


# The Role of Women in the Church

by Patricia David



The issue of the role of women in the church has been a disturbing one. It has also been divisive. It is the historic stance of the holiness movement to allow and encourage the full participation of women in the ministry and to rightfully ordain them for service in the church. Let's look at some of the reasons why this is so.

The Bible has done more for the elevation of the role of women than any other book or movement throughout history. In fact, in any country where the gospel has been preached, women have gained rights. In many ancient civilizations (Israel included), women and children were considered unimportant and insignificant. They had almost no rights. But the New Testament promotes the worth and use of women in a way that was unprecedented at that time.

Notice the prominence given to women in Luke's gospel. Luke records the accounts of **Mary** and **Elizabeth** in chapter one. He talks of **Anna** the prophetess (chapter 2), the **widow of Nain** and the **sinful woman** who anointed Jesus' feet (chapter 7), **Mary Magdalene** and **Joanna** and **Susanna** (Chapter 8), **Martha** and her sister **Mary** (chapter 10), the **crippled woman** (chapter 13), the **widow** who gave all she had to God (chapter 21) and the "**Daughters of Jerusalem**" who mourned for Jesus as He was led to Calvary to die in chapter 23. Women are also used in parables in chapters 15 and 18. In a society where women were not very highly esteemed, Luke shows that Jesus had a genuine concern for them. Even in the book of Acts, which records the history of the early church, women are mentioned time and again: Acts 1:14, 16:14, 17:4, 17:12. Acts 2:18, quoting the prophet Joel, indicates that the Holy Spirit was poured out on women as well as men.

But does this liberating prominence indicate that women should be allowed to serve in the ministry? We would do well to remember at this point that God has often chosen to use women to serve Him. He used **Deborah** (Judges 4) to lead the people of Israel and to deliver them from their enemies (she led Israel for 40 years) and used a woman, **Jael**, to kill Israel's enemy, Sisera (Judges 4:9, 17-22). **Miriam** (Exodus 15:20, Numbers 12:1-2), **Huldah** (2 Kings 22:14), **Noadiah** (Nehemiah 6:14), **Anna** (Luke 2:36) and **Philip's daughters** (Acts 21:9) were also prophetesses. A prophet spoke on behalf of God to the people (in a more direct way than a pastor does today). God never hesitated to use godly women to serve in ways usually reserved for men. And God always called men and women equally: In Numbers 6:2 provision was made for both men and women to take the Nazirite vow of special devotion to the Lord. Joel 2:28-29 declared that both men and women would prophesy.

Paul is often misunderstood as being anti-women. But nothing could be further from the truth. Look at a few of the verses he wrote:

- **Galatians 3:28** “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Christ there was to be no distinction of class, race, or sex. All were considered equal. But this was God's design from the beginning, when he created male and female and gave them both dominion over all that He had made. It was His original intention that this equality exist. It was only after the Fall that a woman desired to be in control and that man began to rule over her (see Genesis 3:17 — God's curse on the woman). Christ came to restore things to God's original design.
- **Philippians 4:3** “Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel...” Paul seems to indicate that women were active in the ministry of the early church. And he is grateful for their contributions.
- **Romans 16:1** “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” The word translated “servant” here in the NIV is actually the word “deacon” (not deaconess). It is the exact same word used in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 by Paul to denote the office of deacon in the church. There is nothing within the context to indicate that Paul is using the term in a

different sense. Other women mentioned in connection with the ministry in Romans 16 are **Priscilla** (16:3), the wife of Aquilla, whose name usually precedes his (which some say indicates her prominence in their ministry team); **Mary** (16:6); **Junias** (16:7), who along with Andronicus was considered to be outstanding among the apostles (the wording in the Greek may very well indicate that she was considered an apostle!); **Tryphena** and **Tryphosa** and **Persis** (16:12), and the **mother of Rufus** (16:13). From Paul's commendations, it is obvious that he highly regarded women and the role they played in the early church.

But we must keep a couple things in mind about women in first century society. Most were unschooled and ignorant. This is one reason why their involvement in the leadership of the church took some time — they had to be educated. They were also still in a culture that looked down on women. For the most part, women were still considered second class. Even though they now were declared “equal” in Christ, they still had to maintain a witness within their society. To help you better understand this concept, take slavery as an example. Anywhere the Bible has been preached, slavery has soon been abolished. It is incompatible with all that the Bible teaches. Yet slavery was a recognized way of life in the first century. Paul nowhere condemns slavery, even though his teachings set the precedent for its demise. He instructs slaves to be submissive to their masters and to serve them willingly (Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22, 1 Timothy 6:1, etc.) — in other words, he wants them to work within the framework of society in order to be a witness to that society. It would have done little for the cause of Christ for slaves to revolt against their masters and demand their freedom in the name of Christianity. Paul's letter to Philemon, though, undermines this institution. So what does this have to do with women? In a society that believed women should be quiet and have nothing to do with religion [the Jews did not even permit a woman to touch the Scriptures, lest they be defiled], Paul cautions women to work within the societal framework until changes came about. Notice how Paul's words (often considered to be against women) take on new meaning in light of the historical situation of that day:

- **1 Corinthians 14:34-35** “...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.” In the synagogue worship at this time (and naturally in the early church), women and men sat on opposite sides of the meeting place. They were not sitting close to each other where they could quietly exchange comments. Now imagine the situation. Here we have a bunch of women, unschooled and ignorant, who have come to Christ and are anxious to exercise their new-found freedoms. They have been taught by Paul that they are “equal” in the eyes of God, who shows no favoritism. Can you imagine them calling out questions to their husbands across the room? They may have been sincere in their desire to learn (which had been denied them for centuries), but their enthusiasm would have been a horrendous witness to the society they were trying to reach for Christ. Their actions would have been considered irreverent and disgraceful. In I Corinthians 11:5-15, Paul requests women to make similar concessions for the sake of their witness in society by covering their heads when they prayed or prophesied or by having long hair. This, too was cultural. On these verses, the NIV Study Bible notes:

“In the culture of Paul’s day, men uncovered their heads in worship to signify their respect for and submission to deity. When a man prayed or prophesied with his head covered, he failed to show the proper attitude toward Christ. For a woman, taking off her head covering in public and exposing her hair was a sign of loose morals and sexual promiscuity. Paul says she might as well have her hair cut or shaved off. The shaved head indicated that the woman either had been publicly disgraced because of some shameful act or was openly flaunting her independence and her refusal to be in submission to her husband. Paul’s message to her was: Show your respect for and submission to your husband by covering your head during public worship.” (p. 1748)

One of the greatest errors we can make is to take Scripture out of context. We must always take the principles of Scripture and make them relevant to today. Some things never change. Others must be understood in their cultural setting in order for us to even understand what was being taught. Paul wants us to be good witnesses in our society.

Another troubling passage in light of Paul’s high regard for women is **1 Timothy 2:9-15**. Notice especially verses 11 and 12: “**A woman should learn**

in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” [Notice that Paul is careful to say that HE doesn’t permit a woman to teach — He doesn’t say God forbids it. He makes this distinction in 1 Corinthians 7:12 when he says, “...I say this (I, not the Lord)...”].] Here again the admonition may very well be cultural. Again, the NIV Study Bible comments: “Some believe that Paul here prohibited teaching only by women not properly instructed, i.e. by the women at Ephesus. Such women tended to exercise authority over, i.e. to domineer, the men.” (p. 1838)

For a woman to be entrusted with the job of teaching would have been almost too revolutionary in first century society. Although we know that Priscilla was involved in teaching Apollos (Acts 18:26), most women were not sufficiently trained to be teachers — and so they were expected to be silent and learn. This does not mean Paul expected this to always be the case — just as he expected the slaves to be submissive to their masters and obey, but being confident that believers would one day see that slavery was inconsistent with Christianity. Paul does not contradict himself. He held women in high regard. He believed all were equal in Christ and that God’s Spirit and gifts were freely given to all. But he also recognized that we have to minister within the framework of society and our witness must be maintained — even if it involves limiting our freedoms.

So where does this leave us in the question of women in the ministry? Many women have been given gifts of administration and teaching and preaching which should be used in the body of Christ as God leads them. We live in a society where to limit the rights of women is seen as offensive. When we try to treat women in the same way first century society did, we actually hurt our witness for Christianity in America. On the other hand, if women, in their effort to be considered equal in areas of ministry, seem to align themselves with the “feminist movement,” they can be equally offensive.

Some denominations today assert a woman’s right to serve and teach, but maintain she cannot be “ordained.” To “ordain” a person for service is to simply give the stamp of approval on his life and ministry and to stand behind him in his response to God’s call on his life. Paul certainly stood behind the ministries of women and approved of their call by God. To say that a

woman cannot be ordained for the ministry is to deny their calling and to assert that God cannot, in His sovereign will, choose to call a woman to a certain ministry. We should always be careful about putting God in a box and determining exactly how He should and should not go about His business of spreading the Gospel. God bestows His gifts as He chooses, and it is not always in accordance with what we expect.

But didn't Jesus' disciples have the same problem? They were more concerned about their exclusive calling than the fact that the Gospel was being preached. Jesus had to remind them to see the bigger picture: **Mark 9:38-40** "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."

Paul, too, reminded his readers that the advance of the Gospel was paramount in **Philippians 1:18** — "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." And this was a case where those who were preaching were doing so with impure motives, trying to increase Paul's hardship in prison.

In light of Jesus' and Paul's attitudes, shouldn't we be more supportive of women in the ministry? They are sincerely seeking to serve Christ and to reach the world for Him. Our attitude should be one of rejoicing instead of criticizing and condemning. It is time to look at Scripture with open eyes and hearts — in its biblical and historical context — and to work together in the proclamation of the Gospel

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