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Women and Order in the Household of God

Richard T. Hughes

When Steven Lemley was a doctoral student at Ohio State, he preached for one of the Churches of Christ in Columbus, and he told me this story about something that happened one Sunday evening during the course of his sermon. He had just begun to preach, he said, when the back door of the church opened and one of the most striking women he had ever seen came into the sanctuary and took a seat in one of the back pews. She was tall and angular, Steven said, with flaming red hair that reached past her waist. Steven noticed. There is no doubt about that. But he kept on preaching.

When he finished preaching and after the congregation had sung the invitation hymn, one of the elders got up to make the announcements. Steven said there were two elders in this church and they were brothers, born and bred on the plains of West Texas, and both spoke in their native Texas twang. So this particular brother—the one who made the announcements—told of the ladies' Bible class on Thursday and the potluck coming up the next month, and then looked around the room and asked in his West Texas twang, "Any more announce-MENTS?"

At that, the woman who had entered the church during Steven's sermon sprang to her feet and announced, "I've come here tonight to tell you folks about an old-fashioned healing revival going on down the street. Why, they're healing the sick and raising the dead!"

And the elder looked around the room and said, with not a twinge of emotion in his voice, "Any more announce-MENTS?"

The pertinence of that story will become clear as we get further into this presentation. But for now I want to make two simple observations.

First, the greatest strength of our tradition has always been our unswerving allegiance to the biblical text. But second, our greatest weakness has been the way we have read that text through the lens of the dominant culture. And our inability to free ourselves from a cultural reading of the biblical text has everything to do with the way we have treated women in our fellowship.

Most members of Churches of Christ today would recognize that the single theme that stands at the heart of the biblical text is the message of grace—the good news that God loves us infinitely more than we can fathom, has accepted us, and has said yes to us in spite of our inevitable failures, our brokenness, and our sins.

But based on a cultural reading of the biblical text, Churches of Christ resisted the gospel of grace until the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, by the 1930s, only a few of our preachers ever spoke of *unmerited grace*. One of those was K. C. Moser, a native Texan and a preacher in Oklahoma and Texas from the 1920s through the 1970s. A careful reading of his Bible convinced K. C. Moser that God's grace was to be found not in his commands but in the cross of Christ. He published his views in 1932 in a book he entitled *The Way of Salvation*.

But it was not until 1934, when he published an article in the Texas-based Firm Foundation, that Churches of Christ paid any serious regard to his perspective. The response, when it came, was almost entirely negative.

Quite simply, Moser argued that while baptism and good works were important, the gospel was a message of unmerited grace and the proper response to that grace was trust in Christ who had been “crucified, buried, and raised for our justification.” The editor of the *Firm Foundation*, G. H. P. Showalter, rejected Moser’s claim out of hand and pressed him to “speedily abandon such fantastic speculation.”

A storm of controversy quickly erupted over Moser’s emphasis on unmerited grace and he became *persona non grata* in many quarters of Churches of Christ for the next forty years.

Thanks to our unswerving allegiance to the biblical text, Churches of Christ finally discovered the gospel of grace that is now a staple of our preaching.

But there is a corollary to the gospel of grace. If God extends his grace to us, we must extend that same grace to other people. No writer in the entire text of the New Testament expressed this corollary more forcefully than did John in his first epistle:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (3:16–18)

The New Testament often describes this corollary as “the gospel of the kingdom.” Matthew uses that very phrase in chapter 4 where he writes that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news [i.e., *the gospel*] of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” (4:23)

And for the most part, Churches of Christ have yet to discover the full implications of *the gospel of the kingdom*.

Matthew’s phrase *the gospel of the kingdom* offers an early introduction to a theme that resonates throughout the gospels, namely, *the kingdom of God*. And if we inquire into the meaning of *the gospel of the kingdom* or *the kingdom of God*, the answer is not hard to find.

In virtually every instance where those phrases appear in the New Testament, they are closely linked to concern for the poor, the dispossessed, those in prison, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and all those who suffer at the hands of the world’s elites. In other words, the kingdom of God is where the powerless are empowered, where the hungry are fed, where the sick are healed, where the poor are sustained, and where those who find themselves marginalized by the rulers of this world are finally offered equality and justice.

And in the New Testament world, no one was more thoroughly dispossessed, no one suffered more at the hands of the world’s elites, and no one was more completely marginalized by the rulers of this world than women.

And that is why the gospel message, with reference to women, was so completely revolutionary. That is why Paul’s proclamation in Galatians 3:28, that in Jesus Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”—that is why this proclamation, if taken seriously, would turn the world upside down.

But why have Churches of Christ resisted the revolutionary implications of this message? Our resistance is rooted not in the biblical text, for a faithful reading of that text would undermine that resistance. It is rooted instead in the cultural lens through which we have read that text for almost two hundred years.

Alexander Campbell set the agenda for Churches of Christ when he urged us to read the biblical text through the lens of the Age of Reason.

We rightly identify the Age of Reason with the eighteenth century, the century in which Campbell was born. And the chief concern of proponents of the Age of Reason was to bring order out of the chaos that had engulfed the seventeenth century, the age of Europe’s religious wars. For 1,200 years—the fourth through the fifteenth centuries—an enforced order prevailed in Western Europe. There was no such thing as religious warfare for there was only one church—the Roman Catholic Church—and that one church routinely suppressed any challenge to its authority.

But the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century gave birth to strong rival churches—the Lutheran Church, for example, and the various Reformed churches of Switzerland, the Netherlands, and England. And the question soon arose as to which of those churches would control Western Europe.

In an effort to answer that question, those churches—and the territories they represented—went to war, marking the seventeenth century as the age of brutal religious warfare.

But leading thinkers of the eighteenth century—the Age of Reason—sought to bring order out of the chaos of the seventeenth century. They did this by rejecting the emotional appeals that had so often defined the wars of religion and by defining the Christian religion instead in strictly rational terms. One leading light of the eighteenth century wrote a book entitled *Christianity not Mysterious*. And John Locke, the single thinker of the Age of Reason who did the most to shape the thoughts of Alexander Campbell, wrote a book called *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

Not only that, but the Age of Reason was also the age of scientific discoveries, and virtually all these thinkers sought to conform the biblical text to scientific models and norms. They did all this in a good-faith attempt to curb the emotional excesses that had defined the Christian faith in the seventeenth century, to put an end to the wars of religion, and to bring order out of the chaos of that brutal age.

And born as he was toward the end of the Age of Reason, these were the assumptions about the Christian religion that Alexander Campbell inherited.

Campbell set the agenda for Churches of Christ when he vigorously promoted the restoration of primitive Christianity. The problem was not the idea of restoration in its own right since the notion of restoration is an inherently useful vision. The problem lay in the fact that Campbell, indebted as he was to the principles of the Age of Reason, defined restoration in strictly rational terms. Accordingly, he viewed the New Testament as a scientific manual upon which rational and unbiased people might reconstruct in scientifically precise and accurate ways the forms and structures of the primitive church.

The notion of forms and structures is crucial to this conversation, for Campbell seldom asked what the Bible said about powerless people. Instead, he asked about the biblical pattern for worship. He seldom asked what the Bible said about marginalized people. Instead, he asked about a rationally constructed plan of salvation. He seldom asked what the Bible said about people oppressed by imperial powers. Instead, he asked about the biblical model for the proper organization of the local church.

In all these ways, Campbell diverted the eyes of Churches of Christ from the prize of the kingdom of God. And because he failed to ask about powerless, marginalized, and oppressed people, he failed to ask in any meaningful way about the role of women in both church and society. Indeed, the plight of women in his own time was essentially irrelevant to his agenda.

But there is more, for his penchant for order led Campbell and so many of his nineteenth-century followers to marginalize not only women but also the Holy Spirit. Indeed, many in Churches of Christ sought to tame the Spirit, to place the Spirit under the rational norms of the Age of Reason, and, in that way, to create a Holy Spirit that they could control.

And their concern to control the Holy Spirit of God was closely linked to their concern to perpetuate the marginal role of women. No one made that linkage more clear than David Lipscomb who claimed that any church that gave women too much freedom permitted “perversions of the service of God” since a woman’s “strong emotional nature demands whatever strikes her fancy, whether authorized by the Lord or not.”

Put another way, men in Churches of Christ, reading the Bible through the lens of the Age of Reason and therefore committed to order in the church, muzzled women for the same reason they muzzled the Holy Spirit of God. Both appeared unmanageable and therefore threatening to a brotherhood that put a high priority on preserving order and control based on strictly rational considerations.

And so we now return to the story that Steven Lemley told about the woman who entered his church one night during the course of his sermon and told about the healing revival where they were “healing the sick and raising the dead.” When the presiding elder, in response to her announcement, looked around the room and drolly asked, “Any more announce-^{MENTS}?” he was rejecting both dimensions of the message he

had heard. He rejected the message, to be sure, but he also rejected the messenger—a woman who had no right to disrupt the rational order this elder sought to preserve in the household of God.

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