

Women in Ministry: A Biblical Briefing

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Women in ministry remains one of the most controversial subjects among Bible-believing Christians, especially concerning Christian leadership roles like pastors, elders, deacons and chaplains.

Is this allowed by God? Is it permitted by Him some of the time but not at other times? Is it not allowed at all? And what about the ordination and licensing of women for ministry?

The Bible gives very specific answers to some of these questions, vague answers in some cases, and is disconcertingly silent in others. Some of the following positions on the subject will undoubtedly fly in the face of certain reputable commentators like F.F. Bruce and challenge current ideas circulating in trendy churches. So back to the Bible we must go. What the Scripture *says* and *doesn't say* is the first and best recourse.

Here's what we know:

1. Biblical prohibitions concerning women in ministry (not exhaustive)
 - a. When the Apostle Paul instructed his disciple Timothy about propriety in group worship in 1 Timothy 2:12-14, he forbade women to teach doctrine to men from a position of church authority. It could be argued that when Paul said, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man..." he was expressing an opinion. This was not the case in this context as Paul cited the events of Genesis 3, supporting his declaration with a Biblical precedent and thus eliminating the possibility of personal bias. Many subsequent sages show a misunderstanding of the nature of the passage, suggesting that Paul was telling Timothy that women cannot teach at all, or even speak in a church meeting, which is not supported by the context. The context, in fact, indicates that women should not be teaching doctrine *to men* due to the Genesis 3 issues cited by Paul. Additionally, that Paul would not allow a woman to exercise authority over a man in a church gathering—according to the context—does not forbid a woman to perform in various ministry or leadership capacities if she acted under the authority of a man (presumably

her husband or a ministry overseer). In such a capacity, the righteous actions of both the husband or wife upheld to the honor and respect of the other. The Judge, **Deborah**, is an example of a leader and prophetess who led Israel while married to Lappidoth. The precedent of these verses appears to be absolute. Further, this context asserts a long-standing tradition of family order—not of greater value or superiority, but of family succession. In other words, in a family, the firstborn—because he was born first—gave him preeminence in the family structure, making his role and responsibilities for primary consideration in family matters and administration. According to Paul, this was the God-established of role of Adam. Eve was not an inferior or lesser human in His creation, but a second-born, and therefore subject to the family structure. It is important to note at this point that when God pronounced the curse on Eve in Genesis 3:16, He declared, “Your desire will be for your Husband, and he will rule over you.” Prior to the sin that brought this curse, the husband-wife arrangement was different and, apparently, more equitable. In other words, when God declared this stipulation in the curse, He was changing things from one order to another, less desirable order.

- i. **Priscilla**, Aquila’s wife was credited alongside her husband with correcting Apollos’ doctrine in Acts 18:24-26. We can conclude that since she was credited alongside her husband—by name and even named first—that women disciples ministering under their husband’s authority were allowed to instruct men when deemed appropriate.
- ii. Other instructions concerning the place and/or behavior of women in gatherings were addressed mostly by Paul, most notably in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 10:23-11:1. When the background and cultural semantics of the Corinthians are understood, Paul’s instructions to them were directed at a specific cultural context and not intended to be universal precedents.

2. There were female prophets (prophetesses) who were highly respected and whose admonitions were heeded by congregations, church gatherings, kings, apostles and other individuals.
 - a. Biblical prophetesses include **Miriam** (Exodus 15:20); **Deborah** (Judges 4:4-5); **Huldah** (2 Kings 22:14-20); **Anna** (Luke 2:36-37); **Philip the Evangelist's daughters** (Acts 21:8-9)
 - b. It's likely prophetesses acted exclusively under their husband's authority, but whether or not this was always the case is not clear in the Biblical text or in other historical writings.
3. Jesus had women disciples.
 - a. Though not among the twelve, Jesus shattered tradition by allowing female followers, some of whom financially supported His ministry as patronesses.
 - i. That Jesus had female disciples meant He broke with local cultural tradition and mores by preparing women for active ministry
 - ii. **Joanna**, wife of Chuza, Herod Antipas' treasurer followed and supported Jesus and the ministry. Joanna was wealthy due to her marriage to Chuza and that her arranged marriage (almost certainly the case here) to a high official demanded that she, too, had a rich and powerful pedigree. As a patroness, she was a woman of tremendous authority, yet still in submission to Jesus as her Rabbi. Joanna was also one of the women at the empty tomb on resurrection day.
 - iii. Other, more familiar female disciples were **Mary Magdalene and Susanna** (possibly patronesses), **Mary and Martha of Bethany**, the **unnamed women** in Luke 7:36-50 and Matthew 26:6-7 (renowned for their worship of Jesus) and perhaps many more.
 - iv. A major cultural barrier concerned the regional belief that the testimony of a woman was forbidden in any court because of the long-held belief they could not be relied on to tell the truth. This makes John 20:17-18 intriguing—Jesus commanded Mary Magdalene to go and tell the other disciples about His resurrection, knowing full well they would reject her testimony. Jesus broke another cultural more by

giving Mary a vital message to deliver to a group of *men* being groomed as leaders.

4. Women deacons, elders and apostles?

- a. A **'wise woman'** in the Old Testament appears in two cases to be a title, possibly referring female city elders (women who held the equivalent position to a male city elder in influence and possible judicial duties). Those specifically mentioned include **the wise woman of Tekoa** (2 Samuel 14:2), **the wise woman of Abel Beth Maacah** (2 Samuel 20:14-22).
- b. **Phoebe** (Romans 16:1-2) was referred to by Paul as a deacon of the church in Cenchrea and was likely a patroness. Paul describes her as having carried and delivered his letter to the Romans, perhaps delivering funds as well. As Wijngaards commented, "Women flourished in the diaconate between the 2nd and 6th centuries. The position required pastoral care to women, instructing female candidates and anointing them at baptism. They were also required to be present whenever a female would address a bishop." *
- c. **Lydia of Thyratira** (Acts 16:13-15, 40) was an international merchant and patroness (as evidenced by her insistence that Paul and his party remain at her house in Philippi). She became the host of the original Philippian church and possibly its first leader.
- d. **Euodia and Syntyche** (Philippians 4:2-3) were Paul's fellow workers in the gospel, suggesting they shared the same mission and equity as Timothy, Silas and Paul's other companions in service.
- e. **Junia** (Romans 16:7) was referred to as an apostle by Paul, who also noted that she became a Christian before he did.

5. Female pastors?

- a. Pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Church in Riverside, California, related an account of a Philippine pastor's conference at which he was one of the speakers. When it came time for him to speak, he was startled to find that the audience consisted mostly of female Filipino pastors of tribal village

* J. Wijngaards. *No Women in Holy Orders? The Women Deacons of the Early Church*. (Norwich: Canterbury, 2002)

churches, numbering in the hundreds. Pastor Greg shares Paul's stance in 1 Timothy regarding women not being allowed to teach men, giving him pause about addressing the hundreds of female pastors. What was going on? Were they acting out of order? By encouraging them, would he be complicit in sending a false Biblical narrative? He prayed—and realized that God is true to His word, but that He would also never neglect any of His people. This was what he was observing. The women pastors were not out of order, but were filling a gap that had been neglected by men or the village had no qualified male Christian leaders. Was this God breaking His own rules or were the women pastors out of order? This seemingly contradictory scenario isn't unique, especially in the New Testament. Paul forbade the circumcision of the uncircumcised, yet he circumcised Timothy. The council at Jerusalem forbade Gentile Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols, about which Paul told both the Roman and Corinthian believers in effect, *don't ask, don't tell* when dining at a Gentile's home. There several more instances—for more discussion on the role of women in the first century church, please refer to the book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by Richards and O'Brien, particularly chapter 7, entitled *First Things First*.

Conclusions

- Female leaders at Calvary Georgetown Divide do not teach doctrine to or within its ranks, therefore a female supervisor or leader is not Scripturally disqualified.
- Women serving in leadership positions at Calvary Georgetown Divide are acting under the authority of a pastor and, if married, their husband. She is therefore not in violation of Scripture and of Paul's edict to Timothy.
- Prophetesses in the Bible were highly respected women who exercised a prophet's authority to speak for God to the nation, kings, assemblies and individuals under the authority of their husband, father or the community.
- Women teaching men on virtually all subjects except Biblical doctrine appears to be a matter of Godly people calling them to do so, based on the authority Jesus and the apostles imparted to their male and female followers.

- Women in the Bible were allowed to lead and exercise authority if they were under the authority of their husband or other recognized male spiritual leadership. In the case of Calvary Georgetown Divide, any female serving in a ministerial role, does so under and with the delegated authority of a pastor and ultimately, the recognized ministry staff of the church.

From a Scriptural standpoint, does a church or a chaplaincy have the authority to sanction female ministers in any leadership capacity? My conclusion is a qualified 'yes', under the aforementioned, non-cultural precedents of Scripture.

Concerning the specific boundaries of women in ministry, the Bible is vague or silent on much of this issue. Concerning such matters, Jesus gave His disciples an excellent tool. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," He told them. This was an ancient rabbinic saying that helped leaders decide on difficult issues that were not specifically addressed in the Scripture. *Having the things of God in mind* (the qualifier of any such decision), they were to reverently render a decision and heaven will stand with them. Anything outside that parameter would be presumptuous and non-binding.

An example of a *failure* of the principle of binding and loosing is recorded in Matthew 16:13-27. Jesus had just handed Simon Peter the authority to bind and loose. Moments later, Peter took rash advantage of it by rebuking Jesus for His announcement that He would be crucified. Peter exercised his new authority based on his own ideas, and not God's. Jesus' response to Peter's reckless presumption was severe: 'Out of my sight, Satan!' *Good old Peter.*

Another time Jesus gave His followers this same authority concerning difficult decisions when dealing with unrepentant sinners (Matthew 18:15-19). In the passage, Jesus told His disciples that if they needed to decide on a matter that the Scripture doesn't specifically address, *if they have the things of God in mind*, then decide. Heaven—and Jesus Himself will stand with them.

The ordination of women, to a large degree, falls under the above category. Ordination, as a church practice, is not taught in the Bible but is a more recent invention of the church. Even though there are no specific Biblical restrictions about ordaining

women, among the more traditional or fundamental churches and organizations, the ordination of women may not be acceptable for regular church leadership. Even so, there may be more flexibility in employing it for the purposes of legal confidentiality in a ministerial or chaplaincy role. Either way, it is church tradition, not Biblical precedent that would restrict the ordination of women in a ministry or chaplaincy context.

How does the debate resolve? It seems to leave us with both feet firmly planted in mid-air, and in many ways it does. That's why the debate continues. The lesson? Grace and faith while we go about fulfilling our corporate and individual calling in Christ. He made us in His image—all of us—and male and female created He them...

But add to this grace a caution—we modern, western Christians are chronically blind to *our own* entrenched church, cultural and ancestral traditions, and that *our own* rules that aren't necessarily His—and may be gracelessly restrictive or perilously liberal.

My two bits.

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