

Baptists and the Ordination of Women

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1. People of the Bible

The first Baptist congregation was organized in 1607 among English refugees in Amsterdam. Since then they have grown to a worldwide community of churches in almost all countries of the world with well over fifty million members. They have by far outgrown the Congregationalists from whom they originated, and they are now one of the major denominational families among the Protestants.

With many other Protestants, Baptists share the conviction that the Bible is all sufficient for salvation by grace and faith, but they differ from many fellow Protestants in that they want to apply the principle of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) equally to the life of the individual Christian *and* to the structure of the church. In short, they want to be and to build their church “according to the New Testament”.

1.1. Baptist Distinctives

As Baptists we have no confession of old, which we all have to sign.¹ Neither do we have a central authority, which tells us how to interpret the Bible.² Nevertheless, over the centuries, much agreement has emerged and has been kept, through what we call the Baptist distinctives.³

There is no exact and approved list of such distinctives, still agreement is wide. All distinctives centre on the *Lordship of Christ* and on the *direct relationship* of every believer to Christ as his or her Lord. Three distinctives address the outside relations of the church: **Religious freedom** (equally for the believer and the unbeliever) and **freedom of conscience**. Both result in the demand for the full **separation of state and church**.

Three distinctives address the believers and the congregation where they worship. The basic principle which distinguishes the Baptists from the mainline churches is the concept of a **regenerate church membership**. The church is not a mixed bag of believers and unbelievers, but a congregation of people with personal faith committed to serve Christ as their Lord. In this congregation (or church) all believers are priests, this produces the distinctive of the **priesthood of all believers**.

For Baptists there is no Pope and there are no Patriarchs and no Bishops.⁴ The highest authority is the local congregation, and therefore the distinctive is the **autonomy of the local church**. This includes the need for cooperation between local churches as it is expressed in the idea of Associations and Conventions.⁵ Finally I would like to point out a distinctive that is very personal and very general at the same time: The right to **personal interpretation of Scripture**. This means that Baptists of differing views can worship in the same local church and that there is no authority beyond the local church to prescribe how to interpret Scripture.⁶

1.2. The Question Raised: Women as Pastors?

Over the last 50 years or so in many denominations, Baptist churches included, this question has been raised, and different answers have been given, with the Catholics and the Orthodox consistently refusing to ordain women as priests and many Protestant churches agreeing to ordain women as pastors and even as bishops.

¹ For Lutherans such a confession may be the Augsburg Confession, for Anglicans the 39 Articles, for Presbyterians the Westminster Confession and for the Reformed the Belgica or the Confession of Dort.

² For Roman Catholics who nowadays are encouraged to read the Bible, the Church and its Teachings Magisterium is such an authority.

³ For a local treatment of the distinctives see: Hany Longwe, *Democratization of the Christian Faith: The Influence of the Baptist Doctrine of the “Priesthood of All Believers” on the History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)*, PhD, University of Malawi, 2007, pp. 2-15.

⁴ Unless a congregation follows the biblical understanding that the elders of a congregation are its bishops (overseers - *episkopoi*). But then there would be more than one bishop in any congregation, not one for a whole diocese.

⁵ Their role is to support the local congregations, not to make decisions for them.

⁶ For this reason Baptist confessions (the first was produced by Smith in 1609, two years after the birth of the first Baptist church ever) are an expression of consensus, not a document that prescribes and binds the faith of the members. This is viewed differently by a new group, the Reformed Baptists, who claim that the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 is the only correct interpretation of the Baptist faith. The Reformed Baptists have been spreading much in Zambia and have come to Malawi as well (For details see: Reinhard Frey, *History of the Zambia Baptist Association 1905-2005*, Zomba: Kachere, 2009, pp. 175ff.)

Over the last ten years or so the question if women can be pastors⁷ or can be ordained has been raised in the Baptist Convention of Malawi, of which I have been a members since 1993.⁸ Since I am involved, I write this little book as a Baptist for Baptists, though I am happy if any non-Baptist can profit from it too. Writing as a Baptist, I want to base my writing on the New Testament, trying to interpret it in the light of the Baptist distinctives.

Should Baptists ordain women as pastors? To have a good base for the argument a look at the meaning of both terms (pastors and ordination) in the New Testament is required if we want to build the church of the New Testament. So we ask: What does the New Testament tell us about pastors and what does the New Testament tells us about ordination? It is easier to ask the question than to answer it, since for both the New Testament evidence is limited.

2. “Pastor” in the New Testament

If we understand a pastor to be an individual looking after a congregation full-time or part-time, we do not find that office in the NT. In the NIV Bible the word pastor occurs only once, and that is in the plural.

It is he who gave some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Eph 4:11-12)

We do not know many details of the early church, but it seems that there is a multiplicity of gifts (“he gave”), and there are pastors and teachers among them.

Though the word “pastor” occurs only here, a related word “shepherd” can give us further insights. In the New Testament we do not read of any congregation that “so and so” was the shepherd.

When the word shepherd occurs in the singular, it always refers to Jesus Christ. In John 10 Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, in Heb 13:20 he is called the Great Shepherd of the sheep, and in 1 Peter 5:4 he is called the Chief Shepherd.

No individual receives the title Shepherd or Pastor in the New Testament, but the New Testament speaks twice of the elders of a church (again in the plural) as the shepherds.

In Acts 20, when Paul called the elders of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17) to bid farewell to them on his way to Jerusalem, he told them:

Be shepherds of the church of God. (Acts 20:28)

Paul tells them to do pastoral work, but there are several such (elders), not just one of them, and not full time.

The other text is very similar, written by the Apostle Peter.

To the elders among you I appeal as a fellow elder ... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

2.1. Baptist Pastors

Both texts show that the elders are the shepherds (pastors) of their church. No individual is ever mentioned as a pastor in the New Testament. If we Baptists want to follow the New Testament, can we have full time pastors, one at a time?

In the Baptist understanding this is possible, since we see nothing in the New Testament stopping a congregation from appointing one elder as the chief pastor and even to pay that elder/pastor for full time work.

But one thing remains clear from the New Testament: the elder/pastor is one of the many bearers of divine gifts in the church, and the pastor has no different status from any of the elders,

⁷ On Baptist Convention women preachers and pastor see: Rachel NyaGondwe Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture. Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere 2005, pp. 123ff.

⁸ Coming from Hochdahl Baptist Church in Germany, I joined Zomba Baptist Church in 1993, moved to Ndangopuma Baptist Church in 2001 and joined Mzuzu Baptist Church in April 2008.

of which he is one.

The New Testament gives only a positive description of pastoral works. To look after the flock. It never gives the elder/pastor a special status. Nowhere in the New Testament there is any clerical status. There are many ministers (with different gifts) in a congregation, none is given a higher authority, each has to serve according to his ministry, according to his gift.

As Baptists, taking as our starting point our belief in the priesthood of all believers, we see the need for shepherding (pastoral work), and we see the need for people to do the work (be it part-time or full-time), but we see no special status or position given to those shepherds.

In most denominations such a different status of pastors is emphasized by allowing only them to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.⁹ Such a concept is based on the priesthood in the Old Testament, while Baptists understand the priesthood of all believers to mean that no member of a congregation is more priest than the other and baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered by the church through whom and in which way the church decides to do this.

To sum up, we are all ministers and the church has the possibility to appoint someone to a special ministry (maybe to be a pastor) and even to make this ministry a full time service. But the one so appointed is not to be elevated above the rest of us. We are still all ministers, we are all priests.

3. Ordination

3.1. Understanding of Ordination in the Mainline Churches

In most churches, ordination conveys a different (and elevated) status to those ordained, they join the clergy, being no longer ordinary "lay" Christians. Such ordination is carried out in Episcopal churches by the Bishop, in Presbyterian churches by the ordained ministers. In all such churches the rules are the same: in order to baptize and to administer Holy Communion, you must be ordained.¹⁰ We must look now for ordination in the New Testament.

3.2. Ordination in the New Testament

Here again, the word "ordination" is not found in the New Testament. But, if the word is not there, is there something to express the same idea? The answer depends on how one understands ordination. If ordination means entering a special state, the state of the clergy, there is no evidence for that. If ordination is understood as "commissioning for service", then there is a good chance to find some support for the concept of ordination. Since the word does not occur in the New Testament, we must look for concepts like "commissioning, blessing, laying on of hands."

In Hebrews 6:1-2 "the laying on of hands" is seen as one of the "elementary teachings about Christ", and we would like to know any details, but none are given. In the whole New Testament three purposes may be discerned:

1. When blessing little children, Jesus placed his hands on them (Mt 19:14,15; Mk 10:16).¹¹
2. Jesus also sometimes laid his hands on people when healing them (Mk 6:5), and the same is promised to his disciples in Mk 16:18. Paul cured Publius, the chief official of Malta, by praying for and laying hands on him (Act 28:8).
3. The other occurrences come close to an understanding of ordination, at least in some way. There are two instances where the laying on of hands is used in the context of receiving the Holy Spirit, in both cases under specific "disorderly" circumstances.

In Samaria the new converts had been baptized, but not yet received the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John came down from Jerusalem, they prayed for them that they may receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15) "... and placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit" (v. 17).

The other "irregular" case is reported in Acts 19, where Paul finds disciples who had only been

⁹ As Baptist we do not speak of sacraments but prefer to speak of baptism and the Lord's Table as "ordinances." But even this word is not found in the New Testament.

¹⁰ There is in all churches the exception of Baptism, if a person is in point of death and no one ordained is in reach. In that case anyone can administer a valid baptism, even a woman.

¹¹ In Luke 18:15-17 no mention is made that Jesus laid hands on the children, only that they were brought to him so that he should "touch" them.

baptized with John's baptism and had not received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6).

The first case where laying on of hands is reported to have been used for commissioning is reported in Acts 6:6. When there had been a dispute about food distribution in the Jerusalem church, seven men were selected to set things right. They were commissioned "to serve at tables", which they obviously did, at least for a time, but too of them were also great preachers, Stephen and Phillip. The Apostles prayed for the seven "and laid their hands on them" (Act 6:6).

Here the commissioning for a specific service was accompanied by prayer and laying on of hands, but there is no indication that they moved from being "laymen" to being "clergy" or that they became minor clergy ("deacons") who were allowed to minister, but not to administer the sacraments, as Phillip soon after that baptized the new believers in Samaria.

A very prominent reference to the laying on of hands when commissioning workers of the Lord is Acts 13:2-3. The church in Antioch then was led by prophets and teachers. Then the Holy Spirit, speaking through a prophet, said that they should set apart Barnabas and Saul for a special work. This was done with fasting and prayer and laying on of hands. Was this an ordination? Yes, if commissioning is in view, no, if a change in status is in view. It is obvious that both Barnabas and Paul had been full ministers of the gospel even before being commissioned as missionaries, but to start work as missionaries they needed a special blessing.

What remains are several references to the laying on of hands in relation to Timothy. Paul had laid hands on him to receive a gift which he should develop (2 Tim 1:6). Paul also exhorts him not to neglect his gift "which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands" on him (1 Tim 5:14). To me it is not clear if there were two layings on of hands or one, but the text seems to imply two, one by Paul, one by the elders.

The letters to Timothy seem to justify the understanding that by then church elders (overseers, bishops) were "ordained" by the laying on of hands, since Paul warns him not to be hasty with it (1 Tim 5:22). If this was indeed ordination, it implied no full time service, and any congregation might well have several elders or many.

3.3. Should Baptists Ordain?

As Baptists we want to build our churches following the New Testament pattern. In the New Testament there is no sign of any ordination that conveys a special elevated status, and that would also conflict with the Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers. But we find in the New Testament the laying on of hands for elders and the commissioning for service. Since Baptist pastors are also elders, and since they are to do their ministry often full-time, I see no objection, when looking at the Baptist understanding of the church, that a pastor can be ordained.

Such an ordination does not make a pastor a priest, at least not more than any other member of the common priesthood of all believers in the congregation. But such an ordination is a commissioning for ministry and a blessing for it by the church. This is how I experienced my own ordination by Hagen Baptist Church. It did not give me sacramental rights,¹² but on my side it was a promise to serve the Lord full time for all my life, and for this I received the Church's blessing and the commission to be a missionary. In addition ordination conveyed on me the government recognition as a minister of religion.¹³

So we can conclude that, though the New Testament does not prescribe ordination, as Baptists we may ordain those who intend to be pastors or do another special ministry. If so, who is the ordaining authority? Here, using the Baptist understanding of the New Testament church, it is the local church which is the highest authority. So the local congregation is the ordaining authority, and since the local churches in the New Testament were not only independent but also interdependent, cooperating with each other, it is desirable that any local church invites representatives of other churches to participate in any ordination. Such representatives of other churches may be ordained or not,¹⁴ since it is the local church which ordains, not a bishop or the ordained ministers.

¹² I had baptized and celebrated the Lord's Supper without being ordained but of course with the approval of my local church.

¹³ In Germany such recognition implies that, as a minister, I may keep the secret of confession and counselling even in a criminal court case, that I am not required to do military service and that I am allowed to teach Religious Education in government schools, even though I am not a trained teacher.

¹⁴ I appreciated very much that at my ordination one of those who laid hands on me was Paul Opitz, a master baker and the leading elder of Wanne-Eickel Baptist Church, the church where I had found Christ,

4. Women's Ministry

The question asked at the beginning was if women should be ordained as pastors. We have seen that the New Testament knows no pastors as they are here today, but that to have such pastors is not against the New Testament. We have also seen that in the New Testament there is no ordination as commonly understood today, but that there is no objection for Baptists to ordain a pastor if they do it in the Baptist way, respecting the priesthood of all believers and respecting both the independence and the interdependence of the local churches.

Since we do not find either full-time pastors or ordination as such in the New Testament, how can we look for a New Testament answer to today's question if Baptists should ordain women? We can not look for an answer in the letter of the New Testament, but in the spirit of the New Testament. We do not find a verse to tell us to ordain women or not, but we should study all that the New Testament (and maybe even the Old Testament) tells us about women's ministry.

4.1. Jesus' Female Disciples

When Jesus selected 12 of his disciples to be apostles,¹⁵ he selected all men.¹⁶ But he had more than 12 disciples (once he sent out 70), and among them were women as Luke records:

After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. (Luke 8:1-2)

Luke does not indicate at this point if the women disciples shared in the verbal proclamation of the good news.

An interesting account of Jesus' attitude to women and the word is the story of Maria and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). There Martha plays the typical female role and complains that Maria did what she felt was reserved for men: listening to his words of Jesus. But Jesus told her off.

Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. (Luke 12:42)

So all women who want to study theology can be sure of Jesus' support and approval.

It was after his resurrection that Jesus chose to meet his female disciples first, as the gospels report. And Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to go and tell the disciples (Mt 28:10).¹⁷ This is why the Church Fathers of Old call Mary Magdalene the "apostle to the apostles." So Mary was told to tell the men that Jesus had risen. She should not be forbidden to do the same today.

Jesus obviously saw men and women as his disciples and Luke reports that "they all joined together constantly in prayers, along with the women." (Act 1:14)

4.2. The Women at Pentecost

Since it was the habit for the community of disciples that men and women worshiped together while waiting for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, it is no surprise that they were all there when it happened (Acts 2:1).

Then we read that "all of them" were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them (v.4). So it seems that the gift of Pentecost, the speaking in other tongues, was given to both men and women.

That the gift of the Holy Spirit was equally given to women was made clear by Peter soon after. As he stood up with the Eleven to explain the strange event, he quoted Joel, the prophet, like this

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people

where I was baptized and which had recommended me to study at Hamburg Baptist Seminary.

¹⁵ The Greek word *apostolos* means "someone sent" like a messenger, probably to convey a message. Therefore "missionary" is a good translation.

¹⁶ This is a major argument for the Roman Catholic Church to reject the ordination of women to the priesthood.

¹⁷ I am sure the two ladies did not tell only the Eleven. How could they keep quiet after they had met Jesus alive?

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. (Acts 2:17-18)

There are different opinions what prophesying precisely means,¹⁸ but it is clear that it involves speaking in public. Though the word is not used here, preaching can not be far from it. So preaching is a female ministry, starting with Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles.¹⁹

4.3 Women Ministry - The Book of Acts

In the book of Acts it is mostly men who are prominent. But some women and their ministries are mentioned.

- (1) In Acts 12:12 we read that it was the ministry of Mary, the mother of John Mark, to offer her house as the meeting place for the church.
- (2) In Acts 9:36 we read about Tabitha or (using her Greek name) Dorcas “who was always doing good and helping the poor”. This is often seen as the “proper” ministry for women, but in Acts it is just one of them.²⁰
- (3) Next Luke reports about Lydia, the first European to turn to Christ. When Paul and his fellow missionaries found her in Philippi she was doubly handicapped: As a Gentile (though being a God fearer) she could not play any real role in the synagogue, but even if she had become a proselyte (and thereby a Jew), being a woman, she could not have participated in constituting proper synagogue prayer.²¹

At the place of prayer at the river, there seem to have been only women present, but Luke makes no mention of that, as much as he makes no mention that Lydia was single or widowed. He just takes her as Lydia, a woman who is not missing anything and who is willing to serve the Lord. Once baptized, she accommodated not only the apostles in her house (Acts 16:15), but also the church (Acts 16:40).

What was her ministry? Using today's terminology, she was the founder of the church in Philippi. But I see much reason to call her also an elder of the church. This could answer the question if there is a woman church elder in the New Testament with yes.

- (4) In Acts 18 we have an interesting reference to Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. They were Paul's fellow missionaries (v.18), and at one point he left them in Ephesus. There they met Apollos, a great preacher of Jesus, though he only knew the baptism of John. Seeing his potential, Priscilla and Aquila “invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26).

Here we find a woman as a teacher of theology. She shared this activity with her husband, but since Luke names her first three times in this text I can not imagine that after inviting Apollos, Aquila did all the teaching and Priscilla all the cooking.

Priscilla and Aquila were frequent coworkers of Paul, and when he mentions them, Priscilla is usually mentioned first.²²

¹⁸ Buku Loyera, the new Chewa Bible, translates *propheteuein* here as *kulalikira*, which is not uncommon in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition of exegesis.

¹⁹ There is also earlier example of a woman preaching. When Mary and Joseph presented their newborn baby at the temple they were met by Anna, a prophet, 84 years old, who never left the temple. There Anna gave thanks to God and spoke about the child “to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”. (There is no clear indication of who these people were, but it seems to me to have been a group that could be identified. Today's terminology could see them probably as a fellowship group.)

²⁰ The Seventh-day Adventist Church saw Dorcas (Dorika) as a shining example and named one of her women's groups after her: Amayi a Dorika.

²¹ Even today, 10 men, at least 12 years old, are needed to constitute a Sabbath prayer.

²² The only exception is 1 Cor 16:19; “Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.”

- (5) The last mention of women's ministry in Acts is 21:9, talking about Philip the evangelist.²³ "He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied". Luke does not indicate how they practiced their ministry, but there is an obvious connection to the prophesying daughters in Acts 2 or to prophesying women in the church of Corinth (1 Cor 11:5).

When looking at the book of Acts as a whole, women's ministry is not prominent. But it is clear that women's ministries include both "doing good" and "promoting the message", with the latter seemingly more prominent.

4.4. Paul and Women Missionaries (Romans 16)²⁴

The apostle Paul has often been accused as being an enemy of women, but the New Testament evidence is against this view, as is very evident when we look at Romans 16. In that chapter he introduces Phoebe and greets 25 individuals, 9 of them women and 16 men.

4.4.1. A Deacon

Who were these women? First, Phoebe, she was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea, not far from Corinth. In some bible translations she is called a "servant", but there is no reason to translate the Greek word *diakonos* here differently from 1 Tim 3:9-12, where it is translated "deacon".

Some translations offer an alternative, for them Phoebe is a deaconess.²⁵ That makes her serving ministry specifically female, maybe different from that of the (male) deacons. But here again the Greek text does not support this view. The Greek word is *diakonos*. Its gender is male. In the Greek language the male gender may well include men and women,²⁶ but it is ill suited to describe something that is specifically female. So Phoebe was a deacon (incidentally female) and not a deaconess (necessarily female).

4.4.2. An apostle

If some readers of current translations are surprised to find a deacon in Romans 16, they might be even more surprised to find that in the same chapter Paul greets two fellow apostles, one a woman, the other a man. Paul says that "Andronicus and Junias ... are outstanding among the apostles" (v 7). In greeting them in this way, Paul does not include them into the circle of the original Twelve, but includes them into the wider group of apostles recognized by the churches,²⁷ which included Barnabas (Acts 14:4,14) and Silas and a number of others²⁸ and, of course, Paul himself.²⁹

4.4.3. Fellow workers

Under this category we meet again Priscilla and Aquila, just as with the apostles, a man and woman, only that in this case the woman is mentioned first (v 3). Paul applied the title "fellow workers" without any distinction to a woman (Priscilla) and to a man (Timothy, v 21). From this we may conclude that their ministries were of the same or similar category, and that the "work" they did as Paul's fellow workers was spiritual work, missionary work.

4.4.4. "Hard workers"

There are several of them, probably in no way different from the "fellow workers" above, but being spoken of with different words. These are four

²³ Philip is here mentioned as one of the Seven (Acts 6), but he is not called "deacon" here or elsewhere

²⁴ For a more detailed treatment see: Janet Y. Kholowa and Klaus Fiedler, *Mtumwi Paulo ndi Udindo wa Amayi Mumpingo*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001.

²⁵ See NIV text note.

²⁶ The same applies to English. The very word "man" often includes both males and females, like in the sentence: "God created man in his image".

²⁷ Such a wider view of apostleship may well be implied in the list of church leaders in Eph 4:11-12, in which the pastors are mentioned. In this understanding the offices of prophets and apostles would not be "extraordinary offices" (as the Presbyterian tradition understands it), but permanent offices alongside pastors, teachers and evangelists, as some of the Charismatic churches see it these days.

²⁸ See for ex. 1 Thess 2:7.

²⁹ An interpretation that gets around a female apostle is to take the apostles as meaning the Twelve. Then Andronicus and Junias would just be outstanding Christian in the view of the Twelve.

- Mary, “who worked very hard for you”.
- Tryphena and Tryphosa, “who work hard in the Lord,” and finally
- Persis, “who has worked hard in the Lord”.

In all four cases the word used for “working hard” in the Lord is equally used for women and men just as the above word “fellow worker”. Paul does not exactly describe what his women fellow workers did, but it is obvious that it was not administration or serving at tables, but work as Paul and his fellow missionaries did it.

4.4.5. A mother

In the list of greetings only one woman is included, who is described in “female” terms. Rufus’ mother, “who has been a mother to me too” (v 13).

4.4.6. Other women

In addition to these women of whom Paul mentions their qualification, there are two who are just greeted without any specific ascription: Julia and the sister of Nereus (v 15).

4.4.7. Conclusion

From Romans 16 it is obvious that Paul had a number of women fellow workers, and that he appreciated their ministry very much. Phoebe was a deacon, Junias was an apostle, Priscilla was, among others, a teacher of the Gospel. The others are “only” given the ascription that they “worked hard in the Lord”. But should that not be enough to call them ministers, if not in the precise sense of today’s ordained ministers, but ministers of Jesus Christ and his church?

4.4.8. They contended at my side in the cause of the gospel

The message of Romans 16 is repeated in Philippians 4. There Paul mentions other coworkers, again male and female. He mentions Euodia and Syntyche “who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Phil 4:2). They did this “along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers”. Here, like in Romans 16, the same terminology is applied to women and men. And here again it is not at all likely that Paul did all the preaching and that his female coworkers contended for the gospel by cooking for the preachers.

5. Old Testament Observations

Though, as Baptists, we want to build the Church according to the New Testament, a look into the Old Testament can still be useful. In the Old Testament the priesthood is exclusively male, only “Aaron and his sons” can be priests.³⁰ In spite of this, female ministry and leadership was not missing.

5.1. Women Prophets

Though they were less than the men in numbers, there were women prophets in the Old Testament. First we read of Miriam, Moses’ sister (Ex 15:20):

Then Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.

Then we read of Deborah, whom we know more as a Judge:

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading³¹ Israel at that time (Judges 4:4)

Deborah gained a great victory for Israel, liberating it from foreign oppression. Some expositors, who do not like women leaders, argue that God chose her because the men had failed. But the Bible gives no hint of that. We just read that Deborah was leading Israel at that time and that she held court under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel, and that the Israelites took their disputes

³⁰ Leviticus 8 and 9. As Baptists we need to remember that the Old Testament priesthood was fulfilled by Christ, the High Priest (Hebrews 8).

³¹ The traditional translation is “judging”. And she was indeed the leading judge in Israel.

to her (Judges 4:4-5). She did what the other judges did, and no attention is paid to the fact that she was a woman.

The most famous of the Old Testament prophets is Huldah, and of her we have even some of her prophetic speech (2 Kings 22:16-20). Like Deborah she was married, and as with Deborah, no specific attention is paid to her being a woman, and no mention is made why the king did not consult either Zephaniah or Jeremiah, both prophets active at that time.³²

The other woman prophet mentioned by name in the Old Testament is not a good example, because the "prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets" had tried to intimidate Nehemiah (Neh 6:14).³³ Nehemiah wants God to remember her together with Tobiah and Sanballat, but he does not complain that she was a woman.

To sum up the Old Testament evidence: No woman could be a priest, but women could be prophets, and of these at least one was an acknowledged leader of God's people for quite a number of years, and during her time she liberated Israel from oppression through a great military victory.³⁴

Should we, as the New Testament church, take a clue from the Old Testament? In one way, no. The Old Testament priesthood has no equivalent in the New Testament since Jesus Christ is the High Priest and all his disciples (male or female) belong to the priesthood of all believers.³⁵

In another way we may take note as there were women prophets in the Old Testament and we also find them in the New Testament.³⁶ In both cases there is no indication that they were only women or that they were substitutes where men failed. The Old Testament, of course, does not give an answer if women should be pastors, since there were no pastors then, but obviously it presents no hindrance for a woman to become pastor of a local church.

6. Women pastors?

So far I have provided the biblical evidence for women in ministry. Though less numerous than men, women were leaders in both Testaments, from Miriam, the prophet of old to Priscilla, the co-worker of Paul and Junias, the apostle.

If we admit that the office of "pastor", as we have it today, cannot be found exactly in the New Testament, no direct answer that a woman can be or cannot be a pastor is to be found. But women were leaders in the church, and the Old Testament and the New Testament acknowledge them as such. Therefore there seems to be no objection to women being called as pastors or to be ordained where that need arises.

7. Objections

7.1 Women's impurity

Some Christians object to women being pastors for a variety of reasons, in Africa as elsewhere. An argument which I have never heard in Europe but sometimes in Africa this that a woman can not be a pastor since her monthly period makes her unclean for the holy office during that time.

In this respect reference is made to the Old Testament, which states that a woman during her monthly period is in a state of impurity (Leviticus 15:19). This reference to the Old Testament is not genuine for three reasons: (1) The preceding verses talk of the same ritual impurity for men (15:17-

³² Sometimes the argument is promoted that in the Old Testament God uses women as leaders only when men fail, and Deborah is cited as an example. But there is no mention that, when she was appointed judge, no man could be found for the job. And while Huldah was a prophetess, Jeremiah surely was no failure.

³³ "Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me." (Neh 6:14).

³⁴ Commentator who do not like a woman to lead (judge) Israel argued that God called her because the men failed. But the text does not indicate that there was no qualified man available when made judge (Judges 4:4).

³⁵ The Catholic Church has transferred some aspects of the Old Testament priesthood to their priesthood. But as Baptists we do not find this priesthood in the New Testament.

³⁶ There is also a woman prophet at the point where the two dispensations meet:

18), and no one these days and in the days of old considered them unsuitable for ministry. (2) Even in Old Testament times women who menstruated could well be prophets. (3) The ceremonial law of the Old Testament is not valid for the New Testament church.

With no visible biblical base it seems to me that the argument of women's impurity does not come from the Bible, but from traditional culture, which decrees that in some ritual processes women must be either before the first menstruation or after menopause.³⁷

7.2. Women's Nature

Here the argumentation comes entirely from culture (or what is perceived as that). The argument is that women—by nature—are not to be leaders (and, by implication, preachers). To this argument Benjamin Titus Roberts, the first bishop of the Free Methodist Church, replied in 1890, that this can not be true. He pointed at a pig: "If you tell a pig to climb a tree, it will not do that, because it is not in its nature." That women are able and happy to preach and to lead shows that it is in no way against their nature.³⁸

7.3 Women were Created Second³⁹

This is a cultural argument that misinterprets the text that it refers to. The argument uses the creation story in Genesis 2, plainly denying what the text itself says. It argues that [male] man was created first, and woman was created after him, and therefore women are inferior and must serve men.

The text affirms the opposite: God decided that man needed a help equal to him.⁴⁰ Then God created the animals, from the soil as he had created man, showed them to man (*munthu*) and to see if they were a "help suitable for him".⁴¹ *Munthu* named them all, but no suitable help was found for him. I guess that *munthu* must have been very tired after a long day of naming these creatures, and disappointed, too, that no *suitable* help was found for him.

All that changed the next morning. *Munthu* woke up, maybe expecting another day of naming those creatures, but then he saw her, and he said:

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh (Gen 2:23)

Munthu did not say: "Fine, she is late, she must serve me", but instead he said that she is no different from him. Different were the animals, they were created out of the soil, like man. The woman was taken out of man (*munthu*), that again emphasizes that she is the same ("flesh of my flesh").

The same is emphasized by the name of the woman. While *munthu* had named all the animals, he did not name the woman, he simply recognized that she had the same name as he himself had: man (*ish* in Hebrew). To that he added an *a* to make it *isha* to express the female gender. That women and man have the same name means that they are the same, not that one must serve the other.

7.4 Women must be silent in church

This objection is based on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:33: "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches." These words have been taken in the Christian Brethren tradition by many as forbidding women to contribute anything to public worship (with men present), be it preaching, testimony or prayer.⁴² But this must be a wrong understanding

³⁷ This is still so in the Chisumphi cult. Isabel Phiri, "African Traditional Women and Ecofeminism. The Role of Women at Chisumphi Cult in Preserving the Environment, *Religion in Malawi* no. 6, 1996, pp. 14-19 [15].

³⁸ Titus Roberts, *Women's Ordination*, 1890. Available free at: www.freemethodistchurch.org.

³⁹ For a more detailed discussion see: Janet Y. Kholowa and Klaus Fiedler, *In the Beginning God Created them Equal*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2003, translated from the original: Janet Y. Kholowa and Klaus Fiedler, *Pachiyamvbi Anawalenga Chimodzimodzi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 1999.

⁴⁰ The Hebrew word *kenegedo* has the literal connotation "in his face". Equality is also implied in the word *etser*, which means help. *Etser* occurs 21 times in the Old Testament, and never is "to serve" the implication, since 17 times God is the help, and 2 times men who are of no use.

⁴¹ The Hebrew word "kenegedo" means, literally translated, "into someone's face", thus "equal to someone".

⁴² In Germany a good number of Brethren congregations belong to the same Convention as the Baptist congregations. I was baptized in Wanne-Eickel Baptist Church, but during my time at the Seminary in

of the injunction Paul gave, as that understanding does not allow for the many female co-workers Paul had in his ministry. This understanding is also contradicted by Paul's words in the same letter, where he mentions that women contribute to public worship through prayers and prophecies (1Cor 11:5).

The understanding may be what the NIV Study Bible shows as the third option of understanding this verse, that women in Corinth used to interrupt worship by noisy discussions surrounding tongues speaking and prophecy, and that they should stop such disorderly behaviour.⁴³

Roland Brown, an American Baptist preacher, who travelled much in the world, said once that in countries where women and men sit separated, that he often heard the women on their side chatting. If that observation is correct, it could be supported by the Greek word *lalein*, used here, which often indicates careless speaking.

As the different explanations of this verse show, it is not easy to interpret. But one thing is clear: If anyone wants to use this verse to oppose women being pastors, he must also forbid women to preach and pray and testify in church. Very few Baptists have ever accepted that.⁴⁴

7.4 Women must not have authority over men

An objection that would apply only to women in leading positions could be based on 1 Timothy 2:4: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." This verse, again, finds many different interpretations. Many commentators see it as applicable only to the local church in Ephesus, and if the injunction is seen as overall valid, then Paul should not have approved of Priscilla teaching a man. We can also hardly imagine that Paul would not allow any of his female coworkers to teach.

Those who use this verse to prove that women should not have authority over any man base their understanding on the Greek word *authentein*. This sound like "to exercise authority", but as it occurs only once in the New Testament, this is insufficient proof. In Greek literature outside the New Testament the word occurs, and several times it has a very different meaning, namely "to make sexual advances". If this meaning is applied, the text would read: "I do not permit a woman to teach and to make sexual advances to a man." When I read about this the first time, it sounded strange to me, as if such a thing should have happened in a church in those days. But then I realized that it did indeed happen, a few years later and about 150 km north of Ephesus: In the book of Revelation we read of "that woman Jezebel. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality" (Rev 2:20). Not far away in Pergamum there were the people that held the "teaching of Balaam" which also included committing immorality. In both congregations such teachers were tolerated. It was not the official teaching of the churches, but these teachers were not stopped in what they were teaching.

I am not enough of a Greek scholar to be able to decide convincingly what the meaning of the verse is, but the variety of interpretations, including the one just described, makes me hesitate to deduct from it an injunction by Paul to forbid women to do what he obviously, according to the NT record, did not forbid them to do, namely to lead and to teach.

8. Paul's Systematic Theology

As Baptists we want to take note of the whole New Testament witness on any issue. First we looked at the issue of women's position and authority from the angle of church history. Indeed, Paul cooperated strongly with women missionaries and appreciated obviously their work. That observation seems to be contradicted by two verses which are not easy to understand. If they are read—as it is sometimes done—as forbidding women any public ministry, that reading would

Hamburg I belonged to a Brethren congregation. No woman ever preached there or prayed there in public, not even during the Wednesday evening prayer meetings.

⁴³ "Still others say that in this context Paul is discussing primarily the disruption of worship by women who become involved in noisy discussions surrounding tongues speaking and prophecy. Instead of public clamouring for explanations, the wives were to discuss matters with their husbands at home (cf. v. 35). Paul does not altogether forbid women to speak in church (see 11:5). What he is forbidding is the disorderly speaking indicated in these verses.

⁴⁴ That is the position of the Reformed Baptists in Zambia, where women withdrew from the choir of Lusaka Baptist Church because, by singing publicly, "they would be teaching men" (Reinhard Frey, *History of the Zambia Baptist Association 1905-2005*, Zomba: Kachere, 2009, p. 175. The leading spirit at that time was Rev Achillee Blaize, visiting from the West Indies.)

contradict what Paul did. So these verses may be understood as pieces of specific advice, not as a general ruling (which he did not follow himself either). So they are part of Practical Theology. If that is so, we may expect more guidance if we turn to Paul's Systematic Theology.

This is where Paul speaks on principle. And here his decision is clear:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, NIV).

Here Paul speaks as a systematic theologian, and he speaks clearly: "Men and women are one in Christ". He made no difference in his ministry, and he makes no difference in principle. It is all equality.

Sometimes the answer is given: Yes, in Christ, but that does not apply here on earth, or in society, or in the church. To answer this understanding, the context is important. Paul insisted that Jews and Gentiles were not only equal in Christ, but even so in the church, and he put much effort into making that point clear for all.

Paul did not abolish slavery, as he obviously had no power to do so. But in the church he tolerated no difference. In the 18th century, when the revival people like William Wilberforce started the fight, first against the slave trade and then against slavery itself, one argument of their opponents was: "Yes, in heaven we will all be brothers, but here on earth that does not apply, the slave must serve the master." Here Wilberforce and his fellow fighters against the slave trade argued back: "No, the black slave is a man and a brother, and that can not be postponed until after death, God has created us all equal."

I propose that we take Paul by his word: There is ... neither male nor female, for we are all one in Jesus Christ. I am convinced that it is appropriate to apply Paul's words even in the church (as he obviously did himself as well).

9. If God owns them in the conversion of sinners...

Church history can not override the New Testament, but sometimes it can help us to understand.

I found it interesting to read that in the 17th century a Baptist congregation in London had a woman as a pastor. The Baptists, at that time still a young revival movement, must not have found that as contradicting the teaching of the New Testament.⁴⁵

A century later, John Wesley was one of the leaders of another revival, the Great Awakening. He realized that the world was his parish, and therefore he became an itinerant preacher and evangelist. Tens of thousands were converted through his ministry, and he expected all converts to join small Methodist "societies" (meeting weekly) in which to sustain their newfound faith.⁴⁶ Women played a role, and some became leaders of and preachers in such groups. In the beginning John Wesley told them to keep quiet, but they didn't. It did not take long for him, though, to recognize that they did good work, so he started to encourage them, and to one he even gave the official "preacher's certificate".⁴⁷ Later in his life, when he was asked why he allowed women to preach, he answered: "If God owns them in the conversion of sinners, who am I to hinder Him".⁴⁸

When Titus Roberts, then the first bishop of the Free Methodists was confronted with the issue of women's ordination as Elders,⁴⁹ he argued: "If they want to help in building God's house, the men must welcome them as fellow workers, not push them down from the scaffolding."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ John Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1991.

⁴⁶ In this respect he had picked up an idea of two from the Moravians, a leading group in the earlier Pietist Revival. The Moravians were the missionary pioneers among the Protestants (1732), exactly 60 years before the Baptist William Carey started the modern missionary movement in 1792 with the publication of his book: William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of former Undertakings and the Practicability of Further Undertakings are Considered*, Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792.

⁴⁷ John Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism*, Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1991.

⁴⁸ Alluding to Peter's words in Acts 11:17 "So as God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (NIV)

⁴⁹ That is how they called and still call their pastors.

⁵⁰ He lost his case in 1890 and because of that published his book: Benjamin Titus Roberts, *Ordaining Women, 1890*. Available as a free download from www.freemethodistchurch.org. The Free Methodist started ordaining women as pastors in 1911, much earlier than other churches, but after the bishop's

Frederick Franson, originally a Baptist, embarked on a worldwide travelling ministry based on the interdenominational Chicago Avenue Church in Chicago,⁵¹ with the aim of promoting worldwide missions. Among others he won several hundred missionaries for work in China, many of them women. Early in his ministry, while in Sweden, he was confronted with the issue of women's preaching through Nelli Hall, a Swedish travelling evangelist. When asked how to react, he had to think a while, then he answered: "The harvest is big and the workers are few. If women want to bring in their sheaves, let them be welcome." When asked how that would tally with 1 Cor 14:33f and 1 Tim 2:11f, he answered: "I do not really know, these are two verses which are difficult to interpret, and we may get some clarity later, but they should not stop women from becoming evangelists to save those who are lost".⁵²

When I did the research for my book on the ecclesiology of the interdenominational faith missions, a scholarship enabled me to visit several of the churches they had founded in Africa. One was Guinea Bissau with the Igreja Evangélica da Guiné, founded in 1941 by Bessie Fricker, then a single WEC missionary.⁵³ I wanted to find out what the role of women is today in a church founded, more than a generation ago, by a woman. I asked the church elder Amaro Lopez about that. He replied: "If it had not been for a woman preaching, I would not have been saved".⁵⁴

Then I thought of the words of Jesus: "There will be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7) and I thought that the angels will equally rejoice over a sinner converted by a woman than one converted by a man. Let the women preach the gospel so that sinners may be saved and the angels in heaven ululate.

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death.

⁵¹ Now Moody Memorial Church.

⁵² Somewhat later, while in Germany, he wrote a booklet: "Prophezeiende Töchter", Emden 1890 [Prophesying Daughters], taking his theme from Joel's prophecy quoted by Peter in Acts 2:16: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy". I intend to republish the book in German and in an English translation later this year.

⁵³ "The Woman is the Man for the Job. The story of a lone woman who dared to believe and obey God. Results? A land open today to the gospel", *Worldwide, Jubilee Year edition*, Sept./Oct. 1964, p. 1f. For more see: Klaus Fiedler, *Ganz auf Vertrauen. Geschichte und Kirchenverständnis der Glaubensmissionen*, Giessen/Basel: Brunnen 1992, pp. 342-343.

⁵⁴ Int Amaro Lopez, 6.8.1986, Bissau.