

Go and Tell: The Role of Women in Ministry

Serving as a mouthpiece of the Lord, the prophet Joel exuberantly declared, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29, NIV). Through Joel, the Lord was foretelling His call on men and women who, by the filling of His Spirit, would speak forth (prophesy) His message so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 32).

In its truest sense, Joel’s prophecy was a gender-neutral call to evangelism.

Despite its fulfillment at Pentecost more than 2,000 years ago, many Christians remain cautious—if not downright belligerent—regarding the role of women in ministry. Should a woman preach, pray in the company of men or occupy a leadership role in a church? Those who answer no to such questions often cite two infamous statements from Paul:

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says” (1 Cor. 14:34).

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet” (1 Tim. 2:12).

Certainly, when isolated, these verses appear troubling to those who support women preachers—or to Joel’s prophecy, for that matter. Yet as any reader knows, statements only make complete sense when read in context. A primary rule of thumb is that Scripture interprets Scripture. And in studying the whole of Scripture, you’ll find that Israel, the apostles, the

Gospel writers and Jesus Himself all support the belief that God uses women in mighty ways.

Supported by Israel

The book of Judges tells of a prophetess named Deborah who was raised up by God to be a judge and to deliver His people from the wicked King Jabin. Not to go unnoticed, Jael, the wife of Heber, also played a significant part in the story. Jael killed the commander of Jabin's army, Sisera, which delivered Israel from his troops. God mightily used both Deborah and Jael in the deliverance of His people. (See Judges 4-5.)

Ancient Hebrew literature outside of the Old Testament has its own tales of women greatly used by God. The story of Judith, albeit fictitious, is an ancient tale of a woman who becomes the instrument of God to the oppressed. She outwits Israel's enemies by using her femininity as a weapon.

These stories give evidence that before Christianity, women, from time to time, were raised up by God to do amazing works and that the Jewish culture did not suppress these events, but on some occasions celebrated them.

Supported by the Apostles

Contrary to Paul's statements in his letters to the church in Corinth and to Timothy, he references numerous women co-laboring in ministry with him. Chapter 16 in his letter to the Romans opens commending Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.

Additionally, he greets Priscilla with her husband, Aquila, a couple who together serves "all the churches of the Gentiles." Mary, he goes on to include, "has worked very hard among you." Finally, Junia (referred to as a woman by early church fathers) is considered by Paul to be "prominent among the apostles." Surely, Paul would not celebrate these women as co-laborers and (in the case of at least one) apostles if he

truly meant for them to remain silent in public ministry.

Also notable is John's second letter, which is addressed to "the chosen lady" and her children (2 John 1:1). Some believe this woman was one who allowed a church to meet in her house.

Supported by the Gospel Writers

Scholars agree that Paul's letters pre-date the four Gospels. And so it is probably safe to assume that if the early church sentiments were against women in the ministry, this would be reflected in the later Gospels. Yet the gospel writers tell of numerous stories of women in evangelism.

In the account of the Samaritan woman at the well, John says that after speaking with Jesus, the woman went back to her city to tell the people about Him. John attests, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony." (See John 4:1-42.). Obviously, this Samaritan woman wasn't quiet!

In Luke's records of the Acts of the Apostles, he recounts Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, taking aside an intelligent Jewish man and explaining "the way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18:26).

Supported by Jesus

Finally, in the book of John, Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene to be the mouthpiece to first alert the world of His resurrection. She received a special command from Jesus: "Go and tell my brothers, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17).

This go-and-tell commission is significant because it was the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus refers to God as "your Father" or "your God." Through Mary Magdalene, Jesus personalized God, announcing His fatherhood shared by all who believe. Truly, this was a new message, and Jesus entrusted it

to a woman.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Mary Magdalene was a radical follower of Jesus and was known by the early church as “the apostle of the apostles.”

What About Paul?

What, then, should be made of those two statements made by Paul in his letters to the church in Corinth and to Timothy? After surveying just a few of the references to mighty women of God throughout the Bible, including those mentioned by Paul himself, it is obvious that he didn't intend for women to be kept from leadership or silenced from preaching.

We must remember that Paul's letters were addressed to specific churches and people at specific times for specific reasons. In this case, Paul was likely speaking to women who were out of order, loud and distracting in the church. It is said that seating arrangements in the meetings of the early church were very different from today. Women were on one side and men on the other. Probably due to a lack of education, it is thought that the women would shout over to the men and ask questions about what was being taught.

Paul's admonishments to the women to keep silent were not because he didn't believe they should spread the gospel, but rather to keep those services in order.

Go and Tell

If you are a woman, feel liberated to boldly proclaim the Good News of Christ without fear of God's (or man's) disapproval. Today, women continue to experience Joel's prophesy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh and are making significant evangelistic contributions. Like Mary Magdalene, women of the church have been charged by God in dramatic ways to bring new and fresh messages to His people. God has anointed and commissioned you to “go and tell”!

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