

WOMEN IN MINISTRY
CAN WOMEN TEACH IN THE CHURCH?
CAN A WOMAN BE AN ELDER?

A Vancouver Bible Fellowship Position Paper

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To begin we must recognize that both men and women receive spiritual gifts. The Scriptures point out that some women received the gift of prophecy (please see our position paper on prophecy) and can prophecy and pray in the congregation if they recognize the headship of their husbands (1 Cor. 11:1-16). Also, we see Paul instructing older women to teach the younger women in Titus 2:3-5. There is admittedly few New Testament references to women in ministry, specifically the teaching ministry. However, it is apparent that Priscilla and her husband Aquila were involved in the teaching ministry. They were the companions of the Apostle Paul in Ephesus and Corinth. Also, Priscilla with her husband taught Apollos, who was "mighty in the Scriptures," with no objection from Paul (Acts 18:24-26). So what is the problem with women teaching? There would be no problem except for two difficult passages on women teaching:

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Corinthians 14:34-35

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.
1 Timothy 2:11-12

On the surface these two passages prohibit women teaching in church. Is this what Paul meant? Two points must be addressed: First, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, would never say anything that would contradict his other writings. Remember, Paul approved of women praying and prophesying (please see our position paper on prophecy) in the church, if they and others recognized the headship and authority of their husbands (1 Cor 11:5). Secondly, the immediate context of each passage points to a problem that was being addressed.

These problems were disorder (1 Cor. 14:40) and dissension (1 Timothy 2:8) in church meetings. Most likely women and men were disrupting the services in Corinth with tongues, prophecies, revelations and teachings, which were out of order (1 Cor. 14:26-40). It is possible that these women defended their disruptions by saying that they needed to act in such a manner so that they could learn. Paul's solution for them is to tell them to "be quiet," "subject themselves," and to "learn" from their husbands "at home" (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

In Paul's instruction to Timothy concerning conduct in the church (1 Tim 3:15), he states that "women are to "quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness." He also does not allow a woman or better said, a wife (gunaiki.) to teach or to exercise authority (or possibly domineer) over a man, but she is to be "quiet" (1 Tim 2:11-15). Paul's reasoning for this command is the order of creation and that woman was deceived. Remember, woman was "quite deceived," yet, man was clearly rebellious.

What can we get from this passage: First, women are not to act like the Corinthian woman. They are to be submissive, quiet and orderly in church. They are not to disrupt the church meetings. Second and most important, women are not to “teach or exercise authority over a man.” The key to interpreting this passage is in verses 14-15. This is the portion in which Paul justifies his argument with a reference to Adam and Eve. Since woman was created after Adam and she was “quite deceived” in reference to God’s command (His authoritative Word), she is not to be in ultimate authority concerning the doctrines and teachings of the church or teach men in the church.

In conclusion, can women teach in the church? Yes, within certain biblical guidelines. We have seen that Paul allows women to prophecy (please see our position paper on prophecy). However, this prophesying must be in order and married women must recognize the headship of the husbands. Also, we have seen that the woman’s teaching must not challenge the authority of the male leaders in the congregation. Women are not to be in or appear to be in a position of leadership that exercises authority over men or be teaching men in church. **This we believe would prohibit women from pulpit ministry or any aspect of teaching where women are instructing men in the church.** With this in mind, women and men teachers are responsible to teach in accordance with the doctrine as established by the Word and approved by the elders. For elders have the authority and calling to oversee, establish and protect the church in sound doctrine (Tit. 1)

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This question assumes that the office of elder is biblical. Note that Paul uses the term elder (πρεσβυτέρος) and overseer or bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) to describe the same office and these terms are virtually synonymous (Titus 1:5, 7). Peter also sheds light on the usage of these terms. He states that “elders” (Πρεσβυτέρους) are to “exercise oversight” (ἐπισκοποῦντες) over the “flock of God” (1 Peter 5:1-2).

The New Testament is clear in its teaching on elders. Luke shares that elders were appointed by Paul and Barnabas in every church (Acts 14:23). Paul “called to him the elders of the church” at Ephesus for a tearful good by (Acts 20:17). He instructed them to “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28; italics mine). Paul instructed Titus to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5).

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, Paul gives the qualifications for elders. An open and obvious reading of these texts reveal this office is for men not woman. In the Greek text all the references are masculine in gender. One who would justify women eldership must ignore the plain teaching of the text. God has given men and women different roles. Even in the Trinity there are differing roles and headship (cf. 1 Cor.11:3). Christ is not demeaned to be under the headship of God is He? Is man demeaned because he cannot give birth? So also male eldership does not lessen the immense value of women. As Peter shares, women are to be honored as fellow heirs “of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7).