

Christ Fellowship's View of Women in Ministry Leadership

The issue of women in leadership within the church has been debated for years. Some members of the global Body of Christ believe that the Bible does not permit women to teach or lead within the church. Others believe God has gifted and called both men and women to minister and lead in the church. Our responsibility is to search the Scripture, ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what God's view is, and then lovingly respect others who differ in this issue.

For people on both sides of the discussion, this is not an issue of Biblical authority, but of Biblical interpretation. Both sides would attest that the Bible is the ultimate authority on this and every matter of life and the church. Great people and great churches fall on both sides of the issue. The Apostle Paul, whose words we will look at more closely, is the one who declares in 1 Corinthians 13:12,13 "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

When forming a theology it is crucial to study the full instruction and perspective giving through the whole of Scripture, and not on just one or two verses. For example, 1 Peter 2:18 says, "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh." In debates about slavery in the 1800's, American Christians would use this passage to justify slavery. They went so far as to argue that no Scripture in the Bible ever says that slavery is wrong. Yet, a complete study the whole of Scripture clearly teaches that all people are made in the image of God, valued equally by their creator. We read the Prophets speak against injustice. We see Paul's treatment of Onesimus in the letter to Philemon. We read in Galatians 3:28 "there is neither slave nor free..." The preponderance of Scripture clearly teaches that all people should be free. So, when the few verses like I Peter 2:18 are understood in the light of the whole of Scripture, we come to the conclusion that slavery is an offence against God. It is morally indefensible so as believers we stand against it. It is within this framework that we look to see what the preponderance of Scripture teaches regarding women in leadership within the church.

Old Testament Context

Starting in Genesis with the Creation account, we learn male and female are both created in the image of God. After God created Adam, He realized that while the Godhead was in perfect community (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) that it was "not good for man to be alone" Gen. 2:18, so God created woman, that they could be one. Woman was to be Adam's "helper." Some have used this title given in Gen 2:18 to imply a inferior or subordinate role. However, when the original language is studied, one discovers the word "helper" is the same word in Hebrew used to define God's role with mankind as our "help and shield" (see Ps. 33:20 as an example). God created both male and female in His image and gave them rule and dominion together (Gen 1:28). -God's original intent was for man and woman to share life fully together.

Some will argue that with the fall of man and the entry of sin (Gen 3), God declares to Eve, "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). We believe that the work of grace through Christ is to see the effects of the fall overturned. The work of Christ is to return us to the original intention when we were created: to love, worship him and live in alignment with his creation values of holiness and community.

Since we believe that God cannot contradict Himself and that he always keeps his own values it is helpful if we look at ways God used women in the Old Testament before jumping to the controversial texts of Paul in the New Testament. Here are three examples:

Miriam – In Exodus 15:20, the sister of Moses is called a prophet. (“Then Miriam the prophet...”). A prophet in the Old Testament was used as the mouthpiece for God, to speak and proclaim the word of the Lord to the people of God.

Huldah – 2 Kings 22:14:20 “So Hilkiah the priest...went to consult with the prophet Huldah...She said to them, The Lord, the God of Israel has spoken...”. God used Huldah the prophet to bring spiritual renewal to Israel. She is here giving spiritual instruction to the priest. Furthermore, in 2 Chronicles 34 the king of Judah seeks the prophet Huldah for spiritual leadership. It’s interesting to note in 2 Chronicles 34:22 we learn that Huldah’s husband, Shallum, was not a part of the instruction for the king and the people of God. Her prophetic declaration brought revival to the land.

Deborah – Judges 4:4-9 “Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet who was judging Israel at that time.” She was the ruling judge giving political, judicial, spiritual leadership. Deborah was the highest ruler in Israel. She, not her husband, was chosen by God to lead Israel. If God opposes women in leadership over His people, why would he have chosen Deborah?

It’s interesting to note that there are no Old Testament records that try to explain or categorize why these women were placed in leadership.

New Testament Context

In the New Testament we have multiple passages that inform about women and the role they had in Jesus life and the ministry of the Early Church. Traditional rabbis held women in low regard, some wouldn’t even look at a woman. They had no legal standing in the culture and they couldn’t give testimony in court. Jesus was unique among rabbis of his day regarding women.

John. 4:27 Finds Jesus talking to a woman of Samaria at Jacob’s well. He engaged her in theological discussion and in the end she became his emissary to her community. John 4:39 tells us that “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.”

Luke 7:36-50 Jesus allowed a woman known in the community as “sinful” to wash his feet with her tears, to anoint his feet with perfume and wipe his feet (to touch him) with her loosed hair. This was a culturally scandalous act which Jesus allowed simply because the woman was so touched by Jesus heart.

Luke 8:1-3 Jesus traveled with his 12 male disciples and several women travelled with Jesus as well, financially supporting his ministry. This would have been unprecedented in his day and culturally scandalous, yet Jesus welcomed them.

Luke 10:38 Many rabbis had disciples but they were always men.(Context see Paul in Acts 22:33 who was brought up at feet of Gamelial as his disciple) Mary sat at the Lord’s feet (as his disciple) there is no other record in ancient texts of a woman being a rabbi’s disciple. Jesus commended Mary for learning.

Matthew 28:10 Women served as the first witnesses of Jesus resurrection. (In culture women were not allowed to serve as witnesses in courts of law)

Recap

God made men and women in His image, and He made them co-regents over creation.

God used women throughout the Old Testament in roles of spiritual and political leadership.

In the Gospels we see Jesus giving women a new and elevated place as he came to reverse the curse.

Women were present at the birthing of the Church and the outpouring the Holy Spirit, and were instrumental in proclaiming God’s truth over the city of Jerusalem on Pentecost.

Paul's Teachings

Now we are prepared to take an in-depth look into the Pauline passages that are often quoted in limiting women's role in the church but before we do let's look further at the role of women in the New Testament:

Acts 1:14 Women were present in the upper room at the birthing of the church. "After Jesus ascended...they all joined together constantly in prayer along with the women..." Women are a part of the church being born.

Acts 2:17 After the Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers, both men and women went into the streets of Jerusalem to declare the wonders and miracles of God. Peter begins to quote the prophet Joel "In the last days, God says, I pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy... 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). Of all the texts Peter could have quoted from the Old Testament, this is the one the Holy Spirit had him declare, reminding us that the gift of God's Spirit and His spiritual gifts are not related to gender.

*It is critical to note for both this passage and the following passages, that according to Greek commentaries like the Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament, the word "prophesy" in the Greek **προφητεύω** means to "*proclaim God's message, preach; prophesy, speak God's message intelligibly* (as opposed to speaking in tongues 1 Cor 14:1ff" [Newman, B. M., Jr. (1993). [*A Concise Greek-English dictionary of the New Testament*](#). (p. 156). Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies.] The word also means to "speak the authoritative word of God." Some have argued that women could prophesy but they cannot teach or preach, implying that prophecy is some lesser form of authority or spiritual function.

Acts 21:9 Tells us that Philip, the evangelist, had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

I Cor 14:3 states, "But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort." Those who prophesy edify the church. Verse 6 continues, "Dear brothers and sisters, if I should come to you speaking in an unknown language, how would that help you? But if I bring you a revelation or some special knowledge or prophecy or teaching, that will be helpful." In this last passage Paul is not making a distinction between – knowledge/ prophecy /teaching/ revelation – all these words overlap in their meaning. They all have to do with edifying and instructing the church.

I Cor 14:31 "For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone can be taught and instructed and encouraged." The result of prophecy is to learn and be taught. Paul wrote this to both men and women. Women were prophesying and teaching in the church at Corinth – to both men and women.

Acts 18:2 Aquila and Priscilla are often mentioned with great respect from the Apostle Paul. Many scholars believe they were the pastors of the church in Ephesus before Timothy. They were both responsible for teaching the full gospel to Apollos. When this couple is first mentioned, Aquila (the husband) precedes Priscilla (the wife). Soon the order is reversed. This is significant in ancient Greek writings, as the order indicates leadership. In Acts we first read of "Barnabas and Saul" but soon it became "Paul and Barnabas."

Romans 16 is Paul's farewell chapter and he starts by commending Phoebe to them who is a deacon (masculine ending in the Greek) of the church in Cenchreae, likely carrying the letter with the responsibility to explain it to the church. Paul greets Junia, a woman who is listed as an apostle (16:7), along with other women and Priscilla and Aquila.

I Corinthians 11:1-16 is a passage that is challenging to interpret. Much of what Paul writes about here is either in result to questions he was answering or to a cultural situation we don't understand. We do not require women to cover their heads or not cover their heads in church. Additionally, in verse 3 Paul states that the "head of every man is Christ, head of woman is man and head of Christ is God." The Greek word for "head" is often used to mean source; e.g. headwaters of a river.

Some choose to interpret it as “boss” or “leader.” Verse 5 is essential in understanding the passage because Paul recognizes women praying and prophesying in the church. Paul uses the argument of interdependence and gives directions to men and women on how they are to pray or prophesy (v5). The directions for head coverings are cultural and restricted - not universal (Old Testament Priests would cover their heads. While in the Corinth Temple prostitutes wore their hair uncovered to be provocative. So Paul is requiring women to cover their hair to show they are godly.)

The Debated Passages

The previous discussion is instrumental in approaching the 2 passages that have caused much discussion and debate within the church. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church and also gave direction to Timothy regarding how to respond to women. These passages I Cor.14:33b-36 and 1 Tim.2:8-15 have led some to believe that Paul prohibits women from teaching and preaching in the church.

To understand these passages, we need to talk about Biblical hermeneutics or interpretation. A key question is the cultural context of Paul’s writings which we will discuss in a moment.

A second issue is understanding if counsel or direction is universal or restrictive. A universal truth means it is for everyone at all times. A restrictive truth means that it has a specific purpose for a limited group for a specific time. Already illustrated in I Corinthians 11 where men are instructed to pray with uncovered heads which is different than the instructions to priests in Ezekiel 44:18 for priests to wear linen turbans.

Here are some Biblical statements. What are universal? Restrictive?

- “Greet one another with a holy kiss?” Rom 16:16 - Restrictive
- “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8 - Universal
- “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and frequent illness.” 1 Tim. 5:23 - Restricted
- “This is my commandment. That you love one another.” John 15:12 - Universal
- “Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me. It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” 1 Cor.7:1 - Restricted

To understand these two key passages regarding women in ministry we want to ask the cultural question and the universal/restrictive question.

I Cor. 14:33-35

This passage is a part of a large problem-solving letter. Paul is correcting problems as they arise in the house churches in Corinth. One such problem is caused by some women, apparently just some wives, who are interrupting the time of prophesying by asking questions. Now Paul has already said in 1 Cor. 11 that women are allowed to pray and prophesy in Christian worship. However, it’s important to understand that the largely Gentile congregation in Corinth brought with them into the church their pre-existing assumptions about prophecy and what was appropriate when approaching a prophet or prophetess, The Oracle at nearby Delphi for example was a consultative prophetess. People would go to her to ask questions like....Should I marry this man, or, buy this property etc. and the oracle would give an answer. Thus it was natural for some Corinthians to think that when prophets spoke in their assemblies they had a right to ask them questions. Paul’s response is no. In effect he is saying, “Worship time is not a “question and answer session” because you are interrupting the prophets. Ask your man (husband) the questions at home. The reason Paul corrects women/wives in this case is not because they are women but because they are causing the problem.

Note: this text says nothing about women submitting to men. The instruction is for these women to be silent and in submission as even the Law says. There is no place in the Old Testament that says a woman is to be silent and in submission to a man. Paul is talking about being silent in the presence of God and listening to His inspired words, in this case coming from those ministering: prophets and prophetesses. The best understanding is that this is a restrictive instruction to solve a specific problem at a specific time and place.

1 Tim. 2:8-15

This text has some interesting instructions to address. In this entire letter to Timothy, Paul is giving Timothy instructions on how to handle fledgling converts (most likely in Ephesus). In this letter there is much corrective teaching for a specific local church. The problem is particular women of high status in society who have fancy clothes and hairstyles and are expecting to immediately be teachers or give instruction. The passage also addresses grumbling, divisive men whom Paul wants to pray with a loving heart and holy hands.

What history tells us about Ephesus is that such women played vital roles in the Greco-Roman religious festivals, temples and worship services. They were priestesses, they were prophetesses, they were teachers, healers, keepers of the eternal flame. It is not surprising that once they found Christ they would expect to do the same things in the church. The problem was, they needed to be properly instructed and learn before they could instruct others. They needed to learn before they taught.

Closer look at the passage reveals nothing is said about women submitting to men. Dr. Dan Light (Greek scholar and former staff of Christ Fellowship) says the Greek is clear enough. The word for “quietness” is used not to silence but to show they are to be in submission to the authoritative teaching of Timothy and others qualified to teach.

Verses 12 and 13 read: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (*New International Version*).

These two verses needs specific attention. The Greek verb ‘*ouk epitropo*’ can be interpreted “I do not permit” **or** “I am not *now permitting*” as it is in the present, active tense. Again, scholars taking into account all the other Pauline passages where he encourages women to prophesy (“*boldly proclaim the Word of the Lord*”) conclude this passage is specific to the situation in Ephesus. Many scholars believe Paul would not say “I never permit women to teach” since the word “prophesy” is so closely related with teaching and preaching throughout the rest of the New Testament, and we have already established that Paul has recognized and celebrated women’s role in prophesying within the church.

As a result, these scholars believe Paul is saying these women in Ephesus are not currently permitted to teach because they need to learn first. In fact in verse 11 Paul is stating in the imperative form that “women should learn.” (Recall this was at a time when Jewish men believed it was better for the Torah to be burned than to educate a woman in the Law of God.) While in the very next verse Paul does not use the imperative tense when he says “I do not permit women to teach.” As noted earlier, this is in the present tense implying a present-day situation. Remember these correctives were given to specific women who were causing problems because their sense of entitlement came from being rich and involved in pagan practices. So Paul says, not now permitting women to teach or usurp authority over the (authorized) men (teachers). The Greek word ‘*authenteo*’ occurs only once in NT meaning either to exercise or usurp authority. Paul is talking about usurping a role or function others have, which is an abuse of power.

One other point to note in this passage. The church does not seem to be worried about women who braid their hair or have gold or pearls or costly clothing. Again, the instruction Paul is giving to these women seem very specific to the situation in Ephesus. At the core we must distinguish between what is a

universal teaching and that is restricted to a particular time and place. One cannot ignore verse 9 (regarding not to wear gold or pearls, or braid one's hair) while trying to hold to verse 12.

Conclusion:

To sum up what we believe the Bible teaches on the role of women in leadership in ministry:

- In creation God made both men and women in His image to be co-regents together managing the earth. He made them for community, to be one before Him.
- Throughout Scripture in the Old and New Testaments God uses women to lead, teach, represent Divine authority to both men and women. If this were intrinsically wrong He would have made other choices.
- The Bible gives instruction that is to be applied different ways. Some instruction is universal – for all people for all time, some is restrictive – for some people, in some places, for a period of time. It is our judgment - in light of the full teaching of Scripture including the other teachings of Paul - that the passages in 1 Cor 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are restrictive to the situations Paul was addressing at the time: a temporary restraining order based on particular cultural and local situations.
- In Christ, we are a new creation, we are the body of Christ, where the old distinctions are gone, including neither male nor female. The Holy Spirit has given the entire body gifts of ministry which are to be used to bless and strengthen the body of Christ. The universal qualification is that spiritual leaders are not to be young in the faith, undisciplined in their behavior, or uninformed of the Scripture.
- We believe the needs of our world, for whom Christ died, are so enormous, that every believer needs to be mobilized, equipped, released to fulfill the calling of God with the gifting of the Holy Spirit without regard to restrictions of gender, race or age. We are the body of Christ, united around Him and his purposes.

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