

# *Women in Ministry and Leadership*

## *A Biblical Reflection*

### **Introduction**

The issue is not about women in *ministry* (which is generally acknowledged to be accepted, at least with children, young people, adult women, students and on the foreign mission field with both men and women). The issue is about women in *leadership*, especially as pastoral staff, public preaching and eldership. To clarify this, I note what are the underlying issues:

- (1) *Scripture*. As I will show below Scripture is ambiguous on the issue, and both those who deny women leadership in the local church and those who support it have Scripture on their side. Scripture is not ambiguous on the subject of homosexual practice, premarital sex, the exploitation of the poor and marginalized. But it is also ambiguous, as well, on the subject of wealth, the Old Testament largely arguing that it is a blessing of God, and the New Testament calling (essentially) for voluntary impoverishment and declaring that the wealthy already have their “reward.”
- (2) *Marriage*. This is a marriage issue as it is argued that if the husband is the “head” of the home, this would be essentially undone by having one’s wife in authority over him in the church. Leadership structures in the church should support the home, not undermine it, so it is thought. But, as I will show below, this is to misunderstand both “head” and authority.
- (3) *Authority*. The reason why women in *ministry* (at least in a limited way with children, women and overseas with anyone) is accepted but *leadership* (as elders or pastors) is denied is essentially a matter of authority. And authority understood as making final decisions on behalf of others and being the “boss.” But again as I will show below this is to misunderstand the nature of spiritual authority in the church which is not a matter of control but is authority in Christ and Scripture. With Christ as head of the Church and Scripture as the final authority on life and morals, church leaders can be corrected by the people whenever they deviate from the source of the church’s authority. Their authority is not positional (by their offices) but in Christ.
- (4) *Church Unity*. The issue is also one that concerns people about “keeping the people together” in unity. Unfortunately the issue is usually divisive either way, whether a church restricts women to serving women and children but denies them leadership, or moves towards affirming the giftedness and character of women for leadership. It is possible, however, for a church to move towards female leadership in partnership with men through mutual submission – the mark of Holy Spirit filling (Eph 5:18,21) with the certain hope that if a “mistake” is being made our God is able to redeem it, as he did when Israel demanded a king though God ended up sending His Son in the line of David. Some churches have moved to a “council,” “servants” or “overseers” format of leadership avoiding the difficulties of using the words “deacon,” “deaconess” or “elder.”

(5) *Culture*. Unquestionably society has affirmed the leadership gifts and roles of women and the feminist movement in particular has promoted the full equality of women in service and leadership. Ironically, as I will also show below, this movement, though sometimes strident and politicized, actually stems from the dignity given to women by the revolutionary life of the first Christians, as it is demonstrated in such historical surveys as E.H. Oliver, *The Social Achievements of the Christian Church* (Regent reprint) and Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). The church has a long way to go to “catch up” to the first century church.

### **The Scriptural Witness**

It is essential not to make the only basis of judgment on the issue from the three corrective passages in Paul’s correspondence: 1 Corinthians 11:1-16; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40; 1 Timothy 2:8-15. In order to gain a fully scriptural view of the place of women in the church the entire Word of God must be explored from Genesis to Revelation. But to start with the three pivotal passages:

*1 Corinthians 11:1-16*. This is a highly corrective passage, where Paul is dealing with freedom gone wild. Women in Corinth, finding new life in Christ through the Spirit, were denying that their marriage meant anything now that they were “eschatological” (end times) Spirit people. This is the issue of “head covering” since the veil or hair let down (we are not sure which is was) was a cultural sign of right relationship with a man. Paul deals with this by means of a number of arguments: cosmic, conventional (what society accepts) and creational. The heart of it is verse 3. Here Paul does not propose a chain of command: God is over Christ who is over the man who is over the women. Rather he carefully compares three kinds of relationships and says they are parallel: The God-Christ relationship is like the Christ-humankind (man) relationship which is like the man-woman relationship. In Paul’s correspondence he sometimes uses “head” when referring to Christ’s rule over all creation as authority over (like the chief of a tribe), and at other times uses “head” to mean source (like the head of a stream – its source). In this passage it seems he is using head as source. Then after arguing for a continuation of gender-related relationships he turns his argument on its head by noting that every man comes from a woman, thus proposing interdependence and limiting what could be otherwise seen as a simple authority role of men over women.

*1 Corinthians 14: 26-40*. Here again Paul is correcting an abuse. Apparently women were dominating the meeting either by insisting that only they had the right discernment of prophecies or commandeering the meeting with their own prophecies. Paul shuts them down completely here insisting that they consult their husbands at home rather than dominating them and other men in the meeting. “Did the word of God originate with you?” (14:36) indicates the strength of Paul’s concern over the dominance of the women in this congregation. As with the 1 Corinthians 11 passage there is a timeless truth in this corrective passage, namely that there is an order and distinctiveness of male and female contributions to the common life of Christians.

*1 Timothy 2:8-15.* Once again we have Paul dealing with a problem in the church. The men were wrangling and fighting, something men are inclined to do. Paul tells them to lift up holy hands in prayer “without anger or disputing.” The women were to dress modestly and to “learn in quietness and full submission,” again alluding to something women were inclined to do. Then he says: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” In this case Paul was shutting down women’s ministry completely (since the “and” in Greek implies something like a period). Women were not to teach anyone, not even women and children. Nor were women to have “authority” over a man. The Greek word for “authority” here is used nowhere else (*authentuo*). It means “bludgeoning” or “suppressing.” Women were not to suppress men. In passing one could argue from Scripture that men are not to suppress women! Why did Paul shut down women’s ministry completely in Ephesus? The reason is found in 2 Timothy where we learn that it was the women of the church that were inviting in the false teachers that were perverting the life of the church (2 Timothy 3:6-9). In 1 Timothy 2:3-14 Paul refers to the Garden of Eden not to propose that women will always be the first to be deceived but because this situation in Ephesus is a replay of the scene in the Garden of Eden where the woman was the first to be deceived. Women will experience their full salvation in being women (not by their bearing children) rather than pretending that they are neutered in Christ or even made manly. Paul here notes one of the three prepositions that indicate that there is a difference and a priority of male in relation to female: woman was made “after” the man (2:13). In 1 Corinthians she was made “for” the man (1 Cor 11:9) and “from” the man (1 Cor 11:8). These prepositions, referring obviously to the Genesis account to which we will turn shortly, indicate that there is a creational difference, indeed same kind of priority in the male-female relationship that is not merely the result of sin (Gen 3:16). Whether this priority is a matter of rule is a subject we will take up.

*Genesis 1-2.* In chapter 1 both male and female are made in the image of God: not males alone, not females alone, but humankind as a social relational being (resembling the Triune God) living in a co-humanity. In chapter 2:18 the first negative word of judgment by God in Scripture is a rejection of man’s solitariness: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” It is the male that cannot cope alone. So God makes a “helper suitable for him.” The Hebrew phrase here means “equal and adequate to himself.” Nothing of subordination is implied. Even the word “helper” does not mean an inferior. The word is used frequently for God himself.

*Genesis 3.* When sin entered the human family the result was the politicization of the sexes. Both Adam and Eve are help responsible for their sin, their attempt to live autonomously, contrary to the teaching that the husband is responsible for the wife’s spirituality. God comes to each and makes each accountable. But the result of the sin was the transformation of the side-by-side relationship (before sin) to an over-and-under relationship. “[Your husband] will rule over you” (3:16). Yet, “your desire will be for your husband.” This “desire” is not a sexual longing or even a longing for companionship but an evil desire to overpower the husband. This word is also used in Genesis 4:7 where Cain is about to murder Abel and God declares this “desire” is trying to overmaster Cain.

Rule and revolt are the marks of sin. This leads so often to a covert attempt to control on the part of women as witnessed in the well-known phrase, “My husband is the head but I am the neck and I can turn the head anyway I like.” Sadly, most evangelicals world-wide, have taken the curse as God’s will for the relationship of the sexes even though the coming of Christ and the outpourings of the Holy Spirit has brought about a new thing – the mutual submission of men and women (Eph 5:21). The fact that the “desire” and “rule” issues keep company with pain in childbirth suggest that it is punitive and not God’s highest desire for male-female relationships.

*Exodus 15:20-21.* Miriam was both a prophetess and a worship leader for the congregation of Israel.

*Exodus 19:6.* God’s intention is that the whole nation is to be a priest.

*Leviticus 10:8-11.* The priests were made and combined ruling and teaching (see also Deut 18:8, 11; Hag 2:10-12; Mal 2:6).

*Numbers 30:9.* The divorced woman or widow has responsibility independent of any relationship with a man.

*Numbers 30:12.* A husband can nullify his wife’s oath under certain circumstances.

*Judges 4:4.* Deborah was both a prophetess and a leader of Israel. Though a married woman, she held “court”, made leadership decisions and led worship.

*Proverbs 31:10-31* This extraordinary woman was obviously a leader and is commended for her enterprise.

*The Gospels.* Though the core twelve were men, Jesus included women in the traveling discipleship community and they supplied his needs from their own funds (Luke 8:3). Jesus never spoke disparagingly of women or suggested that they were clearly subordinate to men or their husbands. Women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. The Lord trusted his first evangelistic witness after his resurrection to a woman (Jn 20:18).

*Acts 2:17-18.* Fulfilling Joel’s prophecy on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit’s descent on all people, male and female, young and old, universalizes ministry, especially that all people, including women are able to prophecy. (Prophecy is speaking God’s word with immediacy and directness). There is, now that the “end” has come not only a priesthood of all believers, but the prophethood of all people as well as the princely rule of all people. There is no scriptural reason to affirm, as some do, that “sign gifts” and “ministry gifts” ceased with the apostolic era. (see George Mallone, *Those Controversial Gifts*)

*Acts 2:42.* Women were taught *in the church*. The church has left the pattern of the rabbis (with the women silent behind the screen but being taught by their husbands at home) for the pattern of Jesus.

*Acts 18:26.* Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned six times in the New Testament and on four occasions the wife's name is given first. She helps instruct (teach) Appolos in "the way" more excellently, though admittedly not in a full church context.

*Acts 21:9.* Philip had four unmarried daughters with the gift of prophecy.

*Romans 16.* Paul's greetings refer to the nineteen men and ten women known to him. Tryphena and Tryphosa ("Dainty" and "Delicate") and Persis are all said to "labor in the Lord," a favorite Pauline word for the Christian ministry. Junia was a female name and is mentioned as being an apostle. The fourth century commentator, John Chrysostom, believed that she was a female apostle and noted how great here devotion must have been that she was an apostle "even though she was a women." Phoebe was not only called a deacon (masculine – quite probably an officer) but *prostasis*, a word which means "protectress," "patroness," or "helper." Women played a key role in the early church and it is hard to imagine that when "leading women" followed Paul (Acts 17:4, 12) they adopted silence and ceased to give some kind of leadership.

*1 Corinthians 11.2-16.* This is a carefully balanced statement about the conditions under which women would publicly contribute to the church. Women were allowed to pray and prophesy (verbal exhortation and admonition) with full apostolic authority but were to do so without casting off their femininity or the mark of their marital status (i.e. their head-covering). Here Paul uses the word for authority (*exousia*) in 11:10 when he says "the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head," which means that she does have her own authority to minister when she is in right relationship to her man. There is in the contemporary Western world no appropriate symbols of masculinity and femininity like those which existed in the first century.

*1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4:10-11.* All the Spirit gifts of ministry given to the body are describes without any reference to certain "gracious bestowings" (that is what they are) being reserved for men, even the gifts of "leadership," "administration" or "pastor-teachers."

*Galatians 3:28.* There is "neither male nor female" in Christ Jesus does not mean the neutering of life and leadership under the New Covenant but, as Paul goes on to say, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The unity we have in Christ is not the obliteration of distinctions (any more than with "Jew" nor "Greek") but unity through diversity, the same argument Paul has in 1 Corinthians 12: diverse Spirit gifts are needed for the unity of the body. The church is more one because of diversity rather than in spite of it.

*Philippians s 4:2-3.* Euodias and Syntyche are called by Paul not only "fellow workers" but also "members of the same team with me" (*sunath lountes*).

*1 Timothy 3.* Qualifications for an overseer (or bishop-*episcopus*) are given with a view to male leadership. “Husband of one wife” (3:2) refers primarily to his marital fidelity (literally a “one woman man”). Women are not prohibited by Paul in being elders but this is an argument from silence. The “women” (3:11) are more probably female deacons rather than “the deacon’s wives” for the following reasons: (1) If these are deacons’ wives why is there no mention of the overseers’ wives? (2) The word “likewise” puts the women in parallel with the deacons who are parallel with the overseers. (3) The absence of a possessive where the statement “their women” would have been decisive, but this is significantly absent.

*Titus 1:5-9.* The qualifications for eldership (*prebuteros*) repeat the “husband of one wife” criterion of 1 Timothy 3, assuming again male leadership.

### **Timeless Truths**

Summarizing the timeless truths mined from these passages:

1. There are differences between men and women that are entrenched in creation and not to be obliterated by church order.
2. That Christ brings complete liberation and freedom to men and women.
3. That some form of male leadership continues with the New Testament though under the new age of the Spirit this may mean partnership rather than subordination of women in leadership.
4. That under the Old Testament there are occasional examples of women in ministry and leadership because, under the Old Covenant, the Spirit was not universally given but was selective, temporary and impersonal. Under the New Covenant the Spirit was universal, permanent and personal.
5. That a new kind of authority is to be expressed in church life. Old testament leadership was clearly a rule with power and authority as few knew the Lord in a personal way or had His Spirit in their hearts (Jer 31:33-34). But under the New Testament all believers have the Word and Spirit. In Hebrews 13:17 the writer exhorts God’s people to obey their leaders and to submit to (or defer to) to them. The NIV says “submit to their authority” but the last three words are significantly missing in the original. In Titus 2:15 Paul tells Timothy to “encourage and rebuke with all authority.” The word he uses here (*epitage*) means “in accordance with the command you have” or “with all impressiveness”. The usual word for “authority” (*exousia*) is used almost exclusively for the power and right of Jesus to decide and act, and for the privileges of the apostles. It is never used for the right of one Christian to make decisions for another or to have power over them. Nothing like a chain of command is implied or supported by the Scriptures. In the New Testament “head” is never used for church leaders and is used exclusively for the Lord of the Church and for husbands. (Consult chapter 8 “The Problem of Headship” in R. Paul Stevens, *Married for Good*.)
6. That the texts of Scripture are ambiguous on whether women should be or were leaders (elders, overseers, deacons or apostles). Nevertheless the biblical theology of the Holy Spirit affirms that in this new age of the Spirit there is a universalizing

of ministry, including the ministry of leadership. If God the Holy Spirit has gifted and anointed women for leadership who are we to deny them this ministry? But we should do this not by neutering leadership (feminizing the men or making the women masculine) but in the context of full partnership, each bringing to leadership the distinctiveness of their gender. In leadership women are better than men in some dimensions of leadership, as much secular research has shown. Full partnership will only enhance a leadership group, especially elders who are called upon to give leadership in three areas: doctrine (to make certain that true teaching is given), discipline and direction.

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