

The Ordination of Women

and

Integrity with History

One of the signs of modern, fallen Christianity is the practice of women teaching men and ordaining women to leadership roles. Historically, very few churches practiced this until the last century and a half. The Bible is quite plain in these points, so I usually do not spend a lot of time reading materials that try their best to make the Scriptures say the opposite of their plain meaning. So when someone recently showed me an issue of a magazine that was dedicated to proving that it was scriptural for women to be ordained as ministers (in the official sense of the word) and to teach men, I didn't pay a lot of attention. I grew up around churches that took that stance and know the arguments.¹

But one section caught my eye. It was the claim that the early Anabaptists had ordained women preachers. Although the article is careful to not actually call them "ordained ministers," the inference is clearly there.

During the last several years I have spent a good bit of time reading Anabaptist thought and history ... and knew that even some of the foremost "liberal" Mennonite historians (who seem to have gone looking for some proof of it to support their own current practice) had concluded after long research that there were simply no ordained women ministers in early Anabaptism.

Were there zealous women, women who boldly stood their ground when asked in court trials (sometimes accompanied by torture) about their faith? Absolutely! About 1/3 of all Anabaptist martyrs were women. But the bottom line was simple: no recorded case has been found of an early Anabaptist woman being ordained to the ministry in the official sense of the word. The word "minister" means serve (verb), or servant (noun). In that sense, every Anabaptist was considered a "minister."

So what do we do with the following, taken from page 1120 of the Herald Press edition of the *Martyrs Mirror*?

¹ I am referring to *The Gospel Trumpet*, published by the Church of God, Restoration. I grew up in churches very similar to this group and have had close contact in the past with it. I wrote a historical overview of the movement, which can be found at www.primitivechristianity.org or by writing to the address in the front of this magazine.

Now when some brethren and sisters in the Swiss dominions had died in prison, of misery, want, hunger, and grief, but five still lived in confinement, the remaining ones who were yet out of bonds, when they were threatened, especially by those of Berne, that they should expel them all from the country, and seize their goods, and sell them, had recourse, next to God, with an humble and friendly letter, to their fellow believers in Holland and elsewhere in the Netherlands, requesting that they should everywhere fervently call upon God the Lord in their behalf, for comfort and grace, to the end that they might patiently endure that which might come upon them according to the flesh, for His holy name's sake.

This letter was written the 22d of July, old style, in the year of our Lord 1645, and was signed by

Hans Duster, at Baltzen, an elder in the word of the Lord.	}	From the Berne jurisdiction.
Ruth Kunstel, at Muchem, a minister in the word of the Lord.		
Ruth Hagen, an elder.	}	From the Zurich jurisdiction.
Hans Mully, a minister.		
Hans Stuss, a minister.		

What followed therefrom, and how it subsequently went with those who were imprisoned, can

The Gospel Trumpet had the following to say about the above section:

Here is an image from *Martyrs Mirror* (Page 1122, Herald Press, 1950 edition), in which two women are clearly listed with men in the ministry. Ruth Kunstel was "a minister in the word of the Lord" at Muchem, in the Berne jurisdiction, while Ruth Hagen was listed as "an elder" from the Zurich area.

These women followed their New Testament forebears Phebe, the four daughters of Philip, Junia, etc., in ministering the Word of God along with men. This cannot be gainsaid, as it is in plain black-and-white recorded for posterity. Let all who claim the Anabaptist heritage know their history.

At first glance, it does seem to indicate that there were indeed women ordained as a minister and an elder in early Anabaptism. But right away I suspected something: Ruth was probably also a man's name in that time period. A quick check to the German version would clear up the question, since the German language has a different article (meaning a different form of "the" and "a") depending on whether the noun is a male noun or a female noun.

The German text of the two Ruths

Hans Duster, zu Balzen, einem Aeltesten an den Worte des Herrn.	}	Aus dem Berner Gebiete.
Ruth Kunstel, zu Muchem, einem Diener am Wort des Herrn.		
Ruth Hagen, einem Aeltesten.	}	Aus dem Züricher Gebiete.
Hans Mully, einem Diener.		
Hans Stuss, einem Diener.		

For those who do not read German (probably the majority of our readers), you will notice the article “einem.” Now take a look at whether that is a male or female article:

Indefinite Article				
	Singular			Plural
	masc.	fem.	neut.	m.f.n.
Nom.	ein	eine	ein	keine
Gen.	eines	einer	eines	keiner
Dat.	einem	einer	einem	keinen
Acc.	einen	eine	ein	keine

So, “einem diener” translates to English as “a male servant or minister.” In the same way, “einem aeltesten” translates to “a male elder.”²

Now let’s take another closer look at the English again. Does the English say “Ruth Hagen, an elder,” or does it say “Ruth Hagen, an eldress”?

Obviously, the situation here is that Ruth was a man. Ruth is certainly not a common male name; in fact it is the first time I have run across it myself. Another possibility in this case is a misspelling, since during that time period spelling consistency was basically an every-man-for-himself sort of thing.

To be sure, at first glance it can easily look like the early Anabaptists may have had “women in the ministry.” A closer look proves that the “proof” was bad proof.

For the other “proof” of “women in the ministry,” a little clip of page 481 of *Martyrs Mirror* was presented:

ELIZABETH, A. D. 1549

Elizabeth was apprehended on the 15th of January, 1549. When those who had come to apprehend her entered the house in which she lived, they found a Latin Testament. Having secured Elizabeth, they said: “We have got the right man; we have now the teacheress;” adding: “Where is your husband, Menno Simons, the teacher?”

They then brought her to the town-house. The following day two beadles took her between them to prison.

She was then arraigned before the council, and asked upon oath, whether she had a husband.

Elizabeth answered: “We ought not to swear, but our words should be Yea, yea, and Nay, nay; I have no husband.”

Lords: “We say that you are a teacher, and that you seduce many. We have been told this, and we want to know who your friends are.”

Elizabeth: “My God has commanded me to love my Lord and my God, and to honor my parents; hence I will not tell you who my parents are; for what I suffer for the name of Christ is a reproach to my friends.”

² Also to be noted is that the German word for minister itself has both a male and a female form. For a lady, it would have to be “einer aeltesterin” and for an eldress, “einer dienerin” (the *-in* suffix making it feminine).

Let me ask you: Just how much proof does the above clipping give to prove that the early Anabaptists had women ordained as teachers to men?

To be honest, it provides exactly 0% proof. Elizabeth was *accused* of being a teacher. But she was also (falsely) accused of being Menno Simons’ wife. Or perhaps the authorities were mocking her. But there is no admission on Elizabeth’s part of being a “teacher.” Or, if she did teach, whom did she teach? Children? Other women? Men?

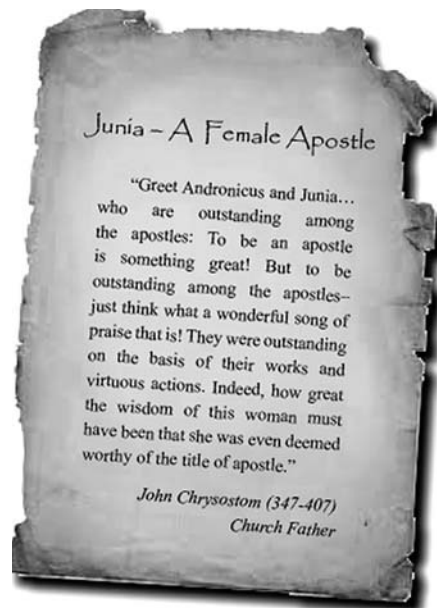
No proof of being a “teacher” is found. Much less whom she taught if she was indeed an ordained “teacher.”

This thing called integrity

All this moved my mind to think of integrity. Integrity has to do with “wholeness.” When speaking of a person’s or a group’s integrity, it carries the idea of being totally honest. For myself, when dealing with Anabaptist history it means admitting—for as much that I admire the Anabaptist movement—that there were some things I cannot agree with. Some of them held wrong ideas about divorce/remarriage. Some of them had really—I mean *really*—funny ideas about eschatology.

Back to history

But before we talk more about integrity, let’s look at the same magazine and one of the “proofs” (shown below) that it gives of the early church having “women in the ministry.”³



Proof of the early church ordaining women as preachers?

³ While the phrase “women in the ministry” is perfectly valid in the sense of women who served and blessed others, the underlying thought is of ordained women as elders, pastors, or teachers of men.

The question here is not so much the interpretation that Chrysostom gave of the passage of Scripture, but the question is about the integrity of using one quote of his to support the idea of women preaching in the church. There are several points that could be argued on his interpretation of Romans 16:7. 1. Whether listing both of them together is meant as a husband/wife team, and only Andronicus was officially the apostle. 2. Whether being called an apostle was an indication that Junia taught men. Many women have been sent as apostles (we call them missionaries in our day ... “one sent out”) and yet never taught men. If we read the rest of the writings of John Chrysostom, it is quite clear that he felt women should not teach men, nor speak in the church. There are a number of things we could quote from him, but this one suffices:

To such a degree should women be silent, that they are not allowed to speak not only about worldly matters, but not even about spiritual things, in the church. This is order, this is modesty, this will adorn her more than any garments. Thus clothed, she will be able to offer her prayers in the manner most becoming. ... [Paul] says, let them not teach, but occupy the station of learners. For thus they will show submission by their silence. (*Early Church Fathers, Vol. XXII*)

Back to integrity

But let’s look at the integrity of pulling one ambiguous quote out of early church history to prove a point, when there are plenty of other quotes that clearly refute the idea that is trying to be proven. For example:

Their [the married Apostles’] spouses went with them [on their mission trips], not as wives, but as sisters, in order to minister to housewives. It was through them

that the Lord’s teaching penetrated also the women’s quarters without any scandal being aroused. *Clement of Alexandria (ANF 2.391-Translated from the Latin)*

If the daughters of Philip prophesied, at least they did not speak in the assemblies; for we do not find this fact in evidence in the Acts of the Apostles. Much less in the Old Testament. It is said that Deborah was a prophetess ... There is no evidence that Deborah delivered speeches to the people, as did Jeremiah and Isaiah. Huldah, who was a prophetess, did

not speak to the people, but only to a man, who consulted her at home. The gospel itself mentions a prophetess Anna ... but she did not speak publicly. Even if it is granted to a woman to show the sign of prophecy, she is nevertheless not permitted to speak in an assembly. When Miriam the prophetess spoke, she was leading a choir of women ... For [as Paul declares] “I do not permit a woman to teach,” and even less “to tell a man what to do.” *Origen*⁴

And these verses (Romans 16:1-2) teach with apostolic authority that females were appointed to aid the church. Phoebe of Cenchrea was placed in this service, and Paul with great praise and recommendation follows by enumerating her beautiful deeds, saying, “She helped everyone so much, by being close at hand when needed, that she even helped me in my needs and apostolic labors, with a total dedication of her mind.” I would compare her work to that of Lot, who while he always

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Antoinette Louisa [Brown] Blackwell is generally recognized as the first woman to be ordained in the USA, in 1853. She was a fervent feminist, as well as an evolutionist, writing, “[Women] will become indispensable to the religious evolution of the human race.”

4 Origen, *Fragmenta ex commentariis in epistolam i ad Corinthios* (in catenis), Greek text published in Claude Jenkins, “Documents: Origen on I Corinthians. IV,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1909), p. 41. English translation from Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1976), p. 28.

took in strangers, one time even merited practicing hospitality on angels. In the same way Abraham also, who was always practicing hospitality, once merited having the Lord with his angels to be entertained in his tent. So this devout Phoebe, continually assist-

This verse (Romans 16:6) teaches that women should labor for the churches of God. For they labor when they teach the young ladies to be modest, to love their husbands, to raise children, to be pure and chaste, to guide their homes, to be hospitable, to wash the saints' feet, and everything else that is written concerning the service of women.
~Origen

ing and obeying everyone, was once merited with assisting and obeying the Apostle as well. This verse teaches us two things at the same time: There are, as was said, female aides in the church, and such should be considered as part of the service of the church. Those who have assisted many, and by good service have attained to apostolic praise, should be counted as part of that ministry. He also exhorts that those who seek to do good works in the churches, whether in spiritual or fleshly aid, should receive in return the

reward and honor from the brethren.

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For how credible would it seem, that he [the Apostle Paul] who has not permitted a woman even to learn with overboldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing! "Let them be silent," he says, "and at home consult their own husbands." *Tertullian (ANF 3.677)*

It is not permitted to a woman to speak in the church; but neither (is it permitted her) to teach, nor to bap-

tize, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function, nor to stay (in any) sacerdotal office. *Tertullian (ANF 4.33)*

That a woman ought to be silent in the church: In the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: "Let women be silent in the church. But if any wish to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home." Also to Timothy: "Let a woman learn with silence, in all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to be set over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not seduced, but the woman was seduced." *Cyprian (ANF 5:546)*

We do not permit our women to teach in the Church, but only to pray and hear those that teach; for our Master and Lord, Jesus Himself, when He sent us the twelve to make disciples of the people and of the nations, did nowhere send out women to preach, although He did not lack [women candidates to do this]. For there were with us the mother of our Lord and His sisters; also Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus; Salome, and certain others. For, had it been necessary for women to teach, He Himself [would have] first commanded these also to instruct the people with us. For "if the head of the wife be the man," it is not reasonable that the rest of the body should govern the head. *Apostolic Constitutions (ANF 7.427, 428)*

But if in the foregoing constitutions we have not permitted [women] to teach, how will any one allow them, contrary to nature, to perform the office of a priest? For this is one of the ignorant practices of the Gentile atheism, to ordain women priests to the female deities, not one of the constitutions of Christ. *Apostolic Constitutions (ANF 7.429)*

Ok, you probably get the point. The mass of early church quotes are clearly against the idea of women teaching men and against ordaining women to leadership roles in the church (unless, like the early Moravian Brethren, the Eldresses only taught or counseled other women or children).

The mass of early church quotes are clearly against the idea of women teaching men and against ordaining women to leadership roles (over men) in the church.

These quotes from the early church neither prove nor disprove if the Bible itself teaches for or against women teaching men or speaking in public assemblies. They do, however, give us a clear indication of how the Ante-Nicene church interpreted Paul's teachings. The bottom line is, as far as I know, there is no straightforward evidence in early church writings that women (excepting heretical groups like the Montanists) ever taught in a public assembly. I say that with integrity. I say it after having read thousands of pages of church history.

I could be wrong, of course; I don't know everything there is to know about church history. But my integrity will not let me say otherwise. Do I say that because I happen to believe that Paul's writings clearly forbid women to be ordained as elders? And that women are not to teach men, or speak in the public assembly?

No, I am being honest with history. I cannot say the same about the Quakers. As much as I like what the Quakers stood for in some areas, my integrity will not permit me to make the Quakers appear as if they forbade women speaking publically in the assemblies. It simply was not so. But the early church and the Anabaptists forbade women to speak in the public assemblies and to teach men. Integrity demands that I say that.

And if we lack integrity in history ...

So what do you do with a person or a group who does not seem to have integrity with history? Personally, I find it hard to swallow the same person's (or group's) handling of the Holy Scriptures. If they pull an ambiguous quote from *Martyrs Mirror* and make it appear that the early Anabaptists had ordained women elders, or if they use one ambiguous early church quote, but ignore a dozen plain ones ... how will they handle the Bible?

Perhaps some of you readers are wondering why I do not take up here an exposition of the Scriptures that touch women preachers. Well, my main point in this short article is not about women preachers, but about integrity. But let us look at one biblical point, again mainly considering integrity.

In the same issue of *The Gospel Trumpet*, there is a small box concerning Phoebe, the *διάκονον* [transliterated, "deaconess"] of the church at Cenchrea mentioned in Romans 16:1. The article states:

Many have thought the word servant (*diakonos*) here means deacon or deaconess, but when the same word is used elsewhere by Paul, it denotes ministers of the gospel:

"Jesus Christ was a minister" (*diakonos*). Rom. 15:8.

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers" (*diakonos*). 1 Cor. 3:5.

"Epaphras our dear fellowservant...a faithful minister" (*diakonos*). Col. 1:7.

"Thou [Timothy] shalt be a good minister (*diakonos*) of Jesus Christ." 1 Tim. 4:6.

"Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister" (*diakonos*). Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7.

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers (*diakonos*) by whom ye believed." 1 Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25.

From the Scriptures selected by *The Gospel Trumpet*, it could easily be deduced that the Greek word *διάκονον* always refers to what we think of when we think of an ordained preacher. However ... the word "minister" simply means "to aid" (verb) or "one who aids" (noun). Are the quoted texts saying that all those mentioned were ordained preachers? Or is it simply calling them aides, or more specifically "one who executes the commands of another" (Thayer's Lexicon)? But let's get down to the integrity of the matter ... why was not Romans 13:4 added in the list selected by *The Gospel Trumpet*?

For he is the minister of God to thee for good ...

Who is this "minister"? None other than the civil authority that is over the believer. Yes, the civil authorities are "deacons" of God! In John 2:5, "His mother saith unto the *διακόνοις*, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." Were those wedding helpers "ordained ministers"?

Obviously my point is that the Greek word *διάκονον* can refer specifically to an ordained servant of the church (1 Ti. 3:8), or it can simply be the men responsible for filling the waterpots at a marriage, or your town mayor, or the girl who wipes the tables after a meal.

In what sense was Phoebe a *διάκονον*: an aide of the church, or a "minister of the gospel"?⁵ From the isolated text of Romans 16:1, nothing can be concluded. We have to take into account the whole NT use of the word, as well as the teachings concerning women and public ministry.

My conclusion—based on the whole of the NT teaching—is that she was simply a woman of the church at Cenchrea who aided the church by carrying Paul's letter and perhaps taking care of some other unspecified "business" while there. It appears that she had been busy succouring many people in the past, so maybe she was simply on a mission to Rome to bless some needy person or family there. Maybe some expectant mother needed an extra hand for a few months. Maybe a sick sister needed

5 Technically the phrase "minister of the gospel" does not specifically refer to preaching. An "aide of the gospel" is simply someone who helps in the cause of the kingdom of God, be it in preaching/teaching, or in helping in physical needs. For that reason I use quotes, since the phrase has come to mean a "preacher of the gospel."

some help. Maybe she taught the younger sisters how to love their husbands. There are myriads of opportunities to aid the church without being an “ordained minister of the gospel.”

But the bottom line is that we really don’t know, from the text of that one verse, in what sense Paul intended the word. But to quote only the verses that tend to use διακονον in a sense of a “minister of the gospel,” and act as if that is the only way to interpret the word διακονον ... is that integrity?

I quote the article again:

... but when the same word is used elsewhere by Paul, it denotes ministers of the gospel.

Does integrity ignore obvious evidence to the contrary? That said, simple, honest ignorance can also be involved. Innocent ignorance does not mean a lack of integrity. The difference is when truth is revealed, innocent ignorance will acknowledge its former error. A lack of integrity will just make excuses or ignore the truth.

Agendas and integrity

One of integrity’s mightiest foes is having an agenda. For example, concerning church history, it is common (and I have found myself doing it as well) to go looking in history to find support for a position, instead of to go looking for what position the historical evidence provides. And the same, of course, applies to looking in the Bible to find evidence to support an agenda. We see it all the time in today’s apostate churches with the “gay” agenda. It “blows me away” that people read the Bible and come away saying that sodomite “marriages” are not sin. My integrity simply will not let me say such a thing (and I am not claiming my integrity is perfect). If I felt sodomy was righteous, then I would have to abandon the Bible. Gay “marriage” is the epitome of self-righteousness. I simply do not have any desire to twist Scripture and history that hard. I have very little respect for the integrity of anyone who claims the Bible supports homosexual “marriages.” Scripture is too plain on that subject.

Yet, I realize that sometimes when I read—be it the Bible or history—I sense that an agenda lurks in the shadows, trying to get *me* to ignore evidence that may contradict my current understanding of an issue. May God help us all to flee from all agendas except the “agenda” to be honest seekers of truth. If the truth of the matter is that the early church and the Anabaptists did ordain women to be preachers to men, then may we have enough integrity to say so. If not, then may we just have enough integrity to not twist and hide evidence so as to support an agenda.

Pray for me! ~Mike Atnip