and in the agencies which it employs for the salvation of mankind, knows no distinction of nationality, condition [or] sex: therefore, no person who is called of God, and who is duly qualified, should be refused ordination on account of sex, or race or condition” (1890 General Conference Minutes, p. 131). After much debate, the motion lost by a vote of 37 to 41. Deeply grieved by this action, Roberts took up his pen. In 1891 he published *On Ordaining Women—Biblical and Historical Insights*. In the preface Roberts states the purpose for his writing: “that truth may prevail, Christ be glorified, and His Kingdom be advanced on earth” (Roberts, p. 8). Unfortunately, Roberts died in 1893 without seeing women fully released to build the Kingdom of God through the Free Methodist Church.

Although the 1890 General Conference refused to grant ordination to women, a step of progress was made for women. The *Free Methodist* (the denominational magazine) for October 22, 1890 reported, “Two of the lay delegates having seats in the General Conference [sic] are ladies....Both are doing some committee work. Most of our readers will be glad to know that the question of admitting ladies as lay delegates did not in the least disrupt the equanimity of the conference.” Throughout its history, the Free Methodist church has not officially limited the role of women in the church except in the case of ordination.

The General Conference of 1894 again addressed the place of women in ministry. It added a paragraph to the section on Evangelists. “When women have been licensed by the Annual Conference, and have served two successive years under appointment as pastors, they may ... have a voice and vote in the Annual Conference; and in the transaction of Conference business they shall be counted with the preachers” (see Hogue, Vol. 1, p. 218). Though Evangelists were supposed to be lay, non-pastoral preachers, the church acknowledged that women Evangelists were pastoring.

Ordination was finally granted to women by the 1911 General Conference. But it was a limited ordination. They could be ordained Deacon, “provided always that this ordination of women shall not be considered a step toward ordination as Elder” (Hogue, Vol. 1, p. 218). Women could preach and pastor, but they were barred from senior leadership in the church until 1974.

In the Foreword to the 1992 reproduction of “On Ordaining Women,” John E. Van Valin says “for the last 132 years, the Free Methodist Church has with honor taken her place among many other groups within the Christian faith who accord to women honor and respect in ministry. For our church this honor is in part symbolized by ... ordination. ... The reprinting of this centenarian volume signals not so much a new era in the life of the church but a presentation of her cherished heritage.”

Interpreting Scripture

In the search for truth, Free Methodists want to know what the Bible says on any issue. Scripture is the ultimate authority on which we depend. But Scripture must be interpreted to ascertain God’s message for us. How one approaches the task of interpretation makes a great deal of difference in the meanings discovered. Before examining the biblical bases for women in ministry, let us identify the principles which should guide interpretation.

W. Ward Gasque in his article “The Role of Women in the Church, in Society and in the Home” identifies several principles which need to guide our study of biblical texts. First the **contextual principle**. What is the author discussing in the surrounding verses? How does the verse under study

relate to the theme and logic of the whole passage? The context provides insight on the meaning.

Second, the **linguistic principle**. The Bible was written in Hebrew or Greek. Translating meaning from language to language is a challenge. Understanding God's word for us requires an honest examination of a passage in its original language. What meanings might words have carried? Is that meaning accurately and fully translated into the English? Have translators used different English words for the same Greek or Hebrew word in different passages? For example, in Romans 16:1 Phoebe is called a "servant." The Greek word used here is usually translated "deacon" or "minister" in verses speaking of men. Why is Phoebe not similarly called a "deacon" or "minister"?

Third, the **historical principle**. Without an understanding of the historical setting in which biblical authors were writing, we often miss the revolutionary nature of Scripture in contrast to pagan ways. Reading Paul's letters to the churches without knowing the historical setting is like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. Our interpretation may be distorted if we do not seek to understand the heresies being spread in the early church and the lifestyle issues which infant Christians brought into the church.

Fourth, **interpret a particular text within the context of an author's writing as a whole**. To discern Paul's views on women, one must wrestle with all that he said on the subject and make sense of the whole. When there seem to be contradictions, the historical and contextual principles may help unravel the mystery.

Fifth, the **principle of the analogy of faith**. Christians assume the consistency of Scripture as a whole. Any individual text must therefore be interpreted in the light of the whole. Understanding the flow of Scripture is important in discovering its consistency. Gilbert Bilezikian in "Beyond Sex Roles" suggests that creation — fall — redemption summarize the flow of Scripture (Bilezikian, pp. 15ff.). In Genesis 1 and 2 we find God's creation design; Genesis 3 records the fall and the rest of the Old Testament tells of God's first covenant with fallen human beings. The New Testament proclaims the story of redemption and the new covenant through which persons can be redeemed and empowered by God's Spirit to live in accordance with God's will — the creation design. When interpreting specific scripture passages it is important to distinguish between the creation design, descriptions of God working patiently with fallen humanity under the first covenant, and God's vision for those who are redeemed.

It is interesting to note that where persons begin their study of what the Bible has to say about women impacts their final conclusions. Some begin with statements from Paul and Peter which seem to limit the role of women in the church and make them subservient to men in the home. They then see the rest of Scripture through these verses. Others begin with Genesis 1-3 and move on through Scripture. They are amazed by Jesus' treatment of women, thrilled by Acts 2:16 and Galatians 3:28. They celebrate the equality the Bible portrays for women and men. In the light of the whole, they wrestle with the difficult passages and discover the harmony of these verses when sound interpretive principles are used (see Gasque, p. 1).

The last principle mentioned by Gasque is the **history of biblical interpretation**. For centuries Christians used Scripture to prove the rightness of slavery. Finally, principles similar to those identified above were applied to the verses referring to slaves and nineteenth century evangelical Christians began to call for the abolition of slavery. Their approach to biblical interpretation also led them to support the ordination of women (see Dayton, p. 90). It is interesting to note that in the first chapter of "On Ordaining Women" Roberts states, "If those who stood high as interpreters of Reason and Revelation, and who expressed the prevailing sentiments of their day, were so greatly mistaken on [the slavery issue] ... , is it not possible that the current sentiment as to the position which WOMAN should be permitted to occupy in the Church of Christ may also be wrong?" (Roberts, p. 11). Sound principles of interpretation are needed to clear up misunderstandings and destructive error.

Biblical Support for Women in Ministry

In recent years, many excellent books have been written to articulate the biblical perspective on the place of women and men in the Church and home. Many of the insights presented by these modern writers had already been anticipated by Roberts in his brief book. Since we are here addressing Free Methodists, we will turn first to Roberts for help in seeing what the Bible says about women in ministry and amplify his work with insights from other scholars. The bibliography at the end of this article provides resources for further study.

Old Testament Insights

Roberts begins his biblical study with Genesis 2:18, “The Lord said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” Some use this verse to prove that women are simply to “help” men, to serve them. Roberts reads this verse to mean that “woman was created, not as the *servant* of man, but as his *companion, his equal*.” Adam Clarke, he notes, understood the Hebrew to imply “that the woman was to be a perfect resemblance of the man, possessing neither inferiority or superiority, but being in all things like and equal to himself.” The word translated “helper” in Genesis 2:18 appears nineteen times in the Old Testament. Fifteen times it refers to God helping needy people. It therefore carries no connotation of inferiority (see Evans, p. 16).

To both man and woman, God gave the order to be fruitful and to take dominion over the world (Genesis 1:28). There is no hint of woman’s subjection before the fall. Roberts notes that when Jesus was asked about divorce in Matthew 19:3, he based his response on Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” Why did Jesus refer back to the time before the fall? “To re-enact the law enacted then. Thus Christ restored the primitive law. He said nothing about the subjection of women — not one word. ... Christ came to repair the ruin wrought by the fall” (Roberts, pp. 35-36). Christ calls redeemed humanity to live out the creation design.

The Old Testament tells of two categories of religious leaders, priests and prophets. All the Hebrew priests were male. With the coming of Christ as our great high priest, the order of priests ended. The prophets are therefore more the Old Testament counterparts of contemporary Christian ministers. And there were women prophets including Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). The Scripture presents their stories, making no issue of their gender. Women judges and prophets are both recognized.

Roberts concludes his review of the Old Testament by stating “there is nothing in the creation of woman or in her condition under the law which proves that no woman should be ordained as a minister of the Gospel” (Roberts, p. 37).

New Testament Insights

Jesus shocked his world by the way in which he treated women. He respected them, taking time to talk with them (John 4), heal them (Luke 8:48), forgive them (John 8:11), engage them in theological discussion (John 4:19-26; 11:23-27), and welcome them as disciples — i.e., learners (Luke 10:39, 42). He drew into his teaching parables from their experiences (Luke 15:8-10). No other rabbi of Jesus’ time did such things. Jesus’ treatment of women was revolutionary. He even commanded a woman to be the first witness to the resurrection (John 20:17). Moreover, Jesus made no statements limiting women in their ministry for him.

But, some may say, the twelve apostles were all men. Does that not indicate church leaders should be men? To this objection Roberts responded, “If *gentiles* are to preach, why did [Jesus] not choose a

gentile among the twelve? Why were the twelve *Jews*, every one of them? The example is as binding in the one case as the other” (Roberts, p. 37).

The key text on women’s ministry for the nineteenth century holiness movement was Acts 2:16-18, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’” One Methodist woman preacher declared Pentecost as “Woman’s Emancipation Day.” A new age began with Pentecost, an age in which the Holy Spirit anointed daughters as well as sons to preach and prophesy (Malcolm, pp. 120, 127).

For Roberts Galatians 3:28 was the key verse which settled the question of whether or not women could be ministers, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Some claim that this verse refers only to salvation. To this objection Roberts replied, “If this verse referred *only to salvation by faith*, the *female* would not be specified In the many offers of salvation made in the New Testament, woman is not specially mentioned’ He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,’ included woman as well as man. Everyone so understood it We must understand [Galatians 3:28] to teach, as it actually does, the perfect equality of all, under the Gospel, in *rights and privileges*, without respect of *nationality*, or condition, or sex. If this gives to *men* of all nations the right to become ministers of the Gospel, it gives *women* precisely the same right” (Roberts, pp. 37-39).

But, you may be asking, what about the verses that seem to limit women’s involvement in the church? Are they in conflict with the rest of the Bible, or is there a way of understanding them which is in harmony with the flow of Scripture? Two such passages are 1 Corinthians 14:34- 35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul talks about women covering their heads when they pray and prophesy. Those instructions would not be needed if all “women should remain silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Paul’s theme in chapter fourteen is orderly worship. Verses 26-35 identify three groups of persons who apparently were creating disorder and needed to be silent: persons speaking in tongues when there was no interpreter (v. 28), those who continued to speak when someone else received a revelation (v. 30), and women who were speaking out during worship (v. 34). John Bristow notes that the word translated “speak” in verse 34 is *la/leo* which of all the verbs that may be translated “speak” is the only one that can simply mean talk to one another (Bristow, p. 63). The Corinthian women were told not to interrupt the church service by conversing together; if they had questions about the topic at hand, they should wait and discuss them at home (v. 35). Probably these women were experiencing new liberties as Christians. They were not accustomed to being in public gatherings. Paul is calling, not for the silencing of women preachers, but for the silencing of women who disrupted worship with their conversations and questions, along with the silencing of others whose behavior detracted from worship (see further Evans, pp. 95-108).

We have already noted that Free Methodists historically have not silenced women in the church. Women have testified, sung, preached and taught in the church. But for over one hundred years the leadership and authority of women were limited by denying full ordination. One speaker in the 1890 General Conference debate declared, “We would give her the same educational advantages, and the same property rights as man. We would acknowledge her to be the equal of man in intellect, equal in ability, but not equal in authority (see Gramento, p. 77).

Persons holding such a view would probably quote 1 Timothy 2:12 as their biblical support, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” A look at linguistics and the historical context can help shed light on the meaning of this passage. In verse 12 Paul uses the Greek word *authentein* for authority, rather than the common word he uses in all such cases.

Authentein carries the idea of autocratic or totally self-directed behavior, of usurping authority or domineering. Paul forbids women to usurp authority that is not rightly theirs (Evans, p. 103). The word translated “man” in this verse is the Greek word often translated “husband.” Some scholars believe verse 12 speaks to husbands and wives as they relate to one another in the worshipping community and not to the role of women in general.

Pastor Timothy was dealing with false teaching in Ephesus. Paul was concerned that Timothy not allow men or women to teach false doctrines (1 Timothy 1:3). In the context of this concern, Paul stated that women “should learn in quietness and full submission” (1 Timothy 2:11). The call for an attitude of quiet submission on the part of the learner probably reflected first century educational ideas rather than limitations prescribed for women. But the significant point in verse 11 is that Paul wanted women to be learning. In our day of education for all, we miss the radical nature of Paul’s statement (Evans, p. 102).

At the end of her study on 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Mary Evans concludes, “While the prohibition [to teach and have authority] is not absolute, it remains a prohibition. No believer, male or female, has an automatic right to teach. Any, particularly women, who are untaught and easily deceived, must continue to concentrate on learning rather than on usurping an authority which had not been given them” (Evans, p. 106). When viewed in their literary and historical context with insights from the Greek, these passages do not contradict what we find elsewhere in Scripture.

Conclusion

What does the Free Methodist Church believe the Scriptures teach about the place of women in the Church? Bishop Roberts summarized those beliefs well.

- Man and woman were created equal, each possessing the same rights and privileges as the other.
- At the fall, woman ... became subject to her husband.
- Christ re-enacted the primitive law and restored the original relation of equality of the sexes.
- The objections to the equality of man and woman in the Christian Church, based upon the Bible, rest upon a wrong translation of some passages and a misinterpretation of others.
- We come, then, to this final conclusion: The Gospel of Jesus Christ, in the provisions which it makes, and in the agencies which it employs, for the salvation of humankind, knows no distinction of race, condition, or sex (Roberts, pp. 103-104).

With these beliefs, women should be encouraged to take their place in all areas of church leadership and ministry. Jesus calls us all, women and men, to make disciples and build the kingdom of God.