

A Bible Study:**This is why women can lead and preach in our church**

This material summarizes a 1992 study paper for NY Mennonite Conference on this topic which I helped write.
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A. THERE ARE SCRIPTURES THAT ORIENT US TOWARD FREEING WOMEN FOR MINISTRY**1. Our Common Salvation**

Men and women alike have a common standing before God in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and share together the gift of the Holy Spirit and prophecy (Acts 2:17,18). Since this is so, are not they both equally capable of making contributions in church life and decision making? Spiritual equality of men and women should have some effect toward equality in their social relations in the church—spiritual realities should find expression in the concrete life of the church.

2. Occasional Leadership Roles for Women in the Old Testament

Miriam, a prophetess, helped lead Israel (Ex. 15:20; Micah 6:4). Deborah led and judged Israel; she prophesied God's command to Barak (Judges 4:4-16). Huldah advised national leaders concerning the book of the law (II Kings 22:14-20).

3. Roles of Women in the New Testament Church**a) Co-worker**

Priscilla instructed Apollos (a powerful evangelist) concerning the way of God (Acts 18:26) and was a co-worker with Paul (Rom. 16:3). Euodia and Syntyche are also called Paul's co-workers (Phil. 4:2-3).

b) Prophet

Peter taught that women would prophesy (Acts 2:17,18). Paul gave guidelines for women who prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5). Philip's four daughters prophesied (Acts 21:8,9).

c) Deacon

Phoebe was a *diakonos* (variously translated deacon, servant, minister) of the church of Cenchreae, and was a helper of many, Paul included (Rom. 16:1,2). She was probably the one entrusted to deliver Paul's epistle to Rome.

d) Apostle

It is quite possible a woman named Junia was an apostle. Paul greets Andronicus and Junia as "outstanding among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7). Some modern translations call this person Junias (a male name) instead of Junia. However the early church fathers took these two people, Andronicus and Junia, as a husband and wife team. Chrysostom, a 4th century church father, said how wonderful it is to be called apostle and how doubly wonderful it is for this *woman* to be called an apostle. The view that this was a woman prevailed for the first ten centuries and began to change in about the 12th. The King James Version of 1611 still testifies to the view of the early church fathers—we can find Junia there.

e) House-church Leader

A woman is recognized in connection with five of the six house churches mentioned in the New Testament. Lydia - Acts 16:15,40; Priscilla & Aquila - Rom. 16:3,5 and also 1 Cor. 16:19 (in Ephesus); Nympha - Col. 4:15; Apphia - Philem. 2,3.

B. THERE ARE ALSO SCRIPTURES THAT SPEAK OF RESTRICTING THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

1. **1 Cor. 14: 34,35** - *“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.”*

Bible students agree Paul is not making an absolute prohibition against all speaking by women in the church. He only moments before gave instructions for women who pray and prophesy in church (11:5).

Many ideas are offered on the nature of the speaking which Paul is here seeking to silence. More crucial than the nature of the speaking he prohibits is the *nature of the submission Paul urges on women*: does the submission to which he refers apply only to the particular situation in Corinth? Or to all times and all places?

INTERPRETATION #1: When Paul brings in *“...but must be in submission, as the law says,”* he brings the principle of man’s headship into the sphere of the church. Paul’s basis for limiting woman’s participation is concern for the law of male headship which applies to all circumstances and all times.

Implication for Women in Ministry: This passage recognizes woman’s submission to man as a universal principle.

INTERPRETATION #2: A law restricting the leadership role of women in Corinth had been passed a few years earlier than when this text was written. The words, *“...but must be in submission, as the law says,”* refer to this civic law. Paul limits woman’s participation because of a circumstance in the Corinthian situation which he felt required such action.

Implication for Women in Ministry: This passage teaches that the women in Corinth are to be in submission. Another situation might receive different instruction.

It’s difficult to choose between the above understandings—unless we bring into consideration other passages.

2. **1 Tim. 2:11,12** - *“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”*

The word translated “quietness” and “silent” in this passage allows some speaking—see its use in v2 of this chapter. Again we will not try to determine the specific behavior Paul is forbidding but rather focus on whether this passage teaches woman’s submission as a universal principle.

INTERPRETATION #1: Paul’s motive for restricting women’s participation is to guard man’s place of headship. Paul is stating that women are not to teach men, for—very simply—doing so means they are usurping man’s headship. He does “not permit a woman to...have authority over a man.”

Implication for Women in Ministry: This passage is a simple universal statement prohibiting woman from exercising authority over men in any circumstances.

The biblical context seems to support this interpretation. The reference to the creation account in verses 13-14 (*“For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the women who was deceived and became a sinner”*) points toward the natural priority and superiority of man. Paul’s reasoning is that since Adam was first and since he was not deceived, he is the one who should have authority. On the basis of man’s priority in the order of creation and women’s weak record in the face of deception, Paul adopts verse 12 as a personal rule.

INTERPRETATION #2: Paul’s motive for restricting women’s participation is the need for qualified teachers. He is stating that *in Timothy’s congregations* in Ephesus, women are not to teach men. Women in the days of the early church generally had not been educated in the Scriptures and, consequently, these women were hardly equipped to teach or have authority over males. Paul is saying, “I do not permit a woman (who is probably uninstructed) to teach or to have authority over a man (who probably has been instructed).”

Implication for Women in Ministry: This passage gives a guideline for a specific type of situation; it does not set a universal principle.

The biblical context can be seen as supporting this interpretation. The reference to the creation account in verses 13-14 illustrates the situation of these women in Timothy’s congregations. Eve, a late-comer on the scene and without the experience of hearing first-hand God’s prohibition on the tree, was not qualified to teach Adam. Similarly, these women in Ephesus missed out on the instruction time. Adam’s priority in creation illustrates the present situation of male priority in teaching at Ephesus.

Again, it’s hard to choose one of the above understandings—unless we bring into consideration other passages.

3. **1 Tim. 3:2** - *“The overseer must be...the husband of but one wife.”*

This instruction seems to imply that a church leader must be capable of taking a wife, meaning we should restrict that position to men only.

However, in Luke 14:26 (*“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple”*) Jesus says nothing about hating one’s husband. We do not let this teach that a wife cannot be a disciple; we recognize that the Bible often describes something which can apply to men and women in terms of the men only. We must be willing to do the same as we interpret 1 Tim. 3:2.

So this passage is not necessarily against a wife being an overseer.

4. 1 Cor. 11:3-16; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Pet. 3:1 - *“For the husband is the head of the wife...”*

These New Testament passages teach the headship of man in marriage. And there is reason to believe that this headship is not a culturally-bound institution: man being the head of his wife is linked to God being the head of Christ, and to Christ being the head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23).

A general definition of headship is that it refers broadly to the leadership function. It at times includes the idea of source from which something grows (Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19). But most commonly it is used with words such as “over,” “under,” and “submit,” referring to those who have power and authority (Eph. 1:22; 5:22; Deut. 28:13,43-44; Isa. 7:8-9; 9:14-15).

This headship of man in the home seems pertinent to the issue of whether women can exercise leadership in the church. If the Spirit of God teaches male headship in the home, would he not also in the church? Concern for male headship in the family would be reflected in the church. Man’s headship in the home would be undercut if there was no corresponding male headship in the church. It is not prudent to assume that God limits male headship to only the marriage relationship. It would seem that male headship carries over into the public sphere of the church.

As we saw, when 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 are viewed by themselves it is uncertain that they teach male headship in the church. But choosing to believe that male headship applies in the church tips the balance toward an interpretation which says 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 teach male headship as a universal principle.

C. WE NEED TO RESOLVE AN APPARENT CONTRADICTION

There is a clear sense of tension between the two sets of Scriptures examined above. One set points toward freeing women from traditional restrictions; the other upholds restrictions.

At one point this tension seems to become an outright contradiction. If some scripture passages teach that men have headship or authority in the church, don’t they then clash with other passages which give examples of women functioning as leaders among the people of God? These women performed many of the same functions that men undertake in leadership roles. It was not just women they were leading. They exercised considerable authority, particularly Deborah as judge. Granted, the number is few; but we see them as significant in light of the fact that women in biblical times normally received little or no training and experience beyond the domestic realm. These examples are not cast in a bad light by the biblical writers who recount them.

Instead of explaining away these examples, let’s rethink our understanding of male headship. The examples of women exercising

primary leadership roles among the people of God do not violate male headship *when we correctly understand the concept of headship*. In fact, headship is functioning according to the divine pattern when that happens.

D. HEADSHIP IS PRIMARILY NURTURE, NOT RULE

1. How God and Christ Exercise Headship

Within the Trinity God is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). As we look at their relationship we see how God exercises headship. He raises Christ to the right hand of his throne (Eph. 1:19-23; 1 Pet. 3:22). Rather than limiting Christ from exercising the authority that belongs to the head, God helps him to exercise it!

Christ exercises headship over the church in a similar fashion. He gives the church gifts which nurture it and build it up; the church grows “*from*” him as head (Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19). And what is his purpose in working for this growth? It is to enable the church to “*become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,*” to “*grow up into him who is the Head*” (Eph. 4:13,15).

Only once is Christ’s headship of the church linked with its submission to him (Eph. 5:23-24). And that passage describes Christ, not as asking the church to submit, but as being the church’s Savior (v23), as sacrificing himself for her perfection, working to remove any flaw keeping her from her full potential (vv 25-27). Paul’s descriptions of Christ as head of the church do not emphasize rule but nurture. Both rule and nurture are present; but nurture is central.

In sum, Christ’s efforts as head focus on serving those in his charge to bring them into his “fullness.” His headship is not a simple hierarchy or chain of command which reserves his position and status for himself. Rather, he takes on himself responsibility to nurture and groom those “under” him to enter into what he has already attained. He is working toward the church being able to reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 22:5).

The two characteristics in the definition of a “head”, that of source-of-growth and that of authority, come together in this understanding of headship as nurture.

2. Headship-as-nurture: the Shape It Takes

If male headship is to include lots of nurture, what are the implications of this understanding of headship for the issue of women in church ministry? How would a gifted woman in the church be treated by a male church leader who, as Christ, gives everything possible to the one “under” him, to enable that one to grow to be able to share his authority?

Such a male church leader may place a gifted woman on a leadership team with himself and be her mentor, imparting his skills and wisdom, helping the potential of her gifts to be actualized. To help her grow, he will move away from making decisions for her and insisting she follow his judgment. He will let her learn if her way fails—and he will learn when her way works! And if he recognizes the woman as gifted, as she gains experience he will empower her for an out-front leadership role. He may eventually place himself in a position of receiving from those gifts. This appears to be what Barak did to Deborah, and King Josiah to Huldah, and what Apollos did to Priscilla—though they did it not out of concern to nurture the woman but out of desperation, needing what she had!

Such a leader invites the woman to share in the exercise of dominion over the earth to which God called both men and women (Gen. 1:28). They function as a team complementary to each other, each contributing from his or her uniqueness. Responsibilities are assigned according to ability, not gender. Leadership and initiative in an area is supplied by the one most able to give it (due to gifts and character).

Now we can join together Interpretations #1 & #2 of 1 Timothy 2. In Timothy's congregation at Ephesus, the relationship between men and women was one where the men were doing all the leading and the women were solely receiving. The redemption that comes in Christ had come to them only a few years earlier. It had just begun to transform the men into ones who exercise their headship as responsibility to nurture and love. But soon this headship-as-nurture would have worked long enough to lift the women to the place where some would have the skills, training, and character to join Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia as co-workers with the men, sharing with them in the task of subduing earth for the kingdom of heaven.

Two Comments (added October 2005):

1) The traditional position that women cannot assume positions of authority in the church has been held by most Bible-honoring churches for most of the life of the church. So to take a new understanding seems arrogant -- "we know more than previous generations." Further, the main push toward this new position came only after popular culture gave women more roles. So those taking this position might just be looking for ways to justify what is already popular.

However, it is also possible that a change in culture freed biblical interpreters to see something in the Bible that was there along. The consensus of the church has indeed changed on issues through its history.

2) Some persons view the traditional understanding as a more straightforward understanding of New Testament texts and thus more appealing. The new understanding that allows women to hold authority is seen as more complex and suspect.

Nonetheless, sometimes other Scripture passages compel us to not take a particular passage as having a straightforward meaning to be followed literally. Take, for instance, Ephesians 6:5-9: "slaves, obey your earthly masters... you masters must treat your slaves right..." (See also Col. 3:22-4:1; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-20 -- there is more specific teaching on the subject of slavery than on women's subordinate role in church.) Do we take those instructions as straightforward, saying that since in Paul's mind slavery was the way things should be, we should uphold the practice of slavery? No. Other passages show Paul working against slavery: ones about slave-traders (1 Tim. 1:9-10) and about slave and free being one in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11) and when Paul leaned on his friend Philemon to free Onesimus (Philemon 1:15-17). And those are the seeds we let guide us in our situation. We don't bring Paul's general instructions on slavery straight into our situation because we know that in his letters he was limited in being about to write against it -- the times wouldn't have allowed abolition of slavery. A protest against it would have been as fruitless as a protest today against our society lending and borrowing money at interest.

Can't we do the same regarding passages on women being subordinate in church? Can't we point out the passages which show what Paul actually thought of women doing ministry in the church (Sec. A), ones that stop us from taking 1 Timothy 2:11-12 as straightforward? And can't we point out that in the New Testament times Paul had limited options -- to have a woman leader would not have been in good repute, and typically women had little education and social exposure?