

The Role of Women in the Church

Introduction: As our society focuses on equality for women in society, concern over this issue is being raised in the church too. Is the woman's role in the church a cultural issue, a biblical issue or a theological issue? Can there be any real answers from a fair and accurate interpretation of the Word of God or is it really a very fuzzy issue that is open to numerous interpretations and therefore cannot be known with certainty? Is it possible to set aside bias and look objectively at the key passages within their historical/cultural setting as well as within the context of the specific writing?

Our elders looked at this subject from the widest possible perspective starting with Genesis, and then narrowing it down to specific passages of Scripture dealing with the NT church.

Let's begin at the beginning.

Creation:

Genesis 1:26-31 A general account of the creation of the human race

Notice in verse 27 Adam is used as a general term for mankind, "So God created man (Adam) in his own image; God patterned them after himself; **male and female** he created them."

This passage is not overly detailed however and we see Adam and Eve, though neither of them is named here, being commanded to be fruitful and multiply and to oversee the rest of creation.

Genesis 2:15-25 A more detailed account of the creation story

In this passage the Lord had created "man" specifically here only Adam and placed him in the Garden to care for it. The Lord gave a command directly to Adam about the fruit he was not to eat. God brought all the created animals before Adam and he named them. This states God gave Adam authority and responsibility before Eve was created. Then God created Eve, from Adam's side.

The Fall:

The Genesis Chapter 3 account of the first sin and its consequences are crucially important because one of the major NT passages that deal with a woman's role in the church allude back to this account as the grounds for the teaching.

Notice though, Adam was created first, though Adam heard directly from God the command not to eat, the serpent chose to address Eve. "The woman was convinced so she ate." "She also gave some to her husband who was with her."

When the Lord came to see them after their sin, He called to Adam 3:9. Then He also questioned Adam first 3:10-13. This clearly signifies Adam's responsibility for his action and failure to lead.

Redemption:

The issue here becomes, how much if any does the salvation of a person change the natural order of things? A key passage to consider at this juncture is **Galatians 3:28** *“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

What was Paul talking about when he addressed the Galatians? Does this one verse with a mighty stroke of the pen eliminate such passages as Ephesians 5:22-23, *“You wives will submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of his body, the church; he gave his life to be her Savior.”* Or does redemption not touch family roles, only roles in the church?

Even a casual reading of the verses in Galatians 3 leading up to verse 28 will show the context has nothing to do with life roles. The verse deals with one single issue and that is how people are saved. The issue faced the early church on reoccurring instances. Is salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone, or some mixture of faith and law? Can gentiles be saved in the same manner as a Jewish person can be saved? So, the apostle says, it doesn't matter who you are Jew, Gentile, slave, free, man or woman there is only one way and we are all one in Christ Jesus.

In other words there is equal access to salvation by grace to all people period. Putting more on this passage is to play fast and loose with the Scriptures, it just isn't in the text.

This raises the question of what exactly redemption removes from the fall and its consequences while still in this life.

Not the author of confusion:

The family roles are clear in Scripture. Some may call Paul a male chauvinist but he clearly says on a couple occasions the man is the head of the home, and the wife should place herself under his authority. See Ephesians 5:21-24 & Colossians 3:18-19. Peter concurs see 1 Peter 3:1-2.

The church is nothing more than an extension of family; it is made up of clusters of families. So, when Paul writes to Timothy to instruct the young pastor, *“I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon, so that if I can't come for a while, 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 support of the truth,”* (1 Timothy 3:14-15) his words apply to churches today as well.

In this writing we have the great passages on elder and deacon qualification, teaching on prayer, worship, general guidelines for dress in the church and this passage, (1 Timothy

2:8-15) *“So wherever you assemble, I want men (not generic referring to the human race but specific males) to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy. And I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent and appropriate clothing and not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. For women who claim to be devoted to God should make themselves attractive by the good things they do. Women should listen and*

learn quietly and submissively. I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly. For God made Adam first, and afterward he made Eve. This passage only seems to be problematic if you would like to dismiss its contents. The fact that Paul reverts all the way back to the creation account to state his reasoning for why a woman should not teach or have authority over the man in the church clearly shows this was a universal teaching, not just a cultural teaching. If you look at the writing above on the Genesis passages understanding can be gained to what Paul referred to.

All authority is delegated by God and is in order. If the Scripture is clear that a Christian man is head of his home, would it make sense to say, but your wife is the pastor of the church?

What does teaching and having authority over men include?

Our study of 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 would seem to indicate the scope of the prohibition. The verses say a man should be the formal, authoritative teacher/elder of the church.

What about spiritual gifts?

Having been given a gift does not nullify all the other clear passages of scripture; rather the gift would be channeled within God ordained boundaries. If my wife has leadership gifts, that doesn't mean she becomes the head of our home. We learn to use that gift in a way that would honor the Lord. In some circles spiritual gifts have become the most significant issue. That is so out of character with the text of Scripture. Spiritual gifts are very important to the life of the community of faith, but spiritual gifts bow to the other clear teaching of Scripture on the authority issue not vice versa.

Practical Implications:

There are many women in the New Testament described as having important roles, Phoebe, Priscilla, the daughters of Phillip, etc. However, there is no clear text that refers to a woman as the teaching pastor/elder of a congregation. Therefore, it is improper to discount a clear teaching like 1 Tim. 2:12. We know these women had roles in the ministry, what we do not know is how they exercised them. There is no clear passage of Scripture that identifies a woman as a pastor, elder, apostle or the spiritual leader of a New Testament church.

Our conclusion is that the position of teaching pastor or elder should normally be held by a man. Since God is omniscient and omnipotent, we believe it is possible for a woman to be placed in a leadership role as shown by Deborah, a Judge of Israel. We believe God will make these exceptions clearly evident to his Church.