

Past, Present, Promise

What I've learned in forty years about women in ministry.

DAVID M. SCHOLER

The following article is adapted from a paper the author presented at the American Baptist Churches Women in Ministry Biennial Breakfast on June 22, 2001, in Providence, Rhode Island.

I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU MY PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON MY forty years' involvement with women in ministry, trusting that I am old enough and have been at it long enough that such personal reflection is not in poor taste.

From John R. Rice to Paul King Jewett

My journey began almost fifty years ago in the fundamentalist church that was the context for my early development in the faith. A voracious reader and curious about theology, by the time I was fifteen I had read John R. Rice's 1941 classic, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers: Significant Questions for Honest Christian Women Settled by the Word of God*.¹ I was a good fundamentalist Baptist boy who knew the place of women!

Still, in my high school years I had private, unvoiced doubts about three aspects of my context: the place of women in the church; the pretribulational, millennial, literalistic eschatology; and ecclesiastical separatism. I once went with two friends to their Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Sunday morning worship, and I reported to my pastor that, to my great surprise, I discovered that they worshiped and honored Jesus Christ. My pastor declared: "Son, do not be deceived; the words may be the same, but they have a completely different meaning!"

When I went off to college, I enrolled in New Testament Greek, determined to find answers to my private theological doubts and questions. A long journey must here be compressed. By 1960 I married my wife, Jeannette, a wonderfully strong, intelligent woman. By 1962 I had two years of formal theological education behind me, had become an American Baptist, shed my dispensationalism, and written in a seminary paper that I could find no biblical reason to exclude women from any form of the ministry.

As naive and uninformed as I then was, I had become, within my social and theological context, a kind of "radical" on the issue of women in ministry. Jeannette's reading in 1963, the year of its publication, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*² and my continuing theological education as a budding New Testament scholar drove me inexorably further into the issues of women and ministry in the New Testament and in the life of the church.

By the time I began my career as a New Testament professor in 1969, I was perceived of as a kind of champion of women in ministry. In 1972 I first offered my seminary

course "Women and Ministry in the New Testament." I have no clear evidence for my assertion, but I think it may have been the first such seminary course anywhere; it was certainly the first such in the evangelical tradition of the church. (The Evangelical Women's Caucus came in 1974; Paul King Jewett's book *Men as Male and Female*³ in 1975—the two great landmarks of the evangelical awakening to the issues of women in the contemporary church.) It was also in 1972 that I gave my first major public lecture on women and ministry in the New Testament—before a conservative group of about two hundred students at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. I still remember the first question from the floor: "Professor Scholer, just imagine for a moment that you were a Christian, how would you answer this question . . . ?"

I have now taught my seminary course twenty-five times, have lectured on women and ministry in hundreds of places and contexts, have been deeply involved in these matters in the ABCUSA and in many other denominations and institutions, have debated publicly most of the conservative scholars who have argued from the Bible for limits to the ministry of women, and have become a professional colleague and

friend of many of the feminist New Testament scholars in the English-speaking world. In these contexts, and from hundreds of women who have been students and colleagues, I have learned much, grown in knowledge and understanding, and have changed in my perceptions, perspectives, and emphases. I want to attempt to summarize what I think I have learned.

Exegesis and hermeneutics

I am, among other things, a New Testament scholar. Much of my learning over the last three decades comes especially in areas of exegesis and hermeneutics. But the very nature of the material with which I work and, even more critically, the persons with whom I have worked, have driven me to invest in the whole history of women in the church, the feminist movement and especially its critiques of Christianity, issues of inclusive and God language, the grim realities of the abuse of women, and more.

I think my most important exegetical-hermeneutical discovery, beginning about 1975 and continuing to unfold, has to do with starting points. When I first taught my course, I began with 1 Timothy 2; after all, that is where the discussion had always begun. My opposition began—and ended—with that text: it was the all-important piece of biblical data. But it began to dawn on me that the New Testament did not tell us where to begin; that was a hermeneu-

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