



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY

There are various interpretations of the Biblical perspective on the role of women in positions of ministry servant-leadership (which is the only type of leadership Jesus recognizes, Luke 22:24-27). Therefore, this paper is offered as a clarification of why Damascus Road Community Church supports women exercising the spiritual gift of leadership on our ministry teams.

Initial Statements:

- Among Bible-affirming, evangelical churches, there is no clear consensus of interpretation on the Biblical passages relating to women in ministry.
- This has been a divisive issue, but increasingly it is clear to healthy churches on both sides that no core doctrines are threatened and the integrity of the Gospel is not distorted by one's position.
- After studying various articles and books by scholars on both sides of the “egalitarian or complimentary” debate, it is also clear that the exegetical issues are complex—and key passages used by both sides are open to honest divergence of interpretation.

BIBLICAL ISSUES

The Creation Account:

1. Genesis 1:26-28 affirms that God's original intent in His new and perfect creation was for male and female as a unit to be seen as the image of God and to exercise co-rulership over creation. “Then God said, ' Let US make MAN in OUR own image, in OUR likeness, and let THEM rule...over all the earth. So God created MAN in His own image, in the image of God He created MAN, male and female He created THEM. God blessed THEM and said to THEM, 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule...over every living thing.'” (See also Genesis 5:2)
2. When the Lord specifically speaks of the creation of woman and her role in relation to man, He describes the woman twice (Genesis 3:18, 20) as a “helper suitable to him,” and creates the woman from his side (not his head or foot). The key word in these passages is the Hebrew term “helper”— what does it imply? It cannot imply an inferiority of status or subservience, since the same Hebrew term is applied to God to describe His relationship with Israel (Psalm 33:20; 70:5).
3. After sin comes in, God declares the “Adamic curse” = God's pronouncement of a curse first upon the serpent, then the woman and finally the man in Genesis 3:14-19. Only then does

God declare, along with many other tragic consequences of sin (such as intense pain, hardship and ultimately death), that for the woman “your desire will be (“for” or “to control”) your husband.” But instead “he will rule over you” (this represents the destruction of the original united co-rulership pictured in Genesis 1:26-28).

[Complimentarians believe that male “rulership” is now the normative ideal until the Second Coming in order to protect the woman’s unique role in the home and society. Egalitarians believe this status of ruled and ruler is part of the fallen creation that, like the rest of this curse, should begin to be reversed within the structures and relationships in the “new creation” of the new community of faith in Christ, i.e., the church (2 Corinthians 5:17).]

Old Testament Examples of Female Leadership & Authoritative Teaching:

1. Miriam, the sister of Moses, is a “prophetess” (Exodus 15:20)

2. Deborah in Judges 4 and 5 is a “Judge” over Israel = a leader and redeemer as well as a “prophetess” who spoke the word of the Lord to Israel and its leaders (see especially Judges 4:4-5). She leads, settles disputes and ultimately takes supreme command of the army in a decisive battle. Deborah is clearly a strong OT model of female leadership and teaching in the name of God.

3. Huldah the “prophetess” in 2 Kings 22:11-20 and 2 Chronicles 34:22-33 is accorded a unique role of highest authority in speaking and determining the meaning of the “Word [and Law] of the Lord.” In this story King Josiah, Hilkah the High Priest and the top scribe (scholar) of Judah turn to this woman as God’s authoritative voice for counsel and to clarify the meaning of the written word of the Lord.

4. **In summary**, Deborah and Huldah make it clear that God was willing to bestow leadership authority and teaching gifts on women in the Old Testament.

New Testament Examples of Female Leadership & Authoritative Teaching:

1. In all four of the Gospel accounts, following the resurrection of Christ, both the angels and the risen Jesus appear first to the women—and to them is first given the commission to “go and tell” the Gospel of the risen Christ’s victory over death. See Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:10-18. This commissioning of women as the first to proclaim the Gospel, even to the eleven key disciples of Jesus, is seen by some scholars as an intentional allusion to the beginning of the reversing of the “curse” of the fall in Genesis. In other words, the woman was the first to fall into the deception of sin in the old creation, and so now the women are the first to share in and proclaim the victory of Jesus over sin and death as He establishes His “new creation.”

2. On the Day of Pentecost Peter preaches the first great Christian sermon following the coming of the Holy Spirit in power. In this message he uses the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 in a paradigmatic way to set the agenda for the new community of Christ—the Church. The heart of his message is the twice repeated affirmation: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out My spirit on ALL people and your sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days—and THEY will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). There is an equality here in the calling of all Christians (men and women, young and old) to be prophetic declarers of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Revelation 19:10 says: “For the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy” (or the Spirit who inspired the prophets). The NLT says: “For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.” This challenge to proclaim Jesus is handed equally to men and women.

3. Romans 16 is a key chapter on women’s roles in the New Testament Church. Paul sends greetings to the leaders and key teachers of the “house churches” of Rome. In this list, women are both preeminent and prominent. The first mentioned is Phoebe (16:1-2). She is a “servant” of the church in Cenchrea, the term Paul uses to describe himself (2 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23,25); and his fellow ministers of the word (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 1:7; 4:7). The construction of language used indicates that she was probably the one who carried the epistle of Romans to the Christians in Rome, so Paul asks them to “receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need.” Her role is probably to deliver and to explain his epistle.

4. In Romans 16:3 Paul greets a wife/husband team, giving preeminence to Priscilla, then affirms they are both “my fellow workers,” a term he especially applies to those who share in teaching the Gospel. See Romans 16:9; 1 Corinthians 3:9; Colossians 4:11; see especially Romans 16:21 and 1 Thessalonians 3:2 in reference to Timothy; 2 Corinthians 8:23 in reference to Titus and see especially Philippians 2:25-30 in reference to Epaphroditus. This role in the teaching of the Gospel is confirmed by Acts 18:26 where Priscilla and Aquila teach Apollos, an evangelist, the clear and full message of the Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul again mentions this couple as the leaders of a “church in their house.” Priscilla is functioning as a teacher and leader within a “church” community.

5. In Romans 16:7 Paul speaks of Andronicus and Junia (female) “who are outstanding among the apostles.” In this instance, a woman, Junia, seems, along with a man [who might be her husband] the role of an apostle (see Ephesians 4:11-12). Apostles specifically had the task of the equipping (teaching) in the church. See also Romans 16:12, which identifies two other female workers in the church as “workers in the Lord,” a phrase that usually applies to those who teach the Gospel.

6. In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul affirms Euodia and Syntyche as two women who had “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.” The whole context puts them on a par with others who labor in sharing the Gospel. See also Colossians 4:15.

7. Paul ranks apostles and prophets among the highest leadership gifts for equipping the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:6). Yet he not only affirms Junia as outstanding among the apostles (Romans 16:7), he also clearly endorses prophetesses (1 Corinthians 11:5; cf. Acts 2:17-18; 21:9); and among spiritual gifts Paul emphasizes prophecy no less than teaching (1 Corinthians 14:1, 26, 29).

The Two New Testament Passages which Do Prohibit Women from Speaking in Church: *Are These Universal Prohibitions?*

If one could win the debate over women's role by who had the most verses, the weight of the debate would favor women in leadership. But we hold the Bible to be God's inspired Word, so no texts can be ignored. There are two passages in the New Testament that prohibit women speaking at all in church. One of these two specifically prohibits women as teachers. What should we make of them?

Should they be interpreted according to then-present cultural conditions and location-specific situations, or as universal norms for all churches in all places at all times?

First, it is important to establish that in Paul's writings there are a number of specific commands or prohibitions that are clearly and universally recognized by Christians to be culturally and historically conditioned—and therefore not enforced today. Two examples will suffice:

- One great example of a culturally conditioned apostolic command is the command by both Paul and Peter (repeated five times in the New Testament) to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). Each time it appears, the call to use a kiss of greeting is in the imperative (command) form, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26 even says to “*greet ALL the brethren with a holy kiss.*” Yet few, if any, churches require all their members to use a kiss to greet one another at gatherings.
- Of even greater weight for our discussion is the serious issue of Paul's commands concerning slavery. They are straightforward and clear—and if not evaluated in a cultural and historical light, seem to offer a strong Christian endorsement of slavery. In 1 Timothy 6:1-4 Paul begins by saying “*Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of our God may not be spoken against.*” He ends by saying that if anyone disagrees with this teaching “*he is conceited and understands nothing.*” In Ephesians 6:5 Paul admonishes “*slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and respect, just as you would obey Christ.*”

Christians are quick to point out the historical context of a Roman world where two in every three people were slaves and any direct challenge against slavery brought the full wrath of Rome. But of even greater importance than the historical reality of an oppressive empire was the overall strategy against slavery used by Paul in his writings. Paul did not call for the immediate abolition of slavery. Instead he used the power of the Gospel to elevate the status of slaves in respect to their masters to that of equals in Christ—and therefore true brothers (or sisters) in Christ (see Ephesians 6:8-9; 1 Timothy 6:3-4 and especially Philemon 15-16). Paul does not call for an open slave revolt in the name of Christ, but through the implications of the Gospel he lays the sure foundation for the destruction of slavery.

Through the saving work of Christ the universal principle of equality of slave and master is clearly identified in Galatians 3:28, a verse that also speaks to the male/female issue of equality. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—for you are all one in Christ. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.”* (Galatians 3:28- 29). How could those who are one in Christ, fellow heirs with Christ and equally loved by Christ subject each other to bondage? So the twice-repeated admonition for slaves to submit and obey their masters is interpreted by virtually all contemporary Christians in a non-literalistic way and within a specific historical context.

These are two of many examples of verses that require a cultural context and have a non-literal application in our day.

Here are the two passages that enjoin silence on women in churches:

1. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NASB): *“Let the women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper [disgraceful] for a woman to speak in church.”*

Several quick observations:

- There were no large structures called “churches” in Paul’s day. “Churches” indicated the gathering of God’s people for worship, fellowship and study, usually in homes. So the prohibition here is against women being allowed to speak in any gathering of Christians.
- Second, the prohibition is absolute and repeated three times. It is far more restrictive than saying that women are not allowed to teach. It is saying that women are not allowed to speak. They are to maintain silence, not talking, not asking questions, during Christian gatherings. If the verse is a universal principle, it prohibits far more than women serving as teachers or leaders. It enjoins silence on all women at all times in Christian gatherings. This is very odd in light of 1 Corinthians 11:5, where, in the same epistle, Paul very clearly endorses women publicly praying or prophesying during Christian gatherings.

2. 1 Timothy 2:11-15: *“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise [usurp?] authority over a man; she must be silent! 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, love and holiness with propriety.”*

Several quick observations:

- The specific issue here (and in Corinth) seems to be inappropriate and talkative female learners during the study time of the church. There is a problem with disruption due to inappropriate questions or comments.

- Once again, the specific prohibition placed on the women in Ephesus, like those in Corinth (and if universal, on all Christian women everywhere), goes well beyond not serving as teachers or leaders. Paul commands total silence from the women at Christian gatherings.

Brief Assessment of these two passages:

In both these sets of verses the prohibition on women calls for total silence (no talking, no singing). They are both part of epistles where other problems are also raised that relate to other time-specific situations; where the reasoning, if taken as universal principle, is hard to understand and creates troublesome implications. For example, the lengthy discussion in 1 Corinthians 11 concerning the rule that women must not pray with their hair uncovered and that short hair on a woman is a disgrace; or the brief discussion in 1 Corinthians 15:29 about baptizing the dead. Few churches still hold these admonitions as literal.

The contextual problem is even more evident in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. If the prohibitions in verses 11-12 are universal and strictly literal principles, without a contextual and historical interpretation, then we should also stay consistent and literal with the remainder of the paragraph (2:13-15). This puts Paul's analogy here in direct conflict with Romans 5:12-19 and introduces the novel doctrine that a necessary part of God's plan for saving women requires childbearing! Woe to the single or barren woman!

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 the issue is not concerned with women serving as teachers (teaching is not mentioned). The issue is clearly how women are learning—and the problem is they are learning too loudly: *“if they desire to learn [question] anything, let them ask their husband at home.”* The prohibition is aimed at stopping women from asking disruptive questions and speaking out during the service. The counsel is wait until later to ask questions.

This is consistent with the first-century Jewish and Hellenistic world. Novices were expected to learn quietly, while it was expected that more advanced students could interrupt with questions.

Unlearned questions were considered foolish and rude. In both Jewish and Hellenistic culture, women did not receive formal education and were expected to learn quietly in public situations because they were not trained. In addition Corinth was a center for temple prostitution. Women who generally spoke in public religious settings in Corinth were temple priestesses (prostitutes). This surely adds significant social dimensions to the concern of Paul—and Paul cared very deeply about cultural concerns (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

Again, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 have to be interpreted consistent with his words in 1 Corinthians 11:5, in which women are allowed to pray and prophesy in the gatherings of God's people. So the silence here and throughout the churches of Asia Minor probably reflects a time-specific prohibition to silence during the teaching of the Word because of specific disruptive situations. Women are asking ignorant and disruptive questions. He even offers a progressive solution. These women's concerns are not to be ignored, but addressed by their husbands through instruction at home—a new status and recognition of the ability to learn for women in those cultures.

Brief Assessment of these two passages:

Undoubtedly 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is a clear and unequivocal prohibition that women cannot teach or seek authority over the men of the church—instead, they must maintain silence when the community gathers. Is this a universal principle?

The female-teaching situation is clearly part of a larger problem in Ephesus where women are given to excessive adornment (2:9-10) and, more importantly, are attracted and vulnerable to immoral false teachers operating within the community. These false teachers appealed to the weakness and sinfulness of women and their “various impulses,” leading these women into an attitude where they are “always learning but never able to come to the knowledge of truth” (2 Timothy 3:6-7). In spite of their errors, such women were not slow in spreading their views to the community at large (5:11-16).

In fact, the primary problem for the church in Ephesus was the spread of false teaching (1 Timothy 1:3-20; 4:1-7; 6:6-10,20-21; 2 Timothy 2:16-26; 3:5-13; 4:3-4). Again, traditionally women in the Hellenistic world were less educated and therefore less discerning of error; and some widows, who had the means (influence) and the time, were quickly spreading nonsense (1 Timothy 5:13). The core problem seems to have been the spread of heresy through ill-informed and ill-equipped female devotees of the false teachers. This larger problem leads Paul to require at least two other situation-specific prohibitions in 1 Timothy 5:9 and 14-15 that few if any would argue should be held out as universal principles.

In the overall context of the Bible, only one New Testament passage specifically forbids women teaching men. This text also requires (together with 1 Corinthians 14:34-35) complete silence from all women in all Christian gatherings. First, there is clear evidence that women played an active role in teaching, prophesying and leading in the New Testament church. Therefore taking these passages as literal and universal principles for all churches in all time is a highly tenuous basis for excluding the teaching and leadership gifts of more than 50% of the Christian community.

Conclusion:

Taking the overall weight of Scripture, DRCC endorses the active role of women who are gifted in leadership, taking a servant-leadership role on ministry teams or staff.