

WOMEN IN MINISTRY

A Two Rivers Church Position Paper

The topic of women in ministry has long been debated. We acknowledge this is a controversial subject and good people have differed in their conclusions.

The following is written to communicate how the Elders of Two Rivers Church understand the Bible as it addresses the role of women in ministry in the church.

How We Arrived At Our Position

The Bible is our guide for identifying ministry roles and practices that are pleasing to God. We have carefully studied the Bible regarding this topic and have arrived at our position from scripture.

There are two common mind-sets we have sought to avoid in our own process:

1. Allowing prevailing culture to shape our opinions so profoundly that we resist the Bible's clear instruction.
2. Allowing our religious preconceptions or previous opinions to be retained apart from carefully submitting them to the Bible's teaching.

We encourage you to submit your thinking to this biblical study as you formulate or adapt your views on this important topic.

This is a summary of our understanding of the scripture's intent for women in ministry:

We believe women are equipped by the Holy Spirit for meaningful leadership in the Church. We are committed to empowering women to serve in roles where they are gifted, including pastoring, under the oversight of the Elders.

What Precedent Is In The Bible For Women In Ministry?

Jesus set a new precedent by including women among his disciples. ([Luke 8:1-3](#), [John 4:39-42](#), and [Matthew 28:1-10](#).) His inclusion of women in this way was previously unimagined in Jewish culture.

Following Jesus' resurrection, on the day the church was born at Pentecost, Peter announced a new era had arrived promised by the prophet Joel:

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit." [Joel 2:28-29](#)

Peter explained that the new outpouring of the Holy Spirit had come to those previously minimized or oppressed. Those previously not affirmed to serve in God's work would now serve His church. In particular, women would be gifted by the Holy Spirit to assert spiritual influence.

The theme of women serving in meaningful ministry roles clearly emerges as we read the unfolding history of the early church in the New Testament.

The Roles Of Ministry That Women Fulfilled In The New Testament:

PROPHET

[Ephesians 2:20](#) affirms that the household of God is built on "the apostles and prophets." These Christian prophets fulfilled an important role in the church. Among those prophesying were women. In [Luke 2:36](#), Anna spoke as a prophet. In [Acts 21:9](#), Luke reports that during Paul's stay in Caesarea with Philip the evangelist, Philip's daughters prophesied over Paul. And in [1 Corinthians 11:4-5](#), Paul gave instruction to women on prophetic etiquette within the church assembly. This instruction makes clear that women were equipped by God's Spirit to prophesy.

TEACHER

In the New Testament we find examples of women instructing men within the New Testament community. One example is Priscilla, who was the wife of Aquila. In [Acts 18:24-28](#) we read that this husband and wife team taught

Apollos, a prominent teacher himself: *“they explained to him the way of God more adequately.”* The word *“they”* indicates Priscilla is participating in teaching Apollos. That Priscilla’s name appears before her husband’s in the text may infer that she was the more prominent of the two teachers, as men’s names generally preceded their wives’ in Roman culture. (e.g. In a similar way, note the shift of name order from *“Barnabas and Paul”*, to *“Paul and Barnabas”*, when Paul’s role surpassed that of Barnabas’.)

PASTOR

In today’s church, the role of *pastoring* is often equated with the *office of elder*. However, the biblical gift of pastoring does not necessarily mean that a person is an elder. The Greek word *pastor* simply means *‘shepherd.’* This ministry gifting describes a person equipped to provide spiritual nurture to others, and an individual who guards others from threats to their faith. In the New Testament, the work of shepherding-pastoring, was done by men and women. For example, in [Acts 18](#), Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, led Apollos to a more complete understanding of the Gospel. She and Aquila were clearly *‘pastoring’* Apollos.

DEACON

In [Romans 16:1-2](#), Paul writes:

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant (diakonos) of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

Phoebe is called a *deacon (diakonos)*. It should be noticed that a masculine ending is added to this Greek word as it is applied to Phoebe. This unusual use of a masculine noun along-side a woman’s name seems to communicate that Phoebe, a woman, was fulfilling a role commonly fulfilled by male deacons. Thus, the male ending indicated that she was a deacon, as were her male counterparts.

Furthermore, in [1 Timothy 3:8-11](#) qualifications for deacons include women:

“Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” NASB

The word *“likewise”* connects women to this same list of attributes indicating that female deacons were to be similarly qualified as male deacons.

Interestingly, in [1 Timothy 4:6](#) the title *‘diakonos’* (the same title applied to Phoebe) that is applied to Timothy is often translated *“minister.”* Paul refers to himself and to Apollos as *ministers (diakonois)* in [1 Corinthians 3:5](#). A first century deacon therefore could also have been a *“minister of the gospel.”* Thus, women who serve as deacons, by New Testament standards, can appropriately be called *‘ministers.’*

APOSTLE

In [Romans 16:7](#), we read:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.” NIV

The **King James** translation reads as follows:

“Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”

Andronicus a man, and a woman named Junia, are described as fulfilling the role of apostle.

The word *apostle* in this context is not used to designate the original twelve apostles, but a person *‘sent out’* to take the gospel in a new place as a missionary or a church planter.

So, from this context, we learn that Paul was sending greetings to a man and a woman, likely a husband and wife team, who both carried the stature of *‘sent ones’* fulfilling an apostolic role as missionaries or church planters.

Kenneth Bailey, a scholar with a background in both language and New Testament culture writes:

“The title of apostle (as applied to Junia) cannot be seen as a casual reference to an insignificant early Christian witness. With Chrysostom, the Early Fathers, Arabic and Syriac Christianity, and the Authorized Version translators, we can affirm with full confidence that Junia (feminine) was an apostle.”

“Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View,” Anvil, v. 11, n. 1, 1994, pp

Finally, it is instructive that the spiritual gifts which Paul lists were without reference to gender, indicating that spiritual gifts are given by God to all people regardless of their gender. ([Romans 12:3-8](#), [1 Corinthians 12:3-11 & 28-30](#), [Ephesians 4:7-13](#), and [1 Peter 4:7-11](#))

The Distinction Between The Words: 'Ministry' & 'Office'

Ministry is what we *all* do when serving the mission of the church using our God-given spiritual gifts.

An *Office* is a scripturally defined role of governance formally affirmed by the church.

THE BIBLE DESCRIBES TWO OFFICES WITHIN THE CHURCH:

1. DEACON

Deacons are first mentioned in [Acts 6](#) when the Twelve Apostles, the overseers or elders of the Jerusalem Church, delegated care of the widows to people they called 'deacons' (diakonos). This word simply means 'servant,' but over time this word became a title associated with an office of the church.

Deacons assisted elders carrying out specific duties to advance the mission of the church.

At Two Rivers Church, the elders have appointed various ministry teams. These teams are populated by men and women who fulfill the qualifications for the office of deacon. ([1 Timothy 3:1-13](#), [Romans 16:1-2](#))

2. ELDER

Two words are used in the New Testament describing these spiritual leaders of the church:

1. Elders (*Presbuteros*)
2. Bishops, or overseers (*Episkopos*)

The 12 Apostles were the first elders appointed by Jesus over the church ([Luke 6:12-19](#)). The office of 'elder' refers to those who, due to their spiritual maturity, provide direction and doctrinal oversight within a church.

Sometimes the words, *elder* and *overseer* are used to describe the same role ([Acts 20:17, 28](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#) and [1 Peter 5:1-2](#)).

While *elders* are called to care for a local church, *bishops or overseers*, may have had a broader range of influence guiding several churches. In [Acts 20:28](#) the Apostle Paul tells the elders to watch over the flock, "*of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.*"

In [1 Peter 5:1-2](#) the elders or overseers are those responsible for shepherding and giving oversight to the church:
"So, I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly."

The appointment of elders is no light matter. Jesus deliberated in prayer before He selected The Twelve ([Luke 6:12-19](#)). The early church prayed and fasted over the appointment of elders ([Acts 14:23](#)).

Can Women Be Elders?

In [1 Timothy 3:1-5](#) we read the following requirements for the office of elder:

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?"

In [Titus 1:5-9](#) we read:

"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

When the qualifications for the office of deacon are presented in the New Testament, both men and women are included.

When the qualifications for the office of elder are described in the Bible only men are mentioned.

It is notable that Jesus, who set a new precedent by including women in His circle of disciples, named only men to be overseers or elders prior to His ascension. When Jesus named 'The Twelve,' He appointed all men.

While the Apostle Paul affirmed and called women into significant leadership roles, he also limited the role of elder to men.

Why Is This Distinction Established In Scripture Since Men And Women Clearly Are Equal In The Eyes Of God?

Admittedly, the Bible doesn't ask and answer this question directly. Consequently, some conjecture is involved in understanding why this is the pattern in the New Testament. We believe a theological pattern was intended by scripture to be lasting, not merely a passing cultural practice that was situational.

God's Design For The Family As It Intersects With The Church

The Bible teaches that God established roles within the family to provide health and order to the family.

Men were directed by the Apostle Paul to sacrificially lead their families. By extension, these roles established for the family extend to the governance of the church, since the church is comprised of families.

The biblically described role of male servant leadership of the family is given this name in scripture: Headship. We acknowledge there have been many historic abuses of the biblical doctrine of headship. Some men have asserted sinful dominance over women, violating both the word and Spirit of Christ. Given these past abuses, we acknowledge this is a volatile topic. Let's take a careful look at the biblical concept of headship.

HEADSHIP

'Headship' (*kephale*) has three meanings in Scripture:

1. A physical head. [1 Corinthians 11:7](#)
2. Source or origin. [Colossians 1:18](#)
3. A person with authority. [Ephesians 1:22](#)

Headship is not the assertion that a man is superior over a woman.

When Eve was made by God, she was called by God 'ezer,' *'one who supplies strength as a compliment to another.'* There is no biblical precedent allowing a husband to dominate his wife. God designed marriage as a complimentary relationship. The role of the husband is to serve his wife and his family by proactively leading. This leadership is to be defined by sacrificial service.

Headship means honoring one's wife ([1 Peter 3:7](#)), loving and caring for one's wife as much as we love and care for ourselves ([Ephesians 5:28-29](#)), caring for one's wife as much as Christ loves and cares for us ([Ephesians 5:25-27](#)).

Headship does not mean the husband must make every decision. Headship is simply the responsibility to provide leadership while serving.

Paul writes about headship as it relates to the role of the wife:

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." [Ephesians 5:22-24](#)

Paul then instructs men regarding their responsibility of spiritual headship:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” [Ephesians 5:25-27](#)

While Jesus and the Apostle Paul empowered women beyond the cultural traditions of their time, the biblical concept of headship and the role of eldership still remained present in the New Testament church.

We are left to consider why women were encouraged to engage in ministry, while male headship remained the standard for the office of elder. **This is our conclusion:**

Because the church is largely comprised of families, and the family is ordered by the biblical design of headship, it follows that the church will retain a similar model of male servant leadership. Consequently, it is our understanding that the office of elder is not merely a by-product of first century culture, but male eldership is God’s design for the church.

The role of elder is one of serving leadership, uplifting both men and women so that they are empowered to use their spiritual gifts in leadership. [Matthew 20:25](#), [1 Peter 5:3](#)

Any form of male eldership which ‘lords it over’ another is antithetical to God’s standard of leadership.

Paul is clear that regardless of our genders we are to be equally valued within the community of Jesus Christ:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” [Galatians 3:28-29](#)

At Two Rivers Church, women will be affirmed in their gifting and encouraged to teach, prophecy, serve as deacons, to be ministers, and go out as missionaries and plant churches.

Women at Two Rivers Church will be affirmed to express their spiritual gifts under the oversight of the elders, including teaching, as all teaching is under the oversight of the Elders.

We are committed to biblically established values, interpreting our present culture from the Bible, not the reverse.

Where descriptions in the Bible address cultural realities of their time, we must look for transcending theological principles to apply to how we live in 21st century.

When scripture speaks theologically, transcending culture, we must respond to the scriptures, even when the Bible’s teachings require that we live differently than our popular culture.

Consequently, we believe:

Women are called to lead as prophets, pastors, deacons, teachers, and to serve planting churches, and taking the gospel into other cultures as missionaries.

It is our consensus that women are called to lead confidently expressing their spiritual gifts in all areas of ministry, with the only limit being the role of elder.

APPENDIX

OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD SCRIPTURAL PASSAGES REGARDING WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Regarding Women Being Silent In The Church

There are a few passages of scripture that have been interpreted in ways that have led to confusion regarding the role of women in the church.

One such passage is found in [1 Timothy 2:11-15](#):

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one who was 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.”

Did Paul really require ‘silence’ of women in the church? It seems unlikely, since Paul gave instructions to women in [1 Corinthians 12](#) how to speak in the church when they prophesied.

Let’s consider [1 Timothy 2:12](#) carefully:

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”

The word for *quiet* (*hesuchia*) is used earlier in [verse 2](#) of this same chapter.

“Pray . . . that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.”

Here we see that the same word ‘*quiet*’ does not refer to ‘*silence*,’ but a life devoid of contentiousness.

What about this portion of the verse:

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man...”

The word sometimes interpreted as “*authority*” (*authentain*) is used only once, here, in the entire New Testament.

When Paul speaks of ‘*proper authority*’ in the church, he uses the Greek word ‘*exousia*.’ (See: [1 Corinthians 6:12, 7:4, 9:4-6, 9:12 & 11:10](#), [2 Corinthians 2:8, 10:8 & 13:10](#), [Colossians 1:13](#), [2 Thessalonians 3:12](#), [Romans 6:15 & 9:21](#))

This unique word (*authentain*), when used in other first century writings usually describes the *assertion of dominance or aggression*. This is why the Latin Vulgate, and several other translations, interpreted this passage as a warning against “*usurping authority*.”

Paul’s instruction here then, was to correct a woman who was dominating biblical discussions within the church. This behavior, of course, would be equally improper for a man.

There is more to notice in this passage: The grammar Paul uses here reveals that he is correcting *a specific woman* who has become a ‘verbal bully’:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.” [1 Timothy 2 :11](#)

Paul’s choice of grammar reveals that he is speaking of an *individual woman*.

Paul used the present active indicative tense in the word *epitrepō* with the negative *ouk*: Literally translated, “***I am not currently allowing...***”. The Greek verb *epitrepō* in the New Testament, in every case, speaks to a specific or limited circumstance.

This is consistent with use of *epitrepō* in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). It is usually related to a specific and limited situation rather than a universal one. [Genesis 39:6](#), [Esther 9:14](#), [Job 32:14](#)

So, Paul never intended this to be a universal admonition. Paul is writing to *a specific woman* who was argumentative and loudly dominating discussions in the Ephesian church.

So, the likelihood is that the verb *didaskein* (to teach) is linked here to the verb *authentain* in what Greek grammar experts call an ‘*Ahendiadys*’, when two words joined by a conjunction make a single point. (E.g. ‘*Don’t drink and drive*’ would be a modern example.)

So, an accurate interpretation of this passage is: *don't teach in a domineering way*. Paul is not establishing a universal theological position on women teaching. He is confronting an individual woman who has been contentious and disruptive, imposing her opinions on others.

What about the rest of the passage?

"For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one who was deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." [1 Timothy 2:13-14](#)

An interesting fact about the cultural context in which 1 Timothy was written:

Ephesus was famous for its devotion to Artemis, a female fertility goddess.

Paul was addressing a community where goddess worship was common, and female superiority was espoused.

Included among the heretical teaching regarding Artemis was the idea that Eve was created before Adam and superior to him. This is likely the object of Paul's writings.

This verse seems to address a truth that we are to observe in the church: Paul affirms male headship as God's design for creation. Headship is the principle concern to Paul. Not silencing women. He is reinforcing God's design for leadership in the home, and therefore, in the church.

What then does this statement mean?

"But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." [1 Timothy 2:15](#)

We know with certainty women do not attain their pardon from sin and secure eternal life through childbearing ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). That would contradict the entirety of the gospel message. Salvation is a gift, given by God, through Jesus.

The word *salvation* (*sozo*), used to describe the gift of eternal life, is also used to describe God's deliverance through a harrowing experience... like having a baby.

Paul is offering women reassurance that God will be with them as they go through the travail of labor - saving them from danger, *if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety*.

A final principle of biblical interpretation: Scripture does not contradict itself.

[1 Timothy 2:1-10](#) provides instructions for both men and women to follow when praying in public. So, women are here taught how to speak in the church. In [1 Corinthians 12](#), women are instructed in how to prophesy in church. Paul also commends a number of women serving in leadership positions ([Romans 16](#)).

So, Paul is supportive of women participating freely and verbally in ministry.

Are Women Prohibited From Speaking In The Church?

This position is derived from an interpretation of [1 Corinthians 14:34-35](#):

"...women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

If this passage is read apart from the larger context of what Paul earlier communicated, it might seem Paul is prohibiting women from speaking in any way when the church is gathered publicly.

However, in his earlier instructions, Paul allowed women to participate in the public life of the church by praying and prophesying ([1 Corinthians 11:5](#)).

Here, greater cultural understanding may bring increased clarity:

The early church was initially populated by Jews who became Christ-followers. Consequently, early patterns for worship were derived from practices observed within the synagogue.

The described moment in this passage of scripture is consistent with a tradition present in the synagogue when heads of households representing their family, were allowed to ask questions regarding what had been taught that day. They could also contest the teacher's statements, which often led to spirited debates.

In this context, Paul asked women not to participate in these exchanges. Culturally, doing so would be considered an act that would usurp her husband's role as the family spokesman and leader of their household.

We believe Paul is seeking to honor male leadership in this unique cultural context, restricting women from questioning or challenging the speaker during the church service, which was their husband's role within this culture. Instead, they were to talk with their husbands as their family spokesman, so he could ask their question, or bring a point of challenge.

This seems consistent with Paul's subsequent instruction:

"If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home." [1 Corinthians 14:35](#)

But we do not believe it to interpret this passage as a general prohibition against woman speaking in all public assemblies. Paul clearly didn't assume that women were to be silent in all settings in the church, because earlier he instructed women in how to prophecy in the church. But even in this instruction Paul instructed women to honor their marital relationship by prophesying with their heads covered ([1 Corinthians 11:4-5](#)). If a woman removed her head covering in that time and culture, it inferred she was single. Paul was directing wives to maintain cultural propriety in the church, deferring to their husband as their family spokesman, and retaining their head covering even when they were publicly prophesying, thus honoring their husbands.

Today, head covering conveys none of this symbolism in American culture. It is a non-issue for us. But if we were in the Middle East, Paul's instruction might still carry cultural relevance.

