

Sons and Daughters

Hearing Women's Voices at the Stamford Church of Christ

By Dale Pauls

Where I worship God I hear women's voices. I hear them read Scripture, sometimes with an interpretive passion I've rarely heard from men. I hear them pray in ways that stir my soul and awaken places in my heart that were dormant and undiscovered. I hear them bring a woman's sensibility to their reflections on the suffering of Christ as we commune together at the Lord's Table. I hear announcements that make sense because they are directly given by those most familiar with the real needs of our church family. And I have sat in, and greatly benefited from, classes taught by female social workers or Bible scholars. In fact, where I worship God we understand that distinctions of roles, privileges, rights and status on the basis of birth (that is, on the basis of race, gender and class) are ended in Christ. We base this understanding on ten years of careful and exhaustive study of Scripture. The following is the story of how this came to be at the Stamford Church of Christ—of how it is that here in this place the Spirit of God is poured out on both our sons and daughters.

A Place in Time and Tradition

Traditionally Churches of Christ have held until recently to an understanding of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that does not examine historical context and that strangely even denies the relevance of historical context, a relevance widely accepted on other texts and issues. On that basis, they have generally prohibited women from exercising "leadership roles" in their public worship. This prohibition amounted, in most congregations, to the almost complete silencing of women in central worship services.

This traditional position has always carried with it irregularities (facts that do not quite fit or questions that resist easy answers). In what way are we to understand the Pentecost announcement that God's Spirit would be poured out on both men and women, and both would prophesy (Acts 2:17-21)? In what sense did women pray and prophesy in the early church (1 Corinthians 11:5)? And what did Paul mean by there being neither male nor female in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28)?

These first-century anomalies were paralleled by our own. A woman could express her faith in writing, and we would put music to it and sing it, or we would read an article she composed, but she was forbidden from simply saying the same things in public worship. There were also large and now well-known inconsistencies in our interpretation of Scripture, how it is, for instance, that we could insist on silencing women but not insist on washing one another's feet. And if these ironies escaped us, they were not escaping the generations coming after us.

Moreover, for the first time in history, women in our culture had become as educated as men, and as trained for responsible leadership in society. This marked a monumental cultural divide—what no culture expected of women before this shift, all cultures, certainly all developed Western cultures, will expect hereafter. Consequently, traditional churches are increasingly viewed as the last cultural bastions of exclusively male leadership.

Naturally there were consequences for us in Stamford, Connecticut. Some members had been lost for specifically gender-related reasons starting in the late 1980s. And reports from the front lines of evangelism became more and more disturbing. Visitors increasingly commented on the male-only nature of our worship, and some of those most active in sharing our faith reported that our public stance on these matters was what it had never been before—a hindrance to the acceptance of the gospel!

Starting to Wonder

It was in this context—the recognition that the solid phalanx of male worship leaders was probably already a barrier to gospel proclamation—that our church family turned its attention to these matters. At a congregational retreat at Channel 3 Country Camp in September 1987, our elders then—Bob Bohannon, J.G. Pinkerton and Bob Speer—agreed that it would be important for their ministers to lead them, and possibly later the congregation, in a study of women’s roles in the church. They realized that in our communities, largely Fairfield and Westchester towns and cities within the orbit of New York City, this issue was not going to go away.

I led the first such exploratory study December 5, 1987 at the Bohannon home with the elders and Ken Durham, Curt Marshall and Eric Hancock present. By that time, I had studied the subject for six or seven years, at first only to defend the way things were. I had tried hard to make sense of the time-honored traditional view of things, looking only more contemporary ways to restate old convictions, but in the end, there were just too things that didn’t fit and there were too many inconsistencies in our own practice. All this clear in our earliest deliberations together, especially as we held up our understandings in the headlights of context and consistency. We quickly realized, for instance, that we could not keep picking and choosing—sometimes from the very same text—what we would understand in a letter-of-the-law way and what we wouldn’t. That first study was followed by another later that winter led by Ken Durham. On March 31, 1991, again at their request, I led the elders at that time—Bruce Evans, John Grady, Ken McAdams and J.G. Pinkerton—in a similar study.

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In the meantime, on their own initiative, the Tuesday morning Ladies Class, led by Kathryn Koczanski and Elinor Gates, devoted the spring of 1989 to studying these matters as well. This same material was repeated during the fall and winter of 1992-93 as part of a Friday evening group at the residence of Kim Bohannon, so that those unable to attend mornings would also have an opportunity to study.

It may be important to know that the Stamford Church of Christ has over the years been blessed by a membership that is diverse racially, economically and geographically. Those raised in the Churches of Christ in Texas and Tennessee worship alongside those brought up Catholic in the Northeast. Moreover, our numbers have always included men and women transferred into our area by corporations, and their life experiences have tended to equip them with an openness to constructive change.

Furthermore, in recognition that the church must address issues that are sometimes controversial, we devoted Sunday morning classes in the fall of 1989 to understanding "Freedom and Authority in the Church at First," and in the same setting during the spring, summer and fall of 1991 we studied "Conflict in the Church at First," a topic which I was later asked to address at the 1993 ACU Lectureship. In these ways God, we believe, was working to create in our gatherings a capacity for mature Christian discussion of complicated but necessary topics.

The first congregation-wide teaching on women’s roles took the form of a five-week presentation on the subject of "Women in the Church at First" to a combined Sunday morning adult Bible class in December 1989 and January 1990. My approach to this subject was what it has always been to other subjects: textual, with a primary focus on discovering, from both the literary and historical context, the **original intent** of the inspired writers (in this case, specifically Paul when he wrote 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:26-40; Gal. 3:26-29; and 1 Tim. 2:9-15). Historical context was carefully examined, especially those aspects of contemporary culture in Corinth or Ephesus that may have influenced and even necessitated Paul's teaching. We understood from the very beginning that all

communication of any kind has the built-in assumption that it arises from a situation of some kind and will be best understood in the light of that situation. And it was clear that there is a circumstantial aspect to Paul's specific instructions, that Paul was guiding his first readers in the male-dominant setting in which they lived, but he was not validating their cultural setting for all time (see Appendix 1, "Neither Male Nor Female," also available as a separate leaflet).ⁱ

This study, covering exactly the same material, was repeated for our largest adult Bible on five Sunday mornings from March 21 through 18, 1993. This time it was preceded by a three-investigation of "Slavery in the Church at First," so our congregation might better understand what the

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church did with another dominant social convention of its time. It was also noted that, one hundred and fifty years ago in America, the debates within Christian circles over slavery parallel almost exactly the discussions now being held over women's roles in worship. The same kinds of arguments were made, based on the same approaches to biblical interpretation. Perhaps no issue illustrates better than slavery how imperative it is to distinguish between what the New Testament says about new life in Christ (e.g. Gal. 3:28) and the actual degree of implementation possible in the first-century churchⁱⁱ (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; Titus 2:9-10; Philemon).

In both the 1989-90 and the 1993 studies, we set down as guidelines for the class that the five-week presentation would first be presented straight through so that the study would not bog down in the quagmire of point-by-point debates. It was important that everyone see the whole picture and the coherence of a contextualized approach, although the elders and minister were available throughout the entire process for personal conversation.

During the second teaching, we opened the floor to four Sunday mornings (April 25 - May 16, 1993) of unrestricted and free-ranging discussion of the issues. Those who spoke and wrote (several submitted papers or letters) distinguished themselves by their honesty, maturity, fair-mindedness and mental vigor, but above all by their love and respect for their brothers and sisters. We can all be thankful to God for what became evident in our midst: a deep passion for standing before God justified; a respect for our religious heritage; a refusal to polarize and reduce complex matters to simple either-ors; impressive interpretative skills across the room; a sense of awe in examining sacred matters of gender; patience with differing and maturing viewpoints; modesty, vulnerability and the kind of discipline it takes to surrender personal rights lovingly to the consciences of others; and the courage it takes to state your convictions, to overcome that lump in your throat when you know others disagree. There were many remarkable moments: disclosures that were astonishingly frank, even life-long wounds that began to heal and be healed, and powerful insights into scripture, God and gender. Perhaps most commendable was the way almost everyone eventually brought the discussion back to Scripture. And it was apparent that everyone in the room respected truth, trusted truth, and knew that in open and free exchanges of ideas truth triumphs.

As a result of all these studies the elders asked that I write a congregational process paper titled **Faith and Gender** in which we might, starting in 1993, keep track of our thinking on this subject. We chose to write this in the form of drafts, so that we might easily keep it updated. The first few drafts were almost all inter-office memos. The first one widely circulated was **Draft 7** (dated March 1994), and the final one was **Draft 9** which offered an account of where we were in our studies up through June 1996. These papers also allowed visitors and new members to catch up on the process without our needing to focus on women's roles from the pulpit or in our classrooms. It was always important to our leadership that we not be a one-issue congregation, or stated another way, that our one issue should always remain gospel and not gender.

Meanwhile we were incorporating women into our quarterly planning sessions as ministry leaders (starting in December 1990), and the congregation quickly recognized their gifts for service and leadership. Also, we were blessed during this time by a woman who taught Scripture at a very advanced level, Kathryn Koczanski, and without fanfare the Tuesday morning class she taught became gender-inclusive. It was at that time a class of ten or twelve meeting on Tuesdays, not on Sunday mornings, but gradually the entire congregation came to understand that mixed classes taught by a woman could be first-rate educational experiences. Other fine female Bible teachers, Gayle Moore and then Ann Newton, followed Kathryn who left us in 1995 because of her husband's job transfer, and this class served as a constant low-profile reminder of how much Bible knowledge men were missing if they refused to be taught by women.

Generally as we had opportunities for a woman's voice to be heard because she was, say, the recognized authority on the subject, we took them. From time to time women led Sunday evening book discussions. Increasingly, when women came forward at Sunday morning services, we gave them the option to express their own thoughts in their own words rather than the minister representing them. This made immediate intuitive sense to almost everyone; it was, after all, their hearts that needed to be heard directly by their brothers and sisters. And when women were the experts on particular ministries (e.g. the directors of Camp Shiloh, Buddy-Mentor, VBS or Youth Rally programs—all women), they made the special announcements and led the planning sessions pertaining to those ministries. Also during these years there was the clear and tireless testimony of a dear, sweet African-American sister Emma Beavers: for the last two years of her life when she was frequently hospitalized (prior to her death in 1994), she never let me leave her bedside without asking me, "Dale, what are you going to do about the women?" She always hoped that change would come before she died.

As this was happening in Stamford, matters of faith and gender started being widely discussed throughout the Churches of Christ. They were prominently featured at lectureships at Abilene Christian University and Pepperdine University, as well as at various workshops and seminars and in religious publications. Freed-Hardeman University sponsored a forum on this subject in 1990, as did the Harding Graduate School of Religion in 1993. Then in 1993 the first volume of **Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity**, a landmark collection of studies by some of the finest biblical scholars in the Churches of Christ, was published.

Also during these years, I was able, in the my graduate studies in medieval history at NYU, considerable attention to—to read thousands of on—the history of women in the Middle Ages. historian I came to know some things more than I would have otherwise. I came, for

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to realize that the church's understandings of male and female relationships owe a great deal more to Aristotle and Greek-Roman gender roles than to the teachings of Jesus. I shared highlights of my studies with those interested in a two-hour seminar on "Women in the Middle Ages" the evening of January 12, 1993. This same material became the basis of my essay in **Volume 2 of Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity**ⁱⁱⁱ published in November 1995; a short summary of this essay is available as Appendix 2, "Faith and Gender ... in History." I was also asked to address this same topic in three lectures on "The Changing Roles of Women in the Church: Why We're Where We Are" at the 1995 Pepperdine University Bible Lectures.

Taking Heat

Naturally we drew some criticism for our study over the years, specifically for **Draft 7 of Faith and**

Gender, although in many ways the criticism was less than we had anticipated. We made a point to mail this draft out to all area-wide congregations and to various Church of Christ leaders nationwide, asking for their response, corrections or suggestions. Many encouraged us in our studies, and only one wrote back offering any challenge at all (and it was simply criticism of one of the sources cited).

Then in early 1996, **Draft 7** was criticized in a strongly personalized way in reviews in the January and April issues of a quarterly called **The Spiritual Sword**. Most of the substantive points raised in these reviews had been considered at great length over the years in our congregational study. And both reviews apparently missed the nature and limited scope of **Faith and Gender**, that it was a process paper for our own church family, a brief review and synopsis of our own proceedings, and therefore not an exhaustive coverage of the subject. **Faith and Gender**, in an extensive bibliography, pointed to a number of scholarly works that combine comprehensive scriptural exegesis with a responsible acknowledgment of historical context, and that is where one would need to go to examine these matters in a truly analytical and thorough way. However, we always considered substantive criticism seriously, and it became part of our congregational study and discussion when we next took up the subject. Moreover, the many favorable and constructive responses and inquiries we received after the criticisms in **The Spiritual Sword**, from all regions of the country and from all age groups, reassured us that the questions we were raising and the concerns we were expressing had become mainstream Church of Christ questions and concerns.

As we continued to work together toward answers that are beneficial and constructive (1 Cor. 10:23-24), it was always important to us that we remember and not forget the sense of loving brotherhood we enjoy with other Churches of Christ and the spiritual safe haven we have traditionally provided for their members transferred into our area. We sought always to preserve the sanctity of Christian consciences of our members, though we took care to distinguish between genuine concerns of conscience and comfort zones where some might have preferred that we stay. Also important to us was the recognition that society itself is still struggling to define what is appropriately male and female.

Throughout these years, it was clear that the elders were involved and supportive of this process, which at the very beginning meant primarily their insistence that the subject be fully understood and discussed contextually. I took the lead in the actual teaching; but throughout the process the elders and I, with our wives and various resource people within the congregation—Curt Marshall, Scott Johnson and Eddie Pleasant merit special mention—kept meeting and studying, especially trying to explore the various implications that would follow from increasing the role of women in public leadership (e.g. Were we suggesting that one day there might be female elders?^{iv} What connection might there be between this issue and the church's views on homosexuality?^v And were we implying by gender equality that the natures of men and women are essentially identical?^{vi}). In all these ways, over the years our elders have distinguished themselves by their dedicated study of the subject and by their increasingly articulate support of gender inclusiveness. And when in 1996 **The Spiritual Sword** made strongly worded and personal attacks on me in two issues, they rose in spirited and unmistakably clear defense.

Waiting

As we engaged the issue of hearing women's voices in both our public worship and congregational decision-making, we moved at a pace that could only be described as judicious and deliberative. Even after it became clear to us that, based on Scripture, the case for keeping women silenced in worship roles was no stronger than the case for supporting slavery in contemporary America, we still moved toward change very slowly, wishing to give everyone lots of time for study and reflection. We knew that time-honored ways of doing things change slowly and should change slowly. We also knew that gender

matters strike at the primal core of one's identity. And of course we took God and Scripture very seriously. We didn't want to be in error. As studious sons and daughters of the Churches of Christ (the large majority of our leadership was Church of Christ born and raised), we wanted to do everything we could to eliminate all possibility of being unscriptural. We wanted to cover every base. It was absolutely imperative that any change in women's roles in churches be completely true to the spirit and original intent of Scripture. So we went slowly in our thinking: probing, examining and reexamining every point and counterpoint.

There is, however, a certain inexorable flow to history, easily seen in hindsight if not foresight. We came to understand that it is, in fact, inevitable that in time, likely sooner than many imagine, churches everywhere will have come to the recognition that it was never the original intent of Scripture to silence women's voices in churches for all time. The spiritual challenge was, and is, to arrive at that point of consensus with a minimum of bloodletting, to conduct ourselves in ways that are worthy of Jesus, that is, with kindness, mercy, respect, truthfulness and love. The slogan with which we ended our discussions in the spring of 1993 was that, in matters this deep and complex, we be "cautious in application and generous in thought."

We also knew that there were few patterns or precedents for what we were doing as a church family. In most religious organizations, councils or conferences meet. Often a power struggle is fought for the soul of the church. Then, in one way or another, the word, a policy, comes down from the top. Hearts may or may not be changed. No one at the local level has to take a stand or assume responsibility of any kind. You can agree or disagree, accept or reject, stay or leave. For instance, hundreds of millions of Catholics worldwide wait on a decision from the Vatican. Within our own fellowship in larger cities that have a number of congregations, church leaders make their decision and dissatisfied members migrate to the next congregation. You vote with your feet, but your mind is largely spared. It was our conviction, however, that Churches of Christ are really meant to be different, that the Bible belongs to each of us, and that we are each meant to take responsibility, read it, eventually master its interpretation, and lovingly create a consensus built on honesty, courage, the surrendering of rights, and commitment to the centrality of the gospel.

As a consequence, in January 1994 as part of **Draft 4 of Faith and Gender** our elders encouraged all of our members to take responsibility for further reflections on these matters, asking "for each believer's assistance as we work together toward the creation of a loving Christian consensus here and elsewhere."^{vii} We felt the process was just as important as the conclusions we might reach—that for disciples of Christ, the process is the truth: conquering fear, fixing our eyes on Jesus, trusting that one day the facts will be clear, turning the other cheek, not being angry with our fellow disciples, extending mercy, practicing forgiveness, and always acting in love for one another. Conducting ourselves in these ways is, we knew, a central part of the truth we offer the world.

After the congregational studies in early 1990 and in spring 1993, people knew that they had time to freely and openly reflect on the subject. Slowly a consensus built that change must happen, but the consensus came from the bottom up, not the top down. During these years, I did not specifically preach from the pulpit on the subject of women's roles in church except for two occasions when the subject came up naturally in series of sermons on 1 Timothy and 1 Peter. I often told the congregation that I would never force the issue; I would teach and educate, but "I was only their servant," and any change would be up to them. Meanwhile, drafts of **Faith and Gender** were always available to members and anyone else interested. And in 1995-96 one of our elders, Bill Cochran, hosted various small-group discussions on **Faith and Gender** in his home. Tapes from my presentations at the 1995 Pepperdine University Bible Lectures on "The Changing Roles of Women in the Church" were also available. Several times over the course of these years (1993-1998) we offered forums for discussing the subject on Sunday evenings. And the attacks in the **Spiritual Sword** actually crystallized thought and moved

the process along by drawing increased attention to the topic. Slowly a consensus for change grew, and increasingly the burden of proof shifted to those who still resisted change.

It should be noted that early in the process, I had developed seven questions to which I was seeking answers. I published these questions even in the earliest drafts of **Faith and Gender**. These questions were sharpened over the years and are now available in the leaflet “SEVEN QUESTIONS on Faith, Gender and the Church” (see Appendix 3). As early as 1994 I circulated these questions to all the congregations in Connecticut and to various church leaders around the country, still very open to correction and a shift in perspective if responsibly answers were forthcoming. But no one offered response, then or ever. And so over the years resisted change within our congregation (as well as detractors) knew that in order to be persuasive they need to make some response to these questions.

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In hindsight, I believe it was important—and essential to our eventually peaceful transition—that while our teaching in the church became gender-inclusive, we still did not force change. The result was that the emerging question became, “Why aren’t we changing?” rather than “Why are we changing?”

On the personal front, by the mid-90s I had spent thousands of hours and read thousands of pages on every aspect of this subject that I could imagine—textual, theological, spiritual, historical, cultural and psychological. Moreover, by circulating our questions to the finest scholars I knew in the Churches of Christ, I had come to realize that many of them saw exactly what I saw though some could freely state this and others had to be more circumspect. Still I waited. I don’t welcome controversy. I don’t like people being angry with me. The sentence I remember most from my childhood is “What will people think!” and it still haunts me. So I kept studying and reflecting, hoping perhaps that this change would just happen without my sticking my neck out too far.

But my conscience would not let me rest. As a court advocate for victims of domestic violence, I was haunted by one woman, huddled like a frightened rabbit in the corner of a small windowless room in the basement of the courthouse, telling of being subjected to a weekend-long binge of abuse while the man said over and over, “I can do this ... because I’m the boss.” Another day, a Christian mother, the mother of two young girls, told me in my office that, even as committed as she was to our church and its good intentions, she pondered worshipping elsewhere so her daughters would no longer experience discrimination on the basis of gender. Another time when I personally had grown weary of the whole subject, an elder’s wife from California visiting in our area asked me over coffee at a local bookstore what our plans were with regard to women. When I showed insufficient enthusiasm, she challenged me with, “If you, knowing what you know, do nothing, what hope is there for any of us?” And of course there was always the gentle witness of my wife, Debbie, drawing from her many years of experience as a social worker, and the sometimes more spirited observations of my adult sons, Marcus and Lucas, who could never envision a future, in church or out, when women would be considered or treated as inferior to men.

So, slowly, each of us in church leadership roles started preparing to take whatever risks or sacrifices were necessary to be honest to the truths we knew. And to do it in good time—time that mattered—not after our witness would no longer really be needed.

Churches of Christ, custodians of marvelous gospel truths about personal rebirth and responsibility, would find their ethical and evangelistic witness crippled by being among the stand for a principle of justice that one day all will see. That all will one day see the justice of gender inclusiveness was not, and is not, in question; it is the witness of Churches of Christ that is at stake.

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Taking Action

The change toward including women’s voices in church worship and leadership came, when it came, with a speed that surprised most of us, certainly me. From my studies as a historian, I had come to realize that this change would happen here and everywhere sooner or later. I knew it really was all a matter of time, and being a historian gave me a certain measure of patience. As a minister, I had come to understand my job was to help prepare people spiritually for the inevitable. By 1998 I had become so certain that this change would happen—not just here but everywhere—that it perhaps mattered less to me than to some just when it would happen.

Then in July 1998 we conducted a poll of our church family asking simply for their comfort or discomfort if a woman were to do each of the following: give announcements, lead singing, read Scripture, serve at the table, or lead prayer. This survey was worded very informally. It had a relaxed tone so as to surface any of various levels of resistance (one of our elders, J.G. Pinkerton, has great skill at wording questions). Responses could be unsigned, but copies were mailed individually to everyone, so as not to get multiple responses from any one person. The results actually surprised us. Out of a congregation of around 130, eighty-eight responded. Only eight were uncomfortable with women doing anything publicly, and several of these were uncomfortable not on their own behalf but on behalf of others whom they supposed would have problems. Fifty-nine were comfortable with women taking on any of the public roles listed. And twenty were comfortable with women doing some things, but not others. The remaining one said the elders should just make a decision and act on it and didn’t otherwise fill out the questionnaire. It was this unanticipated support for change that began the course of events that led to full gender-inclusiveness four months later.

On Sunday, October 18, 1998, the elders—Bill Cochran, Ken McAdams, Jim Moore, and J.G. Pinkerton—and minister issued a position paper entitled “One in Christ Jesus” (available here as Appendix 4), which stated that it is their teaching position that “in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female (Gal.3: 28).” It went on to say, “We understand this to mean that distinctions of roles, privileges, rights and status on the basis of birth are ended in Christ.”

This was followed by a twenty-four-hour fast and prayer vigil from Saturday, November 7, at 9 AM until Sunday, November 8, at 9 AM. Different people signed up for half-hour slots around the clock to pray in our chapel to seek God’s guidance concerning whether or how we should implement change. This was an unbelievably energizing weekend, and from it, it became clear that we would move forward toward not just teaching gender-inclusiveness, but practicing it. Our elders, as part of the morning announcements on Sunday, November 15, read this statement to the congregation:

“As a result of reflections from last weekend’s prayer vigil, it is the elder’s decision that women will now be incorporated in regular worship roles. A worship committee consisting of Eddie Pleasant, Scott and Julia Johnson and Karin Fallon has been established. Their task is to find ways for the voices, gifts, and spirit of both men and women to be used in our assemblies. If any of you desire to take an active role in our assemblies, feel free to contact a member of the committee.”

Our elders felt it was important that no one be surprised or caught off guard when changes were finally made.

For this same reason, I preached two sermons (available on tape) to keynote the change—“In the image of God” (Gen. 1:27 – 2:3) and “He will rule over you” (Gen. 3:1-24)—on Sundays, November 22 and 29; these sermons, briefly stated, focused on man and woman in God’s original intent and located female subordination in the Fall, the effects of which are to be undone by the new creation in Christ. Two principles were highlighted. First, based on male and female both being created in the image of God, women everywhere are to be treated with the same

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respect that is given men as their natural due. Second, hierarchy and chains of command are primarily necessary where trust has been broken, as in a fallen world. Where love and harmony reign, as in the new humanity redeemed by Jesus, human patterns of domination and subordination are ended. Female subordination, for instance, is a directly stated result of the Fall, and is itself a consequence of sin.

Then on Sunday, Dec. 6, 1998 in a group reading from the pulpit men and women participated equally. Over the next four months, women's roles expanded to fill everything but preaching. The church is at peace with the notion of a woman preaching, but has waited for someone with the calling, message and gift to do it.* When seven new deacons were appointed on January 28, 2001, two of them—Sylvia Smith and Lisa Jinkins—were women, which ironically only **restores** the role of female deacons so prevalent in the church of the first four centuries.

Also early in 1999 we began printing in our Sunday morning worship program a brief description of the church here that included our being “gender-inclusive” and offering some context for understanding this. We did this largely for the sake of Church of Christ visitors passing through or newly moved into our area (a copy of this statement is available here as Appendix 5).

It is noteworthy that when the time for change finally came we did not phase in public roles for women. We simply ended all distinctions in Christ except on the basis of spiritual rebirth, gifts and calling. Phased-in change, we felt, runs the risk of pleasing no one; traditionalists are annoyed by any female presence up front, and egalitarians are frustrated by any restrictions. Moreover, this approach reopens the debate as every change is phased in, only prolonging the pains inevitable in change. We found it better to make extensive preparation and then really become “one in Christ Jesus.”

Consequences

The inclusion of women in public roles in our worship happened quite smoothly. I would suppose that most of us, naturally and quite predictably, felt some discomfort at first. Certainly I did; I was especially concerned over how others would respond. For the first several months, I was quite conscious of anything a woman did up front. Then, seemingly all at once, I essentially quit noticing. Now—to be candid—it seems unusual to worship where only men's voices are heard.

In the transition, we did lose a few members, but far fewer than we might have expected and fewer than other congregations making similar changes have. Out of around 130 members, we lost six people; none of those who left us had chosen to participate in any of the study process we had been through. On the other hand, several people who at first were quite resistant eventually became enthusiastic supporters of the change. One who had voted No to everything on the survey was transferred out of our area a year later and in leaving described this as “the best church in America.”

So we were blessed by amazingly little dissension when the changes finally happened. In fact, the changes happened so naturally that a group of us recently had a hard time recalling which exact Sunday the change occurred. Once the leadership was committed to implementing change, it did so in a calm and confident way, assured that this really was, as best we could ascertain, God's will for our time and place; consequently, they felt no need to create “grand opening occasions.”

* This wait ended on Sunday morning, June 16, 2002 (just as we were going to press) when Katie Hays gave an extraordinary morning talk on “God Will Provide the Lamb,” drawn from The Offering of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19. Her message, delivered with both grace and authority, was a revelation for all who heard her. Through the power of God's Spirit so evident in her and a mind trained in our finest theological institutes, she directed our hearts away from gender to a deeply moving proclamation of the gospel. We were touched not by her gender or her courage (though these were evident), but by God's gospel so brilliantly illuminated. Katie and her husband, Lance Pape, are co-ministers at the West Islip Church of Christ in New York, and Katie was a participant at the April 2002 ministry summit at ACU, an invitation-only event drawing a select group of church leaders from around the country.

While very little conflict occurred within the church, more was generated statewide, but even there we were pleasantly surprised by the collegiality and graciousness of most of our sister Churches of Christ in Connecticut. There was, at first, a small cadre of alarmed dissent that sought to prevent Stamford members from serving in any capacity at a local Christian camp, but several senior statesmen around the state rose to the occasion and insisted on congregational autonomy being respected. So although many congregations in Connecticut are quite conservative, they have (with one or two exceptions) treated us fraternally. Attendance at our annual youth rally declined, but I am treated very kindly at the statewide preachers meetings. Incidentally, it is our policy when hosting area events to pay attention to and honor the scruples of whatever sister congregations are involved.

I further note that since we made the change, I have made more deliberate efforts to attend statewide preachers meetings though they are held some seventy miles away. It has also been important, I think, to reassure others that our decisions do not mean for us a repudiation of our heritage, and my experience is that this is reassuring to many people. It is also my intuitive hunch that, one by one, people are beginning to wonder if we might not be right. They are observing us with great interest, some with genuine good will. The conclusions they will draw will depend as much as anything on whether or not they see in us the spirit of Christ.

Most importantly, we have gained families from the community that do not have Church of Christ backgrounds; at least two have made it clear that they would not have stayed with us had we still been gender-restrictive. Another young man from a conservative Church of Christ background chose to resettle in our area because ours was a church to which he could envision bringing his Cornell-educated bride. The full results obviously are not in yet. For whatever reasons, we have had a real upsurge in visitors from our communities.

On the other hand, we have had very few members of Churches of Christ transfer in since the transition. Corporate transfers seem down in general, but I do know of a few members living in our immediate area who are choosing to drive elsewhere because of our being gender-inclusive. But even this picture is not complete without noting that some months prior to the change a couple with a Church of Christ background came our way but were troubled by the male dominance of the church. They stayed with us (until they were transferred out) because they could see that, at least, we had a process in place, and of course they were ardent supporters of the change.

Personal Reflections

So finally we came to the end of a long and, I believe, loving process of reflection and study. But, of course, it was not the end of anything but actually the beginning. I must still wake up each morning, steady my soul and center it back again on trusting God to see me through, past whatever disappointments and challenges come our way. It causes me pain when others are angry with me. It causes me great pain when anyone with whom I have worshipped God will—with great deliberateness—no longer worship with me. And I am often perplexed by how to respond to some letters I receive. Which ones are honest requests for information? Which are spiritual letter bombs? How do I respond to highly personalized attacks? What do you say to a person when every intuition you have tells you that they will always put the worst possible construction on everything you say? I often don't know. I can only pray to God each morning that I will respond in love and trust, and not in fear and anger, and that I will use the time He gives me wisely.

Like most who champion a place for women's voices in our worship of God, I always make every effort to state my case in as reasoned and respectful a way as I possibly can, no matter how difficult the person is with whom I'm dealing or how inconsistently they are using Scripture. Sometimes this represents a large spiritual struggle. Challenging the traditional view on these matters, from the

standpoint of common sense and reason, is no great challenge at all. As one writer has observed, “The emperor has no clothes and hasn’t had them for a long time.”^{viii} Privately we know this, but publicly we will hardly ever say it. Now, however, the time has come to speak out. And time matters now. I am reminded of William Faulkner’s challenge to racial discrimination in 1955, “We speak now against the day when our Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, will, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and good will, will say, ‘Why didn’t someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time?’”^{ix} Why, indeed?

Listening to a person who opposes women’s participation in worship and church leadership today is like listening to a person who still defends the divine right of kings or who still considers slavery to be God-ordained. It is the verdict of our culture, and it is a firm, settled verdict from which there will be no going back, that privileges, rights, status and opportunities cannot be restricted on the basis of gender, and that anyone or any group that does so, in any arena of life, is discriminatory.

The truth is: Women now excel in every other area of life. And it is absurd to suppose that the town mayor may be a woman, the state governor may be a woman, the nation’s attorney general may be a woman, the president of your company may be a woman, your dissertation director may be a woman, but no woman may lead a prayer in your worship services. I know that those who still silence women in worship are mistakenly afraid that to do otherwise will undermine Scriptural authority, but what really undermines the authority of Scripture is for people to see it used to defend absurd conclusions and discriminatory practices. If churches insist on notions that unbelievers know from direct experience to be wrong, the church will never be trusted when it comes to matters dealing with invisible, transcendent mysteries of rebirth and eternal life. So change must come, and come soon.

The greatest challenges are all still in the future. For some of us, there is still much to study (nor would my reflections be complete without honoring those who are yet to be convinced fully but who know that love really is the more excellent way; you truly are my heroes). For others, it may seem that the battle’s won when in fact, in this place, only a declaration of independence has been written and the great spiritual struggles lie ahead. The final outcome is inevitable, but the future witness of the Stamford Church of Christ, and indeed all Churches of Christ, to Jesus—to what is true and good and beautiful—is still to be determined.

To draw from the memorable words of Thomas Paine, these are still times that try our souls. We are up against the weight of tradition, complacency and spiritual inertia on the one hand and the seemingly irresistible pull of commercial and secular values on the other. I came to realize early on that many of the most vocal supporters for involving women were not prepared themselves to make the sacrifices necessary. For them gender justice was a preference not a commitment; it was something they would be in favor of, all other life issues being even. So, some we had come to count on were not here in our most difficult hours. And when some were transferred out, and others continue to be, we cannot yet count on replacing them with Church of Christ transfers in. While more and more churches around the country are beginning to study this issue, some people moving into our area still come from congregations that haven’t yet. They do not at first understand what we have done, or the urgent reasons why we have done it.

Resistance to change always runs deep. There are too many all-too-human reasons to oppose change, and almost everyone, for reasons both cultural and emotional, opposes change when they first think about it. We all have comfort zones we’d prefer not to have violated. For some men, male supremacy is a critical component of their identity. For a few women of a certain age, the thought that their life could have been structured differently is enormously frustrating, so frustrating that it seems better not ever to consider it. But even in this case, especially in this case, the anxiety is driven by not considering the times, by failing to think contextually; decisions made in the 1950s or the 1970s may have been the best

<p>What really undermines the authority of Scripture is for people to see it used to defend absurd conclusions and discriminatory practices.</p>
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decisions possible then. Such women could well forgo regret and choose to be glad that for their daughters things will be better. Still other men and women have not yet studied Scripture long enough to see the necessity of change. Whatever the case, the initial resistance will always be high, so those who know to do better will need to do better. Seriously.

All the same, fearful people sometimes judge us uncharitably. Sometimes they are those we most love, and we will gasp at the things they will say to us or about us; fear is a powerful energy field. With time, though, fear subsides and understanding prevails. But it takes patience, courage and faith on our parts. Some congregations distance themselves from us, and some of their members feel awkward around us, but that too will change with time. Most seriously, Satan—the Great Accuser—will continue his work of spreading fear, accusation and suspicion. And he will test and tempt us in all our most vulnerable spots. From life experience and the study of Scripture, I am convinced that it is exactly where and when the gospel is on the edge of gloriously breaking out into our world again that Satan most seeks to distract, divert and demoralize.

Of course as we continue to occupy ourselves with whatever crisis, real or imagined, within the church, the world keeps filling up with broken, hurting, abused, starving, violated, oppressed and dying people who need to hear and see that Jesus really is the way to life. Jesus came to save the world (John 3:17); that means, he came to rescue, deliver, heal, transform and redeem the world. For this reason and in this cause, he tells us to love even our enemies. He tells us to applaud those whose faith exceeds that of our own recognized community of faith. He tells us to forgive those who sin against us. He tells us to take seriously and not to reject the outcasts in our society. He tells us to stand up to those who are perfectly scrupulous in minor religious matters but who neglect the more important matters of justice, mercy and integrity. He tells us that we must no longer, if we would be *his* followers, think in terms of domination, of who is greatest, of who lords it over whom, of who exercises authority over whom. He tells us that the one who would be greatest must be servant of all. He tells us that the power in life is sacrificial love, in empowering others, in giving power so that all may become empowered, and this he unforgettably demonstrated by his own death. And then knowing us, knowing that few of these things ever come naturally to us, he tells us we will have to be born again; and he tells, and shows, us how. And this is the gospel that can save all who trust it.

<p>One day all people everywhere will be judged not by the categories of their physical birth but by the maturity of their spiritual rebirth.</p>	<p>over He tells the in self- up our</p>
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If we will do these things, one day women will be treated everywhere with the same respect that is given men as their natural due. One day everyone in our nation will be treated with the same respect that has always been given those of European descent as their natural due. One day the poor will be treated everywhere with the same respect given the rich as their natural due. These patterns of abuse and discrimination will end. One day all people everywhere will be judged not by the categories of their physical birth but by the maturity of their spiritual rebirth. And the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah 11:9). One day those who are in Christ's church will again be the most ethical, humane and lovingly involved people on earth, and their witness will be clear to all. We will live radiant, transformed lives freed from sin, fear, lust and prejudice—freed, in fact, from all that holds us back as children of God. And our light will shine.

Our calling as Christ's church is global. Our task is to bring peace—proclaim peace—to those both far away and near. We are expected to destroy dividing walls of hostility. We are finally to understand how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and then communicate that understanding to others. The goal of the universe as God intends it is reconciliation, a bringing together of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Eph. 1:10). The point of history, the point of the cosmos, is a single gigantic pattern woven out of Christ. We must begin living our lives, and if necessary restructuring our ministries, so as to contribute to this meaningfully. I barely know how to begin. I only know that we

must begin. We must begin in humility, in rigorous honesty about ourselves, and in gentleness and respect for others. And we must begin by trusting that truth will triumph, that where there is grace and freedom—where love and trust operate and not fear and anger—truth will triumph.

It has always been God’s intent that there be people on earth, his people, who are a light for the nations, who bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). There is one human story: The God of the Exodus is continuously calling people out of slavery. He proclaims freedom from all that enslaves. He releases the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Now he calls us forward into his future. If we take up this task, even parents and grandparents who may not fully understand now will one day know and understand what we did and why we did it; after all, we are only doing what they did in their time: answering the questions of our age with compassion, common sense and courage. And if we do this, our sons and daughters, and our children’s children, will be with us.

To our Sister Congregations on the Front Lines

A working committee of a high-profile Church of Christ once asked me what role their high profile might play in making a decision concerning ending women’s silence in public worship. At first, I resisted making any answer to this at all, understanding as I do that each congregation alone knows its real circumstances, the risks involved, and its readiness to accept those risks. But eventually I thought better of it and I now make a provisional response.

High-profile status is initially—measured over the perspective of the next three to four years—a consideration in favor of moving slowly. Having said this, high-profile status is also a reason to make whatever changes are necessary for the proclamation of the gospel in our time. Avoiding risk and discomfort over the next three to four years will likely sustain the numerical decline of Churches of Christ as a historical movement over the next ten to twenty years. I observe this as one who has spent a great deal of time training in the discipline of historical thought over the past fourteen years. History has a certain inevitable flow to it; when certain viewpoints reach critical mass there is no turning back, and those institutions that don’t “get it” die. In not too many years the vast majority of Americans will consider female subordination in any institutionalized form no more moral than we consider slavery today. And churches still institutionalizing female subordination will have no more future than a church today still advocating or defending slavery.

Nothing less than our ability to communicate the gospel is at stake. Today many who visit churches that still insist on traditional gender roles, who come to such churches seeking to find God, visit a time or two, and then feel that they are already more ethical and humane than the church. Increasingly it is our most evangelistic people, those who regularly share their faith with others, who most strongly favor and indeed insist on change. They know that the gender ceilings in churches now keep many people from trusting God, and they know that if we continue to insist on such ceilings we are shutting the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.

Even closer to the hearts of mothers and fathers in Churches of Christ, innumerable graduates of our Christian colleges are leaving our religious heritage because, I would conjecture, they feel a disconnection between what they experience in church and what they know to be decent, ethical and humane. Something must be done, and it must be done soon. Meanwhile many of those in their twenties, and those who are coming after them, will be spiritually energized, awakened even, by the witness of churches that courageously take risks to do what they believe to be right. They will see by such examples that faith really matters and has worldwide and historical implications. In the end the greatest contribution that

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high-profile congregations may make to Churches of Christ, in a long history of such contributions, may be that at just the right time they assured (or if they do not wish to bear such a load, helped to assure) the survival and renaissance of Churches of Christ by boldly insisting that women's voices be heard wherever people congregate.

I do not think that such courage will go un-rewarded. I would anticipate that in many of the cities in Texas and Tennessee with the largest concentrations of Churches of Christ, those congregations that first take courageous stands on this matter will quickly draw to themselves like-minded believers living lives of quiet desperation in other congregations. They will soon gain far more than they initially lose.

What I think is perhaps most important of all is that people be taught to see the big picture, that they see that anything we are saying about gender is only a small part of something much larger being done. In this spirit, for the past few years, I have tried to keep the eyes of the Stamford church more closely focused on the plight of the inner-city children in the greater New York City area. By getting our focus off ourselves and centering it on at-risk children, more and more people came to see that many things need to be changed for us to truly become disciples of Christ charged with bringing light to the nations.

We do what we do for the sake of the gospel; we cannot conduct ourselves in ways that become or remain a barrier to millions of others seeking to trust God. We must honor and use—and be seen to honor and use—the gifts and talents of every child of God. We can no longer let the authority of Scripture be undermined by people seeing it used to defend absurd conclusions and discriminatory practices.

We do what we do so that the world might be saved—so that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Consequently, we willingly surrender our own traditions and make whatever changes are necessary to achieve this.

We do what we do so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Surely no one, on careful reflection, supposes that women will be a subordinate sex in heaven.

And we do what we do for the sake of our sons and our daughters, and their sons and daughters.

For Further Reading

There is now a growing body of material written on subjects of faith and gender, but you will not spend long reading in it before the arguments become fairly standard and predictable. You will read many old traditional arguments jazzed up for the late twentieth century, but they are still old and increasingly outdated. The following books contribute genuinely fresh insights to the subject.

[For an even more extensive bibliography and for updates on the progress of gender justice in Churches of Christ, see the timely and valuable web site *Gal328.org*; its general editor is Lance Pape, and its readings editor is Christopher R. Hutson.]

Osburn, Carroll D., ed. **Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity**. 2 vols. Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1993, 1995.

Containing essays by over forty of the finest biblical scholars in the Churches of Christ, including professors from Harding, Abilene Christian, Pepperdine and David Lipscomb Universities, these volumes represent an enormous and necessary step forward in our understanding of matters of faith and gender.

Osburn, Carroll D. **Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal**. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001.

This book, written by a distinguished ACU professor, is essential reading for those in Churches of Christ who are seeking to make sense of contemporary debate over the relevant texts. Osburn makes every effort to subscribe to only the most rigorous standards of scholarship, and he insists that others do likewise. Especially persuasive is his understanding of 1 Cor. 14:34-36. This work represents a substantially revised and updated version of the author's 1994 book **Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion**.

Mickelsen, Alvera, ed. **Women, Authority & the Bible**. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986.

This collection of essays and responses by various highly-regarded evangelical Bible scholars represents well the emerging evangelical consensus. If you can read only one article on this entire subject, I would recommend from this book Richard N. Longenecker's "Authority, Hierarchy & Leadership Patterns in the Bible" (pp. 66-85).

Keener, Craig S. **Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul**. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992.

This is perhaps the most responsible and comprehensive single-author coverage of the various applicable biblical texts and their social contexts currently available. This is a "must read," and those who insist on ongoing female subordination must grasp Keener's arguments and respond persuasively. The discussion of Eph. 5:18-33 is especially thorough. Keener reminds us that Paul is addressing the power structures of his day, not mandating the same power structures for all time. Paul is directing his readers in the setting in which they lived; he is not making their setting valid for eternity. Consequently, we must understand the difference between what God put up with in less than ideal cultures and the loving ideal for which we should strive as we have opportunity. Particularly insightful is the chapter "A Model for Interpreting Wives' Submission: Slaves in Ephesians 6:5-9" (pp. 184-224).

Silvey, Billie, ed. **Trusting Women: The way of women in Churches of Christ**. Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002.

These are the personal stories of nineteen women in the Churches of Christ, each with their own viewpoints and understandings, who tell of their struggles to use their God-given gifts in various ministries; in the hearing of their stories one can trace out the heroic and sometimes painful ways in which women's voices are beginning to be heard in increasingly public ways among Churches of Christ.

Crabb, Larry. **Men & Women: Enjoying the Difference**. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.

This book by an experienced biblical counselor focuses on strengthening marriages and begins with the fundamental premise that there is something uniquely feminine and uniquely masculine that is part of God's design for his creation. Still the author resists legalistically cramming people into rigidly defined gender roles; it should not, for instance, be necessarily unfeminine for a woman to be fully competent and highly regarded as a physician, corporate executive or biblical scholar. Furthermore, he recognizes that technical arguments often prove compelling only to those who already grant their premises. Dr. Crabb proposes instead that we cultivate in

marriage and in life a committed other-centeredness, in contrast to self-centeredness. If, for example, a man relates in other-centered ways to his wife (and/or women)—that is, with a commitment to learn what they need and with an intent to supply that need—what will mature in his life will be that which, by God's design for him, will be most genuinely masculine. Likewise, if a woman relates to her husband (and/or men) in other-directed ways (that is, with her focus on them) so as to supply their real needs, there will naturally mature within her that which is most genuinely feminine. This relational approach recommends itself as being marvelously true to the spirit of Christ. It appropriately addresses, and does not ignore, the issue of God's design for his creation. And it cuts through these matters of faith and gender at a spiritual angle that may just enlighten us all and contribute to a biblical consensus.

Pauls, Dale. "The Changing Roles of Women in the Church: Why We're Where We Are." 3-tape set of presentations at the 1995 Pepperdine University Bible Lectures. Available through Gaylor MultiMedia, Inc., 3026 Owen Drive, Suite 108, Antioch, TN 37013. Phone: (615) 641-6411. Fax: (615) 641-6412.

Pauls, Dale. "A Final Farewell to the Twelfth Century," in **The Transforming of a Tradition: Churches of Christ in the New Millennium**, pp. 105-116. Edited by Leonard Allen & Lynn Anderson. Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2001.

Introduces contemporary readers to the notion that many of the understandings we have about faith and practice, including our attitudes toward men and women, are more indebted to the twelfth century than to the first; one twelfth-century construct with real staying power has been the church's primary understanding of its message and ministries in terms of law rather than gospel.

Rose, Floyd E. **An Idea Whose Time Has Come**. Columbus, Georgia: Brentwood Christian Press, 2002.

Driven by his experience as an African-American minister and out of concern for Churches of Christ, Rose reflects on the parallel between how blacks have been treated by a white-dominated society and how women are treated in a male-dominated church.

Noble, David F. **A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

An excellent survey of the dynamic interplay between church, gender and society in the history of the West—and the premises that shaped it.

Allen, C. Leonard. **Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church**. Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 1993.

Reveals that our heritage in the Churches of Christ is broader, richer and more diverse than previously imagined, and that this diversity extends to how we have approached gender roles and expectations.

Hughes, Richard T. **Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America.** Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996.

This remarkably insightful history of our religious heritage is valuable for several reasons connected to a consideration of gender matters. It reveals how indebted our traditional approach to Biblical interpretation has been to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought of John Locke and Scottish Common Sense Realism (so that the old hermeneutic once was new, and not so very long ago). It also explores the sociological origins of the militant, adversarial, hard style certain churchmen consistently fall back on to enforce conformity and silence disagreement. And it ends by noting that many congregations of the Churches of Christ are currently considering the issue of gender equality.

Wood, Forrest G. **The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

Has nothing to do with gender at all, which makes it even more remarkable that the reader will recognize that the same arguments—pro and con—were made 150 years ago in America on matters of faith and race. Much the same insight could be gained by reading **Quest for a Christian America**, written in 1966 by David Edwin Harrell, a restoration scholar specifically analyzing the Disciples of Christ movement in antebellum and Civil War America. See also Larry E. Tise, **Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840** (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987), especially pp. 116-120, and Richard J. Carwardine, **Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). To begin to understand how gender hierarchy became a particularly explosive issue in the American South during and after the Civil War with lasting consequences, see Lee Ann Whites, “The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender” in Catherine Clinton & Nina Silber, eds., **Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

To understand gender and faith better in its first-century context, see relevant sections in: Gillian Clark, **Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Michael Grant, **A Social History of Greece and Rome** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992); Ross Shepard Kraemer, **Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed., **A History of Women in the West. Vol. 1: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints** (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Paul Veyne, ed., **A History of Private Life. Vol. 1: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

On the edge: These last two books, flawed though they are, raise very important questions and suggest the direction that future research will take. Richard and Catherine Kroeger, **I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), offers a sometimes fanciful reconstruction of events in first-century Ephesus that may have necessitated Paul writing what he did in 1 Tim. 2:9-15. The Kroegers have been heavily criticized for selectively proof-texting pagan authors and for uncritical methodology in general. They stretch, they reach, they speculate. But nothing in the healthy debate they have generated suggests that, as more evidence comes in, the pillars of their

historical contextualization will not still be standing—that Paul must contest in the church in Ephesus proto-Gnostic tendencies that drew on notions of female primacy, thoughts that were influenced by the pagan religion of Ephesus and Asia Minor. Karen Jo Torjesen, **When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity** (Harper San Francisco, 1993), despite an anachronistic title and the occasional historical slips, persuasively argues that with regard to gender, the church in the third and fourth centuries, as it came out from behind closed doors and began to meet in basilicas, sold out to its culture by conforming to the strict hierarchical gender roles of Greco-Roman society so that it might be more socially acceptable.

ⁱ Of course early on it dawned on us that biblical texts must be understood contextually, taking into account both their literary and historical settings. This simple truth, once grasped, makes instantaneous sense. It's like a light bulb going on. It immediately restores consistency, common sense and charitable understandings to both our interpretation and application of Scripture. The restrictions on women in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 have to be understood in their literary **and historical** contexts, as in fact all scripture must be. In fact, interpreting any document of any kind, or even any conversation, depends on understanding its original context in real life. This is **the** cardinal rule of interpretation, the one followed in all contemporary scholarship, and interpreters always do this except when for some reason—usually cultural—they don't want to.

ⁱⁱ P. K. Jewett, **Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 147-148.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carroll D. Osburn (ed.), **Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity**, vol. 2 (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 375-400. Also an abbreviated version of **Draft 7 of Faith and Gender**, our congregational process paper appeared on pp. 579-586 of this same volume.

^{iv} We concluded that when women demonstrated the gifts, calling and experience for church leadership and possessed both the temperamental and servant leadership qualities highlighted by the texts in question (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) they were qualified to serve as elders. We do not believe that the point of those passages was gender and virility; we are far removed today from the first-century world of the **paterfamilias**. Moreover, we do not believe those passages to be a law code when the NT makes very clear we are not to understand it as a law code (Rom. 6:14; 7:6; 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:1-6,17; and the entire force of the Galatian letter). Still we reverently turn to those texts for guidance, seeking as application dynamic equivalence in our time and circumstances that is true to the original intent of the writer. In any case, we were quite certain that one could not shift hermeneutical approach with the chapter break at the end of 1 Timothy 2. The issue has always been consistency.

^v Of course we understand that the texts that touch on homosexuality require contextual understanding, and we would observe that such an understanding of those texts is not usually reflected in contemporary church thinking about homosexuality. Fundamentally, however, we concluded that there is still much that is not known about either appropriate exegesis of the relevant texts or the nature of sexual orientation—that the information needed to make wise decisions on the church's views on homosexuality lags perhaps some twenty or thirty years behind the information needed to understand that women's voices must finally be heard in the public gatherings of the church. On the latter we believe the information is fully available today. On the former, we would urge Christians acting in the spirit of Christ to show compassion as we await more complete understandings. Still, the issues are not directly parallel or connected; the one pertains to birth, the focus on the other pertains to behavior.

^{vi} This one turned out to be a real sticking point for some of our people when the change was made. And they were quite reassured by our understanding that gender equality does not imply that the natures of men and women are essentially identical. Quite to the contrary, we suppose that men and women are different, and speak in different voices (that, e.g., mature men may, in general, be characterized as joyfully decisive, and mature women may, in general, be experienced as gently nurturing). And it is because men and women do speak in different voices (to draw on the work of Carol Gilligan and others) that both men's and women's voices must be heard, especially where life's most important decisions are made, that is, in churches.

^{vii} The entire charge of our elders as it appears in **Draft 4 of Faith and Gender** dated January 1994 was:

“Our last discussions ended May 16, 1993, and the elders then encouraged the congregation -- and all of its various members -- to take responsibility for further reflections on these matters. We urge you to keep these discussions alive at Care Groups, at other gatherings, and in other conversations.

As we look to the future, we are trying to stay current with the finest biblical and historical scholarship on faith and

gender available to us, especially as it relates to the interpretation of those passages that address this subject. We also seek to keep up with the most responsible contemporary social thought on gender and the societal consequences of such thought. And we are particularly interested in Churches of Christ that are considering these matters and their thinking and experiences. We continue to welcome your assistance in all of these efforts to stay current and be actively informed.

We will, as time and insights become available to us, be continuing our efforts to keep this church family fully educated on these matters by a variety of formats: classes so that those who have not previously studied this subject can catch up, evening or Saturday morning workshops on related subjects, open forums for reflection and discussion, and sermons.

Meanwhile, we ask that you please read and reread this paper, that you give prayerful attention to the questions it asks, and that you follow the direction it offers for further reflection on faith and gender. We ask for each believer's assistance as we work together toward the creation of a loving Christian consensus here and elsewhere."

^{viii} John J. Phelan, "An Honest Column: What I really think about opposition to women in ministry," **Priscilla Papers** (Spring 2002: 16:2), p. 22.

^{ix} John Egerton, **Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 618-619.