

Should Women Teach Seminary Classes? John Piper Says No

John Piper is a respected author and Bible teacher, and countless Christians—including many Pentecostals and charismatics—have been blessed by his influence. For more than 30 years, he pastored Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and now, at age 72, he continues spreading the gospel through his books and his Desiring God website.

But a couple of weeks ago, the Calvinist preacher stirred up a hornet's nest when he said on his "Ask Pastor John" podcast that women should never be allowed to teach seminary classes. Piper said: "If it is unbiblical to have women as pastors, how can it be biblical to have women who function in formal teaching and mentoring capacities to train and fit pastors for the very calling from which the mentors themselves are excluded?"

Anyone who knows Piper's background would not have been shocked that he said this. He's a strict complementarian, meaning that he believes only men can teach and lead in the church and that women must follow them supportively. Most Calvinists, by definition, share this view. In the world of Reformed Christianity, women have agreed to take a back seat.

I certainly support Piper's right to hold what he views as a faithful interpretation of Scripture. But because he is injecting his opinions into the mainstream, I can't sit back and ignore the controversy when I've dedicated my life to empowering and supporting my Christian sisters who are in ministry. Piper's words not only insulted women; I believe his message grieved the Holy Spirit and could seriously hinder today's church from advancing the gospel.

As a Pentecostal who believes the Holy Spirit's gifts are

given to all people—regardless of race, class, age or gender (see Acts 2:17-18)—I believe the current discussion about Piper’s podcast provides the perfect platform for a refresher course on the scriptural basis for women as teachers, preachers and leaders.

1. **The Old Testament upholds the value of women as teachers.** Proverbs tells us that, in a family, wisdom comes from both father and mother. “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother” (Prov. 1:8). But a mother’s teaching and godly influence are not restricted to the home. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman preaching in the streets!

We have several examples of women who held leadership positions in Israel, including Miriam and Deborah. And we also see that when Israel was backslidden, and the book of the Law had been forgotten, King Josiah sent his representatives to find a “prophetess” named Huldah (see 2 Kings 22:14) who delivered the word of the Lord. At a time when even the priests had fallen away from God, this faithful woman continued to teach the truth, and she did not hold back from speaking it.

2. **Jesus gave women their voice back.** Jesus ministered at a time when women had no rights. Yet He elevated women to a position of dignity, and He especially reached those who suffered as social outcasts and abuse victims. Jesus also gathered a group of women and discipled them at a time when Jewish rabbis believed it was wrong to teach women from the Torah. He even sent the Samaritan woman to preach to all the men of her village.

And in the end, Jesus chose one of His women followers, Mary Magdalene, to be the first to proclaim that He had been raised from the dead. I believe He did this to demonstrate that the shame-based restrictions placed on women since the Garden of

Eden have now ended. The gospel liberates women from second-class status. And it surely empowers women to speak for God.

3. **We have New Testament examples of women teachers.** I'm not sure how John Piper would explain the ministry of Priscilla, since we see her in the book of Acts instructing the young apostle named Apollos (see Acts 18:24-28). Priscilla is the grandmother of all women seminary teachers. She and her husband, Aquilla, traveled with the apostle Paul and helped lay the spiritual foundations of the early church. To ignore Priscilla's ministry is to dishonor a true mother of the faith.

Piper believes only men can teach men, especially men who are called to be pastors. But by maintaining this position he discounts the ministry of biblical woman such as Euodia, Syntyche, Chloe, Nympha, Junia and Phoebe, all who worked alongside Paul. Calvinist teachers claim to be strict enforcers of the Scriptures, but they actually display a cavalier attitude toward the Bible when they minimize the influence of the female heroes of the early church.

4. **We cannot use Paul's words as a universal ban on women teachers.** Piper and other complementarians base all their opposition to women teachers on 1 Timothy 2:12, where Paul says he does not allow women to "usurp" a man's authority. Yet Paul also allowed Priscilla to teach, sent Phoebe as a deacon to Rome (see Romans 16:1-2), and defended the right of Euodia and Syntyche to do ministry work (see Phil. 4:2-4). So obviously what Paul told Timothy was not a universal, all-inclusive directive; he was addressing a specific heresy in the Ephesian church that required swift discipline.

To all my sisters I say: Don't be discouraged. If you sense the call of God, and you know the fire of the Holy Spirit is burning in your heart, don't let the narrow views of some

Christians stop you from pursuing your dream. Men may seek to limit and restrict you, but God has the last word. He declared on the day of Pentecost: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17b).