

“Your Position Against Women Pastors Is Outdated”

Question for Sue Bohlin regarding women pastors:

It seems like your reasoning centers on one verse: 1 Tim. 2:12. [But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.] My question about that verse would be: Is it a timeless teaching? Wouldn't you agree that there are some culturally relevant areas of the Bible? Is the particular application of the principles of this passage timeless or are they culturally relative? When I study the Bible, to determine whether the teaching is timeless or culturally relative, I ask, was the teaching taught uniformly throughout the Bible. If it is a timeless teaching, then there won't be any variations on it. If it is a culturally relative issue, sometimes it might be there and sometimes not. For example, throughout the Bible you hear differing views on drinking wine, but there is a consistent message about getting drunk. The view that states that women cannot be in leadership in a church context is drawn mainly from 1 Timothy 2:9-13. Due to the pagan religions in Ephesus in Paul's day this prohibition was necessary to distinguish Christianity from other religions. However, that cultural context is no longer applicable to the church today.

If you think that 1 Tim. 2:12 is timeless, then what do you do with the fact that women wrote parts of the Bible? Luke 2:38 (Anna); Luke 1:42-45 (Elizabeth); Luke 46-55 (Mary); Exodus 15:20-21 (Miriam); Judges 5 (Deborah—was leader of Israel). What do you do with the fact that women are prophets? Ex.15:20-21 (Miriam); 2Kg 22:14 (Huldah), Isa 8:3 (Isaiah's wife); Luke 2:38 (Anna); 1 Cor. 11:5 (others). Another thing to consider is that many women are described as having authoritative roles, over men and women in the Bible. Deborah (Judges 5), Anna (Luke 2:38), Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3), Aquilla and Pricilla (Acts 18:26) and others to name a few.

Women were not only recorded as being prophets but also judges and apostles (Rom. 16:7). The cultural restriction of women in leadership roles is not a timeless principle. This restriction denies women who are called into leadership from fulfilling their unique role in God's kingdom. Also, women not being allowed in leadership denies the church from the benefit of half of its leaders, pastors, visionaries, prophets and so on. Men and women are different but together in leadership they can complement one another by bringing out different characteristics of God's character. Not all women, just as not all men, are called into leadership roles in the church. Each person should follow their personal calling. However, women can be free to follow God's call into roles of leadership if God chooses to gift, equip and call them into that role. How can all this be ignored? I am a conservative Christian, but I use my mind to study issues like this to learn the truth. Can you explain how all these references can be ignored?

I completely agree that we must seek to separate timeless principles from cultural, time-bound issues. That is an essential part of reading and interpreting the Bible accurately.

I believe the pivotal verse of 1 Tim. 2:12 is but one link in a chain that teaches male headship and leadership because of the way God reveals Himself through the teaching that men are to assume the

mantle of leadership for the church and the family: the husband as the head of the wife; male elders in church leadership; Jesus choosing twelve men as the foundation of his church (even though He was constantly flying in the face of the anti-female culture of His time, elevating and honoring women in a way no one had seen before). I am particularly struck by Eph. 3:14-15, which can (and I think should) be translated “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every *fatherhood* in heaven and on earth derives its name.” I am struck by how, as a woman, I am unable to represent the Fatherhood of God, which is why male leadership (who can manifest the Fatherhood of God) is so crucial. (There are other aspects of God that I and all other women are able to represent particularly well, such as His beauty, compassion, nurturing, comfort, relational sensitivities—but not His Fatherhood.)

Then what do you do with the fact that women wrote parts of the Bible?

I would respectfully disagree that women wrote these parts. Luke and Moses wrote the verses you cited, quoting these women. Which is awesome, considering the cultural value of women at the time. It shows that God speaks and blesses through women, and the Holy Spirit made sure godly women were credited with being the conduits of praise and blessing that they were. But they didn't write those passages.

What do you do with the fact that woman are prophets?

I thank the Lord for using believing women in this way. A prophet is a servant, the mouthpiece of God. A conduit. This is a separate issue from being a pastor or elder or serving in leadership over men.

Another thing to consider is that many women are described as having authoritative roles, over men and women in the Bible. Deborah (Judges 5), Anna (Luke 2:38), Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3), Aquilla and Pricilla (Acts 18:26) and others to name a few.

Deborah: Indeed, she did serve as a judge. But note how she led—not as a man would. She called herself “a mother in Israel.” Her role was more one of advisor and counselor, the way a mother would counsel her children, and making judicial decisions. She used her “authority” in indirect ways to influence, as opposed to the direct kind of leadership as the male judges did. When the need for military leadership arose, she called on Barak to lead the men into war with the Canaanites.

Anna: All scripture says about this godly woman is that “she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. She came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” There is nothing here to indicate an authoritative role. She served in the temple and testified about God. This does not constitute authority.

Isaiah's wife: she is described as “the prophetess,” which I understand from Bible scholars may well refer to her role as the prophet's wife. But even if she were a full-fledged prophet in her own right, she had no authority. She would have been a mouthpiece for God. The authority was in the words that would have come through her, not in the woman herself.

Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, “took Apollos aside and explained to him the way of God

more accurately." This doesn't mean she was in leadership; it means she sat and explained things, in tandem with her husband, peer-to-peer. Not as a church leader.

Women were not only recorded as being prophets but also judges and apostles (Rom. 16:7).

I'm sorry, but we cannot know that Junias was a woman. The argument that Junias was a female apostle is shaped by modern feminist thought rather than by robust Biblical scholarship.

Also, women not being allowed in leadership denies the church from the benefit of half of its leaders, pastors, visionaries, prophets and so on.

Women are not denied a place of leadership in the church. We are restricted from CERTAIN positions of leadership. Some of the most gifted leaders, teachers, pastors (it helps to use the term "shepherds," which means the same thing) and visionaries in the church are women, and when we use our gifts to lead and serve and teach women and children (which is over half the church), I think God is making a statement about the value of women and children. When we use our gifts and strengths to influence in indirect ways—note the importance of character and maturity in requirements for elders' and deacons' wives or deaconesses, 1 Tim. 3:11—we see the complementarity of male and female gifts and strengths combined to glorify God and serve the Kingdom.

For what it's worth, when my husband served as an elder in our church and it was time to find new elders and deacons, they wisely went to the nominated men's wives first to ask in private, "Your husband is being considered for this role in our church. Please be honest: is there any reason he should be disqualified?" A wife's "yes" was a deal-breaker. That's a powerful position! Not a direct position of authority, but an indirect position of influence. Also, some of the best ideas, and valuable warnings, and concerns borne of sensitivity and awareness of the needs of people, come from women. Wise men in leadership listen to wise, godly women. When men dismiss the contributions and gifts of women, everyone misses out. But that doesn't mean women should be in all positions of authority and leadership.

However, women can be free to follow God's call into roles of leadership if God chooses to gift, equip and call them into that role.

God will not call women into a role that is outside His stated limitations for us. I think it's extremely important that these new ways of attempting to throw off millennia-old understandings of the scriptures only came after feminist philosophy invaded the church.

You write to me because you are aware of my position (which is shared by my colleagues) at Probe Ministries where I have a platform and a voice through our website and radio ministry. I am grateful for this example of how women can use our gifts and callings to serve the Kingdom without transgressing God's order of male leadership. None of the women at Probe are in positions of authority over men, but we are still able to make a difference through our stewardship of influence. And as a woman (and one with an intense personality and pastor-teacher gifts), please let me assure you that this position of influence without authority is not in the least bit demeaning or disrespectful to me.

Thank you for writing.

Sue Bohlin

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