



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
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June 2016

A Few Words about the “Social Gospel”

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We “conservatives” sometimes speak of the “Social Gospel” in a way that shows we know very little about it. Many think the Social Gospel is all about churches sponsoring social activities like social meals and recreational activities. While these unscriptural practices are wrong and may have in some way grown out of the social gospel movement, they are not at the core of it.

Historically the social gospel was a Protestant movement that began in the later part of the nineteenth century and became a strong influence during the beginning years of the twentieth century. It was started by classic theological liberals (classic Modernists) who basically lost faith in the hereafter and tried to make preaching and the church still relevant by making them a means of improving the present world order (the here and now).

Its influence continues to shape the religious thinking, preaching, and church practice of many in this country. The shifted emphasis and focus of the gospel and churches from saving souls and preparing them for heaven to that of social reform and the betterment of society is seen everywhere. The role of Jesus as the Savior has been replaced with Jesus as a mere wise man whose teaching will make a better society. The theory involves the notion that the problem of sin is caused by the corruption and inequities of our social systems. The solution is to produce a better world order and the problem of sin will diminish. The emphasis in preaching is turned to social reform and away from personal conversion to Christ.

Emphasizing salvation from poverty and inequity, rather than salvation from sin and its temporal and eternal consequences is the present

order. Another way of putting it is that the focus has shifted from pursuing heaven and avoiding hell, by overcoming personal sin through the gospel, to making a better life in the here and now. The reason little is preached about heaven and hell is either that they no longer believe in them or if they still do believe they think that virtually no one is in danger of hell and that everyone is going to heaven. The social gospel’s shift is often so subtle that it is hard for us to see. Sure, the gospel addresses a Christian’s behavior in this present world (Titus 2:11, 12), but in the context of how these things affect his pursuit of the future world (v. 13).

Think of the themes and topics for “gospel meetings,” “seminars,” “specials” and even “Sunday sermons” that you see from churches. How many of them suggest that they will be addressing matters of spiritual and eternal import or will it be matters that are basically designed primarily to improve life in the here and now? Will there be lessons from the Bible designed to tell how to better prepare of heaven, or will they be more designed to take the Bible as a manual for their physical and social betterment? Even when the gospel does address Christians’ responsibilities in the home, the community, or work place, is not that improvement in these areas is an end within itself, but as a part of living here in a way that prepares one to live in heaven in the hereafter.

I suspect that we all may have been influenced by the social gospel concept that we realized and need to be careful to preach the gospel as the apostles preached it. Church sponsored social activities may be a spin-off from the social gospel, but the social gospel manifests itself in far more ways than that. ■

Does the New Testament Authorize Deaconesses?

Carrol R. Sutton

The question under consideration in this study is one about which scholars are divided. Some do not hesitate to say that deaconesses are authorized in the New Testament. Others say that it is questionable and still others suggest that there is no authority in the New Testament for deaconesses. We cannot answer this question by appealing to scholars since scholars do not constitute New Testament authority. They are divided as to what the New Testament teaches on this subject.

We cannot settle this question by appealing to “historical evidence” because it does not constitute New Testament authority. Neither is it conclusive as to what existed in the first century relative to deaconesses.

The practice of present day churches does not constitute divine authority on this or any other subject. Neither should our preferences, likes or dislikes be considered authoritative.

In an effort to determine what is God's will relative to deaconesses, our appeal must be to the Word of God. The Scriptures are sufficient to instruct us in righteousness that we might be “furnished completely unto every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, ASV). In the Scriptures we have “all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). The law of liberty is “perfect” and by it we shall be judged in the last day (Jas. 1:25; 2:12). Only God's revelation as given in the Scriptures can produce “faith” in our hearts (Rom. 10:17).

The primary passage used by those who advocate deaconesses is Romans 16:1. It reads as follows:

I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea (KJV).

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea (Revised Standard Version).

In this passage the word diakonos appears in the Greek text and is translated “servant” in the King James Version and “deaconess” in the Revised Standard Version. It is also translated “servant” in the American Standard Version, New American

Standard Version, New King James Version, New International Version and Diaglott as well as some others. Among those that translate diakonos to mean “deaconess” are the following translations: Williams, Moffatt, Macknight and Living Oracles. It also appears in the margin of the ASV as “deaconess.”

The word diakonos appears in the New Testament about twenty-nine other times. It is translated “minister” twenty times, “servant” six times and “deacon” three times. Of the twenty-two translations I checked, Romans 16:1 is the only passage in which some of the translations rendered diakonos to mean “deaconess.” In some other translations diakonos is translated “minister,” “helper, “ ”worker, “ etc. in Romans 16:1. It is obvious from this (and other evidence that could be given) that a word may have different meanings as used in different texts and contexts.

If (and this is a big if) diakonos should be translated “deaconess” in Romans 16:1, it would not necessarily follow that “deaconess” means a female “deacon” in the sense of a “deacon” as used in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1. It could (and probably would) mean nothing more than a female servant or helper. Please keep in mind that the “servants” at the marriage feast in John 2:5,9, the “ministers” (Paul and Apollos) of 1 Corinthians 3:5, the “minister” (Tychicus) of Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 1:7, the “minister” (Timotheus) of 1 Thessalonians 3:2, the “minister” (civil ruler or rulers) of Romans 13:4, the “ministers” (false apostles) of 2 Corinthians 11:15 and the “minister” (Jesus Christ) of Romans 15:8 are translations of diakonos. Question: Would any scholar or serious student conclude that all these were “deacons” as mentioned in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13? Surely not! Note: It is obvious that diakonos does not ordinarily mean “deacon” as used in 1 Timothy 3:9-13 and Philippians 1:1. The context (as well as the word) determines its meaning.

The fact that there is “historical evidence” that “deaconesses” in an official sense may have existed by the second or third century is not evidence from

the New Testament that such are authorized.

Why I Reject Deaconesses

There are several reasons why I reject the idea that the New Testament authorizes deaconesses in an official sense. Here are some of those reasons:

1. The word diakonos that is translated “deaconess” in Romans 16:1 in the RSV (and some others?) does not usually mean “deaconess” (or “deacon”). Ordinarily it simply means a “servant” or “minister.” In the case of diakonos being translated “deacon” in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-11, the context demands (or at least justifies) that such be done. Note: The context of Romans 16:1 does not demand (nor justify) that diakonos be translated “deaconess.”

2. There are no specific qualifications given for deaconesses. If the New Testament does authorize deaconesses, we do not know which women should be selected and appointed to be deaconesses. Question: What “qualifications” would a woman have to meet in order to be a deaconess? Note: If someone replies by saying that deaconesses replies by saying that deaconesses must meet the “qualifications” of 1 Timothy 3:11 and/or 1 Timothy 5:9-10, let it be observed that neither of those passages mentions nor necessarily implies deaconesses. To say these passages refer to deaconesses would be presumption. 1 Timothy 3:11 says “their wives” (ASV says “women”), and 1 Timothy 5:9-10 says “a widow. “ Not a word is said in either passage about deaconesses!

3. There is no mention of “deaconesses” as a class or as a group although “the bishops and deacons” are mentioned with the saints at Philippi (Phil. 1:1).

4. The feminine form of the word diakonos does not authorize an official class or order of “deaconesses” any more than the feminine form of the word presbuteros (translated elders) authorizes female elders. We have the feminine form in 1 Timothy 5:2 where it- says the “elder women.” One might also consider the “aged women” of Titus 2:3. Note: Women would violate the principles stated in 1 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, etc. if they endeavored to serve as “elders” (i.e. “bishops”) in view of 1 Peter 5:1-4, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 20:17,28, Hebrews 13:17, etc.

How Did Women Serve In New Testament Times?

We learn from Philippians 4:3 that certain women “labored” with Paul and others “in the gospel. “ It is not specifically stated what they did in such labors. Mary “bestowed much labor” on some. She worked hard (see Rom. 16:6). We are not told specifically what Mary did in such work. Mary, the mother of John Mark, provided her house “where many were gathered together praying” (Acts 12:12). Lydia provided lodging for Paul and his companions (Acts 16:14-15). Priscilla and her husband Aquila were Paul's “helpers in Christ Jesus, “ provided their house as a meeting place and took Apollos unto them, “and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Rom. 16:3-5; Acts 18:26). We learn from Acts 9:36-39 that Dorcas “was full of good works and alms-deeds which she did. “ We are also told that she made “coats and garments. Phebe was “a servant of the church at Cenchrea. She was a succourer (helper) of Paul and many others. We do not know exactly what she did in serving and helping many (see Rom. 16:1-2). It was prophesied that some women in the last days would prophesy (Acts 2:16-21). We learn from Acts 21:9 that Philip “had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.”

In the first century women were taught to place emphasis on inward, rather than outward, adorning although outwardly they were to adorn themselves “in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety” and “with good works.” Their works were to be such as “becometh women professing godliness” (1 Pet. 3:1-6; 1 Tim. 2:9- 10). They were to engage in such good works as rearing children, lodging strangers, washing the saints' feet and relieving the afflicted (1 Tim. 5:10). The aged women were to be proper examples and “teachers of good things. “ Along with other things they were to teach young women to be sober-minded, pure, keepers (workers) at home, etc. (Tit. 2:3-5).

As women served in the first century they were to recognize man as the head of woman generally and specifically the husband was to be the head over his wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-25). In giving some instructions for women the apostle Paul said:

“Let the woman team in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. “ The ASV says “quietness” instead of “silence” and “have doniinion over” instead of “usurp authority over. “ In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in addressing the church at Corinth and all saints everywhere Paul said: “Let your women (the women - ASV) keep silence in the churches. for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women (a woman - ASV) to speak in the church.” Women were to learn and apply these restric tions and limitations as they endeavored to serve God.

How May Women Serve Today?

Today, women may and should worship God in the public assemblies along with men. Such passages as 1 Corinthians 14:23-35; 11:20-34; 16:2; Colossians 3:16; Acts 20:7; etc. indicate that women could be and were in the assemblies. The fact that regulations were given specifically to restrict or regulate women in the public assemblies is proof that they had a right to be in those assemblies.

Not only do women have the right (and responsibility) to worship God in the public assemblies but they may and should serve God outside the assemblies in various ways and activities.

As far as I can determine, women today may serve God in the same ways and activities (in principle) that characterized women in the New Testament times. When women prophesied as in Acts 21:9, if they did so by inspiration, although they may and should teach the inspired word of God, they can not do so now by direct inspiration. Of course, today, as back then, women must apply the restrictions and limitations that Paul gave in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as they endeavor to teach and serve God in other ways.

Some Good Works Women May Do

Here is a list of some things that women may do without violating the restrictions imposed upon her in such passages as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

1. Along with her husband (if married) she may privately expound the way of God more perfectly to preachers who know “only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:26).

2. Teach others one on one and teach classes of women and children in the home or in a room at the church building (Tit. 2:3-5).

3. Visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction (Jas. 1:27).

4. Provide lodging for those who preach the gospel.

5. Bake bread for the Lord’s Supper and assist in caring for the communion set.

6. Write letters to teach and encourage friends, youth and others.

7. Transport the sick and elderly to the grocery store, worship assemblies and various other appointments.

8. Provide a meeting place for the church.

9. Visit and encourage and exhort other Christians.

10. Distribute tracts and other literature that teach the truth.

11. Visit and help hospital patients and shut-ins.

12. Help in bulletin preparation, printing and mailing.

13. Invite people to attend meetings of Christians. They may visit, call or write.

14. Prepare food and arrange for flowers in times of sickness and death.

15. Make contacts for others to visit and teach.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but I trust that it may at least be suggestive of some specific ways that women may serve in the Lord’s church. Women certainly have the right to engage in any authorized work so long as they do not violate some scriptural principle in so doing.

I have no objection to women serving as women served in the church in New Testament times. If there is a special work to be done for which women are more suitable than men, then no one should object to women doing it. Of course, all of us should make sure that we do not encourage women to go beyond the limits God has placed upon them. Let us also be sure that we are not guilty of binding restrictions upon women that God has not bound.

Guardian of Truth - November 16, 1989 ■