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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Twelve Women in Ministry

Since it is common knowledge that women make up more than one-half of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is important to understand their God-ordained role within the body. In most churches and ministries, women are viewed as valuable workers, as they often do the majority of the overall ministry.

Yet not all agree on women's roles. Women are often restricted from certain areas of ministry within the church that have to do with speaking and leadership. Some churches allow for female pastors; many do not. Some allow women to teach while others do not. Some restrict women from speaking at all during church services.

Most of these disagreements hinge on various interpretations of Paul's words regarding women's roles found in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-3:7. These scriptures will be the focus of our study, particularly at the end of this chapter.

From the Beginning

As we begin, let us consider what Scripture reveals about women from its very first pages. Women, just like men, are created in God's image:

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27).

We know, of course, that God created Adam *before* He created Eve, and this is indeed a spiritually significant fact according to Paul (see 1 Tim. 2:3). We will later consider the significance of this order of creation as it is explained by Paul, but suffice it to say for now that it does not prove men's superiority over women. We know that God created animals before human beings (see Gen. 1:24-28), and no one would argue that animals are superior to people.¹

The woman was created to be her husband's helper (see Gen. 2:18). This again does not prove her inferiority, but only reveals her role in marriage. The Holy Spirit is given as our helper, but He is certainly not inferior to us. Rather, the Holy Spirit is superior to us! And it could well be said that God's creation of the woman to be her husband's helper proves that

¹ It should also be noted that every man since Adam has been created by God *after* God created the woman who gave him birth. Every man since Adam has come from a woman, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12. Surely no one would argue that this divine order proves that men are inferior to their mothers.

men needed help! It was *God* who said that it wasn't good for the man to be alone (see Gen. 2:18). That truth has been proven countless times in history when men have been left without wives to help them.

Finally, we note from the very first pages of Genesis that the first woman was formed from the flesh of the first man. She was taken *from* him, pointing to the fact that he is missing something without her and that the two were originally one. Additionally, what God separated was intended by Him to become one again through sexual union, a means not only of procreation, but of expressing love and enjoying mutual pleasure upon which both are dependent upon the other.

Everything about these lessons from creation stands against the idea of one sex being superior to the other, or one having the right to dominate the other. And just because God has designed different roles for women in marriage or ministry has nothing to do with their equality with men in Christ, in whom "there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28).

Women in Ministry in the Old Testament

With this foundation laid, let us now consider some of the women God used to accomplish His divine purposes in the Old Testament. It is obvious, of course, that God primarily called men into vocational ministry during the time of the Old Testament, just as He did during New Testament times. The stories of men such as Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Joseph, Samuel and David fill the pages of the Old Testament.

Many women, however, stand out as proof that God can call and use anyone He desires, and women equipped by God are sufficient for any task to which He calls them.

Before we consider any of those women specifically, it should be noted that every great man of God in the Old Testament was born and raised by a woman. There would have been no Moses without a woman named Jochebed (see Ex. 6:20). Nor would there have been any other great men of God if it weren't for the mothers of those men. Women have been given by God the weighty responsibility and praiseworthy ministry of raising children in the Lord (see 2 Tim. 1:5)

Jochebed was not only the mother of two God-called men, namely Moses and Aaron, but also of a God-called woman, their sister, a prophetess and worship leader named Miriam (see Exodus 15:20). In Micah 6:4, God categorized Miriam right with Moses and Aaron as being one of Israel's leaders:

Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt and ransomed you from the house of slavery, and *I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam* (emphasis added).

Of course, Miriam's leadership role in Israel was clearly not as dominant as Moses. Yet as a prophetess, Miriam spoke on God's behalf, and I think it is safe to assume God's messages through her were directed not at just the women, but the men of Israel as well.

A Female Judge Over Israel

Another woman whom God raised up as a leader in Israel was Deborah, who lived during the times of Israel's judges. She, too, was a prophetess, and was just as much a judge over Israel as were Gideon, Jephtha and Samson during their lives. We are informed that "the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment" (Judg. 4:5). So she rendered decisions for men, not just women. There can be no mistaking this: *A woman told men what to do, and God anointed her to do it.*

Like most women whom God calls into leadership, Deborah apparently faced at least one man who had difficulty receiving God's word through a female vessel. His name was Barak, and because he was skeptical about Deborah's prophetic instructions for him to go to war against Canaanite general Sisera, she informed him that the honor of killing Sisera

would go to a woman. She was right, and a woman named Jael is remembered in Scripture as the lady who drove a tent peg through sleeping Sisera's head (see Judg. 4). The story ends with Barak singing a duet with Deborah! Some of the lyrics are full of praises for both Deborah and Jael (see Judg. 5), and so perhaps Barak became a believer in "women's ministry" after all.

A Third Prophetess

A third woman who is mentioned in the Old Testament as being a well-respected prophetess is Huldah. God used her to give reliable prophetic insight and instruction to a *man*, the troubled king of Judah, Josiah (see 2 Kin. 22). Again we see an example of God using a woman to instruct a man. Most likely, Huldah was used by God in such a ministry with some degree of regularity, otherwise Josiah would not have had such faith in what she said to him.

But why did God call Miriam, Deborah and Huldah as prophetesses? Couldn't He have called men instead?

Certainly God could have called men to do exactly what those three women did. But He didn't. And no one knows why. What we should learn from this is that we had better be careful about putting God in a box when it comes to whom He calls to ministry. Although God normally chose men for leadership tasks in the Old Testament, sometime He chose women.

Finally, it should be noted that all three preeminent examples of female ministers in the Old Testament were prophetesses. There are some Old Testament ministries to which no women were called. For example, there are no women who were called to be priests. Thus God might reserve some ministry offices exclusively for men.

Women in Ministry in the New Testament

Interestingly, we also find a woman being called of God as prophetesses in the New Testament. When Jesus was just a few days old, Anna recognized Him and began proclaiming His messiahship:

And there was a *prophetess*, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. And at that very moment 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 (Luke 2:36-38, emphasis added).

Note that Anna spoke of Jesus to *all* those "who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." That would of course include men. Thus Anna could be said to have been teaching men about Christ.

There are other women in the New Testament whom God used in the gift of prophecy. Jesus' mother Mary is certainly in that group (see Luke 1:46-55). Every time Mary's prophetic words are read in a church service, it could be said that a woman is teaching the church. (And God unquestionably honored womanhood by sending His Son into the world by means of a woman, something He could have done by many other means.)

The list continues. God foretold by the mouth of the prophet Joel that when God poured out His Spirit, both sons and *daughters* in Israel would prophesy (see Joel 2:28). Peter confirmed that Joel's prophecy was certainly applicable to the new covenant dispensation (see Acts 2:17).

We are told in Acts 21:8-9 that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophetesses.

Paul wrote of women prophesying in the church gatherings (see 1 Cor. 11:5). It is clear from the context that men were present.

With all of the scriptural examples of women being used by God as prophetesses and to prophecy, we certainly have no good reason to be closed to the idea that God might use women in such ministries! Moreover, there is nothing that would lead us to think that women can't prophesy to men on God's behalf.

Women as Pastors?

What about women serving as pastors? It seems clear that the office of pastor/elder/overseer is intended by God to be held by men:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any *man* aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the *husband* of one wife (1 Tim. 3:1-2, emphasis added).

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any *man* be above reproach, the *husband* of one wife (Tit. 1:5-6, emphasis added).

Paul does not expressly say that women are forbidden from holding the office, and so we might exercise a little caution in making an absolute blanket conclusion. It seems that there are numerous very effective female pastors/elders/overseers around the world today, particularly in developing nations, yet they are still the overwhelming minority. Perhaps God does occasionally call women to this role when it serves His wise kingdom purposes or when there is a shortage of qualified male leadership. It is also possible that many of the female pastors in the body of Christ today are actually called to other ministry offices that are biblically valid for women, such as the office of prophetess, but current church structure only allows them to function in a pastoral role.

Why is the office of pastor/elder/overseer reserved for men? Understanding the function of that office might help us to understand. One of the scriptural requirements for the pastor/elder/overseer is that,

He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

This requirement makes perfect sense when we realize that the New Testament elder oversaw a small house church. His role was similar to that of a father overseeing his household. This helps us to understand why the pastoral office should be held by a man—because it so closely resembles the family structure which, if it is in line with God's design, should be headed by a husband, not a wife. More on this later.

Women as Apostles?

We have conclusively established that women can serve in the office of prophetess (if called by God). What about other types of ministries? It is enlightening to read Paul's salutations in Romans 16 where he praises a number of women who served in ministry for the sake of God's kingdom. One may even have been listed as an apostle. In the three consecutive quotations that follow, I've italicized all the female names:

I commend to you our sister *Phoebe*, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that

you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well (Rom. 16:1-2, emphasis added).

What an endorsement! We don't know exactly what ministry *Phoebe* fulfilled, but Paul called her "a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea" and "a helper of many," including himself. Whatever she was doing for the Lord, it must have been quite significant to warrant Paul's endorsement of her to the entire church in Rome.

Next we will read about *Prisca* (Priscilla), who, along with her husband, Aquila, had such a significant ministry that all the Gentile churches appreciated them:

Greet *Prisca* and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Greet *Mary*, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias [or *Junia*, as the KJV translates it, which is feminine] my kinsmen, and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me (Rom. 16:3-7, emphasis added).

Regarding Junias, it would seem logical to think that a person who is "outstanding among the apostles" could only be an apostle. If the correct translation is *Junia*, then she was a female apostle. *Prisca* and *Mary* were workers for the Lord.

Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. Greet *Tryphaena* and *Tryphosa*, workers in the Lord. Greet *Persis* the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also *his mother and mine*. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. Greet Philologus and *Julia*, Nereus and *his sister*, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them (Rom. 16:8-15, emphasis added).

Clearly, women can be "workers" in ministry.

Women as Teachers?

How about female teachers? The New Testament doesn't mention any. Of course, the Bible doesn't mention any men called to be teachers either. Priscilla (just mentioned above and also known as Prisca), wife of Aquila, was involved in teaching at least on a small scale. For example, when she and Aquila heard Apollos preaching a deficient gospel in Ephesus, "They took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). No one can debate that Priscilla helped her husband teach Apollos, a man. Additionally, twice in Scripture Paul makes mention of both Priscilla and Aquila when he writes of "the church their house" (see Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19), and he calls them *both* "fellow workers in Christ" in Romans 16:3. There is little doubt that Priscilla had some active role in ministry along side her husband.

When Jesus Commanded Women to Teach Men

Before we address Paul's words about women keeping silent in the church and his forbidding women to teach men, let's consider one other scripture that will help us balance those.

When Jesus was resurrected, an angel commissioned at least three women to teach Jesus'

male disciples. Those women were instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen and that He would appear to them in Galilee. But that is not all. A short time later, Jesus Himself appeared to the same women and commanded them to instruct the disciples to go to Galilee (see Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-7).

First, I think it is significant that Jesus chose to appear first to women and then to men. Second, if there was something fundamentally or morally wrong with women teaching men, one would think that Jesus wouldn't have told women to teach men about His resurrection, hardly a trivial piece of information, and one that He could have delivered on His own (and in fact later did). No one can argue with this fact: the Lord Jesus instructed women to teach a vital truth and give some spiritual instructions to some men.

The Problem Passages

Now that we have some understanding of what much of the Bible tells us about women's roles in ministry, we are better able to interpret the "problem passages" in Paul's writings. Let us first consider his words about women keeping silent in the churches:

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

Some question, for several combined reasons, if these are Paul's actual instructions or simply his quotation of what the Corinthians had written to him. It is clear that in the second half of this letter, Paul was responding to questions the Corinthians had asked him in a letter they had sent (see 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

Additionally, in the very next verse, Paul writes what could be considered his reaction to the Corinthians' blanket policy of silencing women in the churches:

Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (1 Cor. 14:36).

The *King James Version* translates this verse in such a way that makes Paul sound even more amazed at the attitude of the Corinthians:

What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? (1 Cor. 14:36).

In either case, Paul is obviously asking two rhetorical questions. The answer to both is *No*. The Corinthians were not originators of God's word, nor was God's word only given just to them. Paul's questions are obvious rebukes aimed at their pride. If they are his reaction to the two verses that immediately precede them, they seem to say, "Who do you think you are? Since when do you make the decrees regarding who God can use to speak His word? God can use women if He desires, and you are foolish to silence them."

This interpretation seems logical when we take into consideration that Paul had already, in the same letter, written about the proper way for women to prophesy in the churches (see 1 Cor. 11:5), something that requires them *not* to be silent. Moreover, just a few verses after those under consideration, Paul exhorts all the Corinthians,² women included, to "desire earnestly to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:39). Thus he would seem quite contradictory to himself if he was indeed laying down a blanket command for women to keep silent in church gatherings in 14:34-35.

² Paul's exhortation is addressed to the "brethren," a term that he uses 27 times in this letter, and which clearly refers to the entire body of Christians in Corinth, not just the men.

Other Possibilities

But let us assume for a moment that the words in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 are Paul's original words, and that he *is* instructing women to keep silent. How then should we interpret what he says?

Again, we would have to wonder why Paul was making a blanket command for women to keep completely quiet in church gatherings when he said in the same letter that they can publicly pray and prophesy, apparently in church gatherings.

Moreover, surely Paul was aware of the many biblical instances we've already considered of God using women to speak His word publicly, even to men. Why would he completely silence those whom God has often anointed to speak?

Surely common sense dictates that Paul could not have meant for women to be *completely* silent whenever the church gathered. Keep in mind that the early church gathered in homes and shared common meals. Are we to think that the women said absolutely nothing from the time they entered the house until the time they left? That they didn't speak while they prepared or ate the common meal? That they said nothing to their children the entire time? Such a thought seems absurd.

If where "two or three are gathered" in Jesus' name He is among them (see Matt. 18:20), thus certainly constituting a church gathering, when two women come together in Jesus' name, must they not speak to one another?

No, if 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is indeed Paul's instruction, he was simply addressing a small problem of order in the churches. Some women were out of order in some way in regard to asking questions. Paul did not mean for women to be completely silent for the entire meeting any more than he, when giving similar instructions a few verses earlier to prophets, intended for them to remain silent for the entire meeting:

But if a revelation is made to another [prophet] who is seated, *let the first keep silent* (Cor. 14:30, emphasis added).

In this case, the words "keep silent" mean "temporarily refrain from speaking."

Paul also instructed those who spoke in tongues to remain silent if there was no interpreter in the gathering:

But if there is no interpreter, *let him keep silent in the church*; and let him speak to himself and to God (1 Cor. 14:28, emphasis added).

Was Paul instructing such people to be *completely* silent during the *entire* meeting? No, he was only telling them to be silent in respect to their speaking in tongues when there was no interpreter. Note that Paul told them to "keep silent in the church," the same instruction he gave to women in 1 Cor. 14:34-35. So why should we interpret Paul's words to women to keep silent in the church to mean "keep silent for the entire meeting," and then interpret his words to out-of-order tongue-talkers to mean "refrain from speaking during specific moments in the meeting"?

Finally, note that Paul was not addressing *all* women in the passage under consideration. His words have application only to married women, because they are instructed to "ask their own husbands at home" if they have questions.³ Perhaps part or all of the problem was that married women were asking questions of other men besides their *own* husbands. Such a scenario could certainly be considered inappropriate, and could reveal some degree of disrespect and lack of submission to their own husbands. If that was the problem Paul was addressing, that could be why he bases his argument on the fact that

³ It should be noted that, in the original Greek, there were no different words for *women* and *wife*, or *man* and *husband*. Thus we must determine from context if the writer is speaking of men and women, or husbands and wives. In the passage under consideration, Paul is speaking to wives, as only they could ask their husbands anything at home.

women should be submissive (obviously to their husbands), as the Law revealed in many ways from the earliest pages of Genesis (see 1 Cor. 14:34).

In summary, if Paul is indeed giving instruction regarding women keeping silent in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, he is only telling married women to keep quiet in regard to asking questions at inappropriate times or in a way that was disrespectful to their husbands. Otherwise, they may prophesy, pray and speak.

The Other Problem Passage

Lastly, we come to the second “problem passage,” found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy:

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression (1 Tim. 2:11-14).

Surely Paul knew of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Anna, four prophetesses who spoke on God’s behalf to men and women, effectively teaching them God’s will. Surely he knew that Deborah, a judge over Israel, exercised some degree of authority over men and women. Surely he knew that God had poured out His Spirit on the day of Pentecost, partially fulfilling Joel’s prophecy of the last days when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh so that sons *and daughters* would prophesy the word of God. Surely he knew that Jesus commissioned some women to take a message from Him to His male apostles. Surely he knew of his own words of approval, written to the Corinthian church, regarding women praying and prophesying during church gatherings. Surely he remembered that he had told the Corinthians that any one of them might receive a teaching to share with the body from the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 14:26). So what did he intend to convey when he wrote these words to Timothy?

Notice that Paul appeals to two related facts from Genesis as the basis for his instruction: (1) Adam was created before Eve and (2) Eve and not Adam was deceived, and she fell into transgression. The first fact establishes the proper relationship between the husband and wife. As taught by the order of creation, the husband is to be the head, something that Paul teaches elsewhere (see 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23-24).

The second fact Paul mentions is not meant to convey that women are more easily deceived than men, because they aren’t. In fact, since there are more women and than men in the body of Christ, it could be argued that men are more likely to be deceived than women. Rather, the second fact shows that when God’s intended order in the family is neglected, Satan can gain entrance. Humanity’s entire problem began in the garden when the relationship between a man and his wife was out of order—Adam’s wife was not submitted to him. Adam must have told his wife God’s instruction regarding the forbidden fruit (see Gen. 2:16-17; 3:2-3). She, however, didn’t follow his instruction. In a sense she even exercised authority over him when she gave him the forbidden fruit to eat (see Gen. 3:6). It wasn’t Adam leading Eve in that case; it was Eve leading Adam. The result was disaster.

The Church—A Model of the Family

God’s intended order for the family should certainly be demonstrated by the church. As I stated earlier, it is important to keep in mind that for the first three hundred years of church history, church congregations were small. They met in houses. The pastor/elder/overseers were like fathers of households. This God-ordained church structure so closely resembled the family, and in fact was a spiritual family, that female headship over it would have sent the wrong message to families inside and outside the

church. Imagine a female pastor/elder/overseer regularly teaching in a house church, and her husband obediently sitting there, listening to her teaching and submitting to her authority. That would go against God's order in the family, and the wrong example would be set.

This is what Paul's words address. Note that they are found in the very close context of his requirements for elders (see 1 Tim. 3:1-7), one of which is that a person be a male. It should also be noted that elders are supposed to teach regularly in the church (see 1 Tim. 5:17). Paul's words regarding women quietly receiving instruction and not being allowed to teach or exercise authority over men are obviously related to the proper order in the church. What he describes as being improper is a woman, in part or whole, fulfilling the role of an elder/pastor/overseer.

This is not to say that a woman/wife could not, under submission to her husband, pray, prophesy, receive a brief teaching to share with the body, or speak in general during a church gathering. All of these she could do in the church without violating God's divine order, just as she could do all those things at home without violating God's order. What she was forbidden to do in church was nothing more or less than what she was forbidden to do at home—exercise authority over her husband.

We also note from later verses that women could serve in the office of deacon just as well as men (see 1 Tim. 3:12). Serving in a church as a deacon, or *servant* as the word actually means, requires no violation of God's divine order between husbands and wives.

This is the only way I can see to harmonize Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 with what the rest of Scripture teaches. In every other scriptural instance we've considered of God using women, none serve as models of the family as does the church, and thus none violate the God-ordained order. In none do we find an improper model of wives exercising authority over their husbands in a family setting. Again, picture a small gathering of several families in a house and a wife being in charge, teaching, and overseeing while her husband passively sits and submits to her leadership. This is not what God desires, as it goes against His order for the family.

Yet for Deborah to be a judge in Israel, for Anna to tell men about Christ, for Mary and her friends to tell the apostles about Christ's resurrection, none of these send a wrong message or in any way improperly model God's order in the family unit. The regular church gathering is a unique setting where danger exists for the wrong message to be sent if women/wives exercise authority and regularly teach men/husbands.

In Conclusion

If we just ask our selves, "What could be fundamentally wrong with women functioning in ministry, serving others from a heart of compassion and using their God-given gifts? What moral or ethical principle might that violate?" Then we shortly realize that the only possible violation of principle would be if a woman's ministry somehow violated God's order for the relationships between men and woman, husbands and wives. In both of the "problem passages" under consideration, Paul appeals to the divine order in marriage as the basis of his concern.

Thus we realize that women are restricted in ministry only in a very small sense. In so many other ways, God wants to use women for His glory, and He has been doing that for thousands of years. Scripture speaks of many positive contributions that women have made to God's kingdom, some of which we have already considered. Let us not forget that some of Jesus' closest friends were women (see John 11:5), and that women supported His ministry financially (see Luke 8:1-3), something that is not said of any men. The woman at the well of Samaria shared Christ with the men of her village, and many believed in Him (see John 4:28-30, 39). A female disciple named Tabitha is said to have been "abounding with deeds of

kindness and charity which she continually did" (Acts 9:36). It was a woman who anointed Jesus for burial, and He commended her for it when certain men complained (see Mark 14:3-9). Finally, the Bible records that it was women who wept for Jesus as He carried His cross through the streets of Jerusalem, something not said of any men. These examples and many like them should encourage women to rise up and fulfill their God-ordained ministries. We need them all!