



Should Christians Support a Woman For the Office of Civil Magistrate

by William Einwechter, July 8, 2004

With more and more women entering the political sphere and running for political office, the conscientious, biblically oriented Christian is confronted with the question of whether or not he should give his support and vote to a woman. This question becomes more pressing for many when the “best candidate,” i.e., the most conservative, pro-life candidate in a particular race is a woman. A number of years ago, we in Pennsylvania were confronted with this issue when an articulate, pro-life, politically conservative woman (who was also a wife and mother) ran for governor of our state. Many Christians enthusiastically supported her. But not all of us were confident that this was the right or consistent thing to do. The following essay grew out of the concern over her candidacy, and seeks to address the larger questions of the acceptability of women magistrates and the Christian’s responsibility before God in regard to supporting a woman for political office.

In approaching this matter, we need to first understand that these questions can only be answered from Scripture. Mere human opinion or reason is not sufficient for the Christian. The Word of God is the only infallible, authoritative standard for directing us into the paths of righteousness. Only the Bible has the power to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15-17). The duty of every true follower of Jesus Christ is to obey His commandments (John 14:15), and, in fact, the sign that we are really His disciples is that we continue in obedience to His Word (John 8:31; 1 John 2:3-5). So then, if we are to be faithful to Christ, we must search the Scriptures to see what the Lord says in regards to the issue of women civil rulers, and whether it is permissible for Christians to support a woman for the office of civil magistrate. Second, we should recognize that the issue here is not the character or ability of the woman seeking the office; nor is it her spiritual condition, her views on the issues, or even if she is the “best” available candidate. The point in question is this: does the Word of God give us the liberty to place a woman into a political office where she will in some sense bear rule over us in the

civil sphere? Or, to state it more precisely: is it biblically proper for a woman to hold political office, and thus rule over men? Has God ordained women to be civil leaders, or has He reserved this authority for men only? I believe that the Bible gives a definitive answer to this question: women are not permitted by God to hold political office and rule over men in the political sphere. There are four lines of evidence in the Bible that establish that women are not to hold political office. I will first set forth the biblical evidence that prohibits a woman from bearing rule, and, then, I will deal with the example of Deborah that is often cited as proof that it is permissible for a woman to hold public office.

1. The Biblical Doctrine of the Headship of Man Disqualifies a Woman for Civil Office.

The scriptural revelation of the creation of man and woman, and the scriptural commentary on their creation establishes the headship of the man over the woman. The text of Genesis 2:7 and 2:18-24 teaches us that man was made first, and then the woman was made to be man's helper and companion. The Bible instructs us that this order of creation was by God's design, and that it establishes the positional priority of the man over the woman in regards to authority and leadership. In setting forth the authority of the man over the woman in the context of the local church, Paul appeals to the creation order saying, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim. 2:13). In another passage, Paul states the divinely ordained order of authority and headship: "But I would have you to know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3). Therefore, the Apostle Paul teaches that God has decreed that the order of authority be as follows: God-Christ-Man-Woman. Each one in this "chain of command" is under the headship (i.e., authority) of the one preceding him or her. Later on in this same text, Paul, as in 1 Timothy 2, calls upon the order of creation to show man's headship over the woman. He says, "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (1 Cor. 11:8-9). The Bible explicitly states that the man has headship over the woman, and that this headship is not based on cultural factors, or even the fall; rather, it is based on the created order established by God Himself.

Now it is also plain in the Bible that God has ordained that the order of the headship of man must be maintained in each governing institution set up by God. There are three primary institutions established by the Lord for the ordering of human affairs. These are the family, the church, and the state. Each of these institutions has authority to govern within its appointed sphere. We could say, then, that there are three "governments" in the world: family government, church government, and state government. In each of these governments, God has commanded that men bear rule. The man has headship in the family (Eph. 5:22-24), the church (1 Tim. 2:11-14; 1 Cor. 14:34-35), and also by implication and command, in the state as well (1 Cor. 11:3; Ex. 18:21; see point 2 below).

Could it be that the man has headship only in the family and the church but not in the state? No, this could not be, lest you make God the author of confusion, and have Him violate in the state the very order He established at creation and has revealed in Holy Scripture! If one is going to argue for the acceptability of women bearing rule in the civil sphere, then to be consistent, he or she also needs to argue for the acceptability of women bearing rule in the family and the church. Now it is true that some attempt to do just that; but their denial of male headship for the family, church, and state is really a rejection of the Word of God and is a repudiation of God's created order. And it is not sufficient to contend that it is acceptable to support a woman for civil ruler when she is the best candidate, unless you are also prepared to argue that it is acceptable to advocate a woman for the office of elder because she is better suited than the available men in the church; and unless you are also prepared to say that the wife should rule over her husband if she is better equipped to lead than her husband is.

2. The Biblical Qualifications for Civil Office Require Civil Leaders to Be Men.

Every time the Scripture speaks to the subject of the necessary qualifications for those who will bear rule in the civil sphere, it always speaks in terms of men and never in terms of women. This is significant, and based on point number 1 above, it is not hard to understand. The consistent assumption of Scripture is that men are to be the civil magistrates; and, as we have seen, this is not based on culture but upon the created order. Since God is both Creator and Lawgiver there is never any contradiction between the created order and the law of God. And as creation establishes the headship of man in the civil sphere by means of man being created first and the woman being created for man, so the law of God sets the headship of man in the civil sphere by means of the stated qualifications for civil rulers. God set forth the essential qualifications for civil magistrates for all people and for all time when He spoke through Jethro to Moses: "Moreover, thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers..." (Ex. 18:21; emphasis added). And Moses himself said to the people as they were about to choose their civil magistrates, "Take you wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you" (Deut. 1:13; emphasis added). Importantly, the word for "men" chosen by the Holy Spirit in both of these texts is the Hebrew, gender specific word for a man, i.e., a male as opposed to a female.

Furthermore, the directions that God gives concerning the establishment of a king in Israel requires that a man, and not a woman, be chosen (Deut. 17:14-20). The king was to be a "brother," and he was not to "multiply wives to himself." Clearly, a man is in view here. The law of God commands us, therefore, to choose men to be our rulers! Likewise, in every other passage of Scripture dealing with the civil magistrate and his qualifications and duties, men are in view (2 Sam. 23:3; Neh. 7:2; Prov. 16:10; 20:8, 28; 29:14; 31:4-5; Rom. 13:1-6; etc.).

Therefore, the standard of God's law that men be our civil rulers upholds the order of creation. God has spoken to us in His Word, and there He commands us to set men, not women, into positions of civil authority. To consider these texts (Ex. 18:21; Deut. 1:13; 17:14-20) irrelevant in regards to what they say about setting men in civil office, would logically require us to consider the other qualifications listed as being of no account as well. The rejection of these Scriptures would leave us with no biblical standard for citizens in choosing their rulers. This may suit some, but for those who are the disciples of Jesus Christ and love the law of God, such a position is abhorrent.

3. The Biblical Picture of a Virtuous Woman Is Against a Woman Holding Civil Office.

In Proverbs 31:10-31, we are given the biblical picture of a woman who fears God and walks in His ways. The passage begins with a question: "Who can find a virtuous woman?" The question implies that such a woman is rare and precious, just like rubies. The description of the virtuous woman shows her to be an industrious, loving woman who devotes herself to the well-being of her husband and children. The center of her interest and the place of her ministry are in her home. God has called her to be "a keeper at home" (Titus 2:5), and she willingly and joyfully fulfills her calling to the great blessing of all who depend on her piety, wisdom, and homemaking skills.

Of great importance to the issue before us in this essay, are these words concerning her husband: "Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land" (Prov. 31:23). The "gates" in Old Testament times referred to the place where the leaders of the city (i.e., "the elders of the land") would gather to discuss community affairs, administer civil law, and judge in criminal and civil cases. The "gates," therefore, is a reference to the "city hall," the "capital building," the "courthouse" or, in short, to the seat of civil government. The key for us is to note that, in the case of the virtuous woman, it is her husband who is active in the gates; the virtuous woman is not herself seated in the gates — she is active in her home. This should not surprise us, for the order of creation and the law of God establish the fact that men are to bear rule in civil government. The virtuous woman understands this, and takes the vital place that God has assigned her in the home and with her family; she does not try to intrude herself into a seat in the gates. However, we need to note that the virtuous woman's works are to be praised in the gates (Prov. 31:31). Her works are not in the gates, but they are to be praised in the gates; that is, those who are leaders in the community ought to recognize the great work that she is doing in support of the community by faithfully fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother (1 Tim. 2:15; 5:10, 14; Titus 2:3-5). This is her glorious work for the Lord and His kingdom. It is of the utmost importance!

Furthermore, it should be recognized that the virtuous woman does make her presence felt in community concerns. But it is through the influence that she has on her husband (and mature sons) that her wisdom and knowledge will help to direct the affairs of the community. Yes, it is her husband who sits in the gates, but his renown and ability as a civil leader is due, at least in part (if not largely), to her help and support. Yes, it is the husband who speaks and judges in the gates, but it is his wise and godly wife who is his chief counselor.

Let no one speak lightly or disparagingly of the woman's appointed role and her service to Christ and His kingdom! And let no woman set aside the example of the virtuous woman and seek to sit in the gates with the rulers of the land. And let no Christian have any part in putting her there.

4. The Biblical Lament that “Women Rule over Them” Confirms the Error of a Woman Holding Civil Office.

In Isaiah 3:12, the prophet, as the representative of the Lord, laments the condition of the covenant nation saying: “As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them...” There is some debate as to the precise meaning of this verse. Some would contend that actual children and women were ruling, while others hold that this verse is teaching that those who were in authority were completely unqualified for such a position — as unqualified as women and children.

Whatever the exact connotations of this text are, one thing is clear: women ruling over men in the civil sphere is put in a very unfavorable light. The fact that Israel had women reigning over them is seen to be the result of sin and a part of God's retributive justice; it is certainly not considered a blessing in this text! I believe that the most likely interpretation is that Israel had weak and incompetent leaders (cf. Isa. 3:4; Ecc. 10:16) who are being controlled by women. Now if it is a sign of weakness for men who are civil rulers to be ruled by women, what is it but a sign of feebleness on the part of men to actually seek to have women rule over them? It is weakness and a sin because it is an abdication of their responsibility to be the leaders God has called them to be. No people ought to rejoice in women rulers for it is a sign of confusion and judgment. It is a sign that men have utterly failed to exercise the leadership required of them.

5. The Biblical Account of Deborah Does Not Imply that Women Should Hold Civil Office.

Those who believe that it is biblically permissible for women to hold civil office look to the account of Deborah (Judg. 4:1-5:31) for their main support. They must hope for support of their view in this account because there is no explicit teaching

anywhere in the Bible that establishes the position that women should bear rule in the civil sphere. But does the account of Deborah in the book of Judges support their view? I believe that it does not, and I will seek to show that the example of Deborah is not of sufficient weight to overthrow the four-fold cord of evidence that has been weaved above.

First, in regard to the account of Deborah, recognize that it would be unwise to cancel out the explicit biblical teaching on the headship of man, the clear statements of the law, the picture of the virtuous woman, and the lament over women ruling on the basis of what took place in Israel in one of the most confused periods in Israel's history. We should remember the important admonition of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." We contend that the biblical teaching presented above speaks far more clearly to the issue of women magistrates than does the account of Deborah. It is a serious mistake of hermeneutics to use the story of Deborah to overthrow the positive precepts and principles of other Scriptures, and to establish it as the standard biblical text for determining the propriety of women rulers.

Second, the judges during this period were more military leaders or "avenging deliverers" than they were civil magistrates (cf. Judg. 2:16-19). Because of this fact, we must ask ourselves if we can even consider Deborah to be a "judge" in the same sense as the other judges in the book. The account of Deborah is unique in that she did not lead Israel into battle herself (as did the other judges in the book), but, rather, the Lord choose Barak to be the military commander. Would it not be more accurate to say that Barak was the true "judge" here (cf. Heb. 11:32 where Barak alone is mentioned), and that Deborah's role was that of a "prophetess" who gave divine guidance to Israel?

Third, the Song of Deborah and Barak gives some important insight into Deborah's actual position in Israel (Judg. 5:1-31). In verse 7, she claims to be a "mother" in Israel, not a father. This is significant, given the headship of the father in Israel, and it is in line with our suggestion that her role was one of support and guidance to the leaders of Israel as a prophetess. Additionally, verse 9 indicates that there were yet "governors" (literally, lawgivers, or leaders) in Israel. This would refer to the elders of the people and the rulers of the tribes. This further supports the idea that the judge was not a civil magistrate in the usual sense, but rather a military leader and deliverer — Deborah was neither a "judge" nor a magistrate. Also, in verse 12 of the song, Deborah is exhorted to awake and sing, but Barak is exhorted to arise and "lead," indicating that Barak is the military leader. Additionally, the "dominion over the mighty" in verse 13 is either a reference to Israel's victory over Sisera and the Canaanites, or to the gathering of the people to go up to battle; whichever, it does not mean that God has appointed Deborah to the position of civil magistrate.

There is no question that Deborah was a great and godly woman who had considerable influence in Israel. But in the light of the evidence it is highly questionable to build a doctrine of women rulers from the case of Deborah. Deborah's role in Israel was that of a "prophetess," but not that of a civil ruler or military leader. The text does not support the idea that she was a civil magistrate. She "judged" Israel (Judg. 4:4) only in the sense that she was sought out by the people for advice and judgment in the settlement of disputes because of her wisdom from God. Apparently the priests and Levites were so corrupt that the people had to seek wisdom and judgment from this godly woman. But let us not seek in Deborah a doctrine of women rulers, and thereby become guilty of setting aside the definite precepts and commandments of God which forbid women magistrates.

Conclusion

In view of the biblical evidence presented above, it can be concluded that women ought not to be civil leaders; only men have been called of God to exercise rule in the civil sphere. For those who believe in the full inspiration and authority of the Bible, how can there be any other verdict than this? To assert that God's Word permits a woman to hold civil office and that Christians have the liberty to support a woman for the position of civil magistrate means that one has to deny the biblical teaching on the headship of man, reject the qualifications for civil rulers set down in the law of God, ignore the biblical picture of the virtuous woman, and close his or her ears to the biblical lament of women ruling over men. The example of Deborah does not give sufficient evidence to prove that she held the office of civil ruler or to overturn the biblical doctrine that men alone are called of God to the office of civil magistrate. Therefore, Christians should not support a woman for the office of civil magistrate. It is imperative that Christians labor to restore God's order for the family, the church, and the state. If we violate God's order in any way or in any sphere, we will have confusion and will invite God's judgment on us. God forbid that we would ever be so foolish.

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