

10 Questions about women's ministry

1. Should a woman keep silent in church?

The NT's injunction that women should not speak/keep silent (1Cor.14.34 + 1 Tim.2.12) clearly did not mean that they should not speak at all because elsewhere Paul assumes they will prophesy and pray (1 Cor. 11.5 and 1 Tim 2.9 implied). Joel's prophecy fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2.17) said that "your *daughters* shall prophesy" and clearly there were women waiting for the Spirit (Acts 1.14) and it says they "were all together" (2.1) and that "they were *all* filled with the Spirit and spoke in other tongues" .

2. Can a woman teach in church?

2.1 In Titus 2.4-5, Paul talks about the older women teaching the younger women and so both speaking publicly and also teaching were acceptable in the early church.

2.2 But, you may say, it was one thing to teach other women but surely not men. What about the key verses in 1 Tim 2.11-15? Absolutely, they are key verses and a difficult ones and worth reciting in full here:

NIV A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety".

2.3 Context:

Perhaps it can only be understood in the context of the times. Paul was writing to Timothy in Ephesus. This was a place of...

2.3.1 the famous cult of Artemis (Acts 19.28f). In Greek idol worship the priestess was effectively a prostitute. In Greek society the "heterai" were public escorts for men while the women and concubines stayed at home. The heterai were expensive and could no doubt adorn themselves lavishly and were also allowed to speak in public. In contrast, Jewish women were not allowed to speak in public, were not educated (and so probably wouldn't want to anyway) and needed to have their heads covered according to the Talmud or there was a case for divorce.

These different cultures coming together in the church account for the detailed descriptions about how a woman should dress (note there are differences which you would expect from two different places and letters (1 Cor. & 1 Tim.) probably written 10 years apart).

2.3.2 Since Jewish women were not taught the Torah it would be unthinkable in Judaism for a woman to teach. (One rabbi said of teaching a woman "I would rather teach my dog than a woman"). In the synagogue, women were kept behind a screen on a first floor balcony while the men got on with listening to the Word of God and learning to understand it (and not being distracted by the beauty of the women)!

2.3.3 Not surprisingly we find in 1 Cor.14.34 Paul's injunction that a woman should not speak (i.e. disrupt proceedings by asking questions because they didn't understand or chatter among themselves because they were bored), but rather ask their husbands their questions at home.

2.3.4 Ephesus was also a place of evident confusion of ideas and doctrines; – hence note the great part of both 1 and 2 Timothy that is devoted to correcting those who are getting into myths and controversies. Timothy is strongly urged to guard the truth (2 Tim1.13-15), prove himself a good teacher (1 Tim.4.6, 11, 6.2, 2 Tim2.14-18) and not to get tied up with irrelevant controversies (2 Tim.4.3).

2.3.5 The last thing Ephesus needed was untaught women teaching things when they were not properly taught themselves. The key thing in 1 Tim 2 is that a woman should learn in quietness and submission (v.11). This is the only actual injunction in the passage – i.e. a command that they should learn – a revolutionary idea for Jewish readers.

2.4 Secondly, the phrase used – “in quietness and submission” - is one that is used of a disciple.

You only became a disciple in this way if the intention was that you were going to teach other disciples yourself and so the implication is that women would then become teachers.

2.4.1 Paul was concerned with church order in 1 Tim. 2. (See vv 8-9 for different instructions to outwork this for men and women) as he was in 1 Cor. 14 (see v.40) and as such his own view (2 Tim2.12 “I do not permit...”) was that it would be out of order to have a woman teach in these circumstances.

2.4.2 However, he evidently did not consider women should never teach men because elsewhere we discover that in this very church at Ephesus he had left his co-workers Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18.19) who had instructed his fellow apostle Apollos in a better understanding of the Scriptures (18.26). It would have been a completely untenable position if Paul had said no woman should ever teach a man and also commend Priscilla and Aquila as his co-workers (Rom.16.3-4) when they were evidently teachers of the Word of God to an audience that included men. Indeed, from the placing of Priscilla's name first in 5 out of 7 mentions it suggests she was the dominant partner. Just as his instructions on hair attire are different in 1 Cor.14 from 1 Tim 2 so his view of the role of women in different situations is different.

2.5 But Paul says he does “not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man” so surely a woman should not preach or teach to a group where men are present? There are a number of things to note:

2.5.1 Firstly, the word used is a very unusual one. It is “authentein” instead of “exousia” and is the only time it is used in the Bible. It has the idea of domineering . There is nothing to suggest that it would be any more appropriate for a man to exercise “authentein” over others than a woman whether those subjugated were men or women.

2.5.2 Also, women in the New Testament clearly exercised public ministry. So we have Junia (not “Junias” – male assumed by the translators with their interpreter's hat on) who Paul

numbers among the apostles (Rom.16.7). Surely there is no more authoritative ministry to be exercised than that of an apostle. Also one could also argue that a woman exercising the ministry of a prophetess (1 Cor. 11.5 + Philip's daughters Acts 21.9) is exercising a great deal of authority over men and women alike.

2.5.3 Phoebe is a deacon (Rom.16.1) (normally translated deacon but here normally a "servant" (again because of the translator's interpreting blinkers). Also in 1 Tim 3.11 When Paul is talking about the qualifications for a deacon he goes on to talk about those for a deaconess. This can be translated a deacon's wife but is valid as a deaconess in her own right. This was a position of authority within the local church and it wasn't for some centuries after the Acts of the Apostles that this office was abandoned.

2.5.4 Once again in the context of the passage it is Paul's opinion that for the sake of good order in the Ephesian church women (like men) should not exercise domineering authority over men and who would dispute that? This does not disqualify forever and in every circumstance a Spirit-filled woman who is seeking the glory of God from being involved in the leadership of the church

2.6 But surely there is an argument that a woman is deceived more easily.....

2.6.1based upon what Paul says in verses 13-14 and is therefore not fit to teach. Bearing in mind Paul's eagerness and emphasis here to see women learn this could simply mean that Eve was deceived because she didn't learn properly.

It might even mean that Adam didn't teach her adequately and hence her being easily deceived by Satan. Certainly the New Testament does not emphasise the guilt of Eve in the original sin nearly as much as it lays the blame squarely at Adam's door (Rom. 5.12-14).

2.6.2 The argument that women are more easily deceived comes unstuck within 1 Timothy where Paul is lamenting those men who have gone astray (1 Tim.1.19-20; see also 2 Tim.2.17,4.14-15 +2.17) and by history where most heresies have been started by men led astray by deceiving demons (1 Tim.4.1).

2.6.3 Also if we are going to say that women are more easily deceived than men generally then surely we should not only stop them teaching men but also the more vulnerable such as other women and even more so – children. Paul has a great opportunity to stop this sort of behaviour in writing to Timothy as it is generally acknowledged on the basis of 2 Tim.1.5 that Timothy was brought to the Lord from his early years by his grandmother and mother who instructed him in the Scriptures (2 Tim.3.15).

2.7 Verse 15 of 1 Tim.2 regarding being saved by childbirth cannot mean what it appears to say.

Otherwise what would happen to women who could not bear children or are unmarried? The verse is still part of the parenthesis in Paul's discussion about Eve and more accurately should say "She [singular] will be saved through THE childbearing "[i.e. this is a noun not a verb, or "the birth of the child"]. What childbearing? – That of course of Mary bringing the Saviour to birth by whom all would be saved.

This links back to the promise in Genesis 3.15 that it was through the woman's seed that Satan's head would be bruised/crushed. This passage then reverts to the plural and Roger and Faith Forster suggest that as Mary's example encourages other women to bring forth God's word to the world "they" (all Eve's daughters) – will be vindicated if they (like men also) continue in love and faith.

3. Can a woman be a deacon, pastor or elder of a church?

Starting with deacons first, as highlighted by 1 Tim.3.8 -13, it is assumed that these will be men for the same reasons stated below concerning elders. However, V. 11 refers to "women" but in the NIV margin it says "*Possibly deacons' wives or women who are deacons*". From Rom.16.1 we receive confirmation that women could indeed become deacons when Paul says: "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae*".

In addition, in early church history women were often referred to as deacons and were known for their mercy ministry to the sick and poor.

It seems that it is easier for people to accept women in this more practical level of leadership - which is often thought of as "serving tables" as in Acts 6 - than what might be thought of as the top level of leadership - eldership/ being the Pastor.

Regarding elders/ overseers/ pastors, 1 Tim.3.1-7 and Titus 1.5-9 are the verses in view here. Reading the text at face value, elders/overseers are referred to in these verses solely as male and there is no suggestion that the main leaders responsible for the spiritual well-being of the church - and by implication the position that came to be known as "Pastor" - could be female.

One's first response is "of course not". Both Jewish and even Greek society was paternalistic and male dominated. The idea that a woman could in any way be equal to a man would be outrageous and the original mandate given to the man and the woman in Gen.1.26-28 had long been forgotten with the cursed position of women under male domination from Gen.3.16 long clung to by men of all cultures.

In addition, the absence of teaching Hebrew women to read and write would have kept them from possibly taking on this role at this stage when one of the principle elements of being an elder was that you could preach and teach (1 Tim.3.2 Titus 1.9; Acts 20.28-31). How could women do that when they had never been taught?

In contrast, Jesus commended women who wanted to learn (Luke 10.38-42) as did Paul (1 Tim.2.11). It might take some time before there were women who were as learned and as well qualified as men to teach and preach but the fact that they could not at this point was not their fault, it was just a fact of life.

People will argue that the Bible says, "a man" or "a husband" throughout these passages and so "man" it should be. A basic tenet of Biblical interpretation is to use a consistent approach. But there is a problem if you apply this literalistic approach consistently throughout the passage:

- 1 Tim.3.2 (and Tit.1.6) "*a husband of one wife*" - so taking this literally, does this mean an elder must be married? Does it mean he must not have been married before and if his first wife has died he must not have remarried?

- 1 Tim.3.4 (and Tit.1.6) speaks about him *“keeping his children under control with all dignity”*. Again, taking the strict literalist approach, does this mean being a married man is not enough he must have children? What if he has one child but not children (plural)? Does that disqualify him?

Few churches are willing to apply this type of literalist approach consistently to the passages which would probably disqualify some of their excellent elders who are for example, single or have remarried after the death of a former wife.

It seems to me to make more sense to understand these passages as saying that elders must live godly lives that are above reproach and the things mentioned above are examples of what that means. In our totally different Western society where women have as much opportunity and learning as men and equality between the sexes is taken for granted, there seems no reason to disqualify them from office simply because it says “man”, not “man or woman” or because it says “husband” instead of “spouse”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the past 30 years, some very conservative evangelical-reformed groups¹ have moved a long way in accommodating women’s ministry where before women were not allowed to lead anything with men present. Now women can lead meetings, worship, and, despite 1 Tim.2.12, even preach to a mixed congregation of men and women. However, these churches still falter when it comes to these verses about eldership saying that this is the province of men only. This seems to be logically inconsistent and possibly lacking courage to embrace the implications of allowing these other relaxations. If they falter about eldership because the elder is to rule / exercise authority, one has to ask: What is more authoritative than proclaiming the Lord’s Word to His church on a Sunday? So why not allow them to exercise authority in the elders’ meeting also? That is apart from the fact that a feminine perspective on matters discussed and decided will add a more completely human approach to the matters before them.

4. Was woman created to reflect the image of God, or was it only man?

Genesis is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly it says that we were made in the image of God “male and female He created them” (Gen.1.27). In other words both equally express the image of God although we all know that men and women have different common characteristics and we pull each other’s leg about these but they are reflections of the nature of God. One is not better or superior than the other. Both are equal but different. Physically men and women are different which in turn will affect the roles that they each carry out e.g. within a marriage. But this doesn’t mean that within each relationship the balance of those different roles will themselves be different depending on the particular gifts of each party within the marriage.

5. What does it mean for man to be head of the woman?

Genesis also sets out what the original intention was for man and woman. They were together to rule over the world and the animals (1.28). This was a command given to them jointly. It was the fall that changed things. Two very important things changed at that moment. Firstly, it says that Satan and woman would be at war from then on (Gen.3.15) and secondly, that man would dominate woman (3.16b)

¹ For example: *New Frontiers International*

Looked at through that lens one could look at the way women have suffered throughout history in many, many ways and recognise that something strange has been going on. There has been a concerted and unspoken campaign against women. Who does this come from? From Satan who knew that through the woman's seed what he had stolen from her on the day of the fall would be won back from him through her child, the Lord Jesus. Not surprisingly he has hated her with all he has and has wanted to do her down and degrade her in every way he possibly can.

Unfortunately, man has often proved an only too willing ally to Satan in achieving this. And so through the curse at the fall he has dominated, degraded and abused womankind in ways that have run through history and have largely not abated today.

Talk of headship, in e.g. 1 Corinthians 11 and elsewhere, needs to be understood not so much from the angle of male domination as male sourcing/releasing of the woman and in a spirit of humility and service. Hence the word used in chapter 11 can equally mean "source" as at the head of a river (and substituting that word for head each time it occurs in that chapter seems to make more sense). Ephesians 5 talks of mutual submission of husband and wife and of the husband loving the wife as Christ loved the church – i.e. not lording it over her. Her submission to such love would only be natural as is ours to the poured out love of Christ for us on the Cross.

It is only through the redemption won by Jesus on the Cross creating "one new man" where there is no Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female (Gal.3.28) that the original order can be restored so that man and woman are equal – but distinctively different – partners, each bringing their own strengths to any situation.

Some point out that the Galatian passage relates to mankind's standing before God following the Cross – i.e. a level playing field for all people and both sexes – rather than being anything to do with their role. This is right but I am not advocating the same role to each, and without being sexist it is clear men and women frequently have inherently different characteristics. However, I am suggesting that gifting is not limited by gender. It is "person-specific" rather than "gender-specific" and crosses over the sexes so either men or women can be prophets or teachers or pastors or even have the gift of leadership (Rom.12.8).

Are we just taking on the prevailing culture of our times in re-interpreting woman's role? No, we are aware of feminism and that in itself is a reaction to the way women have been treated as a result of the curse. It is an overreaction but it does highlight an injustice that has existed through the generations. The Gospel is about justice. Dare I say that there was a limit to what Jesus could do in three short years of ministry? Or perhaps I should say He limited Himself to the most important things, the salvation of mankind, and inserting the leaven of the kingdom that could in fullness of time work out in a nation or a world that was influenced by it, and effect even social injustices. So we see that Christians were used by God to bring an official end to slavery even though neither Jesus nor Paul attempted directly to stop this evil. So for the injustices against women, leaven was inserted in a day when women were appallingly treated so that those brave enough to embrace it might see them liberated through the Gospel.

6. Does the church's role for women reflect Jesus attitude to women?

Jesus attitude towards women. In a day when women were at worst treated as chattel and, at best, as a second class human being His attitude was unique and revolutionary. Jesus treated men and women with

equal respect and tenderness in a way that no one had seen before. He clearly wanted to affirm that they were as precious, important, valuable and could use their gifts as meaningfully as a man.

Perhaps most significantly of all are two examples of this. The first is that salvation came into the world through a young woman, Mary, who was completely willing for God to use her in whatever way He wanted to (Lk.1.38) despite the shame and misunderstanding that would result in that. Without her Jesus would not have been born.

Secondly, God entrusted the message of the resurrection firstly to women. In the Law, the testimony of a woman was not acceptable evidence. Yet God, in His wisdom, and maybe to humble proud man, chose a group of women and more particularly, Mary Magdalene, a woman of very questionable past (Mk.16.9) to be what the early church called “an apostle to the apostles” as she both believed and proclaimed the resurrection (Lk.24.10; John 20.18).

To this can be added the following as examples of the ways in which Jesus honoured women and showed His completely even-handed treatment of them:

1. 1/3rd of Jesus relationships mentioned in the Gospels are with women;
2. 54 different women are mentioned in His teaching and contacts;
3. He has women in his band of followers (Lk.8.2-3)
4. They support his work which he allows (Lk.8.3);
5. He allows them to touch him, the bleeding woman – shocking for a Rabbi (Mk 5.25-34); the sinful woman and the oil to his feet (Lk.7.36-50); Mary (Jn.12).
6. He talks with them (Jn.4) even when He knows they are sinners – 5 husbands;
7. He refuses to judge and treats them with tenderness (Jn.8.1-11)- adulteress;
8. He uses illustrations that involve women as much as men (e.g. Lk.15 Parable of the coin //parable of the Prodigal Father; Mt.25 Parable of Talents//10 Virgins; could mention too His references to the widow not letting go in prayer, 2 women at the well at Lord’s return, woman and leaven in the bread, reference to the Queen of Sheba and the widow’s mite.
9. He reveals who He really is to women – the woman at the well (Jn.4) who becomes an evangelist telling her whole town about the Saviour; Martha who confesses that He is the Christ (Jn.11.27);
10. Women were with the apostles as they waited to be clothed from on high with the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk.24.49 and Acts 1. 14) devoting themselves to prayer.
11. Jesus’ promise gift of the Spirit given at Pentecost was to sons and daughters (Joel 2.29 and Acts 2.17-18) not just to the men.

NB **He also does women’s work** – takes towel, cooks breakfast, plays with kids.

7. How were women used in the New Testament Church?

Paul’s references to individual women in the New Testament epistles showed he regarded them as able to have a public ministry. I have already referred to Priscilla as a teacher, Junia as an apostle and Phoebe as a deaconess. To these we should note the following:

Fellow Workers:

Priscilla in Rom 16.3-5. – the term is used of men such as her husband Aquila, Timothy (16.21), Apollos (1 Cor.3.6-9), Clement (Phil. 4.2-3) no differentiation is made .

Euodia & Syntache (Phil.4.2-3)

Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa & Persis are all called workers in Rom.16.1-16, a list of which 1/3rd are females.

1 Cor. 16. 15-16 uses two different words for workers and urges submission to them.

¹⁵ You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, ¹⁶ to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labours at it.

Generally thought that Stephanas = female but even if not, the implication is that female workers as named in Romans 16 should be submitted to just as male workers.

Church Leaders:

Nympha – (Col.4.15) “Nympha and the church in her house” (as with Prisc & Aq in Rom 16).

The lady of 2 John 1.1,5 & 13.

Pray-ers and Prophets - as in 1 Cor. 11.2-16

Equal Partners – Gal.3.28 *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* While this is to do with inheritance it shows that daughters can inherit as well as sons.

Other points to note:

1 Cor. 7 Rights of women within the marriage as well as men (vv. 3-5 sexual, vv. 12-16 re divorce).

Eph. 5 Husbands loving, serving and protecting wives – very revolutionary.

8. Are the gifts of the Spirit gender-related?

The Acts 2 fulfilment of Joel’s prophesy applied to both men and women as specifically stated (v.17). It should not be a surprise therefore that we find the gifts of the Spirit exercised by women in the New Testament (and indeed that these had frequently been foreshadowed in the Old Testament in individuals the same way that gifts of the Spirit were more generally foreshadowed in the OT).

Rom. 12 - Motivational Gifts

Prophecy: Anna (Lk.36-38); Philip’s daughters (Acts 21.9); (OT: Miriam (Ex.15.20); Deborah (Judges 4.4); Huldah (2 Chron.34.22-28); Isaiah’s wife (Is.8.3).

Service or helps: Rufus’s mother (Rom.16.13); Lydia (Acts 16.15); Priscilla (Acts 18.3)

Teaching: Priscilla (Acts 18.24-26); (NB in the OT - Deborah (Judges 4.5))

Encouragement: Elizabeth (Lk.1.41-45)

Giving: The women who ministered to Jesus (Lk.8.1-3); The Widow’s mite (Mk.12.42-3)

Leadership: Junia (Rom16.); Phoebe (Rom. 16.2); Priscilla (Acts.18). (NB in the OT Miriam (Micah 6.4); Deborah (Judges 4.4))

Showing mercy: Dorcas (Acts9.39)

1 Cor 12 - Manifestational Gifts

Tongues + prophesy at Pentecost (Acts 1.14; 2.4;2.17-18)

Healing, casting our demons (Mk.16) “those who believed” is inclusive pronoun.

Ephesians 4 - Ministry Gifts

Apostle Junia (Rom16.7)

Prophet Philip’s daughters (Acts 21.9). In the OT - Deborah (Judges 5.7+12);

Evangelist The woman at the well (Jn.4.28-30,39) ; Euodia + Syntyche (Phil.4.2) ;The great company of women (Ps.68.11)

Pastor/teacher Women’s deacons (1Tim 3.11); Older women (Tit.2.3-5)

9. Does the Old Testament shed any light on women’s role of leading/teaching?

Despite the fall and the curse falling on women and the general low position that women have had to endure through the generations the Old Testament gives some clues as to how things did not have to be that way. The OT was a foreshadowing of the NT and so perhaps, just as other things only saw their complete fulfilment in Christ so the blossoming of the role of women in the NT only found full expression here too. Here are some examples.

1. **Sarah** = “chieftainess/female ruler” or princess – not daughter of a prince but a princess in her own right. Sarai = my princess// Sarah = “the princess” i.e. God strengthened her authority by changing her name.
 - She is referred to as one of the “anointed ones” (1 Chron.16.22/Ps. 105.15 Gen 20.6-7).
 - Abraham told to obey her – Gen.21.12 “But God said to him, Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. **Listen to whatever Sarah tells you**, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned”. Same word used as for Abraham obeying God in Gen.22.18.

2. **Miriam** - a prophet
 - Micah 6.4 Named as a leader alongside Moses and Aaron
 - Nos.12 God disciplines her v. severely when she criticises Moses. As a father disciplines a child (Heb.12.6) – doesn’t just wipe her out.

3. **Deborah** – A Judge – Judges 4.4 “shaphat” same word 20x in the book.
 - She sat in the magisterial seat between Ramah and Bethel (4.5)
 - “sent and summoned Barak” (v.6)
 - “if you go with me” says Barak = the assurance of God’s presence.

- Deborah & Barak's song "That the leaders..." Leaders" = feminine.

4. *Huldah* – the prophetess

- 2 Chron.34.22f delivers the word of the Lord to King Josiah.
- Catherine Booth says in "Female Ministry" her answer to the king "does not betray anything of that trembling diffidence & abject servility which some people think should characterise the ministry of women".

5. "The Strong Woman"

- Ruth 3.11 NASB "a woman of excellence" NIV "a noble woman"
Pr. 31.10 NASB "an excellent wife" NIV "of noble character".
- "chayil" 242 x in OT + in >200 is translated "army" "war" "host" "forces" "might" "power" etc. also "able" "worthy" "wealthy". The remaining 2 x is about women when = "excellent", "noble" or "virtuous".
- Pr.31.10 in Septuagint = "A masculine woman who can find?"
- Pr.31.10 in Syriac = "A strong, powerful, virile woman who can find?"
- The strong woman in the OT was recognised and admired.

NB: Is 3.12 "Children oppress my people and women rule over them" = v. questionable translation. Septuagint says: "As for my people, tax gatherers glean them and exacters rule over them" – more consistent with the context of Syrian oppression.

CONCLUSION

If one reads a few texts in isolation from the whole of Scripture it is possible to come up with this conclusion: women are really not as good as men, they should keep quiet, have children, do what their husbands tell them, look pretty but keep out of man's way as it is man who will do the really important things.

This does not sit comfortably either with

- the revelation of God's original intention for man and woman;
- the hints through the OT that there could be more for women than the roles imposed by men;
- the elevation of the status of womankind through the ministry of Jesus to one that was equal to man;
- and the possibility of using their gifts in meaningful and equal ways to man that is revealed in the Acts of the Apostles and generally in the letters of Paul.

That is not to try to make women more masculine. Women bring their own beautiful ways to the gifts they are endowed with; - but it is to recognise that God can give them the same gifts as a man to be used in love and humility for the Body of Christ and the salvation of a world that does not know Jesus.

To deny this means that the devil's war against womankind announced at the Fall gains a great advantage and more than half the Christian workforce is relegated to the side lines while the church flounders and a world goes merrily on its way to hell.