

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The Word of God teaches that men and women have an equal standing before God. In fact, the Bible exalts women. Genesis 1:24-31 teaches that both men and women are made in the image of God. Galatians 3:28 likewise teaches that there is no distinction between men and women in redemption as they share the same salvation.

Furthermore, throughout the Bible women are equal in the nature of their ministry. Several examples include Deborah, who was a judge of Israel (Judges 4:4), Huldah and Anna who were prophetesses (2 Chronicles 34:22; Luke 2:36), Priscilla who was active in evangelism (Acts 18:26) and Phoebe who was a deaconess (Romans 16:1). Indeed, women played a prominent role in the ministry of Jesus and ministry to Jesus (Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 8:3; 23:49; John 11:1-46; 12:1-8). No spiritual gift is limited to men in the lists in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:8-11) and women were commanded to edify the body of Christ, which included teaching (Titus 2:4) and prophecy (Acts 2:17-18; 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5).

However, though men and women have an identical standing before God and though both serve the Lord in significant ways, we should not conclude that God has intended men and women to function in the same capacity in the church. There are many examples of people who are equal in essence being subordinate in their function, most notably God Himself in the Trinity. Other examples are seen in the family, the government, the work place and even the church, with elders and church members.

Although women have traditionally fulfilled supportive roles in serving the church and gained their greatest joy and sense of accomplishment from being wives and mothers, the feminist movement has successfully influenced many women to abandon these divinely ordained roles. Unfortunately, this movement has made headway even in the church, creating chaos and confusion regarding the role of women both in ministry and in the home. Only in Scripture can God's intended design for women be found.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND WOMEN

In the creation account of Genesis 1, God's first word on the subject of men and women is that they were equally created in the image of God (v. 27). Neither received more of the image of God than the other. So the Bible begins with the equality of the sexes. As persons, as spiritual beings standing before God, men and women are absolutely equal.

Despite this equality, there is in Genesis 2 a more detailed account of the creation of the two human beings that reveals differences in their God-given functions and responsibilities. God did not create the man and the woman at the same time, but rather He created Adam first and Eve later for the specific purpose of being Adam's helper. Eve was equal to Adam, but she was given the role and duty of submitting to him. Although the word "helper" carries very positive connotations - even being used of God Himself as the helper of Israel (Deut. 33:7; Ps. 33:20) - it still describes someone in a relationship of service to another. The responsibility of wives to submit to their husbands, then, was part of the plan from creation, even before the curse. The first books of the Bible establish both the equality of men and women and also the support role of the wife (see Exod. 21:15, 17, 28-31; Num. 5:19-20, 29; 6:2; 30:1-16).

Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's command resulted in certain consequences (Gen. 3:16-19). For the woman, God pronounced a curse that included multiplied pain in childbirth and tension in the authority-submission relationship of husband and wife. The result of the Fall on marriage through history has been an ongoing struggle between the sexes, with women seeking control and men seeking dominance.

Throughout the Old Testament, women were active in the religious life of Israel, but generally they were not leaders. Women like Deborah (Judges 4) were clearly the exception and not the rule. There was no woman with an ongoing prophetic ministry. No woman was a priest. No queen ever ruled Israel. No woman wrote an Old Testament (or New Testament) book. Isaiah 3:12 indicates that God allowed women to rule as part of His judgment on the sinning nation.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND WOMEN

In the midst of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures, which viewed women almost on the level of possessions, Jesus showed love and respect for women. Though Jewish rabbis did not teach women and the Jewish Talmud said it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman, Jesus never took the position that women, by their very nature, could not understand spiritual or theological truth. He not only included them in His audiences but also used illustrations and images that would be familiar to them (Matt. 13:33; 22:1-2; 24:41; Luke 15:8-10) and specifically applied His teaching to them (Matt. 10:34ff.)

In Jesus' treatment of women, He raised their station of life and He showed them compassion and respect in a way they had never known. This demonstrated their equality. At the same time, however, Jesus still did not exalt women to a place of leadership over men.

THE EPISTLES AND WOMEN

In the Epistles, the two principles of equality and submission for women exist side by side. Galatians 3:28 points to the equality, indicating that the way of salvation is the same for both men and women and that they are members of equal standing in the body of Christ. It does not, however, eradicate all differences in responsibilities for men and women, for this passage does not cover every aspect of God's design for male and female. In addition, there are many other passages that make distinctions between what God desires of men and what He desires of women, especially within family and within the church.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

While Christian marriage is to involve mutual love and submission between two believers (Eph. 5:21), four passages in the New Testament expressly give to wives the responsibility to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1). This voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. It is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife's equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25) and to serve as the leader in a relationship of two equals.

While husbands and fathers have been given the primary responsibility for the leadership of their children (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Tim.3:4-5), wives and mothers are urged to be "workers at home" (Titus 2:5), meaning managers of the household. Their home and their children are to be their priority, in contrast to the world's emphasis today on careers and fulltime jobs for women outside the home.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

From the very beginning, women fulfilled a vital role in the Christian church (Acts 1:12-14; 9:36-42; 16:13-15; 17:1-4, 10-12; 18:1-2, 18, 24-28; Rom. 16; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 1:5; 4:19), but not one of leadership. The apostles were all men; the chief missionary activity was done by men; the writing of the New Testament was the work of men; and leadership in the churches was entrusted to men. All the patriarchs were men.

Although the Apostle Paul respected women and worked side by side with them for the furtherance of the gospel (Rom. 16; Phil. 4:3), he appointed no female elders or pastors. In his letters, he urged that men were to be the leaders in the church and that women were not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). Therefore, although women are spiritual equals with men and the ministry of women is essential to the body of Christ, women are excluded from leadership over men in the church.

THE BIBLE SAYS WOMEN CANNOT LEAD THE CHURCH

While women served a vital role in the church from the beginning, men were assigned the role of church leadership. The apostles were all men, the churches were started by men, the Scripture was written by men and the churches were led by men.

More important than the practice of the apostolic church, instructions are given to us that necessarily give men the role of church leadership. One of the qualifications for being an elder of a church is that the person is a man (1 Timothy 3:1). Similarly, 1 Timothy 2:12 specifically prohibit women from exercising authority over a man. In addition, Paul makes it clear that this is not a cultural limitation by resting his statement upon the order of creation (1 Timothy 2:13).

THE BIBLE SAYS WOMEN CANNOT TEACH MEN

1 Timothy 2:12 explicitly teaches that a woman is not to teach a man. Paul gives two reasons why women should not teach or exercise authority over men. Man was created first and while Adam walked straight into sin, Eve was deceived (2:13-14).

In order to understand this limitation on the ministry of women, we must first clarify what is meant by teaching in 1 Timothy. First, it is clear this is only in regard to spiritual matters in the church. 1 Timothy is a pastoral epistle giving instructions for the church and the context of 1 Timothy 2:12 is the conduct in the church and the leadership of the church. This means that women are restricted in teaching or exercising authority over men in the context of the church only. 1 Timothy does not preclude women from occupations that require instruction of or authority over men, as long as these occupations are not in the church.

Secondly, teaching in the Bible is more than simply a transfer of information. It is with the expectation of acceptance and a change of life. Teaching today usually comes from an expert whose instruction is free to be ignored. Biblical teaching carries direction and an exercising of authority (cf. 1 Timothy 4:11; 4:16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Titus 2:15; 3:8). Teaching should be a careful, accurate explanation of the biblical text for the purpose of transforming the life of the hearer and women are restricted in performing this ministry to men in the church.

The women are nevertheless free to teach in many ways. Outside the church, women instruct men in many ways, such as in a profession. Also, believing women are commanded to explain the gospel to all, including lost men (cf. Acts 18:26). Within the church, women may teach women and children. With men in the church, women should discuss spiritual matters in a manner that informs, but should not instruct men in a manner that carries the expectation of application. This does not mean that a man cannot learn from a woman's conduct or from a conversation with a woman and apply what he learns to his life; instead what it means is that the woman's purpose in talking with a man is not to instruct him in this way.



Paul's statement of limiting women in teaching or exercising authority over men has been challenged in many ways:

Many evangelicals see women as being commanded to teach and that the restriction is not solely upon teaching but is upon teaching in a way that usurps authority away from men. Hence women may then teach men as long as they themselves are under the authority of a man. The problem with this view is that authority is inherently involved with the teaching of the Scripture. Teaching in the New Testament is not just a giving of facts but an attempt to convince with an expectation toward application and following. True teaching necessarily exercises authority. Men cannot rightfully delegate something to a woman that God has limited to men.

Some understand Paul's words "I do not allow" (1 Timothy 2:12) to mean his own personal preference which is not abiding for the church at large. However, this undermines Paul's apostolic authority. Indeed, Paul commonly spoke in the first person in directing the church (cf. 1 Timothy 2:1,8,9) and the context of the book itself is direction for the church.

Some have argued that verse 11 gives a condition that women must meet before being allowed to teach men, that is they must be instructed. After being educated they are then qualified to teach men. Kaiser would understand Eve's deception (2:14) as being caused by her lack of education. The major problem with this interpretation is that the text itself gives no hint that instruction would reverse Paul's command.

Some contend that Paul was just wrong in his thinking, which must be rejected on the grounds of the doctrine of inspiration of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

Each of these objections either disregards the text or read into it what is not there and therefore must be rejected. The plain meaning of Paul's words are clear and must be applied, regardless of the current views of our society.

CONCLUSION

The limitation that 1 Timothy 2:12 places upon the ministry of women is not a limitation of either the nature or the significance of their ministry. They are called to minister in the same basic way as men are called to minister and the significance placed upon their ministry is in no way diminished. It is only the sphere of ministry in which women are limited in their authority. Women are not to teach men or exercise authority over men, either corporately in formal church leadership or personally in informal church relationships. Women may communicate information to men, but in regard to spiritual matters women must not teach believing men in a way that directs or demands a response.

Men and women stand as equals before God, both bearing the image of God Himself. However, without making one inferior to the other, God calls upon both men and women to fulfil the roles and responsibilities specifically designed for them, a pattern that can be seen even in the Godhead (1 Cor. 11:3). In fulfilling the divinely given roles taught in the New Testament, women are able to realize their full potential because they are following the plan of their own Creator and Designer. Only in obedience to Him and His design will women truly be able, in the fullest sense, to give glory to God.