

Should Women Serve as Pastors?

Dorothy Kelley Patterson

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The Center for Theological Research
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas
Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, Director

A Biblical Model

1 Corinthians 11:3-10

³But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. ⁶For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. ⁷For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man is not from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. ¹⁰For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor women independent of man, in the Lord.

Paul shows that the relative position of men and women is like the hierarchical structure within the Godhead: “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (v. 3). The Father planned redemption; the Son enacted the plan; the Spirit revealed that plan to us. The home is the primary metaphor used to describe Christ’s relationship to His Church, and one cannot separate the home and the church in divine order because the underlying principles are the same.

Complementarians—those who accept both equality and beneficial differences between men and women—hold that man and woman were created equally in the image of God (Gen 1:27-28); they are equal in their position in Christ (Gal 3:28), and they are equally responsible before God (1 Pet 3:7). However, if the equality of personhood and position in Christ mandates uniformity and the erasure of differences in function and role for believers, then relationships within the Tri-unity of the Godhead may become either misleading or erroneous.

For example, the Bible clearly states that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in being and personhood (John 1:1; 5:23; 10:38; 14:6, 7, 9, 11). Yet Scripture is just as clear that there is a difference in office and function within the Tri-unity. The Son voluntarily is subject (even subordinate) to the Father (John 5:19-20; 6:38; 8:28-29, 54; 1 Cor 15:28; Phil 2:5-11), and the Holy Spirit is sent by and under the direction of the Father with the assignment to glorify the Son (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14).

The hierarchy within the Godhead does not pertain to worth—to being more or less God—but rather addresses function within the divine plan. The same is true of role assignments for men and women. Just as Persons within the Tri-unity have separate and distinct functions, God gave different responsibilities to men and women. In God’s plan, the man was given authority over the woman.

Just as Christ is not less than fully God because the Father is His head or “authority” (Phil 2:5-11), the woman is not an inferior person because the man is her head or “authority” (Eph 5:22-24). The Son’s deity is not dependent upon a denial of the Father’s headship. God sovereignly set the general boundaries for leadership among men and women without regard for an individual’s ability or giftedness to perform the service involved.

Paul appeals (1 Cor 11:9) to the account of Creation (Gen 2) rather than to the story of the Fall (Gen 3), because the divine assignments are clearly given before the Fall (Gen 2:15-24). These distinct roles have never been abolished, but they have been distorted and perverted as a result of the Fall.

The man is given a threefold task. First, he is charged with “tending” or working the garden so that it will be fruitful, providing sustenance. He is also to “keep” (protect or preserve) or care for the garden. Finally, God gives to the man alone—before the woman was created—the most important commandment: not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Disobedience to this command would lead to certain death. Being entrusted with these responsibilities is indicative of the leadership role assigned to the man (Gen 2:15-17). One created to “help” should certainly understand that to be a supportive role to the one you are helping (Gen 2:18, 21-23). And, most importantly, the Creator Himself is worthy of absolute obedience.

Let’s be fair: Paul clearly states his commitment to role distinctions (1 Cor 11:3-10), while certainly indicating that he did not consider the woman to be inferior or less vital to the kingdom (vv. 11-12). This passage allows and affirms, but does not mandate, participation in worship by both men and women. Women are free to pray and prophesy in the church, but they are admonished to do so with an attitude of submission to male leadership. This attitude was illustrated in that culture by the wearing of a head covering.

A Warning

1 Timothy 2:8-15

⁸I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; ⁹in like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly clothing, ¹⁰but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. ¹¹Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. ¹²And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. ¹⁵Nevertheless she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with self-control.

Following the appeal for a modest appearance and faithful good works is a call for “silence” and “submission,” which denotes more an attitude of “quietness” rather than an absence of sound. There is no suggestion of a surrender of mind or conscience or private judgments. This submissive attitude cannot be forced, as can obedience, but is rather a willingness on the part of one to yield to the will of another. Other passages clearly

affirm that the silence mandated here and in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 does not exclude women from participating in worship services since they may both pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5).

Paul admonishes the women to receive instruction quietly, encouraging both spiritual and intellectual growth. He then forbids them to teach men or exercise authority over men—two different functions strangely bound together, with neither task exclusively forbidden, since women can both teach and lead within defined boundaries. God sets the general boundaries for spiritual leadership sovereignly and without regard for the individual's ability to perform the service involved.

To equate feminine submission with slavery or racial injustice is to grasp at an emotional red herring at best and to embrace blatant distortion at worst. There is no theological or exegetical requirement in the text of Scripture for the establishment or continuation of slavery or racial discrimination. However, the Scriptures declare that women are to be submissive because of the order of Creation (1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:11-13; 1 Pet 3:1-2).

Paul does not prohibit Christian women from teaching. Women taught children (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15; Prov 1:8); they instructed other women (Titus 2:3-4); and on occasion they shared understandings with men on a personal level (Acts 18:26). However, the grammatical structure here indicates two distinct functions: A woman should neither teach men nor exercise authority over men. Such teaching and authority are clearly identified with, though not limited to, the pastoral office (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7, 17).

Paul does not leave his readers to conjecture that the directive to women not to teach men or to exercise authority over men is for the first century alone. The theological origin for this directive in worship is again the creation order. The order of creation establishes the man's natural and spiritual headship and the woman's role as his helper. This fact precludes the position of those egalitarians who hold that male/female roles are a direct result of the Fall. The creation order was established in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall.

Paul then proceeds to show the disastrous effect of this role reversal in the garden (Gen 3:1-17). He doesn't absolve Adam of guilt, but he points not only to Eve's violation of the divine command concerning the forbidden fruit but also to the reversal of divine order in which Eve independently made this important decision, thereby refusing to submit to Adam, who at the same time abdicated his spiritual leadership.

An Exhortation Especially for Women

Titus 2:3-5

³The older women likewise, that they be reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; ⁴that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, ⁵to be discreet chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

As a woman, I am astounded and concerned when self-styled “biblical feminists” imply that teaching men has higher value or importance than teaching women, children, and young people! Women teaching women is “spiritual mothering” in which spiritually mature women share through teaching and lifestyle the importance of carrying into daily life an example of holiness as well as voluntarily submitting themselves to God’s order for the welfare of the family.

The curriculum in Titus 2:3-5 includes the relationships of a woman in the home to her husband and to her children, her personal holiness and character, and the domain of her work and activity. Interestingly the list begins and ends with the relationship of the younger woman to her husband.

Single women are not excluded from this challenge to teach and model Christian character. They can exercise their divinely-given nature by acting as “spiritual mothers” to others, which includes keeping their homes as a refuge for those whom God may send to them.

Mary and Martha opened their humble home to the Lord Himself for rest and fellowship (John 12:1-11). There He found a quiet place to sleep, nourishing meals, and comforting friends with whom to relax.

Lydia, a prominent businesswoman, surely must have given money and witnessed verbally to the kingdom cause. Yet, although she was respected and honored in the community for her education, position, and business expertise, she was primarily commended for her hospitality (Acts 16:14-15, 40).

Conclusion

The real issue is not what women can or cannot do in the church but how they respond to the authority of the Bible. Nothing in Scripture suggests that godly women assumed positions of authority over men in the home or in the church. This fact is consistently illustrated by biblical history from beginning to end. In both Old and New Testaments male leadership is overwhelmingly the pattern—whether priests, kings, prophets, judges, or the inspired authors of Scripture. Women indeed share the gospel and do nurturing in the faith, performing a myriad of kingdom tasks—all within biblical boundaries and in harmony with the creation order.

Gilbert Bilezikian and others attribute Jesus’ choice of twelve men to be His apostles as “cultural constraint,” which would have made the ministry of women unacceptable. However, such reasoning would put Jesus at odds with Paul’s exhortation, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold” (Rom 12:2 Phillips). To attribute anything done by Jesus as accommodating to culture is unacceptable and inappropriate.

Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus compromise on moral issues because of cultural pressures. Such an implication impugns His integrity and courage and even His deity and sinless nature. Jesus was a part of the culture of His day, but He must be above and sometimes even against culture. Certainly He must never be bound by culture! The pure Word of God endures across cultures and appropriates itself from age to age with vigor and relevance.

Service to God within the church can never be a purely private matter. Jesus rebuked the Thyatiran church for letting Jezebel, who “called” herself a prophetess, teach (Rev 2:20); whereas He commended the Ephesian church for testing those who while claiming to be apostles were liars (Rev 2:2). Thus, when a woman “feels called” to do a work that on scriptural grounds is not only beyond God’s design for her in creation but also in violation of His written Word, that work must be judged by the church.

Ultimately, neither supreme intelligence, unequalled logic, nor extraordinary gifts will settle this issue. What is relevant today may be irrelevant before the ink is dry on this manuscript. One must not abandon the principles that have linked and governed God’s two most important institutions—the home and the church—at the whim of a cultural revolution. Maleness and femaleness are the very foundation of God’s created order, carefully chosen as the divine vehicle for maintaining His order and purpose.

The church seeks not to suppress but to ensure full and proper use of ministries in a divinely given framework based upon the natural order of creation and the appropriateness of function. You cannot separate the home and the church in the divine order. They are inextricably bound together in principle and metaphor as well as in purpose and practice. You cannot negate truths concerning the structure of home and church, such as the image of the relationship between God and Israel and between Christ and the church, just to satisfy cultural whim or to accommodate higher plateaus of education and opportunity. The passages discussed here are grounded in timeless principles, illustrated by historical observations, and explained by theological arguments. They are not illustrations for a particular church or cultural era; they are commands for believers through the ages.

The text of Scripture affirms that women with varied positions of service, influence, leadership, and teaching functioned in the early church with modesty and order (1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:40), and these women did not teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim 2:11-15; 1 Cor 14:33-35). My fervent prayer is that women like you and me will work under the clear authority of His Word, neither seeking recognition nor demanding higher office, but making every effort to serve the Lord and trust Him to open opportunities appropriate to our gifts, giving us usefulness despite our limitations and beyond our expectations.

PROSCRIPTIVE OPPORTUNITIES

1. Women are encouraged to learn in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Women can view this passage as both presenting challenge and giving commendation that they have been gifted to model one of the highest callings of the church: to listen quietly to God's voice and then use what they have learned in appropriate arenas of influence.
2. Spiritually-mature women are exhorted to instruct the younger women (Titus 2:3-5), and they are given an explicit outline of what to teach.
3. Women share equal responsibility in teaching in the home (Deut 6:7-9).
4. Women are to share the gospel (1 Pet 3:15).
5. Women may pray and prophesy in the church (1 Cor 11:5).
6. Women are uniquely prepared to be guardians of the home and nurturers of the children (Prov 31:10-31).
7. Women are given boundaries (1 Tim 2:11-15) within which to exercise all their spiritual gifts. Only two restrictions are given within two spheres: teaching men or ruling over men in the home and in the church.

DESCRIPTIVE MODELS

1. Priscilla joined her husband Aquila in instructing Apollos (Acts 18:26).
2. Women like Mark's mother Mary and Lydia of Thyatira opened their homes for meetings of believers and practiced hospitality (Acts 12:12; 16:14-15).
3. By His own divine fiat, God reserves the right to make exceptions through the unexpected or extraordinary, such as calling Deborah to be a judge of Israel (Judg 4-5).
4. Paul mentions women, like the highly capable Phoebe, with favor (Rom 16:1-2) and employs women in the service of the gospel (Phil 4:3).
5. Women offered themselves in special ministries to Jesus (John 12:1-11).
6. Women are mentioned as prophetesses: Miriam, who led the women of Israel (Exod 15:20); Huldah, whose only prophecy in Scripture was to a man who consulted her at home (2 Kgs 22:14-20); and, Noadiah, who was labeled a false prophetess (Neh 6:1-14); as well as, Anna (Luke 2:36-40) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9), though the text does not place their prophesying in the assemblies.

PRESCRIPTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Commit yourself to line up under the authority of Scripture. Jesus neither criticized nor questioned Old Testament authority. He believed all of Scripture. Beware of judging biblical teaching so that infallibility falls on your shoulders. Let Scripture interpret Scripture, knowing that all Scripture works together to present God's truth to you (Ps 119:130-136).
2. Examine the positions yourself by going to primary sources. Two organizations representing different viewpoints are the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (representing complementarians) and Christians for Biblical Equality (representing egalitarians). Both of these organizations can recommend watershed books to help you understand their respective positions.
3. Do not accept any scholar's interpretation without demanding to see documentation and then carefully examining it (1 John 4:1).
4. Consult classic commentaries that have stood the test of time.
5. Require from Christian journals, periodicals, and your own denomination a fair representation—open forums with equally qualified proponents—to discuss these issues.

**Dorothy Kelley Patterson,
D. Theol.**

**First Lady and Professor of Theology in
Women's Studies
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary**

