

Christians & Politics: Mrs. President?

Biblical view of women in government
By Jesse Phillips

In this article we will continue our discussion by considering an issue that has been on the forefront of evangelical discussion in this election: women in government and how Christians should view such a prospect.

The discussion of women in politics is not a new one. Both major parties have had women in high positions of office for some time. Condoleezza Rice serves as Secretary of State and Nancy Pelosi is the congressional majority leader and House Speaker.

What has brought this issue to the forefront of public discussion, however, is the central role that several high profile women have played in the primaries and general election. Democrats nearly selected Hillary Clinton as the first female Presidential nominee and Republicans nominated Sarah Palin, who would be the first female Vice President. The prospects of having a woman in such high office has led to some very legitimate questions needing answers. As always, we will look to Scripture for divine perspective for our questions.

“As a married woman called by God to submit to her husband, how can she lead the United States of America?”

Perhaps you’ve been sitting around the dinner table recently and the subject of women in government came up. Specifically, the issue of Sarah Palin as Vice President was raised. “*You know,*” someone says, “*If the President were killed, she would be President. Do we really want a woman as President? Is that biblical?*”

“*How can she be a helpmate to her husband*” another adds, “*if she’s off leading wars in the Middle East?*”

“*Would her husband be the ‘First Gentleman?’*” Someone chuckles. “*Would people say Mr. President or Mrs. President when they address her? How about Madame President?*”

What most women would not aspire to is becoming an almost certainty in our country. For better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, it would seem almost inevitable that we will have a woman elected President, a *Commanderette* in Chief.

The questions that were raised above—both serious and lighthearted—are legitimate. If that conversation took place around your dinner table, how would you handle it? Perhaps it already has. How *did* you handle it? Before we examine what I believe is an appropriate biblical response, I want to look at unbiblical responses. On the one hand, we must be careful not to hastily condemn what scripture does not condemn. On the other hand, we must be careful not to condone what scripture forbids or warns against.

Please understand that the arguments presented are in no way meant to be an endorsement of any candidate or party. Sarah Palin is simply being used in this case as a relevant example to examine the Bible’s teaching. The conclusions arrived at would be the same for any political party.

Wrong Answer 1: She’s only Vice President, not President, so she’ll still be following McCain, not leading America.

The immediate response may be to shrug the issue off because the position in discussion is only the Vice President. While it’s true that different Presidents vary in the amount of authority they give their running mates, this answer is insufficient alone to satisfactorily answer the questions previously raised. The Vice President is part of the executive branch of government. This is one of our nation’s highest offices, presiding over the Senate and acting as an agent able to exercise the powers of the President, if so commissioned by him. Having a higher power to report to does not mean the Vice President is not a high leadership position.

This answer also fails to answer the question of succession to the presidency. If the President were to die or resign, she would become president. If it is unbiblical for women to be in government leadership, could we knowingly elect a woman to a position of direct succession to the nation’s highest office? Part of the Vice President’s responsibility is to act as President if needed. If scriptural principals forbid electing a woman as President, it would also be wrong to give her such responsibility to *act* as President when necessary.

Also, this objection does not address the many women like Mrs. Palin who have enjoyed successful political careers as state executives. Sarah Palin is Governor of Alaska, requiring the exercise of significant authority and leadership. Is this wrong? If so, why?

Wrong Answer 2: At least she’s not as bad as another choice.

Like it or not, the reality is that many political votes seem nothing more than a choice between the lesser of two evils. Even if it was determined that the Bible prohibited or discouraged women in government, a woman might seem to be a superior alternative than a man. Though understandable, the temptation to check our convictions at the door is inconsistent and unnecessary.

The reason this argument fails on its own is that its premise is faulty. If a woman is biblically prohibited from holding governmental office, *she would not be better* than the alternative. From a biblical perspective, she would be every bit as bad as any other male choice, for she would have no biblical basis to rule. Therefore, her very position would be resisted and condemned by the Lord. This argument seems to be based on pragmatism and an arbitrary standard of what is good and evil, not on solid biblical criterion.

So, if submission to the President and the lack of a good alternative choice are not sufficient reasons for voting a woman to power, *are there any good reasons?* Rather than looking for pragmatic justifications for choices this election, we must look to see what the Bible says about the matter.

Right Answer: The Bible does not forbid women from ruling governments.

Whereas there were two wrong reasons given above, we will limit ourselves to one right answer. Although there may be legitimate concerns about how a marriage would maintain its strength if the wife was a state official, the teaching of Scripture does not forbid women from ruling

governments. The context of the instruction about feminine submission is marriage and the church, not civil service.

John Piper summarizes the New Testament teaching thusly: *“Ephesians 5:22, Titus 2:5, 1 Peter 3:1,5 exhort wives to be subject to ‘your own’ (idiotic) husbands. This term ‘your own’ shows that the relationship of leadership and submission between a woman and her husband should be different from the relationship of leadership and submission which she may have with men in general. Husbands and wives have responsibilities for each other in marriage that they do not have to other men and women.”*¹

In addition to the command for a wife to submit to her husband, the Bible also reserves responsibility for church leadership for men (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:6, 1 Cor. 14:34-35). The truth on which the Bible is clear is that within the church and marriage men are responsible to lead and women are responsible to follow. Yet, as Dr. Al Mohler points out, many church denominations that respect male headship in the home do not forbid secular female leadership. According to Mohler, this is not inconsistent thinking. Rather, it provides an accurate understanding of verses on this issue in their proper context.² Wayne Grudem points out that, *“The positive examples of women involved in civil leadership over nations other than Israel (such as Esther and the Queen of Sheba) should prevent us from arguing that it is wrong for women to hold a governing office.”*³

Searching scripture reveals various commands for men to lead churches and homes. Women are called to follow the men in leadership. What you will not find, however, are commands for women to submit and to not have leadership over men in civil government. The argument that *if a woman must submit to her husband she cannot lead the nation* is, therefore, a logical argument, not an exegetical one.

Is it a good logical argument? Can we indeed make such inferences from the Bible? Are the Drs. Mohler, Piper and Grudem being inconsistent in their thinking? The primary objection raised against this understanding of scriptural permission of women to rule in government is based on the objection that *if God doesn’t want you to lead a family or church, what hope do you have of leading a nation?* I would argue, though, that this very question and characterization of Christian faith by non-Christians betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of government on the one hand, and the church and home on the other.

The belief that if you cannot lead a family or church means you cannot lead a nation assumes that it is harder to lead a nation than a family or church. The Bible, however, teaches us the opposite. You may be able to lead a nation quite well while utterly failing in your own home. King David led the nation of Israel effectively but neglected his own sons, one of whom revolted against him. David might have an interesting perspective on the relative ease of leading the nation as compared to his family.

People who hear the Christian teaching on female submission in the home and church—and then argue that this

effectively denies leadership in government—betray an erroneous belief that the government realm is one of higher spiritual authority than the church or home. We would certainly acknowledge that being unable to lead a church means you can’t lead a nation, *assuming the nation is superior to the church*. What if the state was *not* superior to the church? What if a country was *not* supreme over the institution of the family? Would it not follow that a woman could exercise leadership over government, if it was *inferior* to the positions of leadership in the church and family?

The only way governmental authority can be denied women on the basis that authority in the church and home is also denied is if governmental authority is superior to the church and home. However, as we have proven in the previous article on statism, the authority of the church and home are actually greater than the spiritual authority of government. Consequentially, although the Bible does not allow a woman certain high positions of authority as leader of a family or church, she may flourish in positions of lesser authority, including all government positions.

God’s Word is clear that the church is the most important institution in the world. All things have been made subject to Christ, who rules in absolute power and dominion over the earth and all the nations and inhabitants therein (Phil. 2:9). It is through the church that Christ exercises his reign over creation. Although Christians are subject to the governing authorities for the sake of their testimony, the church is not subject to government, but to the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

In a society that idolizes the state and all its earthly power, such an argument is nonsense. In the Kingdom of God the divine perspective is that a faithful pastor of a small church that never makes the evening news, and a faithful father who consistently and lovingly trains his children, both demonstrate more vital leadership and decision-making, more eternally significant guidance and wisdom, wielding more spiritual authority than any world ruler ever would.

Looking Ahead

Elections reveal our values. We have choices to make as Christians. Many politicians believe that government is more important and has more authority than the church and family. This is why they find it incredulous that a Christian could believe a woman could be a submissive wife and devoted mother while holding political office. Granted, it would certainly take impressive godly character to do so.

There are, however, some politicians who respect the spiritual authority of the church and family. They see government as a servant, God’s agent to protect these sacred institutions. We shouldn’t cast our votes based on the gender of the candidates. We should vote for the candidate whose platform best reflects biblical values and whose agenda is going to best protect what God values—marriage, family and the church’s faithful proclamation of the good news of Jesus.

Next Week: ***Where Art Thou, Perfect Candidate? Navigating through an imperfect political landscape***

¹ John Piper, *What’s the Difference*, p. 32

² “Palin Can Serve Both God and Country” *On Faith* (http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/r_albert_mohler_jr/2008/09/a_tale_of_two_offices.html)

³ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, p. 140.