



WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO LEAD IN THE CHURCH?

On many occasions I have been asked the question, “Do women have a right to lead in the church?” My response is always, “No, but neither do men.” None of us have a right to do anything in the church unless God calls us and gifts us for the task. However, it is evident throughout scripture and church history that men and women together have served the church in leadership capacities.

For the sake of clarity and Biblical precedence, I am presenting a condensed and simplified version of an article written by Kenneth E. Bailey, entitled, “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View.” Bailey clearly demonstrates in his article that women had been an integral part of the ministry of Jesus and the early church. Jesus had women disciples. For instance, in Acts 9:36, Tabitha is called a disciple (*mathētria*). Jesus, in Matthew 12:46-50, says that those who do the will of his Father, both men and women, are his disciples. In middle eastern culture, it would be considered an affront to refer to women when addressing a group of men unless there were women in the group. Jesus was clearly talking to both men and women when he made that statement. In Luke 8:1-3, we find that women were also traveling with Jesus and his disciples. This would also explain why in Luke 10:38 Jesus told Martha that Mary was doing the better thing by sitting at the feet of Jesus. To sit at the feet of a rabbi meant to be instructed by him (see Paul and Gamiliel in Acts 22:3).

There were also women who were teachers. In Acts 18:24-28, the preacher Apollos is disciplined by the husband and wife team of Priscilla and Aquilla. In the seven times this couple is mentioned, Priscilla’s name comes first in five of those references. Culturally, this is significant because it suggests the order of responsibility. Priscilla was seen as having the prominent teaching role. The catacombs of Prisca (Priscilla) in Rome also celebrate her martyrdom as a leader in the church. A church, dedicated to her, is built over the top of her grave, and Tertullias said of her “By the holy Prisca, the gospel is preached.”(1) In addition, by ascribing the words of the Magnificat to Mary the mother of Jesus, Luke is also saying Mary is a teacher for those who were, and are still, reading his letter. The theology of this passage is powerful and has instructed both men and women over the past 2,000 years. These are just a few of several examples of women in scripture who had instructed men in the New Testament church.

We find another example when Paul commends to the church in Cenchreae their sister Phoebe as a deacon (*diakonon*) in Romans 16:1-2. She was being sent by Paul to present the written teaching to the church. He encouraged them to embrace her as a fellow minister of the gospel. In the original Greek text, the word is written in

the masculine form, specifically giving her the title of deacon, not deaconess. In 1 Timothy 4:6, that same word in the masculine form is applied to Timothy. Here it is translated as “minister,” a position of responsibility within the congregation. And, since Paul refers to Apollos and himself as a diakonoi in 1 Corinthians 3:5, we can easily see that Phoebe was a minister or leader whom Paul encouraged the church to embrace. Ephesians 2:20 says that the household of God is built on the apostles and prophets. Prophets occupied a high place in the New Testament church. Following that verse, in Ephesians chapter 4 we can see that the role of prophet was included in the five leadership gifts God gives the church for building up the body. In Acts 21:19, the four daughters of Philip the evangelist were known as prophetesses. Later, in Paul’s instruction on head coverings for men and women, he was specifically addressing the actions to be done while prophesying. So here again, we have examples of women leading as prophets.

The role of apostle is the other gift on which the household of God is built. In Romans 16:7, Paul says, “Andronicus and Junia are notable among the apostles.” Chrysostom (347-407AD, Archbishop of Constantinople), an early church father, while preaching on this text, said “how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.” And although it has been argued that Junia was really a man, in the original text it is written in the feminine. The masculine version of the name Junias (the masculine version) first appeared in 1512. However, the original text and the early church clearly recognized this name as a woman’s, who is again, called an apostle.

We must ask ourselves if Reformation interpretation carries more weight for us than the original manuscripts and early church tradition. There were also women elders in the early church. In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, the word “presbutero,” or elder, appears twice. The first time it is in the masculine, the second time it is presented in the feminine “presbuteras.” This has, from time to time, been translated as “older men and older women,” but if you consider the passage it follows, it doesn’t seem that a change of subject has happened even though it is the beginning of a new chapter. This is a continuation of the same thought that elders, be they men or women, are to be respected like spiritual parents.

The biggest argument against women in leadership is found in I Corinthians 14:26-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. But, in the case of Corinth, we must understand the context of the letter being written. If we overlook what was happening in the culture of Corinth, then Paul appears inconsistent in his instructions about men and women. We know that in chapter 11:4-5 of I Corinthians, both men and women are prophesying. If that is the case, why in chapter 14 would they be told to be silent? In reading this section of Corinthians, we see several groups of people were told to be silent when it came to disturbing worship. Because of culture and language, it is assumed that in their gatherings in Corinth the language being spoken was not easy to follow. And for women, who were not as familiar with the culture and perhaps not as prolific in the language as their husbands (due to their roles being more homebound than their husbands), the service was confusing. The disturbances occurred when the women



began asking for clarification in the middle of the service. This explanation is based on the writings of Chrysostom, as cited by Kenneth Bailey in his article. (1)

Along those same lines, prophecy in Corinth, as cited by Ben Witherington III, was common in the culture prior to the establishment of the Christian church. (3) In the temple of the oracle at Delphi, (Greek philosophy) prophecy was given in response to questions from people in the audience. Perhaps this is why, when the church began, the culture of prophecy from a Greek perspective crept into the church, and women in that context were asking questions. Witherington says, “Paul asked them to be silent and ask questions at home. Christian worship was not intended to degenerate into a question-and-answer session. Rather prophecy in the biblical tradition was a top-down matter—God had something to say to his people, rather than his people have something to ask their deity.” Here we have Paul giving instructions for orderly worship in a specific situation, not giving women a rule for how to conduct themselves in the church for all time.

We must also consider the context of the letter to Timothy who was pastoring the church of Ephesus. This church was built in the middle of the cult-city of the goddess Artemis, or Diana. There was a gnostic heresy that had broken out in the church, which sounded similar to the teachings being promoted by the Artemis cult. In chapter 4:1-3, we find that the instructions given by these people in the church were an attempt to infiltrate the orthodox teaching of Paul and Timothy with cult-influenced thinking. Paul takes a hard stand against them and urges Timothy to do the same. Also under their control were thousands of female priestess-slaves. The very economy of Ephesus at this time was directly tied to the Temple and was dominated by women who related best to men who were emasculated. This was a culture of reverse sexism.

Can you imagine the relationship between men and women in this city? For men in the early church of Ephesus, in order to have dignity they also needed to have leadership as the men God created them to be, not as emasculated men. This culture of reverse sexism and anti-male sentiment was creeping into the church of Ephesus. Sexism in either case is clearly unchristian. Perhaps in this case, what Timothy was dealing with were women who had infiltrated the church with an attitude of dominance and anti-male sentiment.

It’s important to re-read that text with the knowledge of what was truly happening. Culture today still plays a significant role in the way we interpret the Bible, but we must be aware of it and be careful to stay true to Scripture’s original intent.

Paul’s phrase, “Letting a woman learn in silence,” is best translated as “quietness.” Instead of a counterproductive aggression, quietness seems to be the instruction of Paul. Frankly, this is good counsel today for both men and women! I would fully concur with Paul’s instruction. But this has to align with what he also said in several other places in his letters to various churches regarding women in leadership. The issue of women’s silence must be understood in the context of what the church of Ephesus was facing.



We must always guard against the culture of sexism in the church, whether it is against women or men. Paul says in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is no longer male or female. An equality of value and gifting is what Paul is teaching the early church, where anyone who is so gifted by the Holy Spirit can exercise those gifts to serve the body of Christ. Dominance and abuse are not right, whether men or women are in charge. We are to foster a culture of respect and honor for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ with unique perspectives, insights, and spiritual gifts intended to serve one another in love.

The Evangelical Methodist background of Crossroads also gives us precedence with men and women serving in leadership together. Methodism that began in the 1700's was founded around three ideas. The first is that we are dead in sin prior to a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. The second is we are justified by faith alone. And the third is our new faith produces inward and outward holiness. America was taken by storm by this new protestant movement. Circuit riding preachers fanned out across the United States establishing meetings until there were few villages left without a Methodist presence. By 1844, with 4,000 active circuit riders, the Methodist Episcopal Church became the country's largest Protestant denomination. Women led many of those preaching points or meetings in the times between the visits of the circuit riders. Crossroads follows that tradition, believing it to be consistent with New Testament practice and in line with the words of Jesus and Paul.

We have men and women serving in leadership positions not because they have a right to, but because they have been called to it. Women are not only able to hold positions of leadership but can receive both ordination as ministers of the gospel and administer the sacraments of the church. Years of tradition can sometimes weigh heavier in our decisions than can actual Biblical fact. Regarding women in leadership, a wise approach is to first ask, "What does the Bible say, and how did the early church handle this?" Granted, scholars differ on the exegesis of passages and the weight they place on extra Biblical text and early church recorded history, but once we understand the issue, we must ask ourselves whether we need to readjust our thinking.

It is not easy for a woman to lead in the Protestant church today, and for those who do, it is often an uphill battle. I believe it is imperative for men and women of the faith who care deeply about this issue to prayerfully examine the scripture, the revealed character and practices of Jesus Himself, and their own hearts. As we do, it is imperative that we lead alongside our brothers and sisters whom God has called and gifted. It will take godly men and women to lead the way, to ensure that we treat one another in love and respect within the body of Christ, and to make sure that human tradition does not take precedence over biblical truth.

Bibliography:

1. "Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View," by Kenneth E. Bailey
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3. A Week in the Life of Corinth, Ben Witherington III, professor at Asbury Seminary, Wilmore Kentucky. p. 154