

For Women in Ministry
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My goal this evening is not to argue with you or get you to join my side or go home and write strongly worded letters to Jeff and your presbyters. My goal is to demonstrate to you that a person can support women in ministry, including leadership roles, while upholding a high and authoritative view of Scripture. In fact, it is because of how I read and interpret Scripture that I have come to believe women can and should be in leadership in ministry.

1. Are there any offices of leadership in the church, such as elder or deacon, that women are prohibited to serve in? Why or why not? Use Scripture to support your answer.

To answer this question, we typically turn to the epistles in the NT for specific instructions about elders and deacons. Before we turn to those, I'd like to survey the canon of Scripture to get a fuller picture of God's view of women in ministry. Throughout Scripture and history, we have clear accounts of women serving in leadership roles in the church.

Now, just because we see something in the Bible doesn't mean that it's good, God ordained, or translatable to all believers at all times. For example, King David was a man after God's own heart who had multiple wives and actually had a man killed to take one of those wives. That's not a prescriptive story that we should reenact today. So, the fact that women lead throughout the Bible, from the OT prophets and judges, to NT deacons and apostles, does not necessarily imply that this is good and God ordained. But it does compel us to look closely at these stories to see if they are mistakes, exceptions, or examples of God's support of women in ministry.

Because church leadership roles have changed over time and look different depending on what church, denomination, and place you live in, I will speak more broadly to show why I believe women are called and commissioned by God and their communities to roles that encompass the work of offices like elder and deacon, including, but not limited to, roles of spiritual, congregational, and administrative leadership.

In Genesis, God created Adam and put him in the garden to work. Then "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper/partner suitable for him'" (Gen. 2:18). So, on Adam's first day of work, God looked down and said it wasn't good for him to be alone and made a woman to partner or help him with his work. My first question for you to consider tonight is: If, according to God, it wasn't ok for man to be alone in the garden, why do we think it's ok for men to be alone on church staffs? In deacon or elder meetings? At church votes?

In God's utopia before the Fall, God created men and women with distinctions to work together. Only after sin enters the world do we see the first power hierarchy: God tells Eve, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3:16b). This is a curse—a result of sin entering the world. It is not a structure that God created men and women for. Notice, God does not command Adam here to rule over his wife. Rather, God explains a new, harsh result of sin to

Eve. We are not called to live under the curses of sin and death; for through Jesus Christ, we are free. We are a new creation. Within Jesus' kingdom on earth, we are one body of believers, where all parts are valued, and our church leadership hierarchies are not set by race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender.

After Genesis, we get quite a few stories of women acting in leadership roles as part of God's people. While we don't have time to dissect these stories tonight, I mention these women because of the prominent leadership roles they held in Israel's community, which I believe are precursors for our church leadership roles today.

Perhaps the most prominent female leader in the OT is the prophetess Miriam who leads alongside Moses and Aaron. The highest ministerial role in Israel's context was that of the prophet. Then we have the time of Judges, wherein Deborah stands out as one of the only righteous judges. Next, the prophetess Huldah speaks the word of God to her community. Then Queen Esther utilizes her power to speak out and save her people from genocide. Even at a time in history when women were the property of men, in God's communities, time and again women show up in leadership roles. Women speak as God's mouthpieces, lead the Israelites into war, and save God's people. These women serve in spiritual, congregational, and administrative leadership roles as prophets, judges, and queens.

While some have argued that these women were mistakes or exceptions, claiming for example that Deborah was a judge because there were no good men at the time, these stories make me wonder: Why didn't God make a good enough man for these tasks if they should have been done by men? Also, why was Israel not admonished by God for resorting to female leaders? God is not shy about telling Israel when they do something wrong or break his commandments. Yet, God does not say that Miriam and Huldah shouldn't have been prophets, or that Deborah was a bad judge, or that Esther should have stayed silent. God never says these women disobeyed God or acted unbecomingly of a godly woman. Rather, these women are upheld as matriarchs and leaders of the faith in the OT.

There's a lot more we could say about each of these women, and others, but for the sake of time, we'll move on to the NT. Throughout Jesus' ministry on earth, he consistently interacts with women in ways that I see as propelling women to inhabit ministerial roles. For example, Jesus commends Mary for sitting at his feet and learning like a disciple (Luke 10:39). While most of us know this story of Mary and Martha, what we may not realize with our 21st-century lens is that for Mary to sit at Jesus' feet inside the home was to transgress a social/cultural gender norm. Jesus commends Mary for doing this. Second, Jesus sends the Woman at the Well to evangelize her Samaritan community (John 4:39). And third, after his resurrection, Jesus sends Mary and Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples the good news (Matt. 28:20; John 20:17).

With these stories of Mary, the Woman at the Well, and Mary Magdalene in mind, I want you to consider another question: According to Jesus' life and ministry, as recorded in the gospels, was Jesus supportive of women participating in ministry?

Some of you may be thinking, “Yes, Jesus used women for ministry, but Jesus did not call women to ordained leadership roles in the church.” To this, I would say Jesus does not appear to be in the business of setting up church clergy roles and ordination practices in the gospels, for men or women. So, let’s keep walking through the Bible to see if we gain clearer insights from anyone else.

During Pentecost, Peter quotes from the Book of Joel saying, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17a). Remember, when the prophet Joel spoke these words, the role of a prophet was the highest ministerial role for an Israelite to hold. So, Joel and Peter say that both men and women will prophesy when God sends us his Holy Spirit. The word “prophesy” can also be translated “preach.” According to Peter in Acts, the time has come for men and women to preach the Word of God.

Peter also says in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Most of us are familiar with the Protestant Reformation’s “priesthood of all believers.” Accordingly, all believers—men and women alike—no longer need an intercessor to grant us access to God. Now, in Christ Jesus and indwelt with the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to serve as priests.

Furthermore, throughout Paul’s corpus, he commends female co-laborers, deacons, and apostles. For example, in Romans 16, Paul names Priscilla as a co-worker, Junia and her husband as “outstanding among the apostles,” and Phoebe as a deacon. As with the female leaders in the OT, these NT women are not listed as exceptions who stood in for men, nor are they reprimanded for overstepping their roles as women in God’s church. Rather, they are praised for their ministerial leadership, and Paul calls on other Christians to respect them in these roles.

Looking more specifically at one of these women, Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me” (v. 1-2). Phoebe is understood to have been the person who delivered Paul’s letter to the Romans, meaning that she brought them the letter and read it to their church community. So, the first person to preach and teach Romans to a church community was a woman, who Paul identifies as a deacon. In the Greek text, this word for deacon is “diakonos,” and in this case it has a feminine noun ending. Some Bible translators have selected to translate this form of diakonos as helper or servant, although it is the same root word for deacon that we see everywhere else in the NT. Therefore, I believe the most faithful translation of this verse says that Phoebe was a deacon, or deaconess.

While many churches believe that 1 Timothy 3 excludes women from serving as deacons, I believe that 1 Timothy 3 addresses the character and qualities that both men and women must have to serve as elders and deacons. Allow me to illustrate why: Verse 1 in this passage is often translated, “If any man desires to become an elder, he desires a noble task.” However, the Greek word “tis,” translated as “man” in this verse actually means “any/anyone.” So, a better

translation might be “If anyone desires to become an elder, he/she/it (because there’s no gendered pronoun here in the Greek) desires a good work.” Further, verse 4 is often translated, “He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive,” but the Greek text simply says, “the own house well-managed, and the children in submission with all dignity.” In order to make verse 4 a complete sentence and make this passage more readable, some male pronouns have been inserted into our English translations. I’m not saying this is a bad thing; I believe we should have accessible English translations of the Bible. But, with this access comes our responsibility to unpack when God gives us gendered distinctions versus when we have inserted them ourselves, thus changing the Word of God. Additionally, we must discern when the Greek, Hebrew, and/or English simply use male language as representative of all humans. As you know, we can say “mankind” to mean all people.

After the section on elders, Paul describes the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). He begins by addressing deacons (“diakonos” with a male noun ending) and then women. Some people translate “women” in this passage as “their wives.” However, a more common translation of that Greek word is “women” in general, without a possessive. Given its placement in a passage on elders and deacons, I interpret the inclusion of women’s qualifications as an inclusion of female candidates for these offices. This fits Paul’s use of parallel structure, where he inserts the Greek word “o-sa-tos,” translated “likewise,” to say that male deacons, like bishops, and women, like male deacons, are to have certain characteristics in these offices. Interestingly, the qualifications for male deacons and women are essentially the same: be serious, control your tongue, be temperate, and be faithful.

In both lists of qualifications for bishops and deacons, the only time I see a clearly gendered qualification is when the text says the bishop and deacon must be “husband of one wife” (v. 2 and 12). I’ve heard these verses used to exclude both women and single men from church leadership. To that, I’m curious, do you think Paul intended to exclude both himself and Jesus from these church offices? Or was the rule simply that church leaders could not be polygamous? Also, does this qualification exclude women, or does Paul simply not mention that women cannot take multiple husbands because that was already against social and legal customs? We know that historically, and in some cultures and religions today, men take multiple wives. I do not know of a culture or society today or historically where women take multiple husbands. So, I read these 2 verses in the same way I read the 7th commandment where it says, “you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Exod. 20:17) to mean that I also should not covet another person’s husband. In fact, none of us should covet anyone else’s spouse. Likewise, female elders and deacons should not have multiple spouses.

Interestingly, the earliest recipients of Paul’s letters and teaching continued to have women serving in leadership roles, like deacons, in the church. The early church received the same texts we have in our Bibles today, and they did not take 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 14, or Ephesians 5 to mean that women cannot lead in their church communities. While the early church did not take those passages to mean that women cannot lead in ministry, many churches and denominations today do. So, let’s turn to one of them now.

2. How do you interpret 1 Tim. 2:12 regarding the role of women in ministry?

1 Timothy 2:12 says, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” Is Paul contradicting himself here? In Romans 16, he commends women as an apostle, co-laborer, and deacon, all of which are ministerial roles that require teaching and having authority over others. He sent Phoebe to speak and teach in a church community, which included men. Plus, Paul learned from Peter, who said that men and women will prophesy, and we are all priests now. Is Paul condemning the ways in which Jesus commissioned women to go tell his good news to the Samaritans and to his own disciples? Is Paul contradicting himself when in 1 Corinthians 11 he instructs women on how to pray and prophesy in a worship setting (v. 5)? No, I do not believe Paul is contradicting himself. Rather, I read this verse in the fuller context of 1 Timothy, Paul’s corpus of epistles, and the canon of Scripture.

In 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy about a specific church with a clear purpose: to stop and correct false teaching. Paul says, “I urge you...to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith” (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Paul is writing this letter for Timothy to instruct *certain people* about specific incorrect doctrines. Paul does not seem to be writing a general theology to transcend his other teachings and practices about women in ministry. As a Christian leader responsible for spreading the gospel, Paul is silencing heresy in this church in Ephesus.

For broader context, the main religion in Ephesus at this time was a female-only cult. 1 Timothy 2:12 is safeguarding Christianity from becoming like this cult, not only in its exclusion of men but also in its false teachings and practices. Given that women specifically have spread these false teachings, Paul instructs women to learn and grow in their faith, but not so that they can usurp men and push them out of the church, as is done in the local cult. The Greek word in verse 12 that we translate as “to have authority over” can also be translated “to govern or rule,” but it is more commonly translated as “to dominate, abuse, or even murder.” Also, it’s important to note that nowhere in the NT are men commanded to exert this word for authority/abuse over others. It is never used to describe a way of leading in the church. So, verse 12 says that women should not teach or abuse men, or it could be translated that women should not teach *in order to* abuse men.

Instead, women are called to take on the roles of learners, a role which requires submission to her teacher and silence for the sake of listening. We may read this as submissive of women, but at the time, for Paul to instruct women to learn at all was progressive. Although the cult of Artemis was prominent in Ephesus, the culture was still a patriarchy. For Paul to instruct women to learn at home during this time period makes perfect sense in this context. We know that Paul was a strategic missionary, and that he said in 1 Corinthians 9, “I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22b). In Ephesus, Paul was progressing women’s education without disrupting the culture.

If I were a missionary today in a country where women are not allowed to go to school or work outside of the home, I would not start off by saying from a pulpit, “Now, let your women wear whatever they want and go to school and lead in your churches.” Rather, I would start with something like “the women in your family need to be educated; start teaching them at home.” This is a progressive move without being so disruptive that it would never be accepted by a new culture, or so progressive that it would unnecessarily endanger the flourishing of the church.

Now, there is more to unpack in 1 Timothy than just verse 12. For instance, Paul appeals to the creation story as a reason for why women must submit to men. He says, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (vs. 13-14). Is Paul saying that Adam was not a transgressor? How do we read this with Romans 5:12, where Paul says that through one man’s transgressions, Adam’s, sin and death spread to all the world? Could it be that Paul is using the creation story to make a specific point, perhaps to correct a false teaching about the creation narrative in this church? Remember, one of the false teachings that Paul names in chapter 1 is myths and endless genealogies. Perhaps Paul is emphasizing the order of creation (men first) and pointing out Eve’s transgression (women’s sin) to contradict a false narrative being spread at this church. It makes more sense for Paul to make this rhetorical appeal to disprove a false teaching, than for Paul to be re-interpreting the creation narrative in a way that ontologically subordinates women to men. To codify the male-female hierarchy, which is a result of the curses of sin, does not fit with Paul’s other teachings about the freedom and unity we all have in Christ and verses like Galatians 3:28 where Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Likewise, I doubt that verse 15 is a theological statement that Paul uses to transcend Jesus and the other apostles’ teachings about how men and women are saved. Here, Paul says, “Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” Do we really believe women are saved by childbearing and modesty, or do we believe that women are saved “by grace through faith,” as Paul says in Ephesians 2? Again, I read verse 15 as speaking to a specific false teaching in the church at Ephesus. Paul is appealing to the Christian creation narrative to correct false teachings, not to codify laws for gendered hierarchies and salvation by childbirth. Similarly, the other time in the NT when Paul appeals to the order of creation as a reason women must do something, it’s that women must be veiled in the church. So, the justification for women being silent in the church is the same appeal used for women to be veiled. How then, can we uphold one of those teachings but not the other? Because both must be interpreted contextually, culturally, and canonically.

Unfortunately, we don’t have time to unpack every passage used by some to prohibit women in ministry, but I hope that I’ve shown you how I support my view of women in leadership with a biblical interpretation. I’d like to emphasize that although I didn’t exegete every problematic text for my view on women in ministry tonight, I am not interested in throwing those passages out of the Bible, which brings us to question 3.

3. Are there any misconceptions about what you and your church believe about women in ministry?

The first misconception about people who hold my view of women in ministry is that we do not uphold the authority of Scripture. I hope I've disproven this to you tonight. I have come to believe that women are called and commissioned by God and their church communities to leadership roles in ministry, not in spite of tricky passages on the topic, but because of how I interpret the whole of Scripture.

Another misconception about supporting women in ministry is that this is a slippery slope to progressivism. Reading Scripture in the way that I've introduced you to tonight does not demand a certain way of reading other passages in Scripture or imply that you must take a non-traditional view on every topic. Every passage of Scripture has to be read in connection to the whole canon and interpreted in the church community, both at present and in our Christian tradition.

4. Finally, what are the consequences of not believing what you believe about women in ministry?

The greatest consequence for not believing that women can serve in ministry roles is keeping women from obeying God. We all know the Christian cliché to serve God, not man. And yet, if we wrongly prohibit women from ministry roles that God is calling them to, we are requiring women to serve men over and against obeying God. I have a distinct memory in high school of saying, "If I were a boy, I would go to seminary and become a pastor." From a very young age, I felt compelled/inspired/called (whatever word you want to use there) to evangelize, preach, and teach God's Word. For a long time, I dismissed this idea because of texts like 1 Timothy 2 and my church's stance on women in ministry. But eventually, I realized I was hiding behind those passages instead of working through them. I knew people disagreed with me and my church, but I didn't really want to be called to ministry. I didn't want to be seen as a controversial woman, and honestly, I wanted to make more money doing something else that didn't require me to work on the weekends. But God kept bringing me back to this call to ministry, and God placed many people in my life who directed me to another way of viewing women in ministry. I'll admit, I don't hold many of my Christian views with certainty, but rather with faith, knowledge, and conviction. So, eventually, I decided to step into ministry with the conviction that I would rather be wrong and still spend my life in ministry than not answer God's call for me to share the gospel and lead in the church.

In addition to prohibiting women from being obedient to God, not holding this view of women can lead to the overall diminishment women's worth and honestly the desecration of God's creation and abuse of God's Word. I see this as the slippery slope for the perspective that women cannot lead in ministry. If taught well, the position that men and women are both made by God, loved by God, and image bearers of God, yet with distinct roles, including that women cannot lead in ministry, should not lead to the abuse of women. In my experience at Covenant Presbyterian and here at Redeemer, I did not encounter the misuse of this teaching for abuse or

control. However, I have experienced this outside of the churches I've attended, and I've known women and families at Redeemer, DaySpring, and outside of the church who left church communities because of a toxic twisting of God's word on gender roles.

In conclusion, I'd like to reiterate my gratitude for you having me and hearing about this perspective. I know I haven't covered this topic in its entirety, but I hope I've at least piqued your interest and introduced you to a new way of interpreting God's word on this topic. I also hope I've proven to you that I hold this view of women in ministry through a high view of Scripture as God's true and authoritative Word. If there's time after Jeff speaks, I welcome your questions and will happily send you resources that further flush out the ideas I introduced tonight. Also, whether you want me or not, I'll be around because you are not only my extended church family in Christ and in Waco, but some of you are literally my family.