

The Role of Women In the Church

By Wesley White
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Many years ago, a small church got a new pastor who transferred in from another city. He was new to them, but he had years of pastoral experience in other parts of the country. On the first Sabbath he was there, he preached for only five minutes. After the sermon, the members said things like, "You know, this guy may not be too bad."

On the second Sabbath, his sermon lasted for ten minutes. Members of the congregation later came to the conclusion that ten minutes isn't so bad.

On the third Sabbath, he preached and he preached and he preached. He went on for two hours!

The local church board decided they needed to call him in and ask for an explanation. They asked him, "Pastor, why did you preach for five minutes the first week, ten minutes the second week, and then two hours the third week?"

The preacher explained, "Well, that first week I had some new dentures and they were really hurting my mouth so I couldn't talk too long. I could only preach five minutes. I went home and filed them down and they were better, but they were still bothering me a week later, so I could only preach for 10 minutes that second Sabbath.

"Then on that third Sabbath, I was running late for church. I reached into the glass to get my dentures and I got the wrong ones. I accidentally grabbed my wife's dentures. I put them in my mouth and *I just couldn't stop talking!*"

This fictional story illustrates the attitude that some people have about the role of women in church. Many seem to have the attitude that you wouldn't want a woman to handle ministerial duties such as preaching.

I was in a church once where they had a men's club which taught public speaking and only the men could attend. I asked the pastor why women weren't allowed in and he said, "Women don't need a class in speaking. They already know how to talk."

Commonly Asked Question

What is the role of women in the church? To some, this is not an easy question. Controversy over women in religion has been going for hundreds of years.

Today, we can see many Protestant women preachers on TV. Several Protestant churches have been founded by women. And this is offensive to some of the other Protestants. The Roman Catholic Church has not been free from controversy regarding women. Many Catholics in America are in disagreement with the Vatican on the subject of ordaining women priests.

The Jews are not having it much easier. There are occasional problems at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Rabbinic rules say that only men can sing, pray, and read the Torah at the Wailing Wall. The rabbis say women may assemble at that location, but they are to do so in their own section and in silence. The Orthodox rabbis claim that a woman's voice should not be used in worship because it is lascivious and will entice men to have bad thoughts.

Not long ago, some Jewish women assembled at the wall to pray, sing, and read the Torah. Men threw rocks at them. Police beat them. And other women bit them.

What are women allowed to do and what should they not do when it comes to serving the church?

Let's go to the Scriptures to see what guidelines are provided on this subject of women in the church. Let's see if we can better understand how women are to serve our Lord as well as the Church of God.

Old Testament Examples

Let's begin our investigation today by going to the Old Testament. It may be surprising to some that, when we go to the Old Testament for guidance on this subject, we find the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob gives women the right to virtual full participation in the religious life of the ancient Israelites! There is very little that women were not allowed to do in the Hebrew nation when it came to worship.

Let's look at an important example. We read in Scripture that the kings of Israel and Judah led their nations into apostasy the majority of the time. And what were the two sins that they committed over and over? Idolatry and Sabbath breaking. We read this in Ezekiel 20:24.

In the midst of all this sin, we find a beautiful situation in II Kings 22.

The situation leading up to this event is that the Israelites had been worshipping Baal. The Bible calls this "whoring." At this time, the Israelites are not obeying God. They are ignoring the Sabbath. They are saying, "All the nations around us are basically good people. Let's learn from them. Let's go worship with them and figure out new ways to worship our God." Did God accept this behavior? No!

But then along comes a new king. His name is Josiah. He wants to do better. The Holy Spirit is guiding him into recapturing the faith of the patriarchs. Josiah wants to bring Yahweh's people back to proper worship practices, so he decides to start by remodeling the Temple. We read in II Kings 22:

3-- *And it came to pass in the 18th year of king Josiah, that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the Lord, saying,*

4-- *Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may sum the silver which is brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people.*

5-- *And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord. And let them give it to the doers of the work which is in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house.*

6-- *Unto carpenters, and builders, and masons, and to buyer timber and hewn stone to repair the house...*

8-- *And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan and he read it...*

11-- *And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes...*

13-- *Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found. For great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.*

Huldah Made the Decision!

So, while the workers are ripping out walls and repairing this wonderful building, they come across something that hadn't been read for years--the Torah. Those awesome first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Initially, Josiah and his advisors don't know what to do with these books. They want to know whether or not they are really the writings of the God. They need to know whether to study these things or to burn them. They've got to go to someone and find out. But to whom do they go?

They went to a woman! II Kings 22:14 says, "*So Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess.*"

This is significant. *God gave a woman the power and authority to make a major religious decision for His nation that day.* The Holy Spirit did NOT inspire these men to go to a man. They sought out a woman to make this tremendous decision that would determine the direction of an entire nation. And because of this woman's leadership, the Jews returned to their God and away from Baal.

And notice what Huldah tells Josiah in verse 19. She says that Josiah's fathers displeased the Lord because they went whoring after false religions. She says, "But you have a tender heart and Yahweh will bless you."

What would Huldah say to us today? Would she say just the opposite to us--that our fathers were blessed because they had tender hearts when they obeyed the Lord, but

that we are not being blessed because we go whoring after all the false religions of the world? This question needs to be asked by the Churches of God.

Someone might say, “Why make a big deal out of a one-time thing? This situation was unique because women weren't allowed to actively participate in the Temple.” Oh? Women couldn't actively participate in the Temple?

Let's read I Chronicles 25:

5--All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the words of God, to lift up the horn. And God gave to Heman 14 sons and 3 daughters.

6--All these were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God...

It clearly shows that both men **and** women were actively participating in temple worship.

There's more in the Old Testament. Psalms 68 says:

24--“They have seen thy goings, O God, even the goings of my God, my King, in the sanctuary.

25--The singers went before, the players on instruments followed after, among them were damsels playing with timbrels.

Women were indeed allowed to play very important religious roles in the Old Testament!

In the book of Judges we find a woman who was not only a judge, but was probably a super judge. She was consulted by Israelites from various tribes who wished to have their disputes settled. These disputes were either too difficult for local judges or they were perhaps of an inter-tribal nature.

Deborah sent the Israelite commander-in-chief, Barak, to go to war. She was so respected that the Israelites asked her to accompany them in battle. Deborah was a judge in every sense of the word.

From these Scriptures alone, we see that there were very few restrictions on women in the Old Testament. Yes, there were a few. And we'll get into that. But the fact remains that there were only a **few** restrictions—not many.

New Testament Examples

Let's move on to the New Testament. What can we learn from the writings of the apostles?

Well, the first thing we find is that women labored side by side with Paul. Let's look at Philippians 4:3. “*And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with my other fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life.*”

It's clear that Paul was giving equal recognition to the women who served the Church.

Some say that Paul was anti-women. But you can't say that--especially when you read his greetings and commendations to women in Romans 16.

1-- I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.

2-- That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you. For she had been a succourer of many, and of myself also.

3-- Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus

4-- Who have for my life laid down their own necks--unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles...

6-- Greet Mary, who bestowed much labor on us...

12-- Salute Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labor in the Lord. Salute the beloved Persis, which labored much in the Lord...

15-- Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them.

Paul and Women

Paul was NOT anti-woman. He used them as he preached the Gospel. Romans 16 is a "Who's Who?" of men **and** women who labored together for the Lord. Women were an important part of Paul's ministry. Paul did not exclude women from participating in church affairs.

But now we come to the part where we must acknowledge that there are a couple of restrictions on women. And there are basically only two restrictions for women in the church.

When we read the Old Testament, it becomes clear that women were not permitted to function as priests. We find this in Numbers 3.

And when we read the New Testament, it becomes clear that women were not permitted to function as pastors or elders. In I Timothy 3 and in Titus 1, Paul makes it clear that an elder must be the husband of one wife. He is not only prohibiting polygamists from being elders, he also prohibiting women from this role as well.

Now, when we discuss these restrictions, someone asks, "Did God restrict women from being priests because of the prevailing patriarchal, male-dominated culture of the time?"

The answer is NO because the culture of that time permitted women to serve as priestesses. Many religions back then included women in their priesthoods.

Avoiding Pagan Influences?

People often ask, “Were women excluded from the priesthood to avoid the dangers of the Canaanite fertility cults and their sacred prostitution?” No. Many pagan priestesses lived celibate lives just like nuns do today. Just because some pagan priestesses served as prostitutes is not a good reason for God to exclude devout Israelite women from service. After all, the sons of Eli were fornicators, but their immorality did not result in the abolition of the male priesthood.

In fact, the danger of MALE prostitution was almost as prevalent as female prostitution during Old Testament times. If the danger of prostitution was the reason for excluding women from the priesthood, then men would not have been eligible either.

Then why did God prohibit women from being in the priesthood? We've already established that women served God well as prophetesses and judges. Why did God make this distinction?

The answer appears to be that the role of the priest was seen as **representing the head of the household**.

During the times of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the male head of the household or tribe functioned as the priest, representing his household to God. Later God appointed the tribe of Levi as priests instead of the head of each family.

The New Testament continued the concept of appointing representative males as elders or pastors.

Adam and Eve

Now, someone says, “Doesn't this gender distinction actually go all the way back to the sin in the Garden of Eden? Didn't God make Eve subordinate to Adam as part of a curse? And didn't Christ come to take away that curse?”

After Adam and Eve have sinned, God makes a pronouncement on them. He says in Genesis 3:16, “*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.*” Some say that, after the sin in the Garden of Eden, the woman was put under the authority of her husband.

Question: Was the woman under the leadership of her husband **before** the sin in the Garden of Eden? Yes, she was. The man was the leader in the relationship from the very beginning. We say this for three reasons:

1) Genesis 2 tells us that God made the woman **OF** the man, to be a helper fit **FOR** the man, and that God brought her **TO** the man. And this certainly implies no inferiority. It only establishes the structure of the relationship.

2) The warnings about the tree of knowledge are given to the man before the creation of the woman. It was Adam's responsibility to convey that knowledge to the woman. This is clearly a leadership function.

3) Adam names the woman. Naming a person is an act that indicates authority over that person. God named the celestial spheres (Genesis 1:5), but he gave Adam the right to name the animals and the woman.

So, we cannot say that the statement made in Genesis 3:16 about man ruling over woman is a curse. The man has already been given the responsibility of being leader in the relationship.

What seems to have changed is that, before the sin, there was a more natural and harmonious relationship. But now, after the sin, the leadership would be asserted in conflict in the same way that man's tilling the earth would also now be in conflict.

Keeping Women Silent in Church?

Let's look at another great misconception regarding women in the church. Let's read I Corinthians 14:

34--Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, and also saith the law,

35--And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in church.

Notice the phrase "it is a shame for women to speak in church." Please keep this phrase in mind because we're going to examine it. But first, let's look at I Timothy 2:

9--In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shame facedness and sobriety, not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.

10-- But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.

11-- Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

12-- But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

Notice the phrase saying that a woman should not have authority over the man. Now, we seem to have two problems here. We need to understand what Paul means when he says:

1) That women should be silent in church.

2) That a woman should not have authority over the man.

And here is where we find our common misconceptions. Let's first talk about women being silent as mentioned in I Corinthians 14. There is no way that Paul is telling us that women are not to utter a single syllable in church. Some people would have you believe this. Some churches don't allow women to say **anything** once church services start.

I have seen visitors to some congregations become offended that women spoke during services. The women asked for prayer requests. They talked when they introduce a song. They gave announcements. And this is offensive to some.

But Paul does NOT expect women to be quiet during Church. Women obviously have to make some noise with their mouths when they sing! And this has precedence in the Old Testament. Also, we know that women prayed and prophesied in the New Testament church. We read this in I Corinthians 11:5. So we can say with **total assuredness** that total silence is NOT what Paul had in mind!

Well, then, what did Paul mean?

What Paul was telling us is that, women shouldn't be asking a lot of questions to their husbands during services? Apparently, this was a problem in Paul's time because we know they had segregated services back then. Men and women didn't sit together.

It seems that some women were going to their husbands during services in a different part of the synagogue to ask questions. This was causing a disruption and Paul needed to address it.

The whole context of I Corinthians 14 is *keeping things orderly in the Church*. It is not a discussion of gender roles. Paul is telling the church to not let noise and distractions degenerate the service into chaos. This is his message!

Women Ruling Over Men?

And what about a woman being forbidden to have authority over the man as mentioned in I Timothy 2?

The question is this, "What man? Is it ALL men? Is it just certain men? How far does this prohibition go?"

For example, what if some of the women in the church are going to run a function? A fund raiser. A social. An open house for the community. Anything.

They are in charge. And suppose they ask some of the men to come move tables and chairs. Can these women tell the men what to move and where to move it to?

Of course they can! We do it this way in the Church of God and there is nothing wrong with it. Paul does not preach against this in I Timothy!

Well, then who is the man that Paul is talking about?

The woman's husband!

What Paul is saying is that no woman should become the head of the household exercising authority over her husband. Paul is simply saying that the man is to rule over his family. This is not the wife's responsibility. That's all.

Paul does NOT limit how much authority a woman can have in the church other than being a pastor or elder. Let's demonstrate this further.

Some churches allow women to serve on the elected board of directors. You can't find anything in Scripture against this. With this in mind, the next question has to be, "Then can women serve on the board of the denomination's international governing body?" The answer to that is this. There should be no denominational governing bodies. But that is a subject for another time.

And let's ask this question regarding the local congregation. Suppose the demographics of a church today were such that there simply were not a lot of guys who were qualified to sit on the board. This happens in small groups. It is possible to have a local group with a pastor and four women running that church! And there is nothing against it in Scripture.

There is nothing wrong with a church being run by women. In fact, I have known churches like that. They have no pastor. The preaching is done by recordings or by

guest speakers. The women make the decisions regarding finances, activities, and sermon speaking schedule. Other than serving as pastor, they do everything else and there's nothing in the Bible that forbids this.

These women are filling a need.

We Must All Serve

Can we agree that ministry or service is not a choice? Is there any one of us who would say, "I have to make a decision as to whether or not I am going to minister and serve?"

No. We have no choice. We MUST serve. And usually it's a simple matter of doing whatever needs to be done. Women who run churches are simply doing what needs to be done.

There are those who ask this question. "Ok. I acknowledge that women are basically prohibited from performing two functions in church. Exercising a pastoral role and anointing." (Remember that James says it is the elders who actually anoint the sick.) The question continues, "But what if we decided to ordain women as pastors in our church? Some denominations do this and don't they benefit from female ordinations?"

This is not a good question.

Can we ask, "Do Baptists benefit from keeping Sunday?"

Can we ask, "Do Catholics benefit from praying to Mary?"

Can we ask, "Do the churches of this world benefit when they keep Christmas and Easter?"

The correct question should be this: "What does the Bible tell us to do? This should be our approach." We have looked at the Scriptures and attempted to determine what God would have us do. This should be the way we attempt to find our answers.

Another question invariably comes up in this discussion. "Didn't Paul say in Galatians 3:28 that there is to be no distinction to be made between men and women?" Let's read what Paul wrote. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Is Paul saying that, once you are a Christian, there is no difference between the sexes? If you really believe that, then you will have to consent to men marrying men and women marrying women. And we know that Paul taught against homosexuality.

Of course Galatians 3:28 does not promote homosexuality. Neither does it promote women being pastors.

Finally, we are now to the point where we can start splitting hairs. People want to have rules for every possible scenario. They ask, "Then can a woman lead the song service in church?" This can be a debatable subject. There are no clear answers here.

For example, I have seen churches where several women stand up and announce the page number of a song. They immediately start to sing. The piano player then tries to catch up with them not even knowing what key they are singing in.

I have also seen churches where the song leader functions in a head-of-household role to the congregation. He not only leads the songs, but he also admonishes and teaches.

Two different churches. Two different types of song leaders. If we wanted to, we could spend hours or even days talking about different possibilities in different circumstances.

Instead, it is better for us to acknowledge that **the Bible wants women to minister**. The Bible wants all of us to serve. Every Christian (man and woman) needs to ask the question, "How am I serving the God and the Church?"

Every church's liturgy and activities should revolve around the 3 E's:

Exaltation--praising God

Edification--uplifting the brethren

Evangelizing--preaching the Gospel to the unsaved.

Every Christian should ask himself or herself every Sabbath, "How am I helping to get the Gospel preached? How am I helping to feed the flock? How am I helping in praising God."

We should be a church of ministers--all of us--men and women.

Please continue to examine your role in the church and your level of service--everyone--men and women.

When Jesus returns, we want Him to say to each man and each woman in the Church of God, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

For more information, check us out on the Web. You can find us at: DynamicChristianMinistries.org.

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We at Dynamic Christian Ministries would like to express our gratitude to the Seventh Day Adventist Church for the research they have done on the issue of the role of women in the church. This is probably an important subject to them considering one of their earliest leaders was a woman named Ellen G. White. We acknowledge the research of that church as the main source for this article. We thank them for their good work.