

THE WOMEN'S ROLE RECONSIDERED

SPECIAL FOCUS: SISTERS ON STAFF

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I. INTRODUCTION

Three papers

In 1990 I authored a paper along with Pat Gempel, "What Does the Bible Really Say about Women?" This first paper was written primarily with a non-Christian readership in mind. In 1993 "The Women's Role & Current Practice" appeared, later presented to the worldwide leadership of the International Churches of Christ in Los Angeles (August, 1993). This second paper was written in part as a justification for expanding the women's role in the church beyond nominal service (e.g. making Communion bread). As a result, women began to baptize, usher, and share publicly with confidence that the scriptures did not forbid their doing so.¹ At this time I am joined by my wife in revisiting the women's role—not to retract what has been written, but to reconsider our practice vis-à-vis women in a third paper.

Biblical approach

In our common approach to women's ministry, we have for all intents and purposes declared that we will "speak where the Bible is silent." Admittedly, opinion matters and flexibility are proper in areas where the Scriptures do not direct us. For example, the Bible never explains which verses women should study with other women to influence them to become Christians. But what about the things the Bible *does* teach? There are scores (perhaps hundreds) of verses laying out the divine plan for marriage and family. Have we been selective? Have we obeyed those passages where the Bible *does* speak?

Thesis

Simply put, our conclusion is that *ICOC teaching on women's ministry does not flow from the Scriptures, but rather receives its inspiration from the American corporate model*. Whereas the scriptures insist on the unity of marriage and family, the spiritual nurture of children, genuine hospitality, and the husband's loving protection of his wife, we have paid insufficient attention to such passages. Instead, we have been caught up in the vortex of achievement.² We are very competitive. We compete against others, against ourselves, in some cases even against our own spouses. We compete against previous records, always striving to maximize growth. In terms of growth, however, we have been slowing down for years. The church is a dysfunctional family to the extent that we attempt to build it by the world's rules.

Our women—and our families—are paying the price.³ Vicki and I have talked extensively. Her ideas and perspectives have been extremely helpful—hence this paper, which we have produced together. "The Women's Role Reconsidered" does explore the women's role generally, yet its special emphasis is on the lifestyle and role of *sisters on staff*.

II. OUR CORPORATE CULTURE

¹ For the record, we still hold to the position that women are not to exercise authority over men in the assembly.

² Loosely speaking, we are part of the "church growth movement," most prominent in the United States. While growth must be our passion and our aim, this does not mean it is to be our *primary* goal. The scriptures teach that growth comes naturally when we faithfully hold to the scriptures. And yet it can no more be forced than we can "force" our children to grow taller, or crops to grow. Acts 2:47 is a by-product of Acts 2:42.

³ When I shared our conviction with the ICOC Teachers at the KT Conferences in 2001 and 2002, all agreed this is a huge need in the movement. They urged me not to drop the matter.

Disintegration vs. integration

In Genesis 1-2 the Lord makes clear that the woman's place is alongside the man. In friendship, in walking with God, and in conjugal love, the woman is in every way man's equal and his true partner. Yet does this mean the woman must strive for a role equal to the man's? Of course not. In leadership, physical strength, emotional stamina, and above all within the marriage relationship, man is "the stronger vessel"⁴ (1 Peter 3). This fact is generally overlooked in the American corporate view of woman, where woman is pressed to achieve what men achieve—or at least try to.

A few years back in the *Washingtonian* there appeared an article in which it was proposed that having children was a sure way to slow down one's career and detract from self-fulfillment. We should forego having children, if we really want the most out of life. Kids are, it was implied, a total nuisance. We were not the only ones disturbed by the article and finding it in bad taste, and (Doug) decided to phone one of the editors and have a chat. She told me that many had been upset by the feature, which had actually been intended "as a provocative joke." Yet if this was so obviously a joke, why did so many persons take it seriously? Surely because it strikes so close to home. It is endemic in our culture to sacrifice family for career achievement.⁵ And so family disintegrates. And not just in the world; it is happening before our very eyes in our own movement. A far cry from the original plan of God, which entails happy marriages, spiritual children, and striving together for common goals as a family.

Put simply, corporate culture *disintegrates* the family; biblical culture *integrates* it. Our movement is already experiencing an alarmingly high level of disintegration. The source: the world. The model: corporate America. The solution: rethinking everything—questioning "the system" and plunging into the Word of God.

Dueling incomes

We all have seen the stats on percentages of "working women" in the United States. When we were growing up in the '60s, the overwhelming majority of married women carried on the noble work of homemaking and childrearing, while her husband provided for the family financially. Women did not feel too much pressure to "make something of themselves"—even those with college degrees.

My (Doug's) own mother, for example, worked as a journalist until she married my father. Not until the nest was nearly empty did she resume work—after some 20 years of homemaking. (My brother and I are glad she took the time off.)

Though I (Vicki) was brought up in a slightly different culture (England), I too am grateful that my mother stopped working as a nurse during the years she and my father were bringing up my sisters and me. There were some financial hard times, which forced mum back to part-time work. The strain of holding down "two" jobs was considerable. As a result she contracted rheumatic fever.

And yet things changed through the turbulent '60s and '70s—the Sexual Revolution, the Feminist Movement, and the anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian streak left our world forever changed. Despite the positive contributions of the feminist movement, it was largely responsible for the change. No longer was it worthy of a woman to just "stay at home." "Not working" was a stigma, and motherhood gradually came to be viewed as a lesser calling than a professional vocation.

Today the vast majority of wives work outside the home.⁶ Children are regularly farmed out to daycare centers and other providers, but why? Many mothers may feel more fulfilled having careers as doctors, lawyers, and business executives. Mothers in two-income families may claim they cannot "survive" with only one income.

⁴ Yes, in some marriages the woman may have the stronger character; we are speaking generally.

⁵ A survey of well paid academics and businesswomen recently revealed that 42% of them were still childless at age 40-55. "While top male executives tend to have spouses and babies (sometimes several of each), top women bosses often have neither" ("High fliers and motherhood" in *The Economist* [May 11th 2002], 78).

⁶ Despite a countermovement either to work from the home or "be a stay-at-home mom."

Perhaps more significant, they are under pressure from their husbands to work. This is not just a matter of keeping up with the Joneses; servicing the considerable debt (mortgages, various loans, and above all, monthly credit card payments) has created a sort of bondage which cripples family life and leaves couples with no choice but to bring in two incomes.

Yet is the extra income really necessary? The typical American home in the '00s is more than double the floor space of the typical home in the '50s or '60s (when most of you reading this article were growing up). The fact is, much of the marginal increase from dual incomes is eaten up in higher taxes, daycare costs, and other expenses incurred as a result of the fatigue the working mother suffers trying to cope with day-to-day life.⁷ Despite all these negative effects, we as a movement have bought right into this thinking.⁸

In our society at large, sadly, America (though never technically Christian) has departed significantly from a more biblical model. The dual income model has both catalyzed this change and been accelerated by it. So what are the fruits of our society's more "enlightened" approach to the institutions of work and family?

Dire straits

Here are just a few of the negative effects when the biblical order is violated. (We are focusing on the situation of the sisters, although we realize much more could be said about families.)

- Many of our women in poor health. Generally speaking, the greater the leadership pressure, the more prevalent the illness. We don't believe all of this is coincidental. Take a look at our sisters' health at the WSL, GSL, and WML levels. Unhealthy pressure levels have psychosomatic effects.
- Kids are relegated and delegated to secondary caregivers. They may become resentful and they often become worldly. Just as our members (leaders included) feel *used* when we are overly focused on results, so our kids can feel like objects. "Quantity time" (essential to effective parenting) degenerates to "quality time" (the tacit admission that other things are more important).
- Marriages are dysfunctional. (Think for a moment just how much time and money have been spent to rehabilitate the marriages of many of our *main leaders*!)

⁷ Let me here recommend Robert Wuthnow's penetrating sociological study, *Poor Richard's Principle*, which I have said elsewhere ought to be required reading for all ministers. Wuthnow's exposé of corporate America's chokehold on us all (debt, companies' supposedly beneficial perquisites, etc) is masterful.

⁸ Consider, for example:

- Job descriptions patterned after the business world (though without the performance evaluations).
- Corporate hierarchy. (Parallels military *officers v. enlisted men*, or denominational *clergy v. laity*.) Though helpful, hierarchy becomes negative when appreciation and respect become inflated. We are not to lord it over others, nor are we to be treated with adulation.
- Salary structures patterned after the business world.
- Insistence that our women be paid, in part so that they would have credibility with career women in the world.
- Artificial distinction (compartmentalization) between "ministry" (business) and everything else.
- Extensive business travel (and time away from our kids).
- Emphasis on making church services marketable ("relatable"): dynamism, "entertainment ministry," etc.
- Honorific titles (Matthew 23:9), which tend to exacerbate a clergy/laity distinction. Furthermore, we are not to derive our self-esteem from our title, but from our relationship with God (Luke 10:20 etc).
- Expectations that the "higher-ups" should be served. Jesus' ministry style was *to serve others* (Mark 10:45). To minister actually means "to serve" (in Greek as well as in Latin).
- "Executive assistants." It is hard to imitate a lifestyle propped up by extra personnel.
- Considerable discretionary spending funds, typical of CEOs and other corporate officers. (This is an area in which we can get into trouble.)
- The near celebrity status of many of our "CEOs"—and their children—in the fellowship.
- Elevation of worldly credentials over spiritual (heart level) requirements.
- A near obsession with "sharpness," polish and image.
- Our spending habits and upper-middle class standards of living.
- Heavy reliance on statistical analysis and monthly goals.

Not that all of these things are all bad. Suffice it to say, most of the trappings of corporate America have their parallels in the church.

- We are losing our kids. If women (and men) were more invested in their own kids, surely the attrition rate among our second generation—already frightfully high—would be reduced.
- Women often baptize more than men, which leads to an inequality in the female-male ratio, especially in the first world churches.⁹ This may well be a direct consequence of taking the women away from their God-given duties and asking them to devote more time and energy to ministry outside the home. Yes, they can baptize their friends and neighbors—and rightfully so; but what about the second generation?¹⁰
- Persistent, nagging guilt—for not taking care of those they love most (husband and children).
- Depression, medication, therapy... our systemic dysfunction manifests itself in so many ways.

Recently I (Doug) had lunch with a denominational minister, who put a direct question to me. “How are the marriages and families of your top leaders doing?” Sadly, I had to confess that we were having some struggles, and were in the midst of rethinking many things. (I hated to admit this, but it’s the truth.)

Summary

The disintegrating effects of corporate American culture are being felt deeply throughout the ICOC. As a result, we are now in dire straits. It is now time to examine our teaching on the women’s role, to see if/how it has been affected by the culture of the world

III. EXPERIMENTS WITH THE WOMAN’S ROLE

Assuaging the pressure

Churches worldwide are already wrestling with these issues. In some churches, although paid by the church as WMLs, the many sisters are “pulling back” and spending more time with family than they had in the past. In quite a few places, mothers attend midweeks only every other week. In some congregations, the kids do not come to midweeks—for reasons concerning homework and sleep, primarily). Mounting efforts (worldwide) to tweak the system in order to afford more grace to parents are proof that we are aware of the pressures on our families.

Moreover, there are many ongoing discussions about the women’s role—just as there are about the failure of the family in the movement. So many of our children are not doing well, and we are the ones who are responsible. Have we created a system unfriendly to family? To a significant extent, we believe the answer is yes.

“Women’s Ministry”?

In Titus 2 Paul commands that the older women teach the younger women. In leadership classes in Boston in the early ’80s, this well known passage was construed as the biblical basis for a separate women’s ministry. It was important at that time to support our sisters in their God-given roles as fellow disciples of Christ, as well as to protect the brothers from compromising situations in which they might work too closely with them. We meant well, but did we “rightly divide” the passage? Did we read too much into the text?¹¹

We have held that, based on Titus 2, women should head up the women’s ministry. Now whether this is true or not, such a conclusion hardly flows from Paul’s instructions to Titus! What is actually written? The older

⁹ In Third World churches, the situation is not infrequently the opposite: the brothers outnumber the sisters. And yet the women leaders often have domestic servants. Could it be that most women in a Third World context cannot relate to such an upper class lifestyle?

¹⁰ Since women tend to be more spiritual than men anyway, perhaps less time is needed for them to lead others to Christ than for men to do the same.

¹¹ Once again, for fear of being misunderstood, I am not reneging on my view of women’s ministry insofar as women may teach women, baptize, usher, and so forth. In fact, in the position paper I stressed that we err when we say—as we still often *do* say—“this man and his wife lead the church.” That is because, in my view at that time as now, it is the man who leads the church. She supports him. The church is not composed of two congregations: a church of males and a church of females!

women (those who are farther along in life—married, having raised their kids, and living spiritually exemplary lives) are to train up the younger women.¹² Train them in the women’s ministry? No, train them *to love their husbands, to bring up children, to be busy at home*, and so forth.

We have taught that the women (ironically, usually the *younger* women!) are to master principles of leadership, evangelism, ministerial organization—everything, in effect, we expect the men to do—and then impart these principles to the other women.

¹ You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. ² Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. ³ Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴ Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. (Titus 2:1-5)

Paul classifies his commands regarding domestic matters to be a matter of “sound doctrine.” There are quite specific instructions for older men, older women, and younger women. (The passage continues to cover the younger men and slaves.) Let’s now compare Paul’s instruction to our instruction:

Titus 2

ف Older women teach younger women.

ف They teach the nuts and bolts of marriage and motherhood.

ف They are to be “busy at home.”

Our take

ف *Spiritually* older women (often physically younger) teach the older women.

ف They teach the nuts and bolts of everything—but primarily of “moving the ministry.”

ف They are to be “busy in their (out-of-the-home) ministry.”

We’ve spiritualized the passage—to our own detriment. The level of pressure to achieve, to make one’s mark, to be a woman who can compete with a man, is enormous. Negative effects often come from pressure to reach monthly growth goals.¹³ Pressure is good, but the wrong kind of pressure leads to breaches of integrity, shoddy workmanship, and familial dysfunction.

When we were younger as a movement, motherhood was not a major issue and our career-woman interpretation of the scriptures was easy to uphold (though less and less so through the 1980s). But now we are older, and the old approaches are failing us. Let me take one example: discipling partners.

Children as “discipling partners”

In the old days (pre-parenthood), a single or married-without-kids could easily disciple three persons. This was usually defined as having three separate appointments a week, one per person. (We all know the routine!) Then along came kids and we began to struggle a bit; we had to rethink our priorities. We never heard anyone ask, how many d-partners would you have to acquire before you had the functional equivalent of one child? This may sound like a strange question, but it is integral to this discussion. How much time does one child take?

Even if your husband took half of the “strain”—which seems unlikely in most homes!—wouldn’t it be fair to consider your share of child rearing as more time-consuming than having two d-partners? (Actually, it’s crazy to talk like this, because we all now it is far, far more demanding. But we hope our conservative assumptions will be accepted.) If so, three kids plus three d-partners would actually be the equivalent of *nine* d-partners. Yes,

¹² The passage also teaches that the men are to teach the older women. To what extent does this take place in our movement?

¹³ Due to the sensitive nature of my paper on Statistics and Church Growth, it is available to staff members only.

nine! Compared to the sister without children who is discipling three women, you would be carrying *triple* the load.

At some point this all has to be processed. All too often we hear evangelists—consciously or not—minimizing mothers’ God-given responsibilities, sometimes even verging on denigrating motherhood (and children) as something that, if we are not careful, might “slow down the ministry.”¹⁴ But motherhood and fatherhood *is* our ministry! How can we evangelize the world if we cannot “evangelize” the second generation?

Careerism, and the American corporate view of the woman’s role, must be resisted. It must be refuted biblically. The world has deeply, deeply affected our movement for the worse.

IV. WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

Women’s role in the N.T.

What is the women’s role as seen in the N.T.? Let’s focus first on the book of Acts. A brief glance at the women’s role in that book reveals the following. (Numbers in parentheses are chapter numbers.)

- Women prayed (1, 12, 16).
- At Pentecost, women prophesied when the Spirit was poured out (2).
- Women took responsibility, with their husbands, for personal financial decisions (5).
- Women were imprisoned (8, 22).
- Women ministered to the needy (9).
- Women made their homes available for evangelism and church services (16).
- Prominent women were converted (16, 17).
- Women were occasionally involved with their husbands in church planting (18).
- Not all women were married (21). The majority, however, became wives and mothers.

Other books of the N.T. also shed light on the discussion.

- Some financially floated Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8).
- They arranged hospitality (John 11).¹⁵
- They were hard working (Romans 16).
- They spoke (albeit in a limited way) in church meetings (1 Corinthians 11, 14).
- They were to be submissive to their husbands (Ephesians 5).
- They were fellow workers in the gospel with male leaders (Philippians 4).
- They were honored, not denigrated, for child-bearing and child-rearing (1 Timothy 2-3, 5; Titus 2).
- They were expected to be excellent mothers and homemakers (the Pastorals).
- They were live patiently and spiritually as they trusted the Lord to bring their non-Christian spouses to a knowledge of the truth (1 Peter 3).

Moreover, the main responsibility for educating the children at the primary level has traditionally fallen upon the woman. For example, Proverbs frequently urges children to heed not only the wise words of their fathers but also the instruction of their mothers. Is it best for babysitter or other caregiver to assume the lion’s share of childrearing during the “critical years” (0-5)? Certainly, the scriptures do not disallow babysitters. Yet the crucial roles of Mother and Father are repeatedly highlighted.

¹⁴ Echoes of the false teaching of the Gnostics of the first and second centuries? (1 Timothy 4:1-5 etc.)

¹⁵ Often, when staff women have others over to their homes, they do not *personally* prepare the meal and arrange the other details of hospitality. Rather, they may rely on caterers, take-away restaurants, or even *those who have been invited*—and asked to “bring something” with them. This seems quite different to the biblical hospitality we read about in both testaments.

In short, the Word shows us that women were *spiritual*. They were effective in their ministries—yet without functioning as WMLs (in the ICOC sense). They were expected to be every bit as committed as the men (Luke 9:23), yet their primary ministry was in the home.¹⁶

Women and Career in the Bible

“The Wife of Noble Character” is the crowning jewel in the collection of wisdom in God’s Word, which is the Book of Proverbs.

- ¹⁰ A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.
- ¹¹ Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.
- ¹² She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.
- ¹³ She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.
- ¹⁵ She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷ She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.
- ¹⁸ She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
- ²⁰ She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.
- ²¹ When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
- ²² She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
- ²³ Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.
- ²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.
- ²⁶ She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- ²⁸ Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
- ²⁹ "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."
- ³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- ³¹ Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Proverbs 31 is the perfect antidote to careerism (the worldly response to insecurity, the feminist movement, and selfishness). What do we see in the famous eulogy of the ideal woman?

- She takes care of her children. (This is not delegated to others.)
- She is hard working and industrious.
- She enjoys a measure of financial independence, and her husband trusts her with the checkbook.
- She conducts a “side business,” though from within the home.
- Her home is exemplary, and brings her husband credit and honor in the public arena.
- Just as her husband provides for her, so she too provides for him, and brings him credit.
- There is a positive dynamic between her and her husband.
- She is able to pass on what she has learned to others, through “faithful instruction.”
- In short, she excels in “domestic” qualities.

In connection with this well known passage, consider the flipside—or what we call “the Proverbs 31 man.” (This is actually a short lesson we like to present when we lead marriage seminars.) Read through the passage again, with an eye on the man behind the woman:

- He has full confidence in his wife.
- He trusts her with domestic responsibilities.
- He is gainfully employed and highly respected outside the house.

¹⁶ These words are hard to stomach for some. We have embraced a non-biblical definition of ministry. Ask most ICOC members what “ministry” means, and they will mention the “full-time ministry” (another misnomer), being on staff, aiming to “grow” a group through evangelism. Yet the New Testament defines ministry as the sphere in which we serve others. Although evangelism is normative for all churches and church members in the N.T., other ministries are emphasized equally, if not more. For more on this, see *Shining Like Stars: The Evangelism Handbook for the New Millennium* (DPI, 2000), chapter 7.

- He allows her to have a modicum of financial independence.
- He does not “control” her, but allows her to live her own life.
- He is positive about his wife, and says positive things about her.
- His children perceive their mother in a highly positive light. Certainly this is affected by their father’s disposition.
- He is not focused on the outward (her appearance and charm), but on her character (her fear of God).
- Bottom line, he *respects* his wife.

In Proverbs 31, the “ideal wife” leads a fulfilling life even without a career outside the home. Though her life does not exclude “business,” the primary locus of her ministry is the home.

Another passage not to be overlooked is 1 Timothy 5, which contains the requirements for being placed on the list of widows—that is, those older women who will be receiving support from the church. The order of widows would be, in our approach to ministry, a quasi-staff position. (The widow needs to have lived a productive life, and this qualification is certainly expected to continue once she receives financial assistance from the congregation.) Well, what do we see, and what do we *not* see?

- She has distinguished herself in bringing up faithful children.
- She has been excellent in the area of hospitality.
- She has “helped those who are in trouble”—a qualification involving the heart (mercy) and the head (practical assistance).
- She has devoted herself to a variety of good deeds, though none is specified.¹⁷
- Note: Nothing is said about evangelism or leadership level.¹⁸

Those things we have most emphasized are virtually absent from the biblical record, and *vice versa*. We have wandered from the biblical message.

Women and family

What are our staff sisters currently being expected to do? (Please excuse a little exaggeration for effect, realizing that not all ministries emphasize all the following responsibilities.) Our mothers-in-the-ministry are expected not just to live up to the domestic qualifications of the Bible—which itself is no mean feat—but also to have consistent Quiet Times, individual weekly discipling times with those they disciple, attend all “meetings of the body,” be involved in studies, counseling, and leadership sessions. They are expected to travel to conferences (and arrange all the babysitting and transportation required in their absence), return phone calls, and be reasonably acquainted with e-mail and the basics of administration. There are social obligations revolving around the kids: school functions, sports activities, lessons, practices, and helping kids with their homework. And amidst the chaos of life and leadership, they must also keep their weight down and fitness up, and keep a positive disposition.

Contrary to the preliminary hopes of non-mothers and mothers of very young children, it only gets *more* challenging as the kids get older. This is not only because homework these days tends to be interactive, requiring parental participation. It gets more challenging also because, as kids enter the middle and high school years, they need more and more time to talk through their days, their feelings, their concerns. Father needs to be there for them, but in some ways mother needs to be there for them even more. Even when he *is* involved and being the support he should be, she still is being asked to do an enormous amount. Oh yes—what about family vacations, relationships with the in-laws, and those special times (memory-creating activities or outings) so vital to the healthy upbringing of the children?

¹⁷ Often the phrase “good deeds” in the N.T. is a technical term meaning helping the needy.

¹⁸ Nothing is said about her “personal fruitfulness,” or ability to “crank her group.” Nothing is said about her educational level. Nothing is said about her having ever having “been on staff.” Nor is anything said about her being “sharp” or making a good impression or being attractive.

Is it not true that a woman's primary responsibility (assuming she is a mother) is to create a secure spiritual environment for her kids—to protect them from the world? If we honor God's word, the children would become disciples, stay disciples, and multiply themselves not only through personal outreach but also through the next generation. If a woman's highest aim is only to “crank the ministry,” however, how will her children feel? Will they be inspired to imitate that example, to do great things for God? Or will they feel second class, obstacles to their parents' evangelistic success? Sadly, that question is already being answered.

If a mother's most important task is to raise her children in the fear of the Lord, we believe we have some rethinking to do. Restructuring will follow. Does the N.T. support the women's role as we have defined it? We do not believe so.

Again, though we are primarily concerned with those who lead in a “full-time” capacity, we are certainly concerned with the entire “sisterhood.” Yet those whose lives are held up as an example—and which are therefore in some sense normative for all the women of the church—require the greater attention at this moment.

Striking a balance

So what would the ideal *staff* woman's life look like? There is no simple answer. A single sister will have much more time to devote to studies and meetings than a wife with children. And yet if the single sister has not been trained by an older woman in simple domestic matters, she may need to devote some time learning how to keep house.

I (Vicki) spoke with a WML recently who does not know how to cook, despite the fact that she has been married for many years and is a mother. Someone else does the cooking (hired help, not the husband). We were all brought up differently. Some of us (men as well as women) still have much to learn in order for us to be able to qualify biblically as elders and elders' wives—those expected to extend hospitality, to model family for the church.

Domestic training is best received from an older adult, one who has “been there, done that”—and possibly still doing it. Titus 2 instructs the older women to devote time training the younger women. This is fairly unusual in the movement. It is seldom emphasized, though much needed.

As the children come along, participation in staff events will be affected. Children should never be viewed as an “obstacle” to ministerial effectiveness! Children are the next generation. A movement, say, of a million members could *easily* become a movement of two million within a generation *solely* through the members' children being reached for Christ. Have we not overextended—spent so much time reaching out to those outside the church family, yet investing too little in our own sons and daughters?

Since we are all at different places, with different strengths and weaknesses, “one size *does not* fit all.” We have got into trouble by tending to treating all sisters the same, ignoring the *huge* differences in schedule and responsibilities between mothers and those who are not mothers. For years we have emphasized “imitation”—yet imitation often excluding domestic qualifications. Where have we erred? We see three problem areas:

- Encouraging (unwittingly) women to compete with men, ignoring the difference in role, domestically speaking, on which the Bible is quite clear.
- Comparing (often unfavorably) married women or mothers with single women. Sometimes their differences in availability, extra commitments, and reserve energy are night-and-day!
- Holding up as a model leaders, usually staff, who receive extra help (cleaning, chauffeuring) not available to non-staff, and extra money (reimbursed restaurant meals, salary-proscribed subsidies for childbearing, etc). Who can compete? People are aware of the special treatment and favoritism often given leaders.

Striking a balance can come only when we stop comparing one sister to another in order to enforce conformity. We are all different, we all have different roles to fulfill, and harm generally comes when our differences are minimized. All sisters are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ; this is not under discussion. Yet how that

commitment expresses itself is *highly variable*. It varies from person to person, and it also varies from the younger years to motherhood—and on to “grandmotherhood.”

Men the primary movers and shakers

If our practice is right, what biblical evidence supports it? It is pointed out that during his earthly ministry certain women supported and followed Jesus (Luke 8). So did his apostles. Neither can be taken as a model for how we are to live—forsaking home and community. Those were exceptional times. Certain principles still apply to our time, but unthinking over-application always leads to problems. What about Priscilla? (Poor Prisca, subject of countless stretched illustrations in marriage/ministry classes!) Even if Priscilla and Lydia are in the Scriptures to inspire us to vibrant, outward-focused Christian living (we think they are), does this mean that women without careers are second rate? Not biblically.¹⁹

Acts, the record of the early church in action, challenges our interpretation. What we find does not match what we have proclaimed as the woman’s role. Nor do we anywhere see a “woman’s ministry leader” in action—not as we have crafted the role. The other day I (Doug) was speaking with a one of our Indian evangelists, who was eager to share a realization he had just come to in his personal study: *In the New Testament, the men are the ones who lead and make the impact, not couples.*

This is not to say we should not aim to have spiritual couples. This is not to say we should not strive to cultivate spiritual, high impact couples. It is a question of what emphasis we find in the scriptures.

Is it a coincidence that we read so little about women’s prominence in leadership in the N.T.? (Again, not to deny that some women were powerful leaders—Romans 16 settles that one.) And the same can be said of the O.T. Yes, a different covenant, as well as a different culture. But why do we think the Lord said *all the males* had to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the major feasts, while the women were free to remain at home with their (presumably younger) kids. Is the Lord more understanding, more flexible, or more merciful than we are? The Scriptures appear to indicate that he is.

This is certainly not to suggest a lessening of commitment on the part of our sisters—unless they have been stretched beyond breaking point. But in the biblical order of things, the brunt of the pressure of leadership has been designed to fall on the man. He is the stronger vessel.²⁰

V. LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS

“Love always protects” (1 Corinthians 13:7), said the apostle Paul. Since man is the stronger vessel, it is incumbent upon him to protect his wife. (Of course, this is not to say that the wife is to expose, disregard, wound, or be unkind to her husband in any way.) Even our culture recognizes this fact, as in the familiar wedding vows:

*I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife –
to have and to hold
from this day forward;
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love, cherish and honor,
till death do us part*

¹⁹ In addition, Deborah is often held up as an example. Yes, I am aware of Barak’s “wimpiness,” his reluctance to lead without Deborah’s backing, but don’t forget that *he* is the one mention in the Hall of Fame of Faith (Hebrews 11), not Deborah.

²⁰ One of the DC Regions has changed the format of its leaders’ meetings. In this particular region, the men only are expected to attend the meetings. This is not to say that there will *never* be women’s leaders’ meetings, or that joint meetings are unbiblical. But it *is* a practical implementation of the principles we are discussing. Will the women’s ministry slow down? Not likely!

*according to God's holy law;
and this is my solemn vow.*

Yet we men tend to do what is convenient for us. We tend to look after ourselves. We are not particularly “maternal” by nature, and, sadly, forget that we are to protect our wives—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I (Doug) have sinned in this area numerous times. Let me share one example.

When our first child was born, the delivery was very difficult. Considering the loss of blood and tissue, it is surprising that Vicki was even able to bear a second child. How did I respond at this difficult time? My aim was to “get her on her feet” as quickly as possible so that she could return to the work of important the ministry as soon as possible. I even left town for a couple of days shortly after the delivery. I grossly neglected my wife, and failed to support and protect her as I ought to have. Vicki was surprised and (rightly) hurt that I did not support her, or even protect her from the challenges she was receiving to get out of bed and “get back to work.” My failure to love my wife in a Christlike way (Ephesians 5) had a negative effect on my mother-in-law. She asked the leaders to let Vicki have some time off after the birth of our first child, though to no avail. This has colored her feelings about the movement.

The world gives time off when an employee has a baby. The ICOC has no such policy.²¹ We have failed our wives. The fact is, we have failed God, who has spoken clearly about the women’s role. But love always protects.

VI. CONCLUSION

We have seen what the Bible teaches about the women’s role, and it is not the same as the teaching of our movement. We have developed as a movement not simply in response to the leading of the Spirit, but under the influence of the world (corporate America especially). What practical steps ought to be taken at this juncture to ensure that we as a movement obey God’s Word? Here are a few recommendations on where to go from here:

- *Feelings:* Ask the sisters how they are feeling. Listen to them. Brothers, as we often say, they are “our biggest fans and our best critics.” This is a true saying. Brothers, are we listening to our wives?
- *Schedule:* Consider exempting mothers from some of the less essential meetings. (Isn’t it interesting how many high level leaders automatically *exempt themselves* from these meetings? And they must do so, if they are to survive.) Or, apart from exceptional leadership meetings, exempt the mothers from leadership meetings altogether.
- *Salary:* Consider paying the husband, not the wife—returning to our previous system. Truth is, many mothers feel unhealthy pressure when 50% of the salary (apart from benefits and parsonage) is legally earned by them. Money tends to create obligations—and guilt. Mothering itself can be—and often should be—a full-time job. Paying our wives (paying our wives “off” instead of listening to them?) may be backfiring, because anything that affects the family negatively will affect the fabric of the church.
- *Responsibility level:* In this time of rethinking church governance, it might be wise to scale back the roles and/or responsibility levels and pressure for our sisters.
- *Discipling partners:* Rethink obligations for discipling partners—especially for parents. (See the chart below for a more realistic way of envisioning the realistic availability of parents for discipling times.)
- *Bible Study:* Study out what the Bible says about the women’s role. In one church, the lead WML had all her staff women take a few weeks to study the Pastoral Epistles and write essays on what they thought the Lord was saying about the women’s role. This is the sort of exercise that will bring us to our own convictions.

Without personal conviction it is extremely unlikely we will rethink (and escape from) our own culture.

As we have seen, there are many things the Bible says about the woman’s role, and there are many things the Bible does *not* say about the woman’s role. By ignoring some precepts and inventing others, we have done our sisters a grave disservice. They are paying the price, our children are suffering, and movement standards

²¹ To the best of my knowledge—though I am confident that this will change.

are slipping.

The “corporate culture” of the world, which we have bought in to, *disintegrates* the family; biblical culture *integrates* it. Our movement is experiencing an alarmingly high level of disintegration. A return to spiritual health goes hand-in-hand with a return to the word of God.

* * * * *

CHILDREN / D-PARTNER EQUIVALENCES

		<i>Children</i> →				
		0	1	2	3	4
<i>D-partners</i> ↓	0	0	2	4	6	8
	1	1	3	5	7	9
	2	2	4	6	8	10
	3	3	5	7	9	11
	4	4	6	8	10	12

Assumptions: 1 child ≈ at least 4 d-partners / Where there are 2 parents, theoretically dividing by 2 means 1 child ≈ 2 d-partners / Thus the number in the grid is simply the number of d-partners + 2 times the number of children.