



The Role of **Women** in the Life of the **Church**



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The role of women in Christian ministry is a subject of debate in the contemporary American church. It is the purpose of this statement to clarify the official position of Connections Community Church on this subject, and to call everyone to embrace a spirit of love, unity and humility, as fitting those who follow Christ.

Context

First, we should put this issue in context. Virtually no one believes that this doctrine is central to the Christian faith. One's eternal fate does not depend on getting this doctrine right. The role of women in ministry is nowhere found as part of the great creeds or doctrinal statements of the historical Christian faith. It is interesting to note that there are many well-respected Christian leaders and scholars who come down on different sides of the issue. These are people who believe in the authority of Scripture, strive to correctly interpret the Word of God, and are willing to do whatever it says. Their lives and ministries evidence the blessing of God.

So whatever our personal beliefs on this matter, they should be held humbly. Good, God honoring, Bible-believing people disagree on this subject, just like the Bible itself teaches us will sometimes happen. (Romans 14-15.) God blesses people no matter which side of the issue they hold. There are legitimate arguments, and hard questions, for people on either side of the matter. This, along with Christ's call for love and unity amongst His followers, should powerfully affect how we hold our position. Sexism, traditionalism and cultural accommodation do exist in the church. But people who limit a woman's role in the church are not necessarily sexist or traditionalists, and people who do not limit a woman's role are not necessarily caving in to cultural pressures. In this matter we should heed the words often attributed to the ancient Christian scholar Augustine:

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Our Goal

Our goal is to determine what the Bible does, and does not, teach on this subject of women in ministry. We are committed to the accuracy and authority of what the Bible says. We attempted to respect the following principles of properly interpreting the Bible:

The Principle of Unity God does not contradict Himself. Whatever the Bible means, it cannot contradict what God has clearly said or done in other places.

The Principle of Context Every book in the Bible was written into a cultural and historical context, and addressed actual situations happening in those contexts. One must discern what these contextual elements are in order to correctly interpret what the Bible commands or forbids to people in other cultural and historical contexts.

The Principle of Linguistics The Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew. The original words used, and the principles of Greek and Hebrew grammar, are important elements to correctly interpreting the Bible.

Our Position

It is our position that the Bible does not limit the role that women can hold in Christian ministry. When it comes to holding offices or performing ministry in the church, it is giftedness, calling and maturity that should be the determining factors, not gender. We hold this position for two basic reasons.

1. This position best harmonizes the Bible

If God were against women leading or teaching, He certainly would never have raised up and blessed women leaders and teachers. But He did, both in the Old and New Testament eras.

- God raised up women to lead God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. *Examples: Miriam (Micah 6:4); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Junia, an apostle (Romans 16:7); Phoebe, a deacon (Romans 16:1); Priscilla, an evangelist (1 Corinthians 16:9)*
- God raised up women to prophesy in both the Old and New Testaments. (To prophesy means to get a message straight from God that is to be delivered with authority. It is a more authoritative act than even teaching.) *Examples: Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Huldah (1 Kings 22:14); Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14); Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3); Anna (Luke 2:36); the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9)*

2. This position best reflects the intent of Christ's redemptive work

Christ's redemptive work reversed the effects of the fall and established His new community (the church) that is to live in oneness and love.

- God's Spirit was poured out equally on men and women (Acts 2:17)
- Men and women were equally empowered to declare God's Word without regard to gender. (Acts 2:18)
- Men and women were equally gifted by God and commanded to use their spiritual gifts in service to Him without regard to gender. (Romans 12:7-11)
- Old divisions and hierarchies were removed in Christ and are no longer to be factors in how people were treated in the church. (Galatians 3:28)

But what about...?

The objections to our position, when not rooted in traditionalism or sexism, come from two lines of thought. First, that there are passages of Scripture that seem to specifically forbid women from teaching or having authority over men. Second, that the biblical qualifications for elders require that they be men only. We will briefly address both of these objections.

But before we address these objections, it should first be noted that, if they are legitimate, we immediately have a theological problem. If women can't lead or teach, then why did God raise up, use and bless women of both testaments to lead and teach? (See #1 above.) Those who restrict people from certain ministries solely on the basis of gender must address this question.

The most common reasons given by those who hold a restrictive position is that 1) There were no men for God to use when he raised up women to lead or teach, or 2) The restrictions apply to the church only (not political, educational or work structures.) Let's briefly discuss these restrictionist reasons before diving more deeply into the main objections to a gender qualification verses a character/giftedness qualification for Christian ministry.

Is it really true that God did sometimes use women to lead and teach because no men were available? If this were true, then God would, under certain circumstances, be willing to violate His own word and standards to get His work done. This hardly seems like a biblically viable position. And on what basis could one possibly say that there were no willing men? Conjecture? God could raise up a woman, but not raise up a man? If God could cause "even the rocks to cry out and praise Him" (Luke 19:39-40), could He not raise up a willing man? We don't believe that God is that limited.

Now consider the argument that gender qualification applies only to the church, not to things like political, educational or business organizations. Here gender restrictionists are between a rock and a hard place. If they say that it's sinful or wrong or a violation of God's design for women to lead or teach men in politics, or in education, or in business, then every sincere Christian man must refuse to submit himself to any woman in any of these settings. This simply isn't done.

But if restrictionists say it's OK to have women lead or teach in these other settings, just not in the church, then they are saying that God designed the church to be the most gender restrictive organization on earth. Condolezza Rice can serve as Secretary of State or president of Stanford and it's no problem, but if she walks into a church she can only lead or teach women and children. Meg Whitman can lead Ebay or Carly Fiorina can lead Hewlett-Packard, but if they walk into a church they can only lead or teach women and children. Restrictionists are forced to say that, by God's design, the most talented, gifted and experienced women are unlimited to affect the world, but when these same women walk into the church they must curtail their abilities and limit themselves to leading or teaching women and children only. Women, Christian women even, are free to express their giftedness without restriction in shaping nations, the halls of higher education and Fortune 500 companies, but in the church they must check their God-given abilities as soon as any man is involved. It appears to us that the church ought to be the most gender liberating organization on earth, not the most gender restrictive. (Galatians 3:28, Acts 2:17,18)

Now let's turn our attention to the two main biblical arguments used for restricting serving based on gender.

Objection #1: The Bible forbids women to teach or have any authority over men.

Those who say the Bible does teach gender restrictions do so based on two passages of Scripture. We shall address both.

1st Timothy 2:11-15 (NIV)

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

How are we to interpret this passage? Do we take it “literally” and at “face value”? If so, then the following things are true:

1. *Creation order determines superiority.* But if this is true, then plants and animals would be superior to men, for they were created first. Or maybe “first” means “from” or “out of” (as many rightly suggest it could be translated), meaning that men are superior because women were created from men (God using Adam’s rib to create Eve.) But if this is so, then dirt would be superior to men because Adam was formed out of dust!
2. *Women are saved through having children and perseverance.* But this can’t be true, because the Bible clearly teaches that it is only by grace through faith that anyone is saved. (Ephesians 2:8,9) Are childless women not saved? Are women with children not saved if they waiver in their personal faith, their love for others or their personal holiness? No one who believes the Bible teaches this.

What this passage reveals is that if one is to correctly interpret the Scripture, at least the more difficult or controversial ones, he or she must be able to consult the original languages (Greek in New Testament passages) and understand the cultural issues into which a passage of Scripture was written. It is important to remember that all of Scripture is situational (written to real people who lived at a certain point of time in history and that addresses real situations that were actually occurring.) It is critical to reconstruct, as much as is possible, the situation (historical context) that a particular section of Scripture is addressing. Let’s dig into this passage with both these factors in mind.

First it is important to note that, in the Greek text, the only command in this passage is that “a woman should learn”. (**μανθάνω**) This is a counter-cultural command. Women were often excluded from educational opportunities in first century culture. But here Paul is clear that women must be given full and equal access to a theological education, just like men.

Paul also addresses how women are to learn. Here, apparently, some of the women were being disruptive and argumentative during teaching times. So Paul corrects this, stating that they must learn with a quiet (**ἡσυχία** - having a calm spirit) and submissive (**εν πάσῃ**

ὑποταγῇ – fully surrendered) spirit. In reality, all people should have this spirit in learning, not just women! But here it was women, probably taking their new-found freedom to learn too far, who were creating problems. This is corrected by reminding them to adopt the right spirit in learning the Bible.

Verse 12 continues Paul's thought. This verse is not a new sentence or a new idea, but rather a continuation of what he wrote in the first part of the sentence. It is at least interesting to note that Paul said, "I do not permit", which would open up the possibility that what follows was his personal practice in that culture rather than an authoritative command from the Lord. Notwithstanding, let's note several points about this verse.

- The word translated "assume authority" (αὐθεντέω) most commonly (70% of the time in classical Greek literature) carried a dark meaning of stealing, wrongfully using or usurping authority
- The word "teach" is grammatically linked to "assume authority" (διδάσκειν οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν) in a way where each word potentially (though admittedly, not necessarily) colors the other. In other words, they should be taken in light of each other.
- The word "quiet" (ἡσυχία), like the preceding verse, means to have a calm rather than agitating or argumentative spirit.

So one legitimate interpretation of this verse would be that Paul doesn't stand for women who are supposed to be learning to improperly assume authority and start teaching or refuting what was being taught. He is reinforcing and amplifying what he said in verse 11. This interpretation is supported by the recurrent theme in 1st Timothy about combating false teaching, some of which comes from people who are deceived or not fully formed in their theological understanding.

Things take an unusual twist in verse 13 and 14. But with a little work, we begin to see that it makes perfect sense and fits perfectly with the point Paul is making. Here are the key components.

- "Formed" (ἐπλάσθη) can refer to things other than physical formation. Adam was physically formed before Eve, but he was also theologically formed before even. Eve's instructions came from Adam. But Adam apparently did a poor job of instructing Eve, as she was off on what she thought God had said regarding the forbidden fruit. (Adding "you must not touch it", which God never said.)
- Paul isn't saying that Adam wasn't responsible for sin coming into the world. (See Romans 5.) While Adam sinned through outright rebellion, Eve sinned because she was deceived, not fully understanding what God has said.

So the point in this? Women must be allowed to be fully and accurately theologically educated, so that they won't be open to deception. Men shouldn't be like Adam and settle for women who, like Eve, had flawed or incomplete theological education.

Now we come to the odd sounding statement made in verse 15. It is, admittedly by all, a difficult passage to interpret, and various interpretations don't affect the flow of the passage. Here are some insights that might help.

- The phrase "women will be saved" is actually singular, referring to a single woman.

- The word “childbearing” has the definite article before it, meaning “the childbearing” (referring to a singular, specific childbirth, probably the most famous birth of all, the birth of Jesus Himself.)
- The Greek work “if” can be translated “when”

So the idea would be that a woman is saved through Jesus coming into the world. Not only are men saved the same way, but saying it this way is a “gentle jab” at men, reminding them that it was a woman who was responsible for bringing the Messiah into the world. This salvation through Jesus is confirmed when a woman lives a life that shows a genuine commitment to Jesus, again, just like men.

1st Corinthians 14: 34-38(NIV)

34 Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. 35 If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings. 36 Or do you think God's word originated with you Corinthians? Are you the only ones to whom it was given? 37 If you claim to be a prophet or think you are spiritual, you should recognize that what I am saying is a command from the Lord himself. 38 But if you do not recognize this, you yourself will not be recognized

These verse appear to be straight-forward at first glance. But let's read it carefully and see what begins to stand out.

First, the word silent (σιγάω) means exactly that, to not say a word. This is strange, since Paul has already taught earlier in this very same letter that women can pray and prophesy publicly. So what he is saying here appears to be an outright contradiction of his earlier teachings.

Second, the call to be silent and submissive at church is based on “what the Law says”. What's being referred to here is the OT Law. Here's the problem. If you scour the Law you will never find such a command. It is simply not taught anywhere in the Law.

Third, the statement is made that it is shameful (αἰσχρὸς - a disgraceful, filthy act) for a woman to say anything at church. They are not to even ask a question. Again, how can this be reconciled with Paul's other teachings that women are able to pray and prophesy and exercise their gifts of leading or teaching in the context of church gatherings?

Those who believe in the inspiration of the Bible should be rightly concerned with this passage. Paul appears to contradict himself and to teach error about the Old Testament. How do we reconcile this? Maybe this way:

DOYOUWANTSOMEMONEY

We know what is meant by that last sentence, even though it's in all capital letters, has no spaces between words and no punctuation mark at the end. Our familiarity with our written language fills in all the gaps. The Greek language was written like the example

English sentence. All caps and with no spaces or punctuation. The readers simply “filled in” what they knew to be needed.

What does this have to do with our text? Many scholars believe that Paul is using a form of sarcasm in verses 34 and 35; that he is quoting the statements made by male leaders in the church at Corinth as a means of pointing out how ridiculous those statements are. The readers in Corinth would have been very familiar with the statements and recognized them instantly as what some of their leaders had been teaching. (The contemporary English reader is deprived of both that knowledge and the punctuation that would help to understand Paul’s intent in using these words in his argument.)

Why do biblical scholars interpret these verses that way? First, it resolves the contradiction issue. Paul is not contradicting his own teaching (in this letter and in other New Testament letters.) He is calling out some leaders in Corinth who were contradicting his teachings!

Second, it solves the inaccuracy issue. Paul is not making an erroneous statement about the Old Testament Law. Such error is inconceivable from a man who was an expert in the Law (as Paul was) and also incompatible with the God-inspired nature of the New Testament letters.

Third, it is supported by the verses that follow. Verse 36 has two pointed questions (again, which are understood to be questions because there are no punctuation marks!) Literally the questions are: “Was it from you that the Word of God went forth? Has it come to you only?” These are rhetorical questions. The answer to these questions is, clearly, “No!” Paul is ridiculing these leaders for basing non-biblical teaching on their own authority as though they alone spoke for God or exclusively heard from God. Paul then follows these rhetorical questions by making some clear statements in order to make sure that there is no confusion on what he is meaning. He says that if anyone really speaks for God or considers himself to be a spiritual person, he will acknowledge that what he (Paul) is saying is God’s true orders. (Like letting women pray and prophesy in public worship services.) Paul concludes by saying that a leader who doesn’t acknowledge Paul’s teachings as correct should no longer be recognized as an approved leader or teacher.

This interpretation of this passage not only clears up all the problems and harmonizes it with the rest of the Bible, it makes it a powerful passage for allowing women to fully participate in worship by praying and speaking God’s Word. And if you are wondering whether such forms of sarcasm are used in other places in the Bible, the answer is “Yes!” (Consider the following passages of Scripture: Judges 10:14; 1 Kings 18:27; Job 38:4f; Amos 4:4; 1 Corinthians 4:4, 18; 2 Corinthians 12:13.)

Objection #2: Eldership is restricted to men only

This subject is often clouded by the fact that the term “elder” is used in various ways to describe various positions in the contemporary church. The term “elder” is used in the New Testament to designate a member of a team of senior leaders in a church who, collectively, had the authority to make decisions regarding the doctrinal accuracy and the moral purity of the church’s constituency. They provided general oversight to the church, primarily through safeguarding the congregation and equipped people to carry on the work of Christian ministry.

We have already demonstrated that women can declare God’s Word and provide leadership in the church. We have also seen that the Bible tells us about women who served as prophets, leaders, evangelists, deacons and apostles. But one question still arises. “Can women serve as an elder in the church?” The reason some hold that women are excluded from this one leadership position is because of statements made in the two “qualifications for eldership” passages of the Bible, found in Titus 1 and 1st Timothy 3. We will examine each qualification that is used to justify an exclusively male eldership. But quickly before we do that, it is important to be reminded about the nature of Scripture.

The nature of the Bible

The Bible is inspired by God. (2nd Timothy 3:16,17) This means that God guided the human authors in such a way that, while their unique personalities, vocabulary and experiences color their writing, what they said was fully true and was fully what God wanted to be said. The Bible is also situational. This means that it was not written as a generic manual to all humankind. Instead, it was written to specific people at particular times in history in order to address specific circumstances or give direction to specific situations that were actually happening. This means there are distinct historical and cultural element to all writings of the Bible. These need to be understood in order to interpret and apply it correctly.

This may sound shocking to some, but the Bible is not written **to** you. The Bible is a collection of writings - history, poetry, proverbs and letters - written to a number of different nations, people groups, churches and individuals. It was written to them. But the Bible was all written **for** you. We hear God speak through what He has spoken. He and His will is revealed to us in these situational writings. They become our guide to God, life and the after-life. When interpreting the Bible we must keep in mind the situational nature of the Scriptural writings.

Now we turn our attention to the specific objections to women serving on a senior leadership team as found in the qualification lists found in those two New Testament passages.

An elder must be the husband of one wife.

This objection to women in senior leadership is simple: Because a woman cannot be a “husband of one wife”, a woman cannot be an elder. Most gender restrictionists say this

qualification excludes women and divorced men from eldership. This, we are told, is simply taking the words “at face value”.

Is this the right way to interpret statement? If we take this qualifier at such “face value”, must we not also say that only married men can serve as senior leaders? And must we also not say that if a man’s wife died, he could never be an elder, because either he isn’t then married or, if he gets remarried, he is the husband of more than one wife? Yet the vast majority of gender restrictionists don’t hold these positions. They appear to be guilty of taking at face value what suits them, and then explaining away other things that are equally “face value”!

This qualifier for eldership was never intended to be a gender restriction nor a second marriage restriction. This is a polygamist restriction. Marriage is one man and one woman. Multiple, simultaneous marriages disqualified a person from senior leadership. Why was only polygamy, and not polyandry (a woman married to more than one man) mentioned? Because situationally, polyandry was not an issue. Polygamy was an issue. The Bible was written into situations that actually existed.

The qualifiers are all stated in masculine terms (i.e., “he must this” and “he must that”).

This one is easy one to refute. First, in English the masculine gender is traditionally used to refer to what is clearly supposed to be everyone regardless of gender. “If any man be in Christ...” we know means “if anyone be in Christ...”. It’s not gender specific. In English, our choice is either “he” or “she” when we mean all people.

But it’s even clearer in the Greek. The personal pronoun “he” (αυτον) is not used in these passages. It is supplied in some English translations in an effort to make the text more readable. This is an admirable goal, but it does cloud the gender issue.

An elder must be a man who manages his home well.

Some say this qualifier excludes women because, first, it is the man who is the head of the home and therefore the “manager”, and it says that “he” (or “the man” in some translations) must manage his home well.

As for the “he”, see the point above. The masculine third person personal pronoun is not used in the passage, it is supplied in some translations. Nor is the word “man”. The Greek word “τις” is used, which means “a certain person”, not a specific gender.

The phrase can easily, and perhaps most legitimately, be translated “one must manage one’s own household well”. The argument cannot be made that a woman has no management role in the home. Case in point, reread the “virtuous woman” passage in Proverbs 31. In describing the many managerial/leadership tasks she undertook, it is said that she “watches over the affairs of her household”. She is a manager in every way!

One more thing...

It is sometimes suggested that women can't be elders because we have no example of a woman elder in the Bible. Again, we do have examples of women prophets, leaders, deacons, apostles, evangelists and leaders! But not elders. Does this argument carry weight?

This line of thought does touch on an important aspect of interpreting the historical parts Bible correctly (those parts that record what people did.) This aspect of interpretation can be phrased as a question: "When the Bible records what someone did, is it intended to be *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? In other words, when the Bible describes something that someone or some group did, is that thing intended to be literally copied by all churches at all times and in all places? Or does it merely describe what those people did, which we can learn from but do not need to literally copy.

Here are some examples.

- The first church selected 7 deacons. Are churches required to have exactly 7 deacons?
- The early church met every day. Are we required to meet every day?
- The women in Corinth wore head coverings. Are woman today required to wear hats?
- The men in Ephesus were to pray by lifting up their hands. Are men today required to lift their hands when they pray?
- Jesus didn't own a home. Are we to sell our homes and live without one?

No one believes that everything good people did that is described in the Bible is meant to be literally applied to all people today. There are principles to learn from what they did, but a literal application is not required.

So what about no women elders being described in the Bible? Is this prescriptive or descriptive? We would argue, especially in the light of all the other evidence, that it is descriptive but not meant to be literally copied by all churches for all time and in all places. There are no gentile elders described in the Bible either, but we let non-Jews pastor. (We assume based on the spread of the church that Gentiles did become elders, but it is an assumption!) Why would we not make the same assumption for women? In fact, the early church fathers (the generation after the generation of the apostles) recorded that a women eldership did arise in the church. This is what happens when the word of God takes root and begins to work itself out in the life of His church and surrounding culture. Traditional, unnecessary cultural barriers and practices begin to erode and disappear.

What principle could we learn from this? That cultural conditions can be a practical factor in choosing elders. In some male-dominated cultures having women elders could be problematic enough that it would make it quite difficult for them to be able to serve as effectively and with joy (as the Bible commends.) In some cultures a childless man or

unmarried man or a man under a certain age might have the same problems. In some patriarchal cultures, men would have a problem serving effectively and joyfully!

Christianity was meant to be flexible enough that it could work itself into any culture and still express itself authentically and powerfully. In fact, it could influence that culture, and through conversion and education change the values that a culture embrace.

This is what happened to slavery. The Bible nowhere commands that slavery be abolished. We have no biblical examples of Christian slave owners freeing slaves. (The treatment of slaves, of course was spoken to directly and firmly. Every person was to be treated with dignity and never to be abused.) But the abolitionist movement was led by Christians who appealed to the teachings of Scripture to end the practice that we, today, find abhorrent. Slavery was deemed to be incompatible with the spirit of Jesus' teachings. It had to end. Most of us would say that is a good thing, a godly thing, a biblically consistent thing. We say the same thing about the liberation of women to full dignity and status in the church.

Summary

The Bible is replete with examples of women being raised up and blessed by God to serve in all sorts of roles where leadership and declaring God's Word was performed. The redemptive work of Jesus was intended to reverse the effects of the fall, including the way gender relationships were affected. The birth of the church ushered in an age where God's Spirit came upon all men and women and gave both men and women the gifts He wanted them to have in serving others in the church. It is gifting and maturity that should determine who a person can serve in the church, not gender. Any apparent restriction on women in various ministry roles disappear upon applying a consistent approach to interpreting the Bible.

For these reasons we humbly hold the position that women have equal standing before God and equal access to ministry roles in the church. We hold this position with conviction, but not with animosity toward those who hold a different view. We want to work toward unity with those who agree with us on the essentials, but may disagree with us on the non-essentials.

In keeping with our mission to, in part, connect people to a God-given purpose, we want to see every person have every obstacle removed between them and doing what God has gifted them to do, to the fullest extent possible. We want to remove the barrier of a gender restriction that we believe is not in keeping with the teaching and spirit of the Bible. We want all women, and all men, to use their gifting as widely and powerfully as possible, as equal brothers and sisters in God's kingdom.