

## Women in Ministry

**Biblical narrative:** There is a wide diversity of texts in Scripture as it relates to the topic of men, women, and leadership. There are complexities that must be worked through, however, tracing the biblical narrative from start to finish can be helpful.

### - Creation

- In Genesis chapter one it says, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'". The Hebrew word for "mankind" is a collective term for human beings, not restricted to one gender or another (unless context shows otherwise, and in this case, it doesn't). We immediately see that the fundamental aspect of human beings is that they are created in the image of God (male and female). With this as the foundation, there is nothing in the creation narrative to show that the nature or function of women is that they are to be in subordination to men.
  - "Here [men and women] are not related as differentiated beings in terms of status or function. Both are fashioned in the image of God; not Adam, then Eve, but both together reflect God. Both are blessed and are given the responsibility of ruling the earth. Both are given the fruit of the earth for food and enjoyment. While they are distinguished according to two types, male and female, nothing in Genesis 1 distinguishes the two in their God-given identity, calling, and relationship to other parts of creation. If all we knew of creation came from this chapter, we would conceive of man and woman as equals, partners, and co-rulers on earth as the image of God. There is no statement of first-made privilege, headship, or gender roles." (Tell Her Story by Nijay K. Gupta)
- In Genesis chapter two, the narrative is told from a different vantage point. This includes the creation of man followed by the statement, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an *ezer kenegdo* for him." This is sometimes translated as "helper suitable," but this can often paint the incorrect picture. "Helper" can indicate someone of lesser status or power, but this is not what the Hebrew word *ezer* truly means. This word refers to an ally, an essential other, who comes to resolve a problem. In fact, this term most often refers to God in the biblical narrative when He comes to save His people. The second term (*kenegdo*) means "opposite of" and "different from". It is a word that holds the tension of similar but different. Therefore, a more straightforward translation could read, "It is not good for the human to be alone; I will make an essential ally who is both like and unlike him."
- There is nothing in either of these narratives that represents women as subordinate to men or carrying out a lesser role in God's plan.

### - The Fall

- When God's good plan is corrupted, we see that man and woman are held equally accountable for their disobedience and lack of trust. We also immediately see that part of the brokenness that enters the picture takes place between the harmonious union of man and woman shown in Genesis 1-2. We see ideas like the man "ruling over" the woman coming into play. It's important to note that this is shown as a consequence of the fall, not part of

God's good, created order. God is not ordering things to be this way, but rather showing the mess that will ensue as a result of their disobedience. We know this because the Hebrew verb for "rule" in this passage means absolute authority over another. This was and is never included within God's idea of the relationship between man and woman. The two are actually called to rule together in harmony, but God knows His design will be distorted.

- "The emphasis here is on the terrible effects of sin, and the destruction of a harmonious relationship that once existed. In its place comes a harmful struggle of wills." (Evidence for Equality by Richard Hess)
- Despite the effects and distortion of sin, we still see God using females as leaders within the Old Testament narrative.
  - Deborah was a judge over Israel (and the most esteemed of them). This meant that the leader of Israel at one point in its history was a female.
  - Huldah was a notable prophet, and Miriam and Isaiah's wife are also active in prophetic roles throughout the narrative. This would've meant that these females were leading in an era with the likes of Moses, Josiah, Jeremiah, etc.

## - **Redemption**

- We believe that redemption ultimately comes through the life, teachings, and work of Messiah Jesus. Therefore, the question must be asked, "How did Jesus relate to women? Did He push a hierarchy mindset between the two genders?" It doesn't take a lot of study before you realize Jesus' view and treatment of women was radical and revolutionary in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century world. Here are a few examples:
  - There are many women (named and not named) that are shown to be disciples of Jesus. They follow Him, talk to Him, sit at His feet... all of this is "disciple" behavior. For a Jewish rabbi to have female disciples in this day would've been beyond innovative.
  - On one occasion, Jesus is told that His family is waiting for Him outside and Scripture says, "Pointing to *his disciples*, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" Again, in His context, naming women amongst His disciples was groundbreaking.
  - The longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another individual took place with the Samaritan woman by the well, who was shocked by Jesus' countercultural willingness to speak to her directly.
  - The vast majority of scholars agree that there were women in the 72 sent out in Luke 10, as well as women in the audience for the Great Commission. This means Jesus' command to "make disciples", "baptize", and "teach" was presented to females.
  - Mary anoints Jesus with oil in Matthew 26, an act that Jesus treats with prophetic significance.
  - Two females are the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. This was an unthinkable choice given the fact that the testimony of a woman was often discarded from the Law Court in this era of history. And yet, Jesus uses these females to be the first to learn of and tell the good news of His resurrection.
- The overwhelming evidence is that Jesus did not distinguish between male and female when it came to value, discipleship, or even leadership. In fact, He was seen as a revolutionary force in female inclusion and empowerment.

- In the time of the early church, we continue to see radical treatment of women that went in line with the workings of Jesus.
  - Four females are named prophets (Acts 21:8-9).
  - Acts 9 uses the feminine form of the word disciple to describe Tabitha.
  - Paul offers instruction to females prophesying in the church (1 Corinthians 11:5).
  - Euodia and Syntyche are called "contenders for the gospel" alongside the Apostle Paul (Philippians 4:3).
  - There are a number of women (Nympha, Chloe, and Lydia) sent out by the Apostle Paul to various Greco-Roman cities to plant churches.
  - Priscilla and Aquilla are often mentioned in Paul's endeavors. When the couple is referenced within their occupation as tentmakers, Aquila (the male) is mentioned first (which would've gone in line with the common form of the day... men being mentioned first). However, when they're referenced within their ministry, the order is switched. This likely suggests that Priscilla was perceived as the primary participant within ministry work. Most notably, Priscilla's name comes first when they are instructing Apollos on the way of Jesus. This gives clear evidence that a female was used in a "teacher" role even within Paul's own ministry structure.
  - Phoebe was the person responsible for transporting the letter to the church at Rome. This was significant because the carrier was typically responsible for reading the letter aloud and answering any questions on it from the intended audience. This means that a female was likely the first person to teach and answer questions on the theologically dense book of Romans. Additionally, Phoebe is referred to as a *diakonos* (minister or deacon), which is a term applied in other places to Paul and even Jesus Himself. This clearly shows that Paul viewed females as honorable and authoritative.
  - Paul personally greets almost as many women as men in the book of Romans, most of which he greets as ministry colleagues ("coworkers"). Among them was a woman named Junia who was said to be, "outstanding among the apostles". This shows that Paul even viewed a female within the role of apostle.
- This means that women in the New Testament were seen within all functions of the ministry (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher).
  - "Maleness and femaleness, in and of themselves, neither privilege nor curtail one's ability to be used to advance the kingdom, or to glorify God in any dimension of ministry... The sexual differences that exist between men and women do not justify granting men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority that are not shared by women. Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy based solely on sexual difference." (Ronald Pierce, Cynthia Westfall, and Christa McKirland)

**Paul's teachings:** Although we see Paul viewing and treating women as respectable leaders in his ministry, we do also see several texts that appear to push the other way. What's going on in these scenarios?

- **1 Corinthians 14:34-35**

- A few pieces of context are important to note. First off, this chapter includes several instructions around being "silent" to ensure there isn't chaos within the church gathering (someone speaking in tongues without an interpreter, someone interrupting a prophet, more than a few prophets speaking at once, etc.). This shows that Paul isn't simply trying to demean women, but a greater context is in play. We also know this because just a few chapters before this Paul speaks affirmatively about women "praying" and "prophesying" within the church. This is not "remaining silent" in the sense that we might think, so something else must be going on. Two realistic possibilities are available:
  - Ancient Mediterranean protocol typically disapproved of a woman addressing a man that was not related to her. Historical evidence within 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth shows that it would've been scandalous, even offensive, for a woman to do this. This was a very specific cultural factor in play. Therefore, if Paul encouraged a female to teach or even speak to a male outside of her family in this context, it could've led to danger and harm to the individual, as well as tarnished the witness of the Church.
  - Unfortunately, women in this culture and context were often unlearned and illiterate (to no fault of their own). They had less access to education and were given far less opportunities to expand beyond fundamental levels. This means that, within the congregation, unhelpful or disruptive questions could've been occurring within the Corinthian church from their less-educated constituents. In order to restore order, Paul instructs them to take these questions home where they can be dealt with in a more appropriate context, ensuring the greater congregation isn't impacted as a result. While this sounds extremely oppressive to our modern sensibilities, this would've actually been radically progressive in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century world (allowing women to openly ask questions was not common form).
- The evidence suggests that Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 is not a universal instruction, but something that was specific to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinthian context.

- **1 Timothy 2:11-12**

- This is a letter from Paul to his protégé Timothy. Timothy is a pastor within the community of Ephesus. One of the main purposes for this letter is to warn Timothy of false teaching within his context. This particular community was inundated with the worship of Artemis, a Greek goddess. She was considered a guardian of female virginity and lauded females as being superior to men. Within this context, Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man." The Greek word for "authority" is extremely rare and not used in any other New Testament passage. If Paul were simply talking about the general idea of exercising authority, he had plenty of other words he could've chosen. This word seems to point to a particular kind of authority that is domineering, manipulative, and power-hungry. It seems likely that within this context Paul is forbidding women from teaching because they are teaching the values of Artemis (false teaching) and doing so in a way that was disrespectful (domineering and manipulative).
- Paul was dealing with a whole cobweb of gender wars going on in this specific context. He had part of the culture that was oppressing women. He had part of the culture that was empowering women (even in some unhealthy ways; saying they were superior to men). For his goal of sound

teaching and order within the assembly to be possible, this was his instruction to the Ephesian community.

- **1 Timothy 3:1-7 & Titus 1:6-9**

- These two passages lay out clear qualifications for serving in the role of elder or overseer. While Paul was writing to a diverse audience, the qualifications remain very consistent (which is important for us to consider in the nomination of eldership). The question remains, "Are women disqualified from serving within this role or office?"
  - Despite the prevalence of male pronouns in our English translations, the original Greek texts contain no male pronouns. The key phrase here is "faithful to his wife," which clearly denotes a specific gender discrepancy. While the interpretation of this can go in a number of directions, our conviction is that this inclusion does not prohibit women from eldership. Instead, it contextually assumes that men will typically fulfill this role in Ephesus and Crete, the places to which these letters are being sent. The fact that Paul assumes most of these roles will be filled by men in these contexts is fair, considering the inequalities in education and formal training.
    - Consider this illustration: "Imagine this: a golf club with a sign by the course that says, 'Golfers must have their facial hair properly groomed.' This statement presumes relevance for the vast majority of golfers (who are men), but by itself it does not prohibit women from golfing." (Tell Her Story by Nijay Gupta)
  - Therefore, we believe that Paul's phrase here is reflective of the majority group to whom he's writing, not exclusive of the minority. In fact, if Paul wanted to clearly restrict women from this or any other office, these two letters would've been the place to do it. Instead, Paul does not take this step but rather speaks to the majority audience.

**Final Statement:** While there are difficult passages within the New Testament on this topic, bringing the cultural context into play brings clarity as to what Paul is doing in each specific instance. Paul is living in a world that is extremely male-dominated and can only do so much to buck the trend. While we would like Paul to come directly out and say, "Women are equals, get it straight," that simply wouldn't have been effective at this time. The same could be said for his instructions on slavery. Often the question is asked, "Why doesn't Paul just come out and call slavery wrong?" The simple answer is that he's giving instructions to a people who are living in a distorted reality (as we all are). He must guide them in a way that is both subversive and possible. While we often want Paul (and Jesus) to speak out more directly, we must recognize that the ground they laid of equality and justice is what has shifted the dynamics over the centuries. Their teachings laid the foundation for the freedom of slaves, female empowerment, and more. Often times, humans simply take far too long to realize greater truth and apply it.

**Bridge Church stance:** We believe that women have the right to participate in all church dealings including leadership, eldership, and speaking to all crowds. We believe that the Bible teaches equality of male and female, and this should be represented in the structure and functions of the church. Gender differences are a good gift of God's grace to bring about His image in a full nature, but we do not believe this should lead to division in the Church or a separation of power and influence. In fact, both genders being represented in

leadership only leads to a healthier church, as all audiences are represented and can be led appropriately.

Here's a clip of this being discussed in a Sunday lesson (timestamp 26:25-34-40): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8F\\_tCd-Ocmk&t=13s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8F_tCd-Ocmk&t=13s)