

WOMEN IN CHURCH AND MISSION

Vivienne Stacey

BMMF International Commission on Church and Mission
October 1981

The Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society came into being in 1854 out of a response by Christian expatriate women to the needs of women in India. After a hundred years of ministry, the Mission opened its doors to male workers and the first couples joined what had become the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission. In September 1957 the Mission changed its name to the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship, continuing as an interdenominational mission (ie drawing individuals with various personal denominational links), working in co-operation with national churches and other missions. The role of both men and women in the life of the Fellowship continued to be governed by the needs of the situation. In remaining a women's mission for a century there was no feeling of the superiority or inferiority of women, nor any defined theological analysis which caused the mission to remain a women's mission for a century and then to change course. The needs of the situation made clear the change in policy and the recruitment of men. Since 1957 men have taken an increasing role in leadership, but there has been no repressing of the ministry of women in Asia. Spiritual gifts have been identified and recognized irrespective of sex.

At this point in history it is extremely impor-

tant that BMMF International should see the theological and practical basis for its attitude in the ministries of both men and women. In the Islamic world, in which BMMF International mainly works, there is a rising tide of Muslim fundamentalism which bodes ill for the position of Muslim women in Islamic societies. Although some Muslim women actively support this movement and join in campaigning for the repeal of reform laws relating to the position and rights of women and children and to family life (eg the Family Laws Ordinance passed in Pakistan in 1961), they do not represent the majority of women as far as one can ascertain. The attraction of the Christian way of life to many Muslim women will depend in the next decades on:

Christian life-style and patterns of family life as lived out in Islamic communities.

The way in which churches in Muslim lands grapple with Christian theology in its application to the position and role of women in society, the church and the home.

Whether evangelicals, with their emphasis on Scripture, are able to distinguish between the authority of Scripture and the supposed authority of their own evangelical tradition built up over the last one hundred and fifty years. Can evangelicals bring their traditions to the bar of Scripture? Their failure to do this will not only mean that the church will fail to rectify its attitude to the role and ministry of women, thus setting evangelical

tradition above Scripture, but it will detract from the attractiveness of the Christian faith to those born into Islamic communities.

Perhaps a few examples will help to clarify the issues:

Example 1: The Theological Seminary in Gujranwala, Pakistan, while it recognized the importance of some training for the wives of its students, never came to grips with the role and ministry of women in the whole church. In Pakistan there has never been a concern to look at the Christian family in the context of the nation, society and the church. The possibility of the Christian family being the most attractive challenge to Muslims to find greater freedom, fulfilment and renewal, has not occurred to most Western and national theological educators in Pakistan if one is to judge by their lack of initiatives in this area.

Example 2: In one North African country the disciplining of converts from Islam was done on a man-to-man and woman-to-woman basis, and one-sex cell groups were formed by Western missionaries. When the groups developed and came together as local churches, mainly through Western influence, the men took over the leadership and the active role and participation of women declined. The strongest influence seemed to be Western evangelical fundamentalism. There was little recognition that even within North African Muslim society women were finding a more active role. The evangelical traditions of North American Christian culture were so strongly taught and practised that they

inhibited both national and expatriate women believers. Scripture does teach that the husband is the head of the Christian family but the exercise of authority in the church is based on spiritual gifts and calling, and not on sex.

Example 3: Phil Parshall, in his recent book *New paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (page 117) writes, 'The family is a great asset to an evangelical ministry among Muslims. It is the norm of the Muslim society. All Muslim girls are married, most of them by age sixteen. The male is usually married no later than thirty years of age. Muslims cannot really understand the single lady missionary. They have no category or role for her in society. This makes life, in a practical sense, very difficult for single ladies in a Muslim land. It is my opinion that they can best find fulfilment in institutional outreaches rather than seeking to engage in traditional evangelistic roles. I have never witnessed directly to a Muslim lady. My wife has never shared Christ with a Muslim man. Our honoring the dictates of Muslim culture, that one must communicate only with members of the same sex, has been appreciated.'

Phil Parshall is, naturally, extremely influenced by his experience in Bangladesh which he seems to have absolutized. In Pakistan the single Muslim woman is rare but she does exist. Miss Jinnah even was nominated as a candidate for the Presidency. The role of the single woman missionary with a gift of evangelism is very difficult, but to exclude her on the basis of cultural

unsuitability is to make Muslim culture absolute and not to allow the newness of the gospel to be seen creating a new society. As for a man never sharing the gospel with a woman and vice versa, one wonders what to make of Christ speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well and whether she should have spoken only to the women of her city concerning the Saviour of the world.

Some of the issues concerning the role of women in church and mission were brought to the fore by campaigners attending the Conference on World Evangelization in Pattaya in Thailand in June 1980. Personally, I declined to campaign at Pattaya on the role of women in the church and in evangelization, but I cannot help agreeing with the following quotation from a paper drawn up by some participants and circulated to all participants: 'Since the church is the Body of Christ, the gifts of the Lord are neither diminished nor denied by gender, nationhood or age. Until the whole church assumes the responsibility of taking the whole gospel to the whole world, we will not accomplish the task. The gifts of women are thus essential to a holistic approach to evangelism. The prayers of women must be heard, the skills of women must be shared, and the presence that women bring to the assembly and to the decision-making body must be allowed to enrich the whole.'

However, we note that, while 72% of all evangelicals engaged in cross-cultural evangelization are women, yet:

58 of the 650 invited participants are women - or 9%

3 of the 50 members of the Lausanne Committee are women - or 6%
1 of the 34 members of the 4 Working Groups of LCWE is a woman - or 3%
None of the 9 Subcommission or Working Group chairmen is a woman
2 of the 18 Consultants to the Mini-Consultations are women - or 11%
None of the Plenary speakers is a woman
None of the Bible study leaders is a woman
None of the 7 Regional Group chairmen is a woman
4 of the 74 alphabetically-grouped prayer group leaders were women - or 5%...

Cultural patterns have encrusted our evangelization.

More serious than the fact that cultural patterns have encrusted our evangelization is the fact that evangelical tradition has become, in some instances, more authoritative than Scripture itself. Dr Kenneth Bailey of the Near East School of Theology, in a lecture in Beirut in February 1981 delivered to a small group which meets from time to time to discuss issues relating to the Church and Islam, gave his distilled wisdom on this subject: I am indebted to him for stimulating my thinking on this matter. He pleaded that the subject of the role of women in the New Testament is a very critical topic as the wave of fundamentalism in today's Islam is bad news for Muslim women. He raised the question as to what will be the Christian stance in the light of this Islamic fundamentalism. The position of women is being discussed all over the world in Muslim and Christian circles.

Dr Bailey calls Christians to return to a study of the Bible on this subject. Roman Catholic and

Orthodox Churches are looking again at their church traditions to see if they are in line with the Bible. Evangelical Protestants who have developed an evangelical tradition over the last one hundred and fifty years may need to face the issue of tradition versus the Bible also.

Dr Bailey reaches the following conclusions regarding the place of women in the Gospel records:

The outstanding woman in the Gospels is unquestionably the Virgin Mary. She is praised for who she is, not because of her famous son. She is an outstanding example of faith, courage, obedience and intelligence.

Women are among the disciples and these women carry a leadership role (particularly in finance). Mary and Martha are held up as outstanding examples of discipleship. Luke 8: 1-3, Matt 12: 49-50.

A woman makes one of the highest Christological confessions of the Gospels (Martha). This confession is as high, if not higher Christologically, than the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. John 11: 27.

Women in the genealogies and in the birth stories make clear that Jesus came as a saviour of all people – both men and women. Matt 1: 1-11.

Jesus demonstrates a deep, compassionate concern for all women – both saints like Martha and Mary, and sinners like the woman in the house of Simon. Luke 7: 35-51.

Jesus' teachings are often specially shaped for women to understand and to identify with. He often uses female images or chooses illustrations out of the life of women. Many of his parables are double parables. One part is taken out of the life of men and the second from the life of women.

On Easter morning, Mary is told to instruct the disciples about the resurrection. John 20: 16ff.

The women's resources for discipleship are by the command of Jesus, left in their hands and under their authority. John 12: 1-8.

No case is found in the Gospels of male authority over the female in the fellowship of believers. The twelve do have a leadership role, but the fact of their being male is best seen as a symbol of the New Israel, not as a symbol of the superiority of men over women.

Dr Bailey then goes on to give a summary of Paul's teaching regarding women in the Christian community as follows:

Women in general

Women in general share equally in all aspects of the life of the New Community. In Christ there is no more 'male and female' (Galatians 3: 28)

In the apostolic band they laboured together as equals.

Women were apostles, teachers, prophets, heads of churches, deacons and 'widows'.

Women suffered with the men as members and as leaders.

Women led and participated fully in the worship services.

Women were told to be silent when they disrupted public worship or taught heresy.

Women in marriage

Equal rights are affirmed in the marital relationship which is seen as good.

The husband and wife are called on to be mutually subordinate to each other (the husband offers serving love and the wife allows her husband a leadership role).

The two become one in body and spirit like Christ and the Church. Indeed the relationship between Christ and the Church is the pattern for understanding the bond of love in Christian marriage.

They are joint heirs of the gift of eternal life.

Bailey argues that husband and wife defer to and serve the other, but what is for the family is transferred to the church in some present-day teaching. The only man the New Testament asks a woman to defer to is her husband. The principle, says Dr Bailey, is for the family only in Ephesians Chapter 5. Leadership in the Christian community is on the basis of spiritual gifts. To this I would add calling.

It might be helpful to conclude this paper with one or two examples of the way in which tradition and traditional interpretation of Scripture have obscured the Scripture itself. Let us look at Romans 16: 1, & 2. Diakonia according to Acts 6: 2 & 4 can refer to the ministry of tables and to the ministry of the word. In the RSV, Phoebe is described as a helper. However, the Greek word *prostatis* means patroness, in authority over. Phoebe has been in authority over many and over Paul as well. When he went to her local church he accepted her authority.

In Romans 16: 7, we read in the RSV, 'Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles.' The Greek uses the word *notable* but does not use the word *men*. Andronicus is clearly a man's name but Junias, until the sixth century, was a woman's name. There was no s. The name was Junia not Junias. They were a

Christian couple like Aquila and Priscilla. The Byzantine monks added the s and the tradition that these were both men has persisted. If Junia is really not only an apostle but outstanding among the apostles this may say something to the church today about the ministry of women. If evangelicals are unwilling to examine or re-examine texts like these in the original, then Bailey is right in saying that we put our traditional interpretations above scripture.

Bailey points out that in Acts 18: 24-26 we have a woman teaching theology, not just to a man but to a famous preacher. Some will argue that this was in private and this is different from public teaching. The Magnificat in Luke Chapter 1 makes Mary the teacher of the whole church. In John 20: 16 the Greek term used indicates an official message. The Jews said that the witness of a woman is not reliable, but Jesus makes a woman his official messenger of the resurrection.

In my opinion BMMF International is not hampered by its own attitudes about the ministry of women. For this very reason, and in the light of its history, it might have something significant to say on this subject to churches, missions and those engaged in ministry to Muslims.