

Why We Should Not Restrict Women From Leadership
by William J. Ellis

This issue of women serving on the Board of Deacons at Riverside Community Church has been an item of debate within the membership since it surfaced several years ago. Although it is an issue of strong personal opinion for some, I don't believe that it is one over which people should separate from fellowship. Church unity should be based upon common core doctrines and purposes. It does not mean uniformity on all issues, especially ones that are more peripheral and ones upon which sincere Bible believing scholars disagree.

In the past I have remained neutral on the issue when it is being debated among the membership. RCC has been and continues to be served well by the men who have served the church on the Official Board. Thus I am mostly ambivalent about the issue in regards to my personal preferences. However, the following are my reasons why I believe we should not restrict women from serving in any position of leadership at RCC.

One reason is because it is the view of the Assemblies of God. It has been the practice of the Assemblies of God from it's beginning nearly 100 years ago that women be credentialed for ministry. The main reason why, even before the "mainline" denominations ordained women, was not because of the "women's suffrage movement" or the "Equal Rights Amendment" debate, but because our church founders simply recognized God's call upon women for ministry. They believed that the Pentecostal experience that birthed the movement out of which the Assemblies of God was formed was a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy which said, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your *sons and daughters* will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, *both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18)

The same reason the early church adopted the belief that Gentiles could be accepted by God — because "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith." (Acts 15:8,9) — is the reason why the Assemblies of God has ordained women. In other words, they determined that if God was gifting women to be prophets and preachers and evangelists and missionaries, who are we to restrain them?

Another reason why we should not restrict women from leadership is that, in general, the early church did not. Jesus and the early church (including the Apostle Paul) were revolutionary to their popular culture in regard to the social restraint of women. Women, in the first century, were no more than the property of the men, equal in status to oxen which plowed the fields. They could not receive an education, nor own property, nor could their testimony be upheld in a court of law. Jesus broke all the social restrictions by the way he esteemed women. He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, caring more for her soul than for his reputation. He was commonly criticized because of his radically welcoming treatment of women. He had women who supported him and traveled with him. He permitted Mary to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching, which was customarily limited only to men, while Martha was "doing the women's work." He permitted the alabaster jar of perfume to be poured out on his feet by a woman with a poor reputation. And, when it came time to pass judgment upon the woman caught in adultery, Jesus profoundly proclaimed God's equal treatment of women and men by accusing the men of equal guilt as the adulteress. Why wasn't the man who

was caught in the act of adultery brought before the crowd? Because there was an ungodly double standard in that culture, is why. Jesus shattered the double standard of his day by demonstrating that men are equally guilty as women under God's standards. (See Leviticus 20:10)

Into this paternalistic society the early church was birthed. It is true that the first apostles were men, and, at least in Ephesus, the deacons were men, but is that because women were incapable or because the culture was incapable of accepting women in leadership positions?

For very pragmatic reasons the Apostle Paul encourages women to cover their heads in worship, and to dress modestly, and not to wear jewelry or to braid their hair. Yet, today, hatless women with braided hair and jewelry fill our pews without scandal. Why? Because we have ceased to equate these practices with prostitution or disrespect for their husbands. Yet the same argument Paul uses to restrict their appearance in I Corinthians is the argument he uses for women to "learn in quietness and full submission, and not teach or have authority over a man" at the church in Ephesus where Timothy was installed as the elder (1 Timothy 2:9-14). Are we consistent in our application of scripture if we say that Paul's restrictions for women's appearance is cultural, but his restrictions on women in leadership are for all places and at all times?

Yes, at Ephesus, it appears that the deacons were men (1 Timothy 3). But, when Paul was explaining to Timothy the qualifications for those who would serve, the emphasis was not that they be men, but that they be men who are spiritually qualified. In other words, if you were to write a letter to your friend explaining the qualifications of the President, you would not say, "she should be honest, intelligent, and faithful to her husband" because the President is not a she, he is a he. So to limit the position of Deacon once and for all because at one church in the first century men were serving in that position, is to extrapolate more than Paul was intending.

This is supported by the fact that Paul recognized the leadership of women elsewhere. Nympha, Pricilla and Phoebe were all esteemed as leaders in the church.

Finally, it is clear that many people still prefer to have men serve in the top leadership positions in the church. Although I may believe in principle that God could qualify and call a woman to that position, practically, in our setting, that person would still have to be elected to serve in that position. As long as people prefer for men to serve, men would be elected. In other words, changing the churches by-laws to permit the possibility of women in leadership does not dictate that a woman must serve in that position. If in the culture of our church a woman would not be able to be effective because men are preferred, a woman would not be elected. Some fear that if we change the constitution and by-laws men would abdicate their responsibility to lead. This argument puts little faith in the men of our church and neglects the reality of what has happened in other Assembly of God churches where women are permitted to serve. Those churches which do not restrict women in leadership discover that people still prefer to elect men, and men still willingly serve. And, I have never known of a church where they do elect women to serve where they are in the majority on the board. And where there are women who serve, they serve effectively.

It is my desire that we change our by-laws by changing the wording "shall be **men** of mature Christian experience... who shall meet the **requirements** as set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1" to "shall be of mature Christian experience...who shall meet the **spiritual qualifications** of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.