

gender roles in ministry

Curt Parton, 2003, 2005, 2008

One question we frequently hear is, "Do you believe women should be in ministry?" We answer with a resounding, "Absolutely!" That response usually triggers a clarification, "Yes, but do you believe that women should be involved in every area of ministry, even pastoring the church as one of the elders?" To that, we would have to answer, "No," but we know of no one in the body who is appropriate for every area of ministry.

The apostle Paul shows us in Scripture that we all have different gifts and that we are to minister to our brothers and sisters using the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). But he also demonstrates (in verses 27-31) that there is no single gift that all of us share. So, for each of us, there are areas of ministry that are appropriate and inappropriate.

If a person does not have a gift of teaching, it is probably not wise for them to be responsible for a teaching ministry to the body; if a person takes on the role of a counselor to their brothers and sisters, they should be appropriately gifted. "Okay, that's fine," a person may continue, "but God doesn't specify certain gifts for men and others for women. So what areas of ministry are inappropriate for women and why?" For the answer to that question, we need to look at a few Scriptures.

We should start with the passage that speaks the most clearly on this issue:

Women should learn quietly and submissively. I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly.

1 Timothy 2:11-12

This seems fairly clear-cut. Most scholars agree that the word "quietly" in this verse does not mean absolute silence, but is contrasted with teaching and having authority. There are two things that the apostle Paul says are inappropriate for women in ministry: teaching men, and having authority over men.

Could this be explained by a difference in culture—something that may not apply to us in the same way today, such as greeting with a holy kiss or head coverings? No, because this is not a method of *demonstrating* a biblical principle; it *is* a biblical principle. Greeting one another is a biblical principle; a holy kiss was a culturally appropriate way of greeting one another. The biblical principle described in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 is that the woman who is publicly praying or prophesying should "show she is under authority." The head covering was the culturally appropriate way for women to show this submission to the leadership of the church.

What is the principle being described in 1 Timothy 2:11-12? The principle is that it is inappropriate for women to teach men or have authority over men in the church. Does this only apply to their culture then? No, because Paul supports this teaching by referring to both creation and the fall (1 Timothy 2:13-14), showing that this distinction went back to the beginning.

Some try to claim that Paul was addressing a specific problem of women teaching false doctrine in the church in Ephesus. There is absolutely no scriptural evidence, though, to support the idea that women were teaching false doctrine. In fact, Paul begins the letter by directing Timothy to "stop those whose teaching is contrary to the truth" (1 Timothy 1:3). If the only concern was preventing false teaching, this instruction would have taken care of the problem without any confusion and without singling out the women for special restrictions.

Some say that the reason for this instruction was to prevent uneducated women from teaching in the assembly. But this doesn't hold up under closer examination. Were all of the women in the church in Ephesus unknowledgeable? Were there no uneducated men who would therefore, apparently, be unqualified to teach? Why this emphasis on education when unlearned fishermen served as apostles to the church?

Others protest that this letter is not intended to be a manual on the church. However, Paul's own words seem to contradict such a position:

I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon, so that if I am delayed, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God. This is the church of the living God, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth.

1 Timothy 3:14-15

However much we are culturally uncomfortable with such a teaching, it is difficult to see any legitimate interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 other than that, in the church, women should not teach men or have authority over men.

We have already discussed 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. This passage shows women praying and prophesying publicly but in a way that shows submission to the male leadership of the church. [Prophesying could be defined as relaying to others, in one's own words, something that God has revealed to that person. For more information, see our [paper on spiritual gifts](#).]

Many scholars agree that the requirement for women to remain silent in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is in a specific context of judging prophecy in the church. This fits well with Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy regarding women taking authority over men.

The Scripture most commonly used to support the right for women to serve in any capacity in the church is Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

However, when we look at this passage in context it is clear that Paul is not removing all gender distinctions. The context is one of salvation and our relationship to Christ. There is no distinction in how we relate directly to God, no matter whether we're Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female—it makes no difference in our access to Christ. To teach that Paul is doing away with any distinction between men and women goes way beyond the context of this passage, and contradicts everything else Paul, and the other scriptural writers, wrote on the subject.

When we look at Scripture we see a great number of women actively involved in ministry. The accounts of the early church in Acts and the letters of Paul frequently acknowledge women who shared in ministering to God's people (Acts 9:36; 16:14-15; 18:26; 21:9; Romans 16:1-12; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). However, none of these examples violate the principle that women should not teach or have authority over men. These same numerous areas of ministry are available to women today.

The many ways that Jesus involved women in His ministry were amazing. In doing so, He went directly against the culture of the day. Jewish women were not supposed to be disciples and receive religious instruction—Jesus taught them and used them in ministry. Jewish women were not considered reliable witnesses in court—Jesus chose a group of women to be the first ones to see Him after His resurrection and to carry the news back to the other disciples that He had risen. Clearly, Jesus was not bound by 1st century convention in the way He used women in ministry. However, when He chose the leaders for His church, He appointed twelve men as His apostles. We should not ignore that. And the elders of the churches followed this example; there is no mention of a female elder anywhere in Scripture or the history of the early church.

We must point out that throughout history women have been horribly mistreated and unjustly suppressed. We do not, in any way, support the domination of women by men. We believe that God created us equal, but different, with different roles to fill. The differences were intended for us to complement each other and work together, not for one to dominate and suppress the other. We should all advance the rights of women to be fairly and equitably treated.

We are all different parts of the body of Christ, with different areas of gifting and different areas of ministry. Is it unfair for God to give a gift of leadership to one man but not to another? No, because each man will have an area of service and each man will be uniquely used by God. Is it inequitable for God to entrust certain areas of ministry to men and not to women? No, because both will have the areas of service that God intends for them to have and both will be uniquely used by God.

We enthusiastically support the involvement of women in every area of ministry and leadership, except for those requiring teaching men or having authority over men.

**But our bodies have many parts,
and God has put each part
just where he wants it.
How strange a body would be if it had only one part!
Yes, there are many parts, but only one body.**

1 Corinthians 12:18-20