

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

A HISTORICAL LOOK

Any attempt to tackle this topic will meet with resistance from some level. This issue is massively misunderstood and has historically suffered from poor insight and bias. We will walk slow and deep into the foray of women and their place in ministry, believing that God has a clear plan for us to follow even if the journey is rough.

Before we embark on a look at the role of women in the church, we must do a historical review of the roles of both men and women, as these historical precedents tremendously impact our views on women in ministry. **Genesis 5:1-2** is an appropriate place to begin:

“1This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. 2He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created.”

A clear historical view of men and women in scripture will go a long way toward a biblical understanding of the issue as it is dealt with in the New Testament. At the outset, it is important to note that God named both men and women Adam. Verse 2 states that they were named “Man,” the Hebrew word is the same word used in verse 1 that is often translated Adam. In both cases the word is the Hebrew word *Adam*. It can be used for generic man or the specific person Adam.

Chapter 2 gives a more specific account of creation and is often quoted in relation to men and women. In fact, when it is quoted in **Ephesians 5:31** it makes it clear that God’s original plan or intent in **Genesis 2** is still His redemptive plan in the New Testament.

Genesis 3 introduces us to the text that holds what is generally known as the fall of man. We meet face to face the horrendous curse that entered into humanity from the disobedience of Adam and Eve, man’s lost authority and the entry of death into the plan of life. After the pronouncement of the curse in **chapter 3:14-19** a seemingly innocuous statement is made in verse 20: **“Now the man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living.”** It is very important to note that this was the first time women hadn’t been called *Adam*. Eve had no name until the fall of man. Both she and Adam were named *Adam*. Until the fall they had one identity. She had a generic term that defined her, the name woman in **Genesis 2:22**, but their oneness was so complete that they shared one name *Adam*. The devastation of the fall was monumental. Identity was lost, hope was lost, balance was lost, life was lost and intimacy was lost. In summary, the curse was total and devastating.

For women the curse bore the pain of childbirth and the strain of a desire for a co-ruling position that was lost. **Genesis 3:16** clearly states her situation: **“To the woman He said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth; In pain you will bring forth children. Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’”** This statement, “your desire,” is the word *tshuga*. It means to desire, to long, to crave something. In this case, the desire would be for position. The curse had effectually destroyed the intimate and balanced roles of men and women. Now there would be a hungering desire on women’s part to return to that co-ruling position with man. This is not a judgment on the skill or ability of women; it is a reality of the curse. The last part of verse 16 declares, **“And he will rule over you”** (*mashal* – oversight), this oversight that the curse ushered in does not carry the connotation of men bossing women around because they are the king of the castle. This authority conferred on man as a leader would be directed by clear and thoughtful boundaries. Redeeming boundaries, such as **Ephesians 5:23-25**:



“23For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ so loved the church and gave Himself up for her...”

There would be authority and there would be submission. Anytime there is authority there will be submission issues. Men have abused authority and women long for their intended role as a co-leader. Men are directed to love their wives as Christ loved the church. If we did this there would be very little our wives would struggle with. Jesus' love for the church and people positions Him more than any one person who ever walked the planet to understand the need for redemption and redemptive values. Clearly there would be strife after the fall and there must be a head, a leader. This does not indicate inferiority of women or superiority of man, but it does imply a functional difference in roles. There is no reflection on skills or gifts here. The bible does not teach a subservient role for woman in regards to man, but clearly the roles are defined as those between the husband and wife. A quick look at **I Peter 3:5-7** affirms these roles:

“5For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; 6just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. 7You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.”

A REDEMPITIVE PLAN

The cross was meant to deliver us into a redemptive plan that would restore us and continue to redeem us from the curse in an ongoing fashion. **II Corinthians 1:10** makes this clear, **“who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us.”**

Many reject any reference to the Old Testament concerning the role of women in the church as biased and unjust due to the prevailing patriarchal atmosphere. This view must be tempered with the heart that God revealed through Jesus toward women. There was much that had grown out of the Old Testament that needed clarifying and restoring when Jesus arrived on the scene and He immediately set about challenging and dismantling a broken and contrived system that the Pharisees had used to enslave people. (See the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount).

NEW TESTAMENT

One of the things Jesus did often and well was challenge the status of women. Take a brief look at Jesus' ministry with women, as He obviously sets the pace for the role of women in the New Testament church. Jesus: 1) Broke Rabbinical tradition and talked with women (including the Samaritan woman, [**John 4:7**]). 2) Healed women (**Luke 13:10-12**). 3) Taught them (**Luke 10:38-42**). 4) Defended their right to be taught (**Luke 10:42**). 5) Included them in parables (**Matthew 13:33**). 6) Allowed them to travel with Him (**Luke 8:1-2**).

Jesus broke tradition in His ministry to and with women, offering them the self worth they are due. Yet, He also did not call any women as apostles (**Matthew 10:1-42**), nor did He send women out to preach, teach or heal (**Matthew 10:5**).



OLD TESTAMENT

The role of women in the Old Testament church was interesting and complex. Women were expected at the three major feasts (**Deuteronomy 16:11,14**). Peninnah took a portion to sacrifice and seek forgiveness for sin (**I Samuel 1:4**). This we know, women participated in worship services at some level. **Leviticus 12** outlines the sacrifices a woman should offer after giving birth and even though only Priests could go inside, women ministered (*saba* – serving in army, service, same word used for Levite Priests in **Numbers 4:23**) at the door of the tent of meeting (**Exodus 38:8 & I Samuel 2:22**). This seemed to be a regular ongoing ministry, “possibly of prayer” (Foh. Pg. 83). She could take the vow of a Nazarite to separate herself to the Lord just as a man could (**Numbers 6**). Women participated during the teaching and reading of the law according to **Deuteronomy 31:12**, “**Assemble the people, the men and the women and children, that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law.**” She could also pray without assistance of a priest (**Genesis 16:7-13**). These items show that the woman had more than a passing role in the Old Testament church and worship services.

We also know women held places of leadership in the Old Testament both in the government and in the service of the temple. Deborah was a prophetess (nebia from nabi – authorized spokesman) (as were Miriam, Huldah & Noadiah) who “**was judging Israel**” (**Judges 4:4**). Some Old Testament women were called wise (*kokma*, **II Samuel 14:2**), as well as industrious and active (**Proverbs 31**).

We see the Old Testament woman was involved in learning the law, sacrificing to receive cleansing from sin, serving at the church (tent of meeting), prophesying, and prayer, as well as in government judging Israel. Though, before leaving the Old Testament we should also see that the women were not seen as priests, teachers or readers of the law.

EARLY CHURCH

As we move to the early church the role of women begins to come into focus as we find: 1) Women joined with men in the upper room praying at Pentecost (**Acts 1:14**). 2) Women receiving the gifts of the Spirit (**I Corinthians 12:7**). 3) They received Christ and were baptized (**Acts 5:14 & 8:12**). 4) They were persecuted (**Acts 9:2**). 5) They were prophetesses (**Acts 21:9**). 6) They were teachers; Priscilla and her husband Aquila “**explained** (*Exethento* – anointed – set forth) **the way of God to Apollos**” (**Acts 18:26**). 7) Women were called fellow workers (**Philippians 4:3**). Finally, we find women as leaders in the early church in the role of deacons in **Romans 16:1**.

PROBLEM TEXTS

This discussion is fraught with difficult and often misunderstood texts that must be addressed to clarify New Testament purpose and ministry direction for women. It is crucial to remember the outcome of the curse and its affect on the role of women as it pertains to ruling and leading. She has always lived with a natural desire to lead. She was created to lead and shared leadership with *Adam* prior to the fall. That natural desire comes into play in the formulation of many of the New Testament texts concerning women and ministry, particularly when these texts are offering a framework that promotes God’s redemptive plan for women.

I Corinthians 11

Beginning in I Corinthians 11:3-15 (please look up and read). Paul outlines two key issues: headship and head coverings. In verse 3, “Christ is the head of every man, and man (*aner*) is the head (*kephale*) of women.” Paul uses this term *aner* often, and how it is translated is crucial to any and all discussion pertaining to women and ministry. *Aner* is used 15 times in chapter 7 and it is translated “husband” each time, not man. The word is used commonly in both situations, for husband and man; the KJV translates it husband 34 out of the 59 times it is used in the New Testament and 18 of the remaining times a cursory review reveals that it appears to reference husbands even though it is translated



man. That leaves 6 times that it is clearly used for man or men. It is important to note this as it is entirely possible that the husband was being referenced in some of Paul's texts where we have translated it in different versions, man or men. This change directly impacts what the author is communicating. An obvious instance is at hand here in verse 3. If *aner* is referencing husband, then the husband is the head of the wife. If it is men or man, then men are the head of women.

As to this text, clarifying women and their role in ministry, verse 5a certainly gives credence to the fact that women can and do minister in public gatherings, i.e. the local church. They obviously do "have a say" or the ability and position to speak during a service as 5a states "every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head." What this covering is, isn't exactly clear, though I believe Paul is speaking of her hair. What is clear here is New Testament women would pray and prophesy in public meetings or the local church.

I Corinthians 14

This seems to fly in the face of texts exhorting her to keep quiet in church. These texts obviously cannot mean she never speaks if she can pray and prophesy. The context of I Corinthians 11 is the public meeting of the church, so how can this be reconciled with I Corinthians 14:34-35 which states:

"34The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35If they desire to learn anything let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."

Before we answer that question, a quick historical look at Acts chapters 1 and 2 would be in order. Acts 1:14 tells us women were present at this meeting in the upper room: "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers."

After the Spirit is poured out in Acts 2, Peter begins to defend what has taken place; he quotes from Joel chapter 2, which clearly includes women in prophesying so it is again apparent that women are gifted with public ministry gifts.

It is sufficiently clear women will function in public ministry in this newly birthed church. We know this actively took place in the New Testament church when we read of Phillip's four daughters in Acts 21:9 that were "prophetesses." Thus, any declaration that women cannot speak or lead in church can and should be challenged. It is abundantly clear that this happened in the Old Testament with Deborah, Miriam, and others previously mentioned. Furthermore, II Corinthians 3:7-8 declares that the glory of the New Testament surpasses the glory of the old covenant, so it would certainly stand to reason that women would have an even greater role in New Testament ministry than they did in the Old Testament.

Phoebe is an example of this as we find her in Romans 16:1-2, defined in terms of leadership as she is commended by Paul:

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; 2that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."

She is referred to first as our sister, so we know this is a female. But Paul also refers to her as a "servant" (*diakonon* - servant, minister, bearer of a specific office, deacon) "of the church in Cenchreae." This role of deacon is a leading role of significance. I Timothy 3:11 confirms this leadership office for women.



I Timothy 3

The context of **I Timothy chapter 3** is important here. First, if as some have said, vs. 3:10-11 refers to deacons' wives when it states, **"10But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless.**

11Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things." Why is there no exhortation concerning elders' wives in **verses 1-7** as it is the highest office? In the midst of instruction to deacons, Paul states, **"Women must likewise, be dignified,"** an obvious reference to the office at hand. In **vs. 8**, he uses the same terminology to introduce a break in the text from elder, to address the office of deacon. This indicates a similar break to introduce the office for women.

RECONCILING PROBLEM PASSAGES

How then do we reconcile the role of women in leadership in the church with the two most confining texts declaring that women must remain silent in the church, those found in **I Corinthians 14:35** and **I Timothy 2:8**? First we will explore the wording in the passage found in **I Corinthians 14:34-35** where instruction is given by Paul:

"34The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."

There are a couple of key textual insights that come into play here. First is the word silent, or *sigao*; this word is used by Paul in this chapter two verses earlier when addressing tongues in the church. One of the standing rules of bible interpretation, also known as hermeneutics, is that if at all possible, allow the bible to interpret itself. Find the same word and see the context in which it is used. This is particularly true if it is used by the same author in the same context, passage or book.

Fortunately, that is exactly what we have in the case of the word silent or *sagao*. If we want to know exactly what Paul meant by telling women to remain silent we need to look at Paul's intent in **verse 28**. Does the command to keep silent in the service if there is no interpreter mean they should never speak in tongues? No, it is quite obvious from **verse 27** that tongue speaking was to go on with an interpreter present; the Greek lexicon's definition of *sagao* supports this position, defining *sagao* as, **"to hold ones piece."** The emphasis is not on an external command to remain quiet, but from an internal decision to **"hold your piece."** What does this mean for women? They need to hang back, hold back and allow men to speak and lead. Restraint is the sense this passage gives. **This has to do with the intuitive sense of women to move and speak into spiritual matters in an initiating fashion. This is the struggle of the curse previously mentioned.**

Church history tells us the early church sermons may have consisted of question and answer discussions, (**Acts 20:7**, **"having been assembled to break bread Paul lectured (dielegeto – to converse, reason) to them."** **I Corinthians 14:35** would fit this context **"let them ask their own husbands at home."** **I Timothy 2:8- 15** would support this position. In **vs. 8**, Paul instructs the men in proper worship, addressing their heart attitude as vital, **"without wrath or dissension."** In **vs. 11 & 12**, he does the same for women stating, **"Let a woman quietly (heesukiah pronounced hayKsooKkheeKah – quietness, to not meddle) receive instruction (manthano – present, active, imp. – to learn, be instructed) with entire (pase – complete, all) submissiveness" (hupottage – subordinating herself in every respect, usually military term meaning rank under, pg. 86 Vines).** In **vs. 12**, Paul elaborates, **"I do not allow (epitrepo – present, act, indic. to permit; present tense emphasizes the continual action and points to an abiding attitude, Reineker p. 621) women to teach" (didaskein – pres., act, infin. Aorist tense could have been used here to denote simple action but "present infin. Indicates a condition or process. This didaxai [aorist] is to teach, while didaskein [present vs. 2:12], is to be a teacher", Dana & Mantey p. 199).** Paul then is stating that a woman cannot be a teacher **"or exercise authority (authenteo pres., act., infin. – to be dominating, to execute your own hand or will) over a man, (aner) but to remain quiet."** Is that really what he is saying?



Again we confront this term *aner*; was Paul directing wives to hold back and “remain quiet,” to not exercise authority over or teach her husband, or was this discourse referencing men in general? **Was he saying a wife shouldn’t be the spiritual leader of the home teaching her husband? Or was he stating a fundamental spiritual truth that all women had to submit to all men?**

The word that seems to hold the key to the context of Paul’s thought here is found in verse 11 of I Timothy 2, *heesukiah*, defined above as quietness, used in the text declaring, “let a women quietly receive instruction.”

Fortunately, this word, like *sagao*/silent, found in **I Corinthians 14** is used again by the same author in the same context, passage and book. Only 10 verses prior in **verse 2** Paul states, pray **“for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”**

The word translated “quiet” is the same word, *heesukiah*. What is Paul saying? Intercede and pray so no one can speak, so we can lead a tranquil or peaceable life, makes no sense in this context. Paul is communicating the need for prayer for leaders that will bring about a peaceable land. The root of this word means to sit or be still or tranquil. As in women, restrain the desire to lead and take over the role of your husband. With this in mind, Paul isn’t likely to be telling women they can never speak, but that they are to remain still and thoughtful, allowing men, *aner*, their husbands to step out of their comfort zone and initiate ministry, to lead. Clearly, the New Testament teaches that they are to submit to their husbands, but it never suggests that women in general submit to men, thus **verses 11-12** which reads:

**“11A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.
12But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”**

An apt paraphrase might be:

“A woman must be still and allow her husband to lead. I don’t allow a woman to teach or disciple her husband nor do I allow her to dominate or boss her husband around. She must restrain her spirit and let him lead.”

Verse 13 supports this context declaring, **“13For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. 14And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.”** Remember here that Adam and Eve were the first husband and wife in creation. Women were cursed with the pain of childbearing, and a desire to be restored to the role of leadership they lost. Both of these issues have been spoken to here and are addressed throughout scripture and support the context of women submitting to their husbands, not to men in general.

Proverbs 9:13 addresses the state of a woman who doesn’t want to restrain herself, **“The woman of folly is boisterous, she is naive and knows nothing.”** **I Peter 3:1-4** restates the need for women to restrain themselves in order to win an unbelieving husband, using same word *heesukiah*:

“1In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, 2as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 3Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; 4but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.”

Final Statement

It is very evident in the Old and New Testament that God has designed men and women for each other. We literally complete one another. The original design was to co-labor together as one. As sin entered that design it became disoriented so God created a plan that allows man and woman to feel complete while unfolding His redemption plan. The plan, women submit (*hypeikō* - to give away or yield) to their husbands, as husband submit to the church (**Ephesians 5:22-33**). Another way of looking at this is for a woman to give herself (her calling, God’s purpose in life for her) to her husband. As her husband does the exact same thing to the bride of Christ (Church). Why? Because “Husbands [are supposed to], love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”



FINAL STATEMENT

Hopefully we now have an understanding about women and the leadership rolls they have within the Church. Also, the rolls of a husbands and wives. With that in mind, it is very evident in the Old and New Testament that God has designed men and women for each other. We literally complete one another. The original design was to co-labor together as one. As sin entered that design it became disoriented so God created a plan that allows man and woman to feel complete while unfolding His redemption plan. The plan; women submit (*hypeikō* - to give away or yield) to their husbands, as husband submit to the church (**Ephesians 5:22-33**). Another way of looking at this is for a woman to give herself (her calling, God's purpose in life for her) to her husband. The husband is than supposed to do all that he can for her to fulfill that calling/purpose. Just as he gives himself to the bride of Christ (the Church). Why? Because “ **Husbands [are supposed to], love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**” Verse 25, “**just as Christ gave himself up for her (the Church)**” husbands must give themselves up for their wives. As they do wives become radiant, without any blemish to God. As the *ekklēsia*, or Church, we must co-labor with the community helping one another fulfill the calling/purpose God has for His people. This shows how Gods redemption plan allows us to once again fulfill the original design He created in the beginning, co-laboring with one another to bring glory to God.

The final thought is this, we cannot allow culture or our societies to dictate Gods calling in peoples lives no matter their gender. As the *ekklēsia* we must stand together and co-labor with one another to help find, understand and fulfill each others callings.



BIBLIOGRAPHY & SPECIAL THANKS

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