
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. From the earliest days of our organization, spiritual gifting has been evident in the ministries of many outstanding women. Divine enablement has also been seen in the spiritual leadership of women in other Pentecostal groups. The Pentecostal movement believes that the 20th-century outpouring of the Spirit is a true fulfillment of the scriptural prediction, “Your daughters shall prophecy... and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28, 29).

The Bible as Final Authority

The history and current practice of the Assemblies of God give demonstration that God can and does bless the public ministry of women. Yet there is currently much debate concerning the proper role of women in spiritual leadership. So it is appropriate to ask if Scripture describes any limits to this public ministry. We all agree that Scripture must be our final authority in settling questions of faith and practice. But when born-again, Spirit-filled Christians, following proper hermeneutical principles, come to reasonable but differing interpretations, we do well not to become dogmatic in support of one position. We affirm the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. We desire to know for certain what God expects of us. When we come to a sure understanding of His divine Word, we are committed to declaring and obeying those clear instructions. But we also exercise caution in giving authoritative importance to interpretations that do not have indisputable support from the whole of Scripture. Although the Holy Spirit may be active in the work of translation and interpretation, we cannot claim inerrancy for interpretations (even of extant Hebrew or Greek texts).

Historical and Global Precedent

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 a place for, and acceptance of, the anointed ministry of women. Over time, however, concerns about organization and lines of authority begin to emerge, and the group moves toward a more structured ministry. As institutional concerns come to the forefront, the spiritual leadership of women is accepted less readily, and church leadership becomes predominately male. The experience of the Assemblies of God has been no exception to this progression.

Twentieth-century practice among Pentecostals around the world reveals evidence of a genuine struggle to apply biblical truth in various cultural contexts. In some settings, female spiritual leadership is readily accepted; in others, though women may have limited ministry, leadership posts are withheld from them. At times there is inconsistency between the leadership a female missionary has at home and that which she has on the field, or

between her opportunities and those of a national female. Indeed, culture has influenced the extent of leadership a woman has been allowed to share. The Church must always be sensitive to cultural concerns, but it must look to Scripture for the truth that applies to all times and cultures.

Biblical Examples of Women in Ministry

Old Testament history includes accounts of strong female leadership. Miriam was a prophet, one of the triumvirate of leaders God sent to Israel during the Exodus period (Exodus 15:20). Deborah, as prophet and judge, led the army of the Lord into successful combat (Judges 4 to 5). Huldah, also a prophet, authenticated the scroll of the Law found in the temple and helped spark the great religious reform in the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34).

The New Testament also records ministering women in the Church Age. Tabitha (Dorcas) is called a disciple and had a ministry of helps (Acts 9:36). Philip had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8,9). Euodia and Syntyche were Paul's coworkers who shared in his struggle to spread the gospel (Philippians 4:2,3). Priscilla was another of Paul's exemplary "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3,4, NIV). In Romans 16, Paul greets a multitude of ministering persons, a large number of them women.

Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchrea, was highly commended to the church at Rome by Paul (Romans 16:1,2). Unfortunately, biases of modern English translators have sometimes obscured Phoebe's position of leadership, calling her a "servant" or "helper", etc. Yet Phoebe was diakonos of the church at Cenchrea. Paul often 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 (because Phoebe was a woman), such a distinction is not in the original Greek. It seems likely that diakonos was the designation for an official leadership position in the Early Church.

Junia was identified by Paul as an apostle (Romans 16:7). But many translators and scholars, unwilling to admit there could have been a female apostle, have since the 13th century masculinized her name to Junias. The biblical record shows that Paul was a strong advocate of women's ministry.

The 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 should 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 came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). New Testament leadership, as modeled by Jesus, portrays the spiritual leader as a servant. 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 (“help meet”, KJV). Yet the word ezer (“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. Instead of being created as a subordinate, Eve was created to be a “suitable” (kenegdo) helper, or one “corresponding to” Adam.

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 distinctives 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; 1Peter 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 shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). That women received and exercised this gift of the Spirit is well attested in the New Testament (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5).

If Peter found certain statements by Paul hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), then it is no surprise that we, who are removed by 1900 additional years of history, would share his struggle in interpreting some Pauline passages. 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 kephale (“head”), debated widely by contemporary evangelical scholars, are (1) “authority over” and (2) “source” or “origin.” Both meanings can be 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 the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things [are] of 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 to resolve this debate, we do not find sufficient evidence in kephale 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 which 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 along side Paul’s other statements and practices, they can hardly be absolute, unequivocal prohibitions of the ministry of women. Instead, they seem to be teachings dealing with specific, local problems that needed correction.

There are various interpretations of what Paul was limiting when he said, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (14:34). 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. Yet, Paul does allow women to pray and prophesy in the corporate service (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Although we may not solve all the difficulties of this chapter, we do conclude that this passage does not prohibit female leadership, but like the rest of the chapter, it admonishes that “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

First Timothy 2:11-15

The meaning and application of Paul’s statement, “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man” (1 Timothy 2:12), have puzzled interpreters and resulted in a variety of positions on the role of women in ministry and spiritual leadership. Is the prohibition of women teaching and exercising authority a universal truth, or was Paul reporting his application of divine truth for the society and Christian community to which he and Timothy ministered?

From the above survey of passages on exemplary women in ministry, it is clear that Paul recognized the ministry of women. Yet there were some obvious problems concerning women in Ephesus. They were evidently given to immodest apparel and adornment (1 Timothy 2:9). The younger widows “learn to be idle... and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not” (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, NIV).

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 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.” But we know from other passages that such an 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 intended to be, and indeed were, males. It is true that the passage deals primarily with male leadership, most likely because of majority practice and expectations. When there were women leaders, like Phoebe, they would be expected to meet the same standards of character and behavior.

Translations of verse 11 present evidence of the translator’s choice based on personal expectations. The word *gunaikas* can be translated as either “wives” or “women,” depending on the translator’s assumptions concerning the context. One rendering leaves the impression that these are qualifications for deacons’ wives; the other suggests this exhortation is addressed to female spiritual leaders.

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 which imply that most leaders were male should not be made to say that women cannot be leaders.

Galatians 3:28

Those who oppose allowing women to hold positions of spiritual leadership must place contextual limitations on Galatians 3:28. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye 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.... neither bond nor free... neither male nor female”- these are basic relationship principles to which faithful followers of Christ must give highest priority.

The God of the Bible has “no respect of persons” (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; man must not put limitations on divine prerogatives. In Christ we are truly set free from sin and its curse, which separate from God and 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 in the secular world of bigotry against women 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 which are at variance with Kingdom principles. Like Paul, we affirm 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. To the degree that we are convinced of our Pentecostal distinctives-that it is God who divinely calls and supernaturally anoints for ministry-we must continue to be open to the full use of women's gifts in ministry and spiritual leadership.

As we look on the fields ripe for harvest, may we not be guilty of sending away any of the reapers God calls. Let us entrust to these women of God the sacred sickle, and with our sincerest blessings thrust them out into the whitened fields.

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