

Women in Ministry in the Church

This document has been compiled for the following purposes:

- An overview of women's roles within the *full* scope of Scripture
- A look at specific passages of Scripture that have been debated regarding women in ministry
- Our cooperative fellowship's affirmation and history of women in ministry

Women in the Bible

Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, God calls and commissions women to lead. It is imperative that we see the pattern of women leadership throughout the *whole scope* of Scripture.

- Miriam was a prophet to Israel during the Exodus, alongside of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20)
- Deborah was a prophet and judge who directed Barack to lead the army of Israel into battle against Israel's oppressors (Judges 4-5)
- Huldah was a prophet who 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)
- Esther, the fearless Queen has an entire book of the Bible written about her risking her life to save the Jewish people
- Tabitha began an effective benevolence ministry (Acts 9:36)
- Lydia was the first woman to respond to the gospel of Jesus in Europe (Acts 16:14-15) As a successful business woman she gathered a church in her home and became a leader in the church (Acts 16:40)
- Philip's 4 daughters were prophets (Acts 21:8-9)
- Paul recognized Euodia and Syntyche as "women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel..." (Philippians 4:2-3)
- Priscilla was a fellow worker in Christ Jesus with Paul (Romans 16:3-4)
- Paul lists other women leaders in Romans 16, including Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (see also 1 Corinthians 16:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Timothy 5:17)
- Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchrea was highly commended by Paul as a *diakonos*, which means a minister or leader of a congregation, a word he used to describe Jesus Christ, his own ministry, Timothy's ministry and other male leaders (Romans 16:1-2)
- Junia was identified by Paul as an apostle (Romans 16:7) However, beginning in the 13th century, many translators masculinized her name to Junias. Broadly, the feminine name Junia is found in Roman literature, but the masculine form Junias is unknown in any Greco-Roman source.
- Jesus disregarded cultural norms and talked with women, befriended them, taught them, healed them, honored them and partnered with them in ministry.

New Testament Passages & Prohibition of Women in Ministry

The following Scriptures were selected for examination in this document, as they are often cited as obvious and apparent passages barring women from preaching, leadership, teaching, or any ministry influencing the church at large.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16 (NIV)

Focus: Verse 3 - "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

- What does this mean? Is Paul teaching that women are subordinate to men and therefore should not minister without permission or only in submission to men? If we read this verse in isolation, we might come to that conclusion. But when we read it in its broader context, we see something different. Paul is writing to the predominantly Greek church in Corinth and responding to questions they had asked him in a previous letter. His responses begin in 1 Corinthians 7:1—“Now concerning the things of which you wrote me...” and continue through this section in chapter 11.
- At first reading, Paul seems to contradict himself regarding women publicly ministering. But when we recognize that this is a letter, the format becomes clearer. Verses 1–2 affirm the church. Verses 3–10 reiterate the cultural gender beliefs and practices the Corinthian church was asking about, while verses 11–13 and 16 provide Paul’s instruction in response to those cultural norms.
- The cultural context is important. For example, Corinth was a Greek church, and Greek customs regarding men’s and women’s appearance differed from Jewish customs. Jewish men traditionally covered their heads in worship. Paul is addressing the cultural norms of the Corinthian church, not establishing those cultural practices as universal Christian requirements.
- Paul makes a distinct transition in verse 11: “Nevertheless...” This signals that he is moving from the cultural norms being discussed to his instruction for the church.
- So what is Paul actually teaching? Verses 11–12 make his point clear:
- “In the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”
- Paul emphasizes the interdependence of men and women, while ultimately pointing both back to God. In light of this teaching, Paul tells the Corinthian church to judge for themselves how men and women should appropriately dress when publicly ministering in their cultural context.
- Then, in verse 16, Paul makes clear that there is no universal practice regarding these matters across the churches. Therefore, the Corinthians should respect the appropriate cultural distinctions between men and women in how they present themselves while ministering.
- This passage is not about women needing permission from men to minister or being subordinate to men in ministry. Verses 4–5 affirm that both men and women publicly pray and prophesy when the church gathers.
- The issue Paul addresses is cultural decorum, not ministry eligibility. In Corinth, gender influenced how men and women were expected to appear when they ministered publicly—not whether they were permitted to minister.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NIV)

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

- This passage can feel particularly difficult because it raises an obvious question: What church do you know where women are completely silent? Are we all contradicting Scripture?
- If Paul were instructing women never to speak in church, he would seem to contradict himself and the many ways women are affirmed and included in ministry throughout the New Testament and his own letters. So we need to look more closely at what Paul is addressing.
- There are two possible explanations for these verses within the broader context of the chapter.
- In chapter 14, his primary concern is *order in worship*, particularly regarding prophecy and speaking in tongues. Immediately before verses 34–35, Paul writes: “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.” (v. 33)

1. Paul may be correcting disruptive speech

- In verses 28 and 30, Paul gives two other situations in which people are instructed to remain silent so that worship does not become chaotic or confusing. These instructions apply to both men and women. It is possible, then, that verses 34–35 address a specific situation involving women who were speaking disruptively during worship.
- Culturally, there were women priestesses in some non-Christian Greek gatherings who were associated with speaking in tongues and practices that could produce confusion rather than clarity and edification. It is possible that some Christian women in Corinth were imitating these practices, and Paul was correcting them. His instruction that these women should learn at home could then be understood as a way for them to gain understanding so they could participate more appropriately in the worship gathering. The point would still be order and the building up of the church, not a universal command for women to remain silent. A command for all women to be silent would neither fit easily with Paul's encouragement just a few chapters earlier for women to pray and prophesy publicly (1 Corinthians 11:5), nor with his broader affirmation of women participating in ministry.

2. Paul may be repeating a cultural belief in order to challenge it

- A second possibility follows the same basic logic we see in 1 Corinthians 11: Paul may be reiterating a cultural belief held by the Corinthian church in order to challenge it.
- Throughout chapter 14, Paul addresses both men and women and encourages the church to participate in worship together (v. 26). In verses 27–32, he explains when people should remain silent so that worship does not become confusing or disorderly. He then concludes in verse 33 by emphasizing that God is a God of peace and order.
- Then verses 34–35 abruptly state that women should not speak in church and should instead learn from their husbands at home. This is followed by Paul's strong response in verse 36:
- "Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?"
- Paul's response could be understood almost rhetorically: "Where did you get this idea? Do you really think this is the standard for all God's churches?"
- Under this interpretation, verses 34–35 represent a commonly held cultural belief by some in Corinth that women should remain silent in church and learn at home. Paul then challenges that thinking in verses 36–37, affirming that anyone who believes they have a spiritual gift should follow his instructions (expressed prior to vs.34) for orderly worship. The standard is not gender, but whether the gift is exercised in a way that reflects the God of order and peace.
- Either way, the larger context is important. Paul is not presenting a blanket prohibition against women speaking or ministering in the church. The chapter is addressing orderly worship, appropriate participation, and the building up of the body of Christ. Verses 34–35 must therefore be understood alongside Paul's instruction only three chapters earlier, where women are clearly participating in public worship through prayer and prophecy.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 (NIV)

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing— if they continue in faith, loved and holiness with propriety."

- There are several important things to consider when interpreting this passage. First, the purpose of 1 Timothy is for Paul to instruct and encourage Timothy as he addresses false teachers troubling the church in Ephesus, the same church to which Ephesians was later written.
- It is also important to recognize who was already serving in leadership in Ephesus. Priscilla was a prominent female leader in the early church. Paul commends Priscilla and Aquila in Romans 16:3–4, and Acts 18:19–21 indicates that they were ministering in Ephesus. While there, they took the gifted evangelist Apollos aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Luke even names Priscilla first, which may suggest her prominent role in this teaching.
- So how could Paul prohibit women from leading or teaching when a woman was already exercising significant ministry leadership? The key is the word translated in the NIV as “to assume authority.” The Greek word is *authentein*. Its meaning is debated, but proposed translations include “to exercise authority,” “to control or domineer,” and “to usurp or assume authority.” This creates an important distinction: saying that a woman may not usurp authority or exercise domineering control is different from saying that women may not hold positions of authority or teach.
- In light of Paul’s broader affirmation of women in ministry and leadership throughout the New Testament, this passage can be understood as Paul prohibiting women from usurping leadership or exercising authority in a domineering way, rather than universally prohibiting women from teaching or leading. That fits the servant-leadership model expected of every follower of Jesus, male or female.
- Paul then grounds his instruction in creation, the Fall, and redemption (vv. 13–15), drawing from Genesis 2–3. Some interpret this as teaching that men are inherently superior to women. But Paul’s statement about salvation through childbearing points in another direction: the woman who participated in bringing about the Fall also participates in God’s redemptive story through giving birth to Jesus, who breaks the curse of the Fall. Paul also clearly believed that both men and women could live single, devoted lives within the church. Therefore, “saved through childbearing” cannot mean that women are only fulfilled through having children or focusing exclusively on their families. Rather, Paul is pointing to God’s redemptive work through the woman who gave birth to the Messiah. In Christ and his Kingdom, there is no longer a hierarchy of spiritual worth between men and women.
- Finally, the context of false teaching is essential. Paul is instructing Timothy on how to restore a church being troubled by false teaching. He uses Eve as an example of how deception can lead to sin and instructs women who are vulnerable to false teaching to learn in quietness and submission. Yet the two specific false teachers Paul names in this letter are men—Hymenaeus and Alexander—whom Paul says have been “handed over to Satan” (1:20). The language of quietness and submission itself is not unique to women. Elsewhere, Paul calls followers of Jesus to live quiet and peaceful lives (1 Timothy 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:11) and to submit to one another.
- Therefore, this passage is best understood within its specific context: Paul is instructing Timothy on how to bring restoration to a church suffering from false teaching and disorder. It is not necessarily a universal prohibition against women teaching or leading, but a specific instruction concerning learning, deception, and the proper exercise of authority within a troubled church.

The Assemblies of God & Women in Ministry

North Ridge Church is part of the General Council of Churches that make up the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal fellowship. The Assemblies of God has historical roots in the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, which was marked by diversity: cultural, socio-economic, ethnic, and gender. In holding to these

dynamic beginnings, the Assemblies of God has credentialed and supported ministry for men and women from its founding in 1914. This position is not a contemporary shift but an affirmation of our ecclesial identity to a century-long standard of diversity and inclusion.

- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit plays a significant role in the formation and advancement of the cooperative fellowship of The Assemblies of God. In the early 1900's a significant outpouring of the Holy Spirit was believed to be the fulfillment of the early church prophecy, "Your sons and daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days..." (Acts 2:16-19).
- From the inception of The Assemblies of God, women full of the Spirit of God have led powerfully both in the United States and abroad. Notable early leaders included Maria B Woodworth-Etter, Aimee Semple McPherson, Alice Reynolds Flower, Anna Ziese, and Marie Burgess Brown.
- At present, there are women worldwide who are leading within the Assemblies of God in all forms and functions of leadership. As a credentialing agency, The AG does not discriminate against women being called by God to any leadership position. The calling and equipping of a minister of the gospel is not determined or limited by gender, but is based on gifts given by the Spirit who gives to the church indiscriminately.

Women in Leadership as Elders/Overseers

1 Timothy 3:1-7 (NASB)

"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires [to do]. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. [He must be] one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), [and] not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside [the church], so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

- We understand 1 Timothy 3:1-7 not as a prohibition against women serving as elders/overseers, but as primarily a description of the character qualifications and faithfulness God desires in those who lead His church.
- In the original Greek, masculine language was often used as the grammatical default, much like we say in English, "those guys" or "mankind", which includes both male and female. The use of "he" in English translations is not a word-for-word translation, as specific male pronouns are not used in this passage (1 Timothy 3:1-7) in the original Greek.
 - For example 1 Timothy 3:1 reads in the English translation (NASB) *"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires [to do]."*
 - The original Greek word translated 'man' here is 'tis'. This is not a male pronoun. It can be translated as, "some, anyone, one, anything, any, someone, something."
- The original Greek passage does not literally or loosely prohibit females in the role of overseer/elder. The consistent absence of gender specific pronouns throughout the passage clarifies that the passage is meant to be read with emphasis on character for whomever, and not gender specific roles.

- Seeing this passage as a prohibition to women in leadership would be similar to reading it as an elder/overseer must be married to serve in this role. This seems too far-reaching, and should be seen similarly to excluding women from the role.
- Quoting theologian and scholar Philip Payne, the closest English equivalent to “man of one-woman” is “monogamous,” and it applies to both men and women. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines monogamy on p. 920, “1. *the practice or state of being married to only one person at a time* 2. *[Rare] the practice of marrying only once during life...*” ¹
- As an Assemblies of God church, we affirm that Scripture does not prohibit women from serving in any position of church leadership. We hold a deep and high view of Scripture.
 - Our desire is not to make the Bible fit a more progressive perspective, but to faithfully understand and live out what Scripture is actually teaching. We believe women serving in leadership is not a departure from the authority of God’s Word, but a faithful response to it.

¹<https://bbpayne.com/does-one-woman-man-in-1-timothy-32-require-that-all-overseers-be-male>

Additional Resources

What Paul Really Says About Women in Ministry , Parts 1-3 George P. Wood in <i>Influence Magazine</i>	Theology Matters , Women in Ministry, Dr. Allen Tennison
Women in Ministerial Leadership , Position Paper of The Assemblies of God by The General Presbytery	What Paul Really Taught About Women in Ministry , Waldemar Kowalski in <i>Influence Magazine</i>