

Who May Serve in Ministry?

Scriptural Considerations

1. “Women should keep silent in the church” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11).

These passages are cited as evidence that women cannot be leaders in the church. The reasoning goes, if women are forbidden to speak at church, they are forbidden to lead. One needs only to reference, however 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 and 14:26-32 to find examples where women are appropriately praying and prophesying (speaking) at church. You also have Romans 10:9 which suggests all who confess the Lord Jesus with their mouth will be saved. Surely this must pertain to women as well as men. Women "not talking in the church" in the context of 1 Corinthians 14 had to do with interrupting services at church with their questions while someone else was talking. The counsel to learn in silence (or “in quietness”, or “peaceably”) applies not only to women, but to men as well (1 Corinthians 14:28). The neuter "*if anyone* speaks in tongues” (another spiritual gift involving speaking) includes male and female, and if there is no interpreter they, whether male or female, are to "keep silent in the church" (14:27, 28). Likewise if “someone” (NIV - gender neutral) is prophesying, and another gets up to prophesy, the first is to "keep silent" (v. 30). The point from the context of 1 Corinthians 14 is, it isn't just women who are to be silent in the church, *everyone* is to be silent in the church when someone else is preaching, praying, prophesying, or speaking in tongues. In this way order is maintained and confusion is avoided (vs. 33, 40).

Then you have the language of 1 Peter 4:10, 11.

As **each one** has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If **anyone** speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If **anyone** ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The Greek words here for “anyone” and “each one”, are gender inclusive. Not "any man" as it says in the KJV, but any person. The implication is clear. If any person has been given the gift of public preaching, what should they do? Preach for God, be they male or female. And if any person is given the gift of being a minister, what should they do? Minister...be they male or female. Gifts, not gender, determine ministry roles.

2. “I forbid a woman to teach...a man” (1 Timothy 2:12)

This text on its surface seems plain enough—women teaching men is forbidden. Yet there are many examples of women who appropriately taught men in the Bible. Deborah counseled Barak, one of the great men of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 (Judges 4:4-9), Anna taught Christ to everyone she met at the temple in Luke 2:38, Priscilla taught Apollos in Acts 18:26, and in 1 Corinthians 14:31 church-goers are to quietly *learn* from the prophets, including female prophets (1 Corinthians 11:5). With so many examples of women properly teaching men, it seems apparent that Paul was correcting a different problem with false teachers in Ephesus, and among them some women (see 1 Timothy 1:3-4; 18-20; 4:1-4; 6:20-21). These women had forsaken roles as mothers and wives (4:3; 5:9-10, 14), had begun to dress immodestly (2:9-10; 5:6), and had inappropriately taken roles domineering over their husbands and other men in the church through their “teaching” ministry (2:11, 12). These women, not all women, were forbidden to teach. It seems that what Paul is forbidding is for teachers to domineer over others, a practice equally forbidden, gender aside, by Jesus and Peter (Matthew 20:25-26; Mark 10:42-43; Luke 22:25-26; 1 Peter 5:2, 3).

3. “A woman should not ... have authority over a man” (1 Timothy 2:11-12)

This injunction is cited by those opposed to women in pastoral leadership as water-tight evidence. However, one must also weigh that the Bible offers the same injunction to men in leadership (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-6). Church leadership is not an opportunity to have authority over anyone. This is as true for men as it is for women. Leadership authority is not an authority *over* people, but an authority *for* leaders to do their ministry, and that authority indeed is very great (Matthew 28:18-20)! If Christian leadership is not characterized by having “authority over”, but rather by serving others, then no one is excluded from the responsibility of servant leadership on the basis of gender.

4. An elder should be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:4)

1 Timothy 3:4 states that the elder should be "the husband of one wife". Doesn't that show that an elder, and therefore a pastor, should be a man, and not a woman?

Three responses are in order.

1. Firstly, the qualification that the elder be the husband of one wife does not disqualify women from being elders any more than deacons being the husband of one wife disqualifies women from being deacons (1 Timothy 3:12). In Romans 16:1, Paul is writing to the believers in Rome his recommendation of Phoebe, a “sister”, who was a deacon (the Greek word behind *servant*). The point of the counsel in 1 Timothy 3:4 is sexual purity, not gender exclusion. The Greek language of Paul’s day did not have a gender inclusive term for “spouse”— in other words he could not write “the elder should have just one spouse”. To be gender inclusive the writer would have to use the masculine (the husband of one wife), and elsewhere indicate he means both male and female elders. This he does at the beginning of this chapter where he writes “if anyone [gender inclusive] desires to be an elder”. Which leads to a second point.
2. The moral qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3 are not addressed to male elders only, but for “anyone”, male or female, who desires to be an elder (3:1). Paul does not say *any man*, but *anyone*. The Greek word for *one who (ei tis)* is not gender specific, but gender inclusive. Paul could have written “if any man (*aner*) desires to be an elder” and thus excluded women from the pool. By his word choice Paul addresses both male and female elders in this chapter.
3. Thirdly, one of the qualifications of a widowed female elder later in Paul’s discourse in 1 Timothy 5:1, 2 was that she had been the wife of one man (1 Timothy 5:9).

5. An elder should “rule his house well” (1 Timothy 3:4, 5)

The elder, as head of his family, should "rule his house well" as evidence he is ready to rule over the church, right? 1 Timothy 3:4, 5. Isn't the Bible clear the husband is the head of his family? Aren't these evidences that men are to be elders, and not women?

As with men, women are also to rule their houses well. In 1 Timothy 5:14 young wives are admonished to “manage the house”. The word translated *guide* or *manage* is actually *despoteo*, which means *rule*, not guide or manage. A despot is an absolute ruler. If you go back to the context of 1 Timothy 3 the qualification of an elder to "rule his/her house well" has to do with children, not spouses (1 Timothy 3:4, something the Bible commands both mothers and fathers to do, Exodus 20:12) and it is required so that we can trust they will *take care of* the church well, not “rule” the church well (read again 1 Timothy 3:5). No one but Christ is to rule the church (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-6; Ephesians 1:22). Children are to "obey their parents” (plural), "father *and* mother” (Ephesians 6:1-2). In the NT husbands do not have authority over their wives, rather husbands *and* wives share authority over each other (1 Corinthians 7:4), thus restoring the pre-fall family values of equality and mutuality (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18). The NT church was instructed not to delineate church roles based on gender because Christ has made all, male and female, one (Galatians 3:27, 28).

6. “The husband is the head of his wife” (Ephesians 5:23)

The thinking goes like this: if the husband is the head over his wife, then women are excluded from church leadership because this would undermine the man’s role by placing him under the leadership of a woman. The section of Paul’s writings where he talks about headship is prefaced with the statement “we should submit to one another” (5:21) and then it says wives are to submit to their husbands (5:22), and husbands are to give themselves up for their wives (5:25). There is to be mutual submission to the other, just as there is to be a shared authority between husband and wife (1 Corinthians 7:4). Those who cite the so-called “headship principle” in relation to ministry reinterpret the verse which says, “as the church is subject to Christ, so wives be subject to your husbands”, to mean “just as the wife is subject to her husband, so church members are to be subject to their pastors.” This is just simply not a biblical correlation, and is an inappropriate argument to enter into the discussion of who should be in the ministry. Only Jesus is head of His church...not the pastor (Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18).

7. The OT priesthood was an all-male priesthood, so should be the NT ministry.

That the OT priesthood was an all-male priesthood is evident in a number of scriptures (Leviticus 7:31-34). No one debates this fact. What is debated is whether or not this is sufficiently supported as an enduring pattern in the NT. Consider the following: in Hebrews 7:11, 12 the laws concerning the Levitical priesthood have been annulled: in Acts 2:17, 18 Peter cites Joel 2:28-31 which says the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh—male female, young, old, Jew Gentile; as a result there is now neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female for all are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28); the NT restores God’s original plan for the priesthood of all believers—male and female (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9, 10); the kingdom of priests the Lord is making is comprised of all whose sins are washed in Jesus blood (Revelation 1:5, 6).

Biblical Examples of Women in All Forms of Ministry

Prophets - The prophets mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 included women (1 Corinthians 11:5), Anna was a prophet (Luke 2:36), and Philip's daughters were prophets (Acts 21:8, 9). Deborah in Judges 4:4, Miriam in Exodus 15:20, and Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14 are all examples of female prophets in the OT. Of course, there is also Joel 2:28-31 (and Acts 2:17, 18) which predicts male and female prophets right up to the end of time when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon people of all ages and both genders.

A Judge - Deborah was a judge (Judges 4:4). This was a position of rule (Proverbs 8:16.) Only three biblical characters were both judges and prophets: Moses, Samuel, and Deborah. Only Deborah’s record is without witness to her faults.

Pastors - Phoebe, once a deacon in her hometown in Greece, was entrusted with the care of the flock in Rome (Romans 16:1, 2). Some Bible versions render Phoebe’s calling as a *helper*. The Greek word translated *helper* in verse 2 is a feminine noun *prostatis* rooted in the verb *proistemi*, which when applied to the elders who labor in word and doctrine (i.e. a pastor) in 1 Timothy 5:17 means "one set before or set over for the purpose of care or protection". What is interesting about Phoebe's case is that in all the references to elders the verb is used, emphasizing their function. But with Phoebe, only with Phoebe, the noun is used implying she had the office of pastor, or the title of pastor, as well as the function. Priscilla and her husband Aquila were house church leaders (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19) both had responsibility to teach and train church members and leaders (Acts 18:26). Lydia (Acts 16:14, 15, 40), and Nympha (Colossians 4:15) were also house church leaders. Though thoughts on the gender of this last example vary, many translations maintain the feminine (see NET, NIV, J.B. Phillips, ESV, NASB, The Message, ISV, GNB, NCV, NLT, and note in NKJV.)

Teachers - Anna taught (Luke 2:38 - *laleo*) at the temple. Priscilla taught Apollos more perfectly (Acts 18:26), an occasion that neither her husband Aquila, Apollos, or Luke who wrote Acts, objected to. Deborah counseled Barak, one of the great men of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 (Judges 4:4-9). Also in 1 Corinthians 14:31 Paul instructs all church members to *learn* in quietness from the prophets, who were both male and female (1 Corinthians 11:4, 5).

Apostles - Junia was a prominent apostle - Romans 16:7 (NKJV, KJV, ASV, ISV, MEV, NRSV, NASB, NCV, NIV, The Message, see Nancy Vyhmeister's article on *Junia*). The word *apostle* means *one who is sent forth with orders*. Mary was sent by Jesus with orders to tell the other disciples of the resurrected Jesus (John 20:17). She was sent to the Apostles as a fellow apostle, and the unbelieving Apostles were reprimanded for not believing her (Mark 16:14). Phoebe was also "sent out" with orders to lead the church in Rome (Romans 16:1, 2).

Missionaries - Priscilla (Acts 18) and all the female co-laborers on their missions with Paul (Romans 16) travelled extensively in their ministry. Phoebe was recommended as a missionary from her hometown in Greece to cross-cultural ministry in Rome (Romans 16:1, 2).

Deacons - "Our sister" Phoebe, was a deacon in Cenchrea - the Greek word here for *servant* is *diakonos* where we get the word deacon (Romans 16:1.) The women in 1 Timothy 3:11 were female deacons (*Theology of Ordination Study Committee Final Report*, p. 85.)

Elders - 1 Timothy 3:1 reads "*anyone* (the gender neutral Greek word includes male and female, not *any man* as it reads in most Bibles) who desires to be an elder, desires a good thing". Paul later affirms he includes women as elders in 1 Timothy 5:1, 2. Hebrews 11:2 "the elders" (masculine noun) included Sarah (11:11), Rahab (v. 31), and "other women" (v. 35). *Elders* in Hebrews 11 refers to elderly people, or people of old, not necessarily church elders, but the point is the masculine term "elder" refers both to men and women as it does in 1 Timothy 3:1 and 5:1, 2. While the term "elder" is gender specific, it is not gender exclusive. Phoebe, as already mentioned, was entrusted with the responsibilities of an elder. The noun in Romans 16:2 *prostatis* (translated helper) means "one set before or set over for the purpose of care or protection". In 1 Timothy 5:17 the verb form of this noun, *proistemi*, refers to the work of the elder. It was this biblical evidence in 2010 that led the General Conference of SDAs to vote to ordain female elders.

Intercessors - The references to female intercessors at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13), and Anna in the temple (Luke 2:37) show that women appropriately spoke, prayed, and taught at church as part of the first century liturgical practices.

Speaking in Tongues - 1 Corinthians 12:10, 30; 14:27 all indicate it was appropriate for both men and women to speak at church. Everything was to be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). Therefore it was not indecent or shameful for a woman to speak in church as long as it was done in an orderly manner.

Influencers - Some biblical women did not hold offices, but they were influencers all the same. The Hebrew servant girl in Naaman's household (2 Kings 5:1-4), the wealthy Abigail's wise counsel to King David (1 Samuel 25:3, 18-34), and too many other examples to note here show women played critical and prominent functions as influencers regardless of their gender and their status in society.

Community Service Leaders - Dorcas (Acts 9:36, 39) was an extraordinary leader of felt-needs ministries. Some believe she housed a church in her residence in Joppa.

Church Leaders - Members were to submit to the leadership of "everyone" in the household of Stephanas, which presumably had men and women (1 Corinthians 16:15-16). Phoebe was a leader in the church in Rome (Romans 16:1, 2). Priscilla (Romans 16:3), Mary (Romans 16:6), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Romans 16:12), Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2, 3) were all "co-laborers" with Paul. These ladies were not working *for* Paul or *under* Paul. They were working *with* Paul, *alongside* Paul as "fellow-workers" ... partners...equals...co-laborers. The church members were to submit to "all" of Paul's co-laborers; male and female (1 Corinthians 16:15-16.)

Church Administrator - In sending Phoebe to Rome (Romans 16:2) Paul counseled the members to provide her with "any assistance in her work that she may need" (J.B. Philips). He did not tell them that Phoebe was coming to help with their work. Phoebe was to be a leader in their church. Her role was to orchestrate and facilitate their ministry—delegating work to them.

House Church Leaders - Lydia (Acts 16:15, 40), Nympha (Col 4:15), Priscilla (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19), and the women co-laborers in Stephanas' household (1 Corinthians 16:15-16) are all examples of female house-church leaders.

Disciples - Acts 1:14, 15 mentions female disciples, and in Acts 9:36 Dorcas is named a female disciple. The command in Matthew 28:19, 20 is to make disciples of all, which is what all become when they are baptized and obey all the Lord had commanded; gender is not at issue. If we do not allow women to be disciples of Christ, then we should not allow them to be baptized. All who are baptized are disciples, and all disciples are to be disciple makers.

Preachers - In Mark 16:15-17 all who believe are to preach. In 1 Peter 4:11, Peter says, "If anyone speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies." The Greek word for *anyone* is gender inclusive. The word for *him* is not in the Greek, nor is it implied. If gender were an issue, Peter could have made that clear by using the term "any man". What Peter means is this; male or female, if you have the gift, you should be allowed by all (yourself, others, the church) to use it to God's glory. Gifts, not gender determine roles at church. The prophets in Corinth, which included women, were to "speak edification, and exhortation and comfort to men" and "edify the church" (1 Corinthians 14:3, 4) by preaching the word (2 Timothy 4:2). The last work on earth before Christ comes is to preach the gospel to every person on earth (Matthew 24:14; Revelation 14:6). To finish this task we need every believer, male and female (Joel 2:28-31). Jesus taught we should be praying for more workers, not limiting them to men only (Matthew 9:38).

It may be after citing this information some are of the same opinion still—no female leaders at church. Or maybe they would allow for female prophets and teachers, but not elders or pastors. But this begs the question. What is there in the responsibilities of being a pastor or elder, that is not included in a teacher, a prophet, an apostle, an administrator, an intercessor, an exhorter, a preacher, or a church leader? The Bible is full of examples of women in all of these ministry roles—without explanation, without apology, and without reprimand. To say that women may not be leaders in general, or pastors or elders in particular requires a very thorough explanation, for the Scriptures provide us ample evidence to the contrary.