

“Church & Gender” Study Guide

Lesson 13: Historical Concerns

Outline

1. QUESTIONS
 - a. How did the early church understand these passages?
 - b. Should we be influenced by the church’s history of interpretation and practice?
 - c. What about the history of the Church of Christ in particular?
2. The Early Church
 - a. Historically, a strong precedent exists for men in leadership roles in the church.
 - b. It is entirely possible that the earliest church was mostly arranged as house churches.
 - c. If so, many of the “authority” issues prevalent in large groups would not exist.
 - d. This may be a fabricated problem for modern churches in many cases.
 - e. DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM (3RD C): Deaconesses were “assisting at the baptism of women, going into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in the area of their need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness.”
3. Historical Mandate
 - a. ON THE ONE HAND ... Church history cannot be ignored. If the Holy Spirit was at work in the church in all ages, then it is reasonable to assume that historic teachings and practices of the church mean something.
 - b. ON THE OTHER HAND ... Church history is not a record of perfect churches. If humans were involved in those churches, then they are flawed.
4. Examples
 - a. TERTULLIAN (d. 220): “And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? ... You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert---that is, death---even the Son of God had to die.”
 - b. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (347-407): “The woman taught once and ruined all. On this account therefore he saith, let her not teach ... for the sex is weak and fickle, and he is speaking of the sex collectively.”
 - c. THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274): “The human group would have lacked the benefit of order had some of its members not been governed by others who were wiser. Such is the subjection in which woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational discernment is by nature stronger in man.”
 - d. JOHN WESLEY (1703-1791): “This verse [1 Timothy 2:14] shows why she ought not ‘to teach.’ She is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives.”
5. Historical Summary
 - a. Church history has typically shown a very strong complementarian (or even traditionalist) doctrine.
 - b. Church history has often stated and practiced this doctrine in ways that demeaned women.
 - c. We can’t ignore history, but neither can we follow it blindly.
6. The Church of Christ

- a. C.R. Nichol, *God's Woman: The Place of Women in the Social and Religious Life as Revealed in the Bible* (1938)
- b. Nichol conceded that though most women were physically weaker than men, but "that does not argue she is his inferior in mental ability" (p.43).
- c. "This woman, Huldah, taught a group of men without usurping authority over them, and women can teach men today without refusing to be in subjection to men!" (p. 30).
- d. ON 1 CORINTHIANS 14: "The conditions which existed in the church at Corinth at the time this letter was written, and the conditions under which women were required to 'keep silence' exist in no place on earth today." (p. 140).
- e. ON 1 TIMOTHY 2: Nichol's challenges the prevailing culture head-on in his exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:8-15.
 - i. He writes, with emphasis, "I INSIST THAT YOU DO NOT READ INTO THE PASSAGE THAT WHICH IS NOT THERE" (p. 149).
 - ii. "May a sister teach one of the groups, in the meeting house on Sunday morning, in what is usually called the 'Sunday School?' Yes! Women are not free to teach all literary subjects five days in the week, and then forbidden to teach the most important subject in the world – the Bible, on Sunday" (p. 48).
 - iii. "But whom may she teach? She may teach anyone who becomes a member of the group she instructs; anyone who seeks instructions at her hand" (p. 48).
 - iv. "Are there no restrictions touching the occasions when she may teach? Yes. She is not allowed to usurp authority over a man on any occasion nor under any circumstances. Her teaching then must be such, and under such circumstances, that she does not fail to be in subjection to men" (p. 48).
 - v. "If a woman teaches a Sunday School class, at the solicitation of the elders in the church of Christ, she does not usurp authority over man." (p. 154).
- f. ON 1 TIMOTHY 3:
 - i. "The student of the New Testament often inquires 'In the days of the apostles there were women in the church called 'deaconesses,' why is it that we do not have such women in the church today?'" (p.159).
 - ii. "To me it seems absurd to contend that Paul when discussing the qualifications of a deacon would turn aside abruptly and mention the character of the deacon's wife; but makes no reference to the character of the bishop's wife, when in the same connection he had discussed the qualifications of the bishop. ... In truth verse eleven in the passage does not have reference to the wife of a deacon" (p. 161).
 - iii. Female deacons were essential not so much to have a "Twentieth Century Church" but to have "the church of the first century, the New Testament church" to function "in the twentieth century" (p.166).
- g. Should we agree with C.R. Nichol? Not necessarily. But it does prove that churches and ministers within the Church of Christ have held strongly differing views on this topic without severing fellowship or losing respect for each other.

Discussion Questions

1. What does history teach us about church and gender?
2. Does history help you feel more confident in your own view, or less so?