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Women's Leadership

JEANIE SHAW

I remember as a young girl sitting in church and eagerly listening to a missionary tell of his adventures for God. He spoke of the many lives he was seeing changed by Jesus. I was waiting to be inspired, and I was inspired by his life. However, I was saddened to think that since I was a girl, there was likely no way that I could make such an impact on others for our God. I saw many nice women around me, yet I did not see things from these women in the church that inspired me to change the world, which in my youth and enthusiasm I longed to do.

From my window growing up in the Churches of Christ, I viewed women in the church very much as in the background. At times, I assumed women were less important and useful in the church because there was no mission or role for women other than cooking for events, teaching children's classes, washing nursery sheets and baptismal robes, doing secretarial work and organizing events. I'm not demeaning these needed tasks, and greatly appreciate the humble service of women who gave what they could, but I desperately wanted to make more of a difference for God. It seemed that teaching, training and evangelism were for the men.

As a preteen I was inspired by my passionate woman teacher. In my early teens, I was inspired by seeing a woman in action teaching and training other women. In 1968, at fourteen years old, I observed her as she moved among the women. Her life and impact for God was clear and visible; her leadership and training of other women was felt. Though surely there have been many others throughout history, she was the first one I knew personally who started a ministry for women. I saw her in evangelistic outreach, and teaching classes for women. She was not paid for her work, but she filled a needed role. She "took me in" and inspired me, taught me and prayed with me week by week. A few years later, after I graduated college and moved to be involved in campus ministry in Gainesville, Florida, a few women were actually hired by this church as "women's counselors" to help with the many new Christians that were being converted. This, to my knowledge, was a first in the Churches of Christ.

As I grew older I ordered tapes from other women I knew to be teaching and training in other places, called other women to learn what they were doing, and I wrote letters to women who were impacting others. I would ask for time and mentoring and went to every training opportunity I could find. When there were not women doing these things around me, I attended small group Bible studies and classes taught by men, so I could learn how to lead and teach women. This zeal to learn should not be seen as weird or unusual! This is what happens when women get inspired to make a difference in this world.

Strong, spiritual male leadership is not only God's plan for his church, it is also inspiring and securing for women. However, only women who exemplify the life of Christ can provide the real life example of how his life can be lived by women. We all need to see life modeled. I have a deep conviction that the church desperately needs women to powerfully and inspiringly lead other women in being disciples of Jesus.

JESUS AND WOMEN

Jesus rocked the women's world! In his view of women, he crossed cultural and traditional norms.

How did Jesus think of women and address them? Think of Jesus' interactions with women. Over and over he made the countercultural point that women mattered, they were to be valued and respected and they were needed to make a difference in this world. In the Gospels we see a significant difference between current thinking and Jesus' posture toward and view of women.

Do we really understand from the Gospels what Jesus did for women in his speaking to and of them? Sometimes we see these simply as "biblical accounts" without understanding the deep significance of these events. Consider the woman at the well (John 4). Jesus chose her, a woman, to first disclose who he really was. He showed compassion to a "sinful woman" to teach a group of men in John 8. Mary and Martha were engaged in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 15.40) and it was to a group of women after Jesus' death that he chose to make his first appearance (Mark 16.1–10).

We see in the new covenant, as revealed in Acts and the letters, the new place for women in the church as opposed to their role in the synagogue.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3.26–29).

Though a woman might have a different role from a man in the church or the home, Paul's words mean her standing before God was one of complete equality. A passage in 1 Corinthians 7 addresses the sexual relationship in marriage: Paul describes the same equality, showing how radical is the Christian's view of a woman's value. The writings of such Romans as Plutarch, Aulus Gellius, Valerius Maximus and Julius Paulus make it clear that in Roman culture, women were at the complete mercy of their husbands' whims with no right to any expectations.¹ To Christians Paul writes something that is so different:

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife (1 Cor 7.3–4).

Women were mentioned as leaders in Acts 2.17 and in Acts 18 (Priscilla with Aquila), the prophesying daughters were spoken of in Acts 21. We must consider Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4.2–3), whom Paul spoke of as fellow workers contending at his side for the cause of the gospel. They obviously had influence in the assembly, as they were in disagreement with each other, likely causing dissension in the church (given Paul's public appeal to them and previous reference and appeal to unity). Many other women traveled with the apostles, providing much of their support. Romans 16 lists a number of women who were considered ministers, or servants, in particular churches.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me (Rom 16.1–2).

1. *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Online at www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/ (accessed May 26, 2010).

Walvoord and Zuck exegete the passage concerning Phoebe's role in this way:

16:1–2. Phoebe (which means “bright, radiant”) was Paul's emissary to deliver this letter, so he wrote officially, **I commend to you our sister Phoebe.** The relationship mentioned is spiritual, not familial. Phoebe was **a servant of the church in Cenchrea**, a seaport a few miles east of Corinth (cf. Acts 18:18; and see the map between Acts and Rom.). The word διακονον, “servant,” is used for the office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 10, 12) as well as used generally (Rom. 15:8; 1 Cor. 3:5). Use of the word with the phrase “of the church” strongly suggests some recognized position, a fact appropriate for a person serving as Paul's emissary. Paul not only officially commended her (cf. 2 Cor. 3:1), but also asked the Roman Christians **to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help** (lit., “and to stand by her in whatsoever matter”) **she may need from you.** Paul explained, **for she has been a great help** (προστατις, “a protectress, succorer”) **to many people, including me.** So they should help her since she had helped others.²

Then as we continue in Romans 16, we hear:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them . . . Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you . . . Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord . . . Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord (Rom 16.3–4, 6, 12).

These examples of women who served in the church of the first century (and perhaps were even supported by it) show that the concept of having women in ministry was acceptable. The need for women to fulfill specific tasks or roles is something to be determined by the wisdom of those in leadership, depending on the makeup and the needs of the congregation.

DESIGNATED WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Titus 2.3–5 discusses older women leading younger women. The training of women to be godly wives and mothers is a high calling, but leadership among women is not limited to what is described in this passage.

Church leaders are to prepare God's people for works of service so that “all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4.11–13). Surely included in this would be designating women for particular leadership roles among the women so that the body grows as each part of the body, including the more than half that is usually female, learns to do its work (Eph 4.16).

Each church must wrestle with whether or not they will empower and/or employ women to lead other women. The church leaders in the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) have asked qualified women to fulfill ministries to other women. This practice has a forty-year history. Women leaders are often a part of church leadership teams and sometimes on church boards. In most churches each small group (from teens to the older women) has a woman designated to lead the women in the group. The small groups are the basic functioning units of the entire church.

When the development of women's ministries is neglected, the following will more likely take place:

- *Fewer women in this lost world are brought to a transforming relationship with Christ.* Many women will be unprepared to bring the good news to fellow moms, work associates, women neighbors and relatives. Men are just not the best ones to train women how to connect with women and how to use those connections to introduce the kingdom.

2. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 499.

- *Men and women are put in positions where they are more vulnerable to sin.* When men primarily reach out to women, and also counsel and teach them, the temptation for unhealthy attachment and sexual sin greatly increases. All too often, ministers counseling women end up in compromised and sinful situations where both the counselor and the counselee have impure and unhealthy thoughts that lead to sin. Which is more prudent and wise—to have a man or a woman talk to a woman about purity in her dating relationship and ask, “So did he touch your breast”? Women need to be trained to counsel and teach one another.
- *The world gets our best talents.* Without inspiration and a sense of purpose in their lives, the “prominent Greek women” of our day most often use their gifts and talents exclusively in their careers. Women need to see discipleship “with flesh on it” as it is lived out by women. They also need further teaching and training to effectively refute the lies of this world that most women believe.

Beyond these, I see that without the leadership of women by women, sinful patterns tend to develop more easily:

- Roots of bitterness are often left unaddressed and grow up and defile many. Patterns emerge from these temptations to slander, gossip and be busybodies—things that are specifically mentioned in connection with women in the scriptures and with which I see women struggle again and again.
- An unsubmitive, competitive and rebellious spirit of women toward leaders, husbands and/or one another may be left unseen and unaddressed, or at least unresolved. Women are going to have influence in all churches, but the type of influence that it is will be largely determined by the effectiveness of the leadership by women among women.

Perhaps some reading this article have never been a part of a ministry where there is *not* a women’s ministry. For those, it may be more difficult to envision what can often result when there is no leadership for women by women. Certainly, women in the church have opportunity to hear the word preached by men and can read their own Bibles and instruct one another. However, when there is no spiritual leader involved in their lives in a personal, practical way, many revert to a way of functioning day-to-day with what comes most natural to them, failing to apply the teaching and preaching they hear. This default mode most often goes back to their family life training, or buying into the very persuasive culture that throws role model after role model of unspiritual women in their faces.

FULL-TIME (COMPENSATED) WOMEN’S MINISTRY WITHIN THE ICOC

In the ICOC, women’s ministry is almost always considered important, and in most cases, churches have women who are full time or part time on the church staff, functioning as a part of the leadership team. As such, they are treated with respect and appreciation. Most often the woman on staff is the wife of a church leader, allowing them to be more effective as they work together, avoiding the temptations that may come from working closely with a staff member of the opposite sex. Yet, there are opportunities for single women to serve in a ministry to the female adults and particularly to students, where we have seen such great impact from having women take the good news into campus housing.

Over time we have learned that women who are hired to work in a women’s ministry role need to have clarity in their “job description,” a good understanding of boundaries, and possess the faith, leadership gifts and desire to fulfill the task.

Why would leaders have a conviction to have a women’s ministry? I asked some of our church leaders. Their responses were as follows (and you will recognize some similarities to my earlier thoughts):

- The church membership is over half women.
- Teaching and training needs, as well as studying the Bible with others, apply to women as well as men; women are better able to know women and teach and train them.
- If women are not receiving this teaching and training, it will be detrimental to the growth of the church, and the equipping of the “women saints” will be inadequate for the health and growth of the sisters.
- The only way to accomplish these things outside of a women’s ministry is for the men to take more of their time to teach and train the women; and that is seen by our leaders as not wise for the sake of prudence, effectiveness, appropriateness and time.
- Women who are trained to lead can then train others, who then train others, and the church better builds itself up in love.

If you visit a worship service of an ICOC congregation, you may see women participating in several ways that were not practiced in the mainline Churches of Christ that I remember. You may see a woman assisting in ushering during the communion, singing as part of the up-front worship team or as a soloist, making an announcement about an upcoming women’s event, sharing alongside a brother who is leading the thoughts before the communion meal (we do ask that the sisters share from their lives without preaching!), or doing “much of the talking” at the baptism of another woman and then along with other sisters baptizing the new disciple. During retreats or devotionals you may see a man and woman teaching together as the woman directs her thoughts to the other women in the group, or shares a women’s perspective with the men. The sisters strive to have respect for their brothers in all these practices.

Beyond the services, you would see women training other women and practicing “one another” relationships as they seek to help each other grow in the Lord. You would see sisters opening the Bible with other women as they study the scriptures with them. From my experience you would see them being valued, consulted and honored by the brothers.

In our churches, women’s ministry came under much scrutiny in 2003. In some churches, women had assumed too much authority, which had its due effect. At times there was heavy-handed leadership coming from a woman who showed disrespect toward other leaders and members. Some of the women carried too much responsibility and expectations, and they “burned out” under the load. I believe God’s discipline of the church helped us all to reevaluate and define what is best and needed.

I believe a public and felt presence of women’s leadership assures the women that they will be heard, considered, trained and inspired. For a few years following our upheaval, many of our women leaders were lacking in support and confidence, and it could be felt within by a loss of purpose, passion and unity among the women. Leadership among the women needed to be restored and/or rekindled and great progress is being made.

I count it as an incredible privilege to be able to serve God’s church in women’s leadership as we help reach this lost world. I have grown and continue to learn each day. Through the mountaintops and valleys of my Christian walk of forty-three years (thirty-five of which I have served in the ministry and nearly twenty of those receiving a salary), I have not one day of regret for this choice. We have an amazing fellowship of sisters from all walks of life in the church, who lift up our arms as we all do the work of the ministry.

We have something wonderful to share, and women in and out of the church are waiting, as was I, to be inspired by women with the amazing, life-changing message of Jesus. They are waiting to grow in their faith, to gain vision and to see their womanhood used to the glory to God.

JEANIE SHAW HAS BEEN IN WOMEN’S MINISTRY FOR THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, SERVING IN NORTH CAROLINA, WEST VIRGINIA, AND AT THE BOSTON CHURCH, WHERE SHE HAS BEEN SINCE 1987.