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# A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S MINISTRIES

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## Introduction

The subject of women's ministries has been a somewhat controversial issue during the past few decades. As political correctness has infiltrated our society and sadly, our churches, it has become increasingly common to demand equal rights for women in positions of leadership, and correspondingly unfashionable to maintain the traditional view that there are some roles within the life and structure of the Church that God designed for men, and men only. The area of women's ministry has been of great personal interest to me, and to many of my female friends, as it poses many questions about our priorities and responsibilities as Christian women. Should we be campaigning for the 'liberation of women' within the Church? Have the scriptures really been twisted over the centuries in order to manipulate and oppress women? It is essential for every woman at some point to evaluate in which areas she is able and indeed, gifted. We must look at the needs of our churches and ask ourselves how we can benefit our brothers and sisters in Christ in practical terms. Is it appropriate for women to handle scripture? Can we be trusted to do anything other than pour tea at the end of the morning service?

## What picture does the Bible give of Womanhood?

Throughout the Bible we see various roles entrusted to women, in both the Old and New Testaments. Miriam, the sister of Aaron, is described in Exodus 15:20 as a prophetess and is credited in 2 Samuel 14:2 and 20:16 as a 'wise woman'. Another revered prophetess in the Old Testament is the judge, Deborah, who is described as the leader of Israel in Judges 4:4. A rather different kind of woman appearing in the Old Testament is Ruth, who, despite her nationality as a Moabite proves an integral link in the line of David, and thereby, the line of Christ. Through her dedication and obedience to Naomi, Ruth provides a respectable model of submission, loyalty to God and observance of his laws. It is through her meekness and humility that we see God's eternal providence so clearly radiating from scripture. While it is true that the responsibilities given to women such as Miriam and Deborah were more or less exceptional, there can be no credibility for the argument that throughout history God has worked solely through men.

There is also much that can be noted from New Testament writings. As Sharon James observes in *God's Design for Women*,

...the rest of the New Testament shows that the prohibition on teaching is not absolute. Women can teach other women (Titus 2:3-5), they can teach children (as Lois and Eunice taught Timothy) and in some contexts they can teach men (as Priscilla, alongside her husband, taught Apollos).

Some scholars appear to find it very easy to use the example of Aquila and Priscilla given in Acts 18 as validation for women to be included in all areas of ministry, but this does appear to be taking things out of context. More concerning perhaps is the application of the husband-wife model in some churches today, forbidding women to be active in serving the church unless they can be supervised by their husbands, even in ministering to other women. For single women especially, this can cause total redundancy. Dorcas, raised from the dead by Peter in Acts 9, is described as a

woman who was ‘always doing good and helping the poor’. There is much that Christian women can learn from her example in the practical service of others. Similarly, Paul’s appreciation of his sister in Christ, Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 is apparent. Although perhaps a somewhat contentious debate, Phoebe is thought by some scholars to have been a deaconess [‘diakonos’] in the early Church. However, Paul also uses the Greek word for patron/helper [‘prostater’] to describe her, and it is not entirely clear which term is more appropriate. In his work, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, R Haldane refers to deaconesses as females specifically assigned to care for other women. Sharon James also suggests that Phoebe’s role can be linked to that of the widows at Ephesus, as mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:3-10, who were encouraged to perform good works with humility. As in the Old Testament, we can see from passages such as these that women were not excluded from serving their churches. However, verses such as 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 make it clear that there is a line to be drawn.

### **The Prohibitive Verses: 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12**

There have been varied interpretations of these passages, with some claiming that verses such as Galatians 3:28 invalidate Paul’s strict instructions as to how women should behave within their churches. It is difficult to say with great certainty whether the so-called ‘prohibitive verses’ were written in order to address specific issues in the Corinthian and Ephesian churches at the time, but it is perhaps a little too convenient to simply overlook them in the name of egalitarianism. It is my opinion that verses such as Galatians 3:28, far from disproving the complementarian view of Biblical manhood and womanhood, actually strengthen its case. Paul isn’t saying that there are no differences between men and women, he is saying that both are equally justified by the blood of Christ. Indeed, it can be very tempting to spend much of our time considering exactly how these verses should be applied, and I have to say that when I first looked at them I was horrified! *How could Paul ever write something that so blatantly suppressed women*, I remember thinking, *this proves my suspicion from 1 Corinthians 7 that Paul was a total misogynist!* In particular, the idea that women would be saved through childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:15 was very difficult for me to comprehend. Over time, however, God has greatly changed my feelings on these passages, and I have come to appreciate that the roles God has assigned to men and women aren’t there to make us suffer, but to help us to serve Him, and one another, more effectively. I can sympathise with any woman who reads these verses with initial frustration, but I truly believe that the living out of complementary roles by men and women brings glory to our Heavenly Father. I struggle to see how any man or woman has the right to demand of God that they be used in a certain ministry of their own choosing, because all ministry is a gift of grace. Furthermore, I cannot agree that the only important people in our churches are those who stand up at the front and teach God’s Word. Passages such as Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:12-31 teach us that there are many roles to be fulfilled within our churches, and that the Church would not work if every member of the congregation had the same calling.

### **Ways that women can serve**

Although initial study of the scriptures can appear to inhibit women’s ministries, there are a myriad of ways in which a woman can serve. An area of key importance is caring for other women, whether old and frail, new mothers, younger Christians, those who may be sick, disadvantaged or weak in faith. Women can also be actively involved in prayer, either individually or by encouraging one another in large or small groups. Prayer is a vital component to the wellbeing of the Church, and should be the prerequisite to all areas of Christian life and ministry. The day to day running of the Church is sustained by practical services such as administration, catering, music or hospitality, all areas in which women can become involved. However, women do not have to be

limited to Bible-free ways of serving, as there is a great need for able Bible teachers for children and young people, single women, wives, widows, and even men in some contexts. One of the most important ministries, however, is evangelism – an area that all Christians, men and women, should be whole-heartedly devoted to. As Christians, we know Jesus’ words in Matthew 9:37 to be true – ‘*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few*’. It is vital that women involve themselves in evangelistic ministries, whether on an individual level through friendship, or by helping at larger events organised by their church or Christian Fellowship group. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11-13, God has specially gifted some to be evangelists, but this is not to say that all Christians should not seek opportunities to tell others the good news of Christ. Our greatest need as humans is to be reconciled to God, and that can only happen by acknowledging our sinful state before God and asking Jesus to be our Saviour and Lord. How will unbelievers know this unless we tell them?

## **The Problem**

As Wayne Grudem observes in *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*: ‘*many churches have been far too restrictive in their views of the type of ministry open to women, and this has often been aggravated by an excessively clergy-dominated view of ministry.*’ Very sadly, in some cases the need for women’s ministries is almost totally denied. The absence of women from pastoral teams in many churches leaves little in the way of pastoral support for women. Younger single women in particular are sometimes very limited in options where pastoral care is concerned, mainly because they do not necessarily fit into any of the existing ‘categories’ within the Church, which do often focus on married couples and families. Is it appropriate to discuss spiritual matters with a male pastor? If not, is the pastor’s wife the correct woman to approach in such situations? Very often, it is difficult to know. Of course, it would not be right to concentrate on one section of the congregation at the detriment of the others, and many churches have perfectly adequate provision for men and women, whether single or married. It is important though to ensure that women are not overlooked in these areas, and crucially, that those who are gifted in certain ways are not denied the opportunity to serve in line with scripture.

## **Conclusion**

There is a great deal of written material available concerning this area, and it is not necessarily feasible to draw up a conclusive list of what women are and are not allowed to do. It is difficult to know exactly where to draw the line when it comes to women’s ministries, as scholars do interpret the parts of scripture relating to women in varying ways, sadly often because they are more concerned with using the Bible to back up their opinions rather than forming their opinions as a result of what they read in the Bible. But we must not neglect our calling as Christian men and women, to serve God, and to do so in line with what we know to be true from the Bible. The controversies of this area can easily distract us from doing this, and as a result, there must be a point where each woman must decide how she will apply these truths to her life. It is important to serve with a clear conscience, knowing that we aren’t doing anything that is forbidden by God’s Word. However, we cannot hide behind the Prohibitive Verses – scripture makes it clear that our calling as Christians, regardless of our gender, is to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices. This we must do with joy and humility, whether we are active in ‘front line’ Bible ministries or in ‘behind the scenes’ practical ministries, such as administration, catering or hospitality.

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