

Let the Women Preach!

For centuries men have misused and misinterpreted the Bible to keep women silent. But the message of Scripture is clear: God has called His daughters to prophesy.

It's a lie to say that women are not equipped to assume leadership roles in the church. Cultural norms as well as religious mind-sets have helped spread and given credence to this lie, but in spite of arguments to the contrary, it is not supported by Scripture.

Too many years have passed for most of us to remember that Christian leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries aggressively opposed the effort to grant women the right to vote in the United States. In 1920, Roman Catholic bishops in Massachusetts ruled that women would be considered "fallen" if they entered the political arena. Other denominations passed rulings decrying the suffrage movement, predicting that if women began voting they would forsake their domestic duties and trigger the downfall of civilization.

Some preachers jumped on the anti-woman bandwagon and launched an effort to "re-masculinize" the church out of fear that women would somehow come to dominate it. One of them, Horace Bushnell, a Congregationalist, predicted in his book *Women's Suffrage* that if women started voting, their brains would swell, and they would eventually lose their femininity—and their morals.

For the most part, those who fight the idea of women's ordination today are still using the same cultural arguments and misinterpreted Bible passages that were used by medieval

church patriarchs. Old lies don't die easily.

This was most obvious in June 2000, when the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant denomination, passed a policy that states: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture." One Baptist leader who opposed the measure, Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tennessee, told a reporter from The Orlando Sentinel that the 15 million-member SBC "has pulled up the drawbridge to the 21st century and locked its members into a 19th-century cultural castle."

Why is it that the church always seems to be 50 or 100 years behind the times when it comes to making social progress? Why must we drag our feet so clumsily when the Holy Spirit is urging us to break free from religious traditions that hinder His work?

We live in a culture in which qualified women serve as governors, senators, mayors, university deans, corporate presidents, ambassadors and even military commanders. Women have achieved remarkable status in diverse fields, including space exploration, medicine, business and athletics. Yet a majority of evangelical churches remain closed to the notion of a woman assuming the role of senior pastor. As a result the world views the church as ignorant, insensitive and irrelevant. Sadly, we deserve that label.

Did Jesus Believe Women Could Lead?

This strong church bias against women in leadership is peculiar when we examine Jesus' own inclusive attitude toward the women who followed Him. Jesus affirmed the equality of women in the midst of a culture that denied them basic human rights. He called them to be His disciples during a time when religious leaders taught that it was disgraceful even to teach a woman.

We read in Luke 8:1-3 that the women who followed Jesus were a vital part of His traveling ministry team: "The twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance" (NKJV).

These women were not just stragglers who stayed at the back of Jesus' entourage watching Him from a distance. They were Jesus' disciples in the fullest sense, and we have every reason to believe that He commissioned them to minister in His name.

When Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon the church, as recorded in the book of Acts, many of these same women were in the upper room and received empowerment on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). Those who were Christ's disciples had been commissioned to go into all the earth as witnesses, but they had been instructed to wait until the Holy Spirit came upon them to empower them to fulfill this commission (see Acts 1:4-5).

When the Holy Spirit came to fulfill this promise of empowerment for ministry, both men and women, including Jesus' own mother, received Him. This was noted by Peter, who then

recited the verse from Joel's prophecy: ""Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy"" (Acts 2:17, emphasis added).

If Christ commissioned only men to the ministry of the gospel, why did He send the power for that mission upon both men and women?

The women in the upper room were not the only women Jesus commissioned. In the story of His visit with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-42), we read that after Jesus revealed His true identity to her, the woman began telling others about Him (vv. 28-29). Here we see perhaps one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of Christ as an ordainer of women.

The gospel account tells us that after the woman's encounter with the Savior, "Many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of [her] word" (v. 39). Why would the Messiah send this woman into her village to tell others about His power if He was opposed to the concept of women in ministry?

Interestingly, this was the first recorded instance in which Christ commissioned someone to evangelize beyond the narrow confines of the Orthodox Jewish community. To prophetically demonstrate that the gospel would ultimately spread to "'Samaria, and to the end of the earth'" (Acts 1:8), He sent a woman evangelist to preach!

We must remember the cultural context of this passage. In Palestine at the time of Christ, women were not considered reliable witnesses because they were believed to be ignorant and easily deceived.

Yet, to whom did Jesus announce His resurrection on Easter morning? And whom did He commission to tell others that He had triumphed over the grave? Was it not His brave women disciples?

Because of cultural biases, Christ's male disciples did not believe the testimony of the women when they gave the astounding report about the open tomb. Yet Jesus appeared to the twelve and confirmed the witness of the women, and by doing so He intentionally refuted the idea that women could not offer faithful testimony. Indeed, He affirmed the ministry of the women and challenged His narrow-minded male followers to do the same.

When Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, "'Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God''" (John 20:17), was He not affirming her as a witness of the gospel? Was He not commissioning her both to go and to speak for Him? Why then do we deny women the opportunity to carry this message?

A Gospel That Empowers Women

In conservative Christian circles women are expected to live contentedly in the background, presumably to focus on domestic duties, because this is their humble, God-ordained "place" in life. It's a place of invisible service and of godly but quiet influence over children and the home, or perhaps over the church nursery, Sunday school class or women's Bible study.

Women, of course, are told it is an honor to live in the shadow of their husbands or other male authorities and a disgrace for them to assume a place of significant spiritual authority. But we need to ask: Where did we get this warped idea when it was not the perspective of Jesus, nor is it promoted anywhere in the Scriptures?

The Bible, in fact, contains a rich record of women who were placed in authority by God. We must consider the way God used them before we attempt to pull an isolated verse out of context to build a doctrine that restricts the ministry opportunities of women. Consider the following biblical women and the level of authority they were given:

Miriam. There is no question that Moses' sister was considered a leader in ancient Israel. This is confirmed in Micah 6:4: "'I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam'" (emphasis added). She represented the authority of God to the people in the same way Moses did. She spoke for God. That's why she is described in Exodus 15:20 as a prophetess.

Deborah. Among the judges of Israel, Deborah was the only one other than Samuel who held the respected position of prophet. She is referred to as a prophetess in Judges 4:4, and her attentiveness to God's purpose and strategy resulted in an impressive military victory for Israel that secured peace for 40 years (see Judg. 5:31).

Deborah functioned as a civil ruler and was so respected for her anointing and spiritual insights that Barak, Israel's military commander, refused to go into battle without her.

Deborah, who is called “‘a mother in Israel’” (Judg. 5:7), presents an intriguing problem for conservative church leaders today who want to promote the view that women cannot function in senior positions of spiritual authority.

Huldah. After 50 years of paganism and spiritual adultery in Israel, King Josiah assumed the throne and rediscovered the Book of the Law, which had been hidden in the temple. When it was read aloud, he immediately repented and turned to the Lord, then sent his high priest to seek out a faithful follower of God who could speak for Him. To whom did he turn? To Huldah, a prophetess who obviously had remained faithful to the Lord during one of the darkest periods in Israel’s history (see 2 Kin. 22:14).

We know little about this woman except that she lived in Jerusalem with her husband, Shallum, and that her prophetic message to Josiah came true. The fact that Israel’s high priest, Hilkiah, and his associates sought her out to make their inquiry of the Lord shows that she had earned a reputation for hearing from God.

Esther. Although Esther did not function in a place of ecclesiastical authority, her life proves that God can and does use women in strategic positions of influence to further His purposes. Indeed, He singled out this young Jewish woman and thrust her into the place of an intercessor and deliverer, not unlike Moses, and her prayers and courageous actions literally saved her people from genocide.

Phoebe. Paul commended Phoebe to the church at Rome and asked them to “receive her in the Lord” when she arrived from Cenchrea to work among them (Rom. 16:1-2). Although he refers to her as a “deacon” (diakonon in Greek), scholars have

translated the word as “servant” in many Bible versions. But it is more accurate to categorize Phoebe with men such as Stephen and Philip, whom Paul describes with this same Greek word.

Paul’s commending of Phoebe to the Roman church was his way of enduing her with apostolic authority, and he obviously expected the early Christians to follow her instructions when she arrived. She was sent by Paul to carry out specific plans, probably related to evangelism and church planting.

Priscilla. Along with her husband, Aquila, this woman was a noted laborer in the early church, and it was this couple’s influence that helped launch the apostolic ministry of Apollos (see Acts 18:24-26). It would be safe to say that they also functioned as apostles, since Paul refers to them in Romans 16:3 as “fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” We are told that they had a church “in their house” (v. 5) and that this brave couple “risked their own necks” to save Paul’s life (v. 4).

Philip’s daughters. Acts 21:9 says that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were “prophetesses” (NASB). The term used here is taken from the same root word used in Acts 15:32 to describe two male prophets, Judas and Silas.

We know nothing about the daughters, but we can assume that their influence was significant enough to be mentioned in the biblical record. Obviously they were engaged in public speaking, and their words carried the same level of authority as those of Agabus, a male prophet who is mentioned in Acts 21:10. Philip’s daughters were, in essence, women preachers who experienced a high level of respect for their spiritual insights and level of giftedness.

Lois and Eunice. The apostle Paul commends these two women, Timothy's mother and grandmother, for shaping the young man's ministry through their instruction and example. Although it is an obscure passage, it is a crucial one because so many churches today use Paul's letters to Timothy to justify misguided policies that limit the scope of women's ministry.

It is ironic that people twist Paul's words "I do not permit a woman to teach" (1 Tim. 2:12, NKJV) in order to make a blanket prohibition against women teaching men, when in 2 Timothy 1:5 Paul commends Lois and Eunice for teaching Timothy the faith!

There are several other examples of women who held positions of spiritual authority in the New Testament church. Like Jesus, the apostle Paul had women disciples whom he trained and commissioned to preach and evangelize on the front lines. Where are the women who "share the struggle" of apostolic ministry today? How tragic that the church in the 21st century has not empowered an entire army of women with the authority necessary to take cities and nations for Christ.

Who Says Women Can't Lead?

The prophet Joel predicted that one day the Holy Spirit would be poured out on the church and, as a result, our "'sons and daughters [would] prophesy'" (Joel 2:28, emphasis added). This passage clearly indicates that when the New Testament age began, both men and women would be empowered and commissioned to carry the message of the gospel to the world. God's Holy Spirit would no longer rest simply on isolated individuals as was the case under the old covenant.

In the Pentecostal age, all believers, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social status, would have full access to the graces of the Spirit and would speak the

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graces of God.

If preaching were to have been limited to men only, Joel would not have mentioned daughters in his prediction. He would have said instead, "In the last days, I will pour out My Spirit, and your sons will prophesy while your daughters serve quietly in the background and pray for the men."

That is not what the Bible says. It clearly states that women will preach. They will lead. They will be on the front lines of ministry. Like Deborah, they will take the church into enemy territory and watch as the Lord gives victory. Like Esther, they will not keep silent. Like Phoebe, they will co-labor with apostles to establish churches in unevangelized regions.

If this is the clear mandate of Joel 2:28, why do churches that pride themselves on faithful adherence to a literal translation of the Bible reject it? There is no biblical basis for the popular notion that prophesying or preaching is a uniquely masculine act.

Both genders have been called to minister in the Holy Spirit's power, and we grieve the Spirit when we restrict the full release of that power by forbidding women to speak God's Word or use their talents in His service. We will answer to God for limiting His work by restricting the flow of His Spirit through women who have been called to speak for Him.

We need to understand that the Bible does not lock women into the stereotypical mold of silent wimps. In the book of Proverbs, godly wisdom is portrayed as a fearless woman who stands in the middle of the city and “cries out” (Prov. 8:3). She declares: “‘To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men’” (v. 4).

Not only does she preach authoritatively, but she preaches to men. This allegorical woman is not leading a women’s Bible study in her home. She is evangelizing men in the central square of a major city. Yet how many leaders of major denominations in the United States would tell this woman preacher to sit down and shut up?

It is tragic that eloquent women preachers in former centuries had to defend their skills and anointing to clergy. It is even more tragic that equally anointed women preachers today must continue to defend themselves. When are we going to stop quenching the Holy Spirit by denying our sisters their right to prophesy? To keep them silent is to tune out the voice of the Spirit. To reject their leadership is to reject the Lord.

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Shouldn’t Women Keep Silent?

‘t the Bible say women can’t assume leadership roles in the church?

Bible offers many examples of women who were placed by God in positions of spiritual authority. The most prominent Old Testament example is

Deborah (see Judg. 4), but other examples include Miriam, who was a prophetess and worship leader (see Ex. 15:20), and the prophetess Huldah (see 2 Kin. 22:14).

And in the New Testament, the apostle Paul mentions nine women who served as co-laborers on his apostolic team. One woman, Junia, is described as an apostle (see Rom. 16:7). Another itinerant female minister, Priscilla, brought doctrinal correction to Apollos (see Acts 18:24-26).

didn't the apostle Paul say in 1 Timothy 2:12 that women aren't allowed to teach or to have authority over men?

verse is commonly cited to suggest that women can never teach men in a church setting. But because it contradicts other biblical passages that describe women exercising spiritual authority, we must look deeper to discover the context of the passage. In this verse, Paul says he wants women to "be in silence" (NKJV).

But in other epistles he endorses the idea of women praying and prophesying publicly (see 1 Cor. 11:5). So obviously his

stern restriction on women in 1 Timothy 2:12 does not apply to all women in all situations.

Many Bible scholars believe Paul was dealing with a serious heresy problem in the church at Ephesus when he wrote 1 Timothy 2:12. Certain female teachers were spreading dangerous gnostic fables, and in some cases they were suggesting that women are superior to men or that Eve was created before Adam. Paul commanded Timothy not to let these women spread their doctrines. Yet we know that he was more than willing to let trained, Bible-believing women teach—since he commends such female ministers as Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, Tryphena and Tryphosa .

why didn't Jesus appoint any women to be His disciples?

did have women disciples. He encouraged Mary to sit at his feet and learn His teaching (see Luke 10:38-42) even though Jewish rabbis never allowed women to learn the Torah. Jesus' women followers also supported him financially (see Luke 8:1-3), and they were the first to be witnesses of His resurrection—even though women were not considered credible witnesses in court in first century Israel. There also were women disciples in the upper room when the Holy Spirit empowered the church on the day of Pentecost.

So why did Jesus select 12 men to be His most visible representatives? Some Bible scholars say He did this to make a symbolic statement to the Jews. The 12 disciples symbolized the 12 tribes of Israel, and this was a prophetic sign that Jesus had come to establish a “new Israel” through the new covenant.

women can be spiritual leaders, then why did Paul say they had to be silent in church?

apostle Paul’s strong words in 1 Corinthians 14:34 (“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak”) is a curious verse, one that has perplexed scholars because it seems to contradict Paul’s earlier words in the same chapter—in which he encourages all believers to prophesy.

Some theologians believe the apostle is calling for order because women were disrupting the church meeting with loud, argumentative chatter. Others believe that verses 34 and 35 are quotes from a letter written to Paul by the leaders of the Corinthian church, which Paul answers in verse 36 (Amplified) by saying: “What! Did the Word of the Lord originate with you?”

However we interpret the complexities of this passage, we cannot use it to create a blanket rule that restricts women from preaching, praying, teaching or prophesying. Women prophets appear in the Old and New Testaments, and Joel 2:28

declares that both your “sons and your daughters” (NKJV, emphasis added) would prophesy after the Holy Spirit was given to the church.

didn't Paul also say that women shouldn't teach because they are more easily deceived than men?

mentions Eve's deception when he tells Timothy that he won't allow women to usurp men's authority (see 1 Tim. 2:14). But this is in the context of the situation at the church in Ephesus—where ignorant, untrained women were spreading heresy by claiming to have special revelations. If Paul believed that all women were deceivers by nature he would not have commissioned Priscilla, Junia or any other woman to lead churches or share apostolic responsibility. His comment about Eve was a warning about the dangers of letting untrained people spread doctrinal error.

It is a chauvinistic view to suggest that women are more easily deceived than men. Both men and women have a fallen nature, and both have the capacity to deceive and to be deceived. But when women are trained to skillfully handle the Word of God, they deserve our respect.