

Reaching Out in Today's World

To be a
Christ-trusting,
grace-sharing,
relationship-building,
community-serving,
world-engaging,
difference-making
church



A Leadership Bible Study Presentation

Section Two – Women's Roles in the Life of the Church

I. Gender Roles in the Old Testament

We will seek to answer three simple questions in this first part of the study: *What do we learn about men and women from creation? What roles did each play in the fall? Prior to the cross of Christ, did women serve in leading or teaching in the life of Israel?*

1) Creation (Genesis 1-3)

- Man and woman are both made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27)
- Genesis chapter 2 records the special creation of woman, a helper for man.
- Both were given the instructions to "rule the earth." (Genesis 1:28)
When God instructed "them" to rule over the earth, he gave woman the same responsibilities and rights as man.

2) The Fall (Genesis 3:1-18)

Eve was tempted initially by Satan and this has prompted some to blame her for the fall of man. Yet Paul said in I Corinthians that it was through Adam that sin entered the world. (I Corinthians 15:21-22)

Both Adam and Eve sinned and both were punished. (Genesis 3:16) Woman was told that she would "desire her husband" and that he would "rule over her." This indicates that this was not the arrangement prior to the fall.

3) Women in the Life of Israel

There are many women who were honored in the Old Testament and whose faith and virtue are held up as models. But there are a number of women who served as leaders and teachers in Israel, often called "prophetesses", a word meaning someone who speaks for God.

- *Miriam*, the prophetess (Exodus 15:20) led in praising God
- *Deborah*, a prophetess and judge, led Israel (Judges 4:4)
- *Athaliah*, was queen over Judah (II Kings 11:3)
- *Huldah*, the prophetess, counseled the leaders (II Kings 22:14 & II Chronicles 34:22)
- *Noadiah* was a prophetess. (Nehemiah 6:14)
- *Anna*, a devout woman, prophesied publically when the baby was brought to the temple. (Luke 2:36)

The Old Testament describes a patriarchal world: Men most often led the tribes and ruled the nations. But God used women also to lead and teach at different times and in different ways. The only role it seems women could not serve in was the role of priest.

II. Gender Roles in the New Testament

1) How were women involved in the ministry of Jesus?

- Women supported Christ's ministry (Luke 8:2-3)
- Mary & Martha. (Luke 10:38-41)
- The Woman at the well. (John 4)
- After his death it was some women who came to anoint his body. (Matt 28:1-7)

2) How were women involved in the early church?

- Female disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4 and 17-18)
- Lydia, (Acts 16:14-15)
- Phillip's daughters (Acts 21:8-9).
- Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, (Romans 16:6 & 12)

3) Did women serve as ministers, missionaries or leaders in the early church?

Many of us grew up believing that women never prayed or taught in the assemblies of the early church. But, in I Corinthians 11:4-5 & 13, Paul addresses how women should dress when they were praying and prophesying. There are several women that scripture seems to indicate performed some teaching or leading:

- a. *Phoebe* (Rom 16:1) She served as a deacon in the church.
- b. *Priscilla* (Rom 16:3-5). Priscilla and Aquila are referred to as “fellow workers.” Both Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside and taught him. (Acts 18:24-26.)
- c. *Junia* (Rom 16:6-7) This woman was referred to as an apostle.
- d. *Euodia* and *Syntyche*. (Phil 4:2-3). Paul calls these women “fellow workers”.
- e. *Nympha* (Col 4:15). Another woman who hosted a church in her home. She was considered a patron.

II. Paul’s Teaching on Women, Worship & Teaching

The apostle Paul wrote a number of letters that addressed how women served in the churches of his day.

Galatians 3:26-28. In the letter to the churches in Galatia he makes an amazing statement that will serve as a launching pad for our study into his teaching about women.

- What three divisions among people are addressed?
- How are these three connected or similar?
- How have these divisions changed over time?

I Corinthians 11:4-5, 13 Paul is instructing about women who are praying and prophesying. Prophecy means to speak a word from God, whether direct spiritual revelation or a planned message.

Titus 2:3 Paul instructs the mature women in the church to be teachers specifically of the younger women.

5 Principles to Help Determine “Is it Cultural or is it Universal?”

1. The further one moves from the central message of the Bible, the greater the chance of cultural relativity.
2. The less an issue is addressed in scripture, the possibility of cultural relativity increases.
3. Distinguishing universal teachings (Teachings intended to be followed by everyone) from teachings given to one person, group or place.
4. When a teaching on a particular point is uniform and consistent it is less likely to be culturally impacted, as opposed to when there are differences in the places it is taught.
5. Compare the biblical setting with our own cultural setting. Significant differences may uncover culturally-limited applications of biblical texts.

I Corinthians 14:34-35

1. What does the command for silence mean?

The Greek word translated “silent” literally means “say nothing, stop speaking.” It is used several times in the context to different groups.

2. Who is commanded to be silent?

In the larger context, chapters 11-14, the concern is disorder in the assembly. This suggests that perhaps the Corinthian women were being disruptive in some way. Further, they are sent to their husbands for answers, narrowing the focus of the command to married women. Further, Paul seems focused on the authoritative interpretation of scripture, such as decided by church leadership. This may well be the type of speech he was restricting. However the passage is interpreted, it seems to have nothing to do with reading scripture or praying.

I Timothy 2:11-12

1. *What does the command for silence or quietness mean?*

The word he chooses means “quietness” and describes a submissive position, not the “do not speak” word used in Corinthians.

2. *From what is he restricting women?*

His focus is on the attitude of the woman and the authority of the speech. His command is for women to learn. He modifies that with the way they are to learn. At issue are the words “to teach” and “exercise authority.” The focus on authority seems clearer when we note that Paul directly follows this section with instructions about elders. They were the final teaching authority in the church. Again, we find that the authoritative teaching of church leadership, through the decisions of the elders on Biblical interpretation and through the preaching of the Word from the pulpit, seems to be at the core of Paul’s restrictions.

From this review of scripture, we have seen how women used their gifts in the early church to admonish, pray, encourage and edify the church. They did not serve as the authoritative interpreters of scripture in the role of elders. In view of this, we believe that women may serve the Lord’s Supper, collect the contribution, pray, testify, sing and edify the church in the assembly without contradicting any biblical mandate.

III. How have those before us have interpreted this issue?

We are not bound by any one historic approach, for the Bible is our sole authority. But we can learn from the way other believers have faced this questions. What we find is that the approaches and interpretations have varied for centuries.

Early Church Leaders 100 – 500 AD

Clement of Alexandria	
Ambrose	<i>Encouraged women to participate</i>
Ephraem	
Cyril of Jerusalem	<i>Restricted women from singing</i>
Commandment of the Fathers	
Pliny	<i>Mentions deaconesses</i>
Didascalia Apostolorum	<i>Taught about women baptizing</i>

500 – 1500 AD

The overall leadership in the church was held by men. Apostles through to bishops and church leaders were almost always men. Some special orders and roles were reserved for women. Some of these can be traced back to the first and second centuries with widows and virgins taking vows of faithfulness to God’s service. As always there were some exceptions.

1500 to Present

Alexander Campbell (cir. 1800) chose to enroll women in Bethany Bible College.

Walter Scott (cir. 1810) refers to and commends a deaconess and her meeting group.

Clare H. Babcock (cir. 1910) is reputed to have baptized 1,000 by 75th birthday.

Sadie McCoy Crank (cir. 1920) established 15 churches and baptized over 5,000.

J.W. McGarvey (cir. 1916) pioneer preacher and teacher wrote that women were free to speak in the assembly if allowed by the elders.

David Lipscomb (cir. 1920) Chose not to allow women to teach, but later recanted and apologized

Daniel Sommer (cir. 1940) wrote that women could pray and read scripture in the assembly.

C.R. Nichols (cir. 1940) *God’s Women* promoted women in serving and teaching roles

Burton Coffman (cir. 1950) taught that men in the eldership had the ability to say to women: ‘You may speak.’

Our Conclusion:

In order for us to be as effective as possible in bring people to Jesus and using all the gifts available to the church, we believe it is the right thing at this time for us to remove the restrictions that have kept women from serving the Lord’s Supper, reading the scriptures and praying in our assemblies. We continue to believe that the role of elder or preacher is one that scripture calls for men to fill.