

The Role of Women in Ministry As Described in Holy Scripture

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Supernatural manifestations and gifts of the Holy Spirit have played a distinctive role in the origin, development, and growth of the Assemblies of God. Since the earliest days of our Fellowship, spiritual gifting has been evident in the ministries of many outstanding women who pioneered and directed a wide spectrum of ministries. It was not uncommon for a married woman to minister in partnership with her husband. Occasionally, husbands worked at secular professions to support the active ministries of their wives. Many women chose to forego marriage to better fulfill the ministries to which the Lord had called them. Courageous women served on mission frontiers at home and abroad as missionaries, evangelists, church planters, pastors, educators, and in other roles.

Pentecostals believe that the outpouring of the Spirit begun in the early twentieth century is a true fulfillment of prophecy, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28,29; cf. Acts 2:16–18).¹ That women as well as men are to prophesy is indicative of their inclusion in the ministries of the new covenant age.

The Bible as Final Authority

While the history and practice of the Assemblies of God appears to demonstrate that God blesses the public ministry of women, debate continues as to the proper role of women in spiritual leadership. Since the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, it is important to do a fresh study of its teachings and ensure that our approach is not merely subjective and pragmatic.

It is our intention to examine the biblical text as carefully and objectively as possible, using established rules of exegesis and interpretation. We will note both historical and theological guidance. We will also carefully evaluate texts traditionally used to limit or deny the ministries of women.

Always, it is our intention to be faithful to the teachings of the Bible, God’s inspired and infallible Word to humankind. At the same time, we want to be charitable toward those from other traditions who sincerely may disagree with our findings. We recognize that, occasionally, practical compromises in nonessential aspects of ministry practice may be in order to most effectively plant the Church in traditionally patriarchal contexts.

Historical and Global Precedent

Historians have observed that in the early days of most revivals, when spiritual fervor is high and the Lord’s return is expected at any time, there is often ready acceptance of dynamic, pioneering women ministers. Over time, however, as young churches move toward a more structured ministry, and institutional concerns come to the forefront, the

¹ All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version (NIV).

spiritual leadership of women is less readily accepted and church leadership tends to become predominantly male.

The experience of the Assemblies of God has been no exception. Notable women ministers among the early Pentecostals included Maria B. Woodworth-Etter, Aimee Semple McPherson, Alice Reynolds Flower, Anna Ziese, and Marie Burgess Brown. But even though women had great freedom to minister in the early days of the Fellowship, the proportion of women in leadership dropped dramatically beginning in the early 1920s. More recently, the trend is again upward and the number of credentialed women is growing.

Throughout their history, Pentecostals around the world have struggled to apply biblical truth in widely divergent cultural contexts. In some settings, female spiritual leadership is readily accepted; in others, where women have limited ministry, leadership posts are withheld from them. At times there is inconsistency between the leadership a female missionary, for example, has at home and that which she has on the field. There may also be a difference between her ministry opportunities on the field and those of women in the culture she serves. Without doubt, particular cultures have influenced, and continue to influence, the nature and extent of female leadership. While the Church must always be sensitive to cultural concerns, it must nonetheless consistently look to Scripture for principles and directions that rise above particular contextual practices.

Biblical Examples of Women in Ministry

Old Testament history includes accounts of strong female leadership in many roles. The following are striking examples: Miriam was a prophet to Israel during the Exodus, alongside her brothers Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20). Deborah, both a prophet and a judge, directed Barak to lead the army of Israel into successful combat against Israel's oppressors (Judges 4 to 5). Huldah, also a prophet, authenticated the scroll of the Law found in the temple and helped spark religious reform in the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22:14–20; 2 Chronicles 34:22–28).

The New Testament also shows that women filled important ministry roles in the Early Church. Tabitha (Dorcas) initiated an effective benevolence ministry (Acts 9:36). Philip's four unmarried daughters were recognized prophets (Acts 21:8,9). Paul singled out two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as "women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2,3). Priscilla was another of Paul's exemplary "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3,4). In Romans 16, Paul greets numerous ministry colleagues, a large number of them women. In these greetings, the word Paul uses to speak of the work (*kopiaō*), or labor, of Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Romans 16:6,12) is one he uses extensively for the labor of ministry (1 Corinthians 16:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchrea, was highly commended to the church at Rome by Paul (Romans 16:1,2). Unfortunately, translation biases have often obscured Phoebe's position of leadership, calling her a "servant" (NIV, NASB, ESV). Yet Phoebe was *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea. Paul regularly used this term for a minister or leader of a congregation and applied it specifically to Jesus Christ, Tychicus, Epaphras,

Timothy, and to his own ministry. Depending on the context, *diakonos* is usually translated “deacon” or “minister.” Though some translators have chosen the word deaconess (e.g., RSV, because Phoebe was female), the Greek *diakonos* is a masculine noun. Therefore, it seems likely that *diakonos* was the designation for an official leadership position in the Early Church and the proper translation for Phoebe’s role is “deacon” (TNIV, NLT, NRSV) or “minister.”

Moreover, a number of translations reflect similar biases by referring to Phoebe as having been a “great help” (NIV) or “helper” (NASB) of many, including Paul himself (Romans 16:2). The Greek term here is *prostatis*, better translated by the NRSV as “benefactor” with its overtones of equality and leadership.

Junia was identified by Paul as an apostle (Romans 16:7). Beginning in the thirteenth century, a number of scholars and translators masculinized her name to Junias, apparently unwilling to admit that there was a female apostle. However, the name Junia is found more than 250 times in Rome alone, while the masculine form Junias is unknown in any Greco-Roman source. Paul clearly was a strong advocate of women in ministry.

These instances of women filling leadership roles in the Bible should be taken as a divinely approved pattern, not as exceptions to divine decrees. Even a limited number of women with scripturally commended leadership roles affirm that God does indeed call women to spiritual leadership.

A Biblical Survey of the Role of Women in Ministry

Of primary importance in defining the scriptural role of women in ministry is the biblical meaning of “ministry”. Of Christ our great model, it was said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served [*diakoneō*], but to serve [*diakoneō*], and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; cf. Matthew 20:28). The New Testament leadership modeled by Jesus portrays the spiritual leader as a servant, whether male or female. The question of human authority is not of primary significance, though it naturally arises as organization and structure develop.

Genesis 2:18–25

Some expositors have taught that all women should be subordinate to adult men because Eve was created after Adam to be his “helper” (NIV; “help meet”, KJV). Yet the word *ēzer* (“helper”) is never used in the Hebrew Bible with a subordinate meaning. Seventeen out of the twenty times it is used, it refers to God as the helper. Eve was created to be a help (*kenegdo*) “suitable” or “corresponding to” Adam, not a subordinate.

Some argue that God created men and women with different characteristics and desires, and that these differences explain why leadership roles should be withheld from women. Others attribute these perceived differences to culture and social expectations imposed on children from birth to adulthood. Physical differences and distinctive biological functions are obvious; but it is only by implication that gender differences can be made to suggest leadership limitations.

Paul's Emphasis on Charismatic Ministry

Ministry in the New Testament is charismatic in nature. It is made possible and energized as the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes spiritual gifts (*charismata*) to each member of the body of Christ (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:7–11,27,28; Ephesians 4:7–12; 1 Peter 4:10–11). While some gifts are a spontaneous work of the Spirit and others are recognized ministry gifts to the Body, all are given for service without regard to gender differentiation. For example, the gift of prophecy is explicitly for both men and women: “Your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17). The New Testament confirms that women received and exercised this gift of the Spirit (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5).

If Peter found certain statements by Paul hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), it is no surprise that we, removed by nearly two thousand additional years of history, would share his struggle in interpreting some Pauline passages. While the original audiences were familiar with the problems that Paul addressed, we are left to reconstruct them and apply his prescriptions as best we can in light of the larger context of his letters and biblical revelation. And we, like Peter (2 Peter 3:15), must respect and love our brothers and sisters who hold alternative interpretations on issues that are not critical to our salvation or standing before God. We only request that those interpretations be expressed and practiced in love and consideration for all of God's children, both men and women.

First Corinthians 11:3–12

The statement that “the man is the head of the woman” has for centuries been used to justify the practice of male superiority and to exclude women from spiritual leadership. Two alternative translations for *kephalē* (“head”), debated widely by contemporary evangelical scholars, are (1) “authority over” and (2) “source” or “origin.” Both meanings are found in literature of Paul’s time.

Taking the passage as a whole, the second meaning fits as well as or better than the first meaning, leading to the summary statement of verse 12: “As woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” Even the relationship between the eternal Son and the Father—“the head of Christ is God” (11:3)—fits better as “source” than “authority over” (cf. John 8:42). Without attempting definitively to resolve this debate, we do not find sufficient evidence in *kephalē* to deny leadership roles to women (in light of biblical examples of women in positions of spiritual authority, and in light of the whole counsel of Scripture).

First Corinthians 14:34–36

There are only two passages in the entire New Testament that might seem to contain a prohibition against the ministry of women (1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12). Since these must be placed alongside Paul’s other statements and practices, they can hardly be absolute, unequivocal prohibitions of the ministry of women. Instead, they seem to be dealing with specific, local problems that needed correction. Therefore, Paul’s consistent affirmation of ministering women among his churches must be seen as his true perspective, rather than the apparent prohibitions of these two passages, themselves subject to conflicting interpretation.

There are various interpretations of what Paul was limiting when he said, “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Paul uses a word to limit the speech of women (*sigatō*) that previously has been used to limit the speech of those speaking in tongues if there is no interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:28) and prophets if a prophecy is given to another person (v. 30). It is only under such specific circumstances that the speech of tongues speakers, prophets, and women are to be silenced in the church. Under what circumstances then, is the speech of women to be limited?

Options include (1) chatter in public services, (2) ecstatic disruptions, (3) certain authoritative ministries (such as judging prophecies), and (4) asking questions during the service. It is apparent that Paul permitted women both to pray and prophesy in public worship at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5). Moreover, Paul advised that those who prophesy (evidently including women) should be among the ones to judge prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29). Therefore, as with Paul’s constraints on both men and women tongues speakers and prophets, it may be that Paul’s additional constraints on women have to do with other forms of disruptive speech.

While the precise nature of Paul’s prohibition in this text is a matter of ongoing study, we do conclude that it does not prohibit female leadership, but like the rest of the chapter, it admonishes that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

First Timothy 2:11–15

The meaning and application of Paul’s statement, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:12), have puzzled interpreters and resulted in a variety of positions on the role of women in ministry and spiritual leadership.

From the above survey of passages on exemplary women in ministry, it is clear that Paul recognized the ministry of women. There were obvious problems in Ephesus, some relating to women. Some women were evidently given to immodest apparel and adornment (1 Timothy 2:9). The younger widows were “into the habit of being idle . . . And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to” (1 Timothy 5:13). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warned against depraved persons (possibly including women) who manipulated “weak-willed,” or “gullible,” women (2 Timothy 3:6).

A reading of the entire passage of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 strongly suggests that Paul was giving Timothy advice about dealing with some heretical teachings and practices specifically involving women in the church at Ephesus. The heresy may have been so serious that he had to say about the Ephesian women, “I am not allowing women to teach or have authority over a man.” Other passages show that such exclusion was not normative in Paul’s ministry.

First Timothy 3:1–13

This entire passage has been held by some to confirm that all leaders and authorities in the Early Church were supposed to be males. The passage deals primarily with male leadership, most likely because of majority practice and expectations. But there is also significant support for female leadership.

Typical of modern English versions, the New International Version translates verse 11, “In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect”. The NIV translators arbitrarily decided that the verse refers to the wives of deacons (even though there is no reference in the preceding qualifications of elders to their wives).

However, the word translated “wives” is the plural of the Greek word *gynē* which can be translated as either “woman” or “wife” depending on the context. Recognizing this, the NIV translators did include the word “deaconesses” as an alternate reading in their footnotes. But the NASB and the NRSV render the plural form of *gynē* as “women.” Thus, literally, the verse is addressing the qualifications of women in spiritual leadership who, in this context, might easily be called “deacons.”

Although the first-century cultural milieu produced a primarily male church leadership, this passage along with other biblical evidence of female spiritual leadership (e.g., Acts 21:9; Romans 16:1–15 ; Philippians 4:2,3) demonstrates that female leadership was not prohibited, either for Paul’s day or for today. Passages that imply most leaders were male may not be taken to say that all leaders were male, since the biblical record speaks approvingly of numerous female leaders.

Galatians 3:28

Those who oppose allowing women to hold positions of spiritual leadership place contextual limitations on Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Some interpreters restrict the meaning of this triad to salvation by faith or oneness in Christ. That truth is certainly articulated throughout Scripture. Yet the verse carries a ring of universal application for all our relationships, not just an assurance that anyone can come to Christ. “Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”—these are basic relationship principles to which faithful followers of Christ must give highest priority.

The God of the Bible “does not show favoritism” (Romans 2:11; cf. also 2 Samuel 14:14; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Acts 10:34; Ephesians 6:9). He calls whom He will and gives gifts and ministries as He chooses; humans must not put limitations on divine prerogatives. The strained relationship between Adam and Eve, including the statement that “he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16), comes as a result of the curse, making it clear that this was not a part of God’s original and durable design for humankind. In Christ we are truly set free from sin and its curse, which separate us from God and each other and cause us to elevate or demean according to race, social standing, or gender.

Therefore We Conclude

After examining the various translations and interpretations of biblical passages relating to the role of women in the first-century church, and desiring to apply biblical principles to contemporary church practice, we conclude that we cannot find convincing evidence that the ministry of women is restricted according to some sacred or immutable principle.

We are aware that the ministry and leadership of women are not accepted by some individuals, both within and outside the Christian community. We condemn all prejudice and self-promotion, by men or women. The existence of bigotry against women in our world, and all too often in the church, cannot be denied. But there is no place for such an attitude in the body of Christ. We acknowledge that attitudes of secular society, based on long-standing practice and tradition, have influenced the application of biblical principles to local circumstances. We desire wisely to respect yet help redeem cultures that are at variance with Kingdom principles. Like Paul, we affirm that the Great Commission takes priority over every other consideration. We must reach men and women for Christ, no matter what their cultural or ethnic customs may be. The message of redemption has been carried to remote parts of the world through the ministry of dedicated, Spirit-filled men and women. A believer’s gifts and anointing should still today make a way for his or her ministry. The Pentecostal ministry is not a profession to which men or women merely aspire; it must always be a divine calling, confirmed by the Spirit with a special gifting.

The Assemblies of God has been blessed and must continue to be blessed by the ministry of God’s gifted and commissioned daughters. The Bible repeatedly affirms that God pours out His Spirit upon both men and women and thereby gifts both sexes for ministry

in His Church. Therefore, we must continue to affirm the gifts of women in ministry and spiritual leadership.

Surely, the enormous challenge of the Great Commission to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) requires the full deployment of all God’s Spirit-gifted ministers, both men and women.

Bible Translations and Versions Abbreviations

NIV New International Version

NASB *The New American Standard Bible*

ESV English Standard Version

RSV The Revised Standard Version

TNIV Today’s New International Version

NLT *New Living Translation*

NRSV New Revised Standard Version