

WOMEN'S SEMINAR / RETREAT

(by Alan Bonifay)

Today the church is living in a dangerous time. Back in the '30s and '40s and '50s great men of God were waging battle after battle in order to restore and maintain the New Testament pattern for worship. In the early decades of the twentieth century false teachers had crept into the church unawares and from her own ranks men arose who corrupted the doctrine of the ancient faith. They changed the Lord's Supper from the original pattern of one cup and one loaf per congregation to the use of individual cups and multiple loaves. They also divided the church into classes for the teaching of God's word. As a result of these corruptions the brotherhood was rent in two.

Men such as Homer King, Homer Gay, Ervin Waters, and E. H. Miller fought valiantly and brilliantly for the cause of Christ in debate after debate, forging out of the fires of digression the brotherhood we enjoy today. In later generations these men were succeeded by faithful brethren including Ronny Wade, Lynwood Smith, Bennie Cryer, and Paul Nichols who sounded out the same clarion calls to the truth on these issues. In those years the arguments on these issues, which had so horribly rent the body of Christ, were in the hearts and minds of most brethren. Brethren were well versed and articulate with respect to these issues. However, those days have passed us by for the most part. The division between us and the digressive churches of Christ has long since crystallized; there is little movement in either direction. We have become settled about how to observe the communion and how to conduct the teaching of the congregation. With the passing of time these issues have become somewhat "old-hat." No one among us has any desire to change how we conduct our worship. Consequently we do not hear these issues taught from our pulpits very often, and as a result many brethren have become forgetful of the scriptural arguments that sustain our positions on these subjects. Whenever that happens to a fellowship, trouble is not far around the corner. It is not that anyone wants to directly attack the truth on these subjects. Rather, the longings of some to be like the "nations" around them lead them to introduce practices that have the same principle errors in them that are wrong with the Bible class method of arranging the audience for the purpose of teaching. About twenty years ago one of our older preachers told me that the next great battle we would have to fight would be over women teachers in the church. I found that hard to believe at the time, but out of respect for his wisdom I filed it away. And behold the battle is upon us.

In the past ten years there have been no less than a dozen incursions into our fellowship that indicate the presence of a creeping tendency toward evangelical feminism. When I became cognizant of this fact I approached Smith, *CE's* managing editor about the need to respond to this problem with a Special issue of the *Expositor* addressing the various facets of this error. He agreed. That occurred in late December of 2001 before anything was known of the current incursion under opposition.

Several sisters in the church have begun to organize a retreat or, “women’s weekend” as they like to call it. The plan is to invite numerous women from around the country to gather for several days at a lodge reserved for the occasion and discuss issues relating to how women can better serve the cause of Christ. A multiplicity of independent and credible witnesses has confirmed these plans during the past four months.

It has been objected that this testimony is based upon hearsay evidence and therefore it is not credible. Others have suggested it is based on the far shakier grounds of gossip and rumor. In response allow me to remind you that Paul based the entire first four chapters of 1 Corinthians on the hearsay evidence of the house of Chloe (1 Cor 1:11-12). Furthermore, his instructions to the church to withdraw fellowship from the incestuous man were based on what was “commonly reported” (1 Cor 5:1-2). Because evidence is based on hearsay testimony does not make it invalid. Its validity depends on the number (Deut. 15:19) and credibility of the witnesses. Now, I am not the apostle Paul. I have neither his authority nor his inspiration. But I did verify the story I originally heard by the mouths of numerous credible witnesses.

At that juncture I contacted the principal organizer of this “women’s weekend” and attempted to persuade her of the scriptural problems attached to such an event. I tried to convince this sister that to proceed with her project was a mistake fraught with serious consequences. I sent her my article that ran in the *OPA* (April, 2002). I sent two emails to her in further discussion. She remains unpersuaded. In our discussion she did say that she planned to discuss Titus 2:3-5 issues at her “women’s weekend.” She indicated that it was her belief that women in our brotherhood have been marginalized and that it was her goal to move the role of women forward in our churches. She also indicated that some of her plans were yet in a state of flux. After I talked to her two other respected preachers of the gospel have also contacted her in efforts to convince her of the error of the project and the danger it poses to the peace and harmony of the brotherhood. But apparently all of this has been to no avail.

In my previous article (*OPA* April, 2002) I said, “It is even said that they have secured the services of a speaker from some other religious fellowship to address matters relating to issues revealed in Titus 2:3-5.” The director of the proposed “weekend” affair denied to me that this was ever true of her plans. After consideration I told her that I intended to leave that sentence in my article because that was what was being noised abroad and it needed to be answered. Whether or not she actually had such a plan was immaterial. What was important was that brethren needed to see that such was not acceptable or scriptural. If my judgment concerning this one sentence was faulty or if the sentence was misleading I apologize.

While we acknowledge that the motivations behind such a project may have been well intentioned, that does not change the fact that such a project is unscriptural and sinful. Since the efforts made thus far have been unsuccessful in stopping the project and the date of the “women’s weekend” approaches we believe it is essential to warn brothers and sisters in Christ about this danger. Preachers and leaders who stand for the truth are not going to sit idly by and allow innovation and digression and division to enter our ranks. Powerful forces of opposition are marshalling to point out this grave danger and to

preserve the faithful from the same divisive forces that struck the church in the early days of the last century. But you rightly inquire, “Just exactly what is wrong with such a gathering of women to discuss issues relative to their service in the church?” Let us turn to the scriptures and see.

WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURES?

In order to understand the teaching of God’s word on this subject several passages of scripture need to be considered and their connections with one another understood.

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35

This passage teaches that women are not permitted to speak in any assembly of the saints that is gathered for the purpose of offering up worship to God (see verses 23 and 26). The Law of Moses taught the same thing; therefore, it cannot be successfully argued that this was a cultural restriction placed only on the Corinthian church. This was, and is, a universal principle underscoring the woman’s role of submission. Women are instructed to consult their husbands at home if they would learn anything, because it is a shameful thing for women to speak in the church assembled for worship. In verse 37 Paul reminds his readers that these are not casual suggestions but the “commandments of the Lord”. This instruction prevails whether the church meets for worship in a public place and invites the public or in a home under private or secret circumstances.

1 Timothy 2:11-12

It is suggested by many commentaries and subheadings in Bibles that this passage is limited to the assemblies of the church for worship. However, that notion is wrong. There is nothing in the context, near or remote, that would even hint at such a position. This view is popular because it fits the agenda of evangelical feminists and because it is more convenient for those who are not intent on following the Bible pattern.

This passage is the overarching passage in the New Testament regarding women teachers. It teaches clearly that there are two activities forbidden to Christian women: first, she may not teach the word of God; second, she may not have authority over men. The KJV idea of usurping or unwarrantedly seizing authority is not present in the Greek. The idea is that women may not be in authority –period. If this passage were all that the New Testament said relative to women teaching the word of God, then Christian women could not teach the Scriptures to anyone, at any time, under any circumstances – period. However, we know that this is not all that is said of women teaching the Scriptures. There are several passages, which qualify this one. However, we must be careful to remain within the limited parameters of the qualifying passages or we make this principal passage of none effect.

Titus 2:3-5 qualifies 1 Timothy 2:11-12 by indicating that it is the responsibility of older women in the body of Christ to teach the younger women how to conduct

themselves in their domestic relationships. This is clearly a command, which must be obeyed. I would like to point out relative to the issue at hand that no one is saying that older women should not teach younger women; they must. However, we need more information to tell us where and when an older woman should do this work.

2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15 also qualifies 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Clearly, Timothy's mother and grandmother were instrumental in his early instructions concerning the word of God. However, neither in this passage nor the previous one are we given any instructions about how or in what circumstances the instruction was to be given.

Acts 18:24-28; 21:8-9 also qualify 1 Timothy 2:11-12. These two passages provide the only two instances in the New Testament church in which women taught the word of God to anyone. For that reason, and also because they are qualifiers to the passage in 1 Timothy 2, these verses are *examples*. All biblical examples are binding and normative. An example explains, clarifies, or illustrates a background rule. The background rules in focus here are 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and Titus 2:3-5. What is illustrated is that as long as the teaching is individually initiated (as opposed to being under the authority of a local church), when a woman is under the authority of her husband or father she may--from a role of submission--teach the word of God to a small group of people in a private (that is—"house to house") setting. In such a situation a woman may teach anyone. However, in no situation may she be in authority over men.

APPLICATION TO THE PROPOSED SEMINAR

As you can see from these verses of Scripture the proposed "women's weekend" is not scriptural. The group that is to gather at the lodge in Oklahoma is individually initiated but it is not under the authority of any home. The teaching situation envisioned here is unknown to the Bible. It is neither under the authority of a home nor under the authority of a local congregation. Those are the only teaching situations described in the New Testament church. It does not appear that a teacher at this "women's weekend" will be teaching from a role of submission. She will not be teaching as a woman among equals but as one recognized authoritative teacher instructing a class of recognized students. The teacher, or teachers, will not be teaching a small group of women in a private or house-to-house situation. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 forbids a Christian woman from either figuratively or literally ascending a pulpit.

It is not wrong for the older women to teach the younger women in their congregation. It is wrong for women to preach. I know many dedicated and diligent Christian women who labor hard for the cause of Christ in their proper sphere. They study their Bibles; they teach their children the principles of the Christian religion; they

visit the sick and the elderly and the shut-ins; they support and even instruct their husbands from a role of submissive helpship; they teach the younger women of their congregation their domestic responsibilities; they instruct their neighbors about the hope that lies within them. No one is opposed to such behavior. In fact, we greatly respect and appreciate it and the Bible commands it. These works do not appear to be what the organizers of this “women’s weekend” are interested in. They seem to be determined to organize and conduct a teaching program unknown to the word of God and from a national forum.

It is my prayer and that of my colleagues that Christian women all over our brotherhood will take note of this and avoid being connected with such a work. Such an assembly of women to teach God’s word is contrary to the scriptures and therefore, sinful. Because someone does not intend to be in the wrong does not therefore place him or her in the right. Remember that in order for a Christian woman to teach the Scriptures in a manner acceptable to God she must do so according to the only two binding examples we have (Acts 18:24-28; 21:8-9). These four things must be in place:

1. The teaching must be individually initiated.
2. The teaching must be conducted under the authority of her husband or father.
3. The teaching must be conducted from a role of submission.
4. The teaching must be done in a group small enough to be in a “house-to house” situation.

Otherwise Paul said a woman may not teach. And furthermore she may not have authority over a man.