



The Role of Women in the Church **“Bloom Where You’re Planted” March 2001**

I. Some examples of women who led or served spiritually

A. Old Testament

- 1. Women who served at the entrance to the Tabernacle** - Exodus 38:8, 1 Samuel 2:22
- 2. Miriam** - a leader and prophetess, Exodus 15:20, Micah 6:4, who stood by bulrushes watching Moses in the basket. She spoke to Pharaoh’s daughter, offered to go get a nurse for the baby, and brought Moses’ mother.
- 3. Deborah** - a leader, prophetess and judge, saved Israel from the Canaanites. Barak would not go into battle without her, and forfeited the glory of his victory over Sisera to have Deborah with him. Judges 4,5
- 4. Jael** - the woman who killed Sisera, a warrior who compromised her family and safety by driving a tent stake through his head. Judges 4,5
- 5. Ruth** - participated in the Christ-line, because she stayed with Naomi in spite of great personal risk. Her following of Naomi’s God and obedience to Naomi’s guidance led her to Boaz, with whom she had Obed, father of Jesse, father of David. Book of Ruth - the kinsman-redeemer.
- 6. Hannah** - Samuel’s mother, who was barren, sought the Lord for a child and vowed to dedicate him for service to the Lord. 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11
- 7. Abigail** - married to a fool, Nabal, who raised David’s ire to the point that David threatened to kill his entire household and servants. She interceded and prevented David from the sin of unwarranted bloodshed. 1 Samuel 25
- 8. The wise woman** - who confronted Joab, who was laying siege to the city of Abel Beth Maacah to kill Sheba who was hiding there. She urged him not to destroy the city, and delivered him the head of Sheba. 2 Samuel 20:14-22
- 9. Huldah** - a prophetess whose counsel was sought by Hilkiah the priest and an entourage of the king’s officers, at the king’s instruction. 2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22
- 10. Singers and musicians in worship** - Ezra 2, Nehemiah 7, Psalm 68
- 11. Esther** - who saved the Israelites in captivity from utter destruction, preserved the Christ-line, and paved the way for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Book of Esther

B. The Gospels

- 1. Mary** - mother of Jesus, “blessed among women.” The four Gospels
- 2. Elizabeth** - mother of John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness who prepared the way for Christ. The four Gospels
- 3. Anna** - prophetess and widow who served in the temple in Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

4. **The Samaritan woman who spoke with Jesus at the well** - convinced the men of the city of Samaria to go see him. John 4
5. **The women disciples** - mentioned throughout the Gospels who followed Jesus, ministered to him, heard his teachings, and served him and the apostles in various ways.
6. **Zebedee's children and others who stood by the cross** – followed Joseph of Arimathaea as he put Jesus' body in a tomb. Matthew 28:55ff, Mark 15:40ff, Luke 23:55ff
7. **Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others** - first witnesses of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene was the first to see and speak to the resurrected Christ. They all were witnesses of the resurrection to the disciples. John 20:1-18, Luke 24, Mark 16, Matthew 28

C. Acts and the Epistles

1. **Priscilla** - a fellow-laborer with Paul, who laid down her own neck for him with her husband Aquila. Acts 18:2,18,26; Romans 16:3ff, 1 Corinthians 16:19
2. **Lydia** - a seller of purple dyes in Thyatira, to whom Paul witnessed, and who welcomed Paul into her home after his release from prison there; also had a church in her home. Acts 16
3. **Philip's daughters** - prophetesses. Acts 21:9
4. **Phoebe** - a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea, and helper of Paul and many others. Romans 16:1,2
5. **Mary** - a laborer for Paul and his company. Romans 16:6
6. **Junia** - a kinsman and fellow-laborer of Paul. There is a textual question as to whether she was an apostle or was noted among the apostles. Romans 16:7
7. **Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis** - laborers in the Lord. Romans 16:12

II. Absence of enumeration of gender-specific tasks in the Church Epistles

- A. In the sections of Scripture that list giftings and ministries, there is an absence of reference to gender. Some examples are:
 - Romans 12:4-8
 - 1 Corinthians 12:12-31
 - Ephesians 4:11-13
- B. In the context of living by the law vs. living by faith, the Word of God states, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus... and heirs according to the promise." Galatians 3:26-29. (NIV)
- C. Two sections that might be sighted as gender-specific, but are not meant to limit the service of women:
 - Titus 2:4 - lists topics elder women are to teach younger women
 - Timothy, Titus – qualifications of a leader, "husband of one wife"

III. *Exclusion or limitation of women in leadership*

There are more than 100 passages in the Bible that affirm women in leadership and fewer than 6 that appear to oppose it. What, then, is the origin of the idea that women should be excluded from spiritual leadership?

A. *Difficult Scriptures*

1. **1 Timothy 2:11-15**

a. *A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.*

- KJV translates “quietness.” Elsewhere *hesuchia*, is “tranquility,” “peacefulness.” In a time when Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures excluded them, Paul’s statement was an invitation to women to become educated. In each of those cultures, all students were to learn in peacefulness and submission to the instructor.

b. *I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*

- “Silent” is again *hesuchia*, “peaceful.”
- “To teach or have authority over” is *didaskein...oude authentein*. *Authentein* has 4 meanings in Greek literature: “to begin or author,” “to usurp,” “to rule or dominate,” or “to claim authorship or origination.” There are no other Biblical occurrences of the word by which to determine its meaning.

Examining its context, immediate and remote, reveals at least 22 references to false doctrines or myths in 1st and 2nd Timothy. Some examples are:

1 Timothy 1:3,4,6
1 Timothy 4:1,3,7
1 Timothy 5:13,15
1 Timothy 6:3,4
2 Timothy 2:14,16,18,23,24
2 Timothy 3:6-8, 13
2 Timothy 4:3,4

It is evident that the overriding purpose of 1st and 2nd Timothy, written to him while he was at Ephesus, was to clarify sound doctrine from erroneous and damaging myths, teachings, and practices that were infiltrating the church at Ephesus. These myths, which stem primarily from Gnosticism, are both generally and specifically addressed in 1st and 2nd Timothy. Some examples are:

- The 1945 discovery of Gnostic writings in Egypt reveal frequent occurrence of nonsense syllables, gibberish, which may explain Paul's references to meaningless talk (1 Timothy 1:6) and godless chatter (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:16).
- 1 Timothy 5:13, busybodies, *periergoi*, elsewhere "workers of magic."
- 1 Timothy 4:7, old wives tales, actually Gnostic myths kept alive by older women.
- Some Gnostics sects taught that women could produce offspring without a male. They were pre-occupied with knowledge of origins, and "endless genealogies," referenced by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:4.

Acts 18, 19, 20 lend some perspective of the intensity of the opposition to Paul's ministry at Ephesus, and the stronghold of idolatry and mythology there.

By context, the correct definition of *authentain* for this section of Scripture is "to claim authorship of." The meaning of the phrase is "to teach or claim authorship of." *Oude* in this case is conjunctive, not disjunctive, meaning it links the idea of teaching and claiming authorship of. In other words, an appropriate understanding is "do not allow a woman to teach or claim that she is the author of man." The statement specifically refutes Gnostic myths that held woman (Eve) as the author of man (Adam).

c. *For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived...*

- Aside from Gnostic mythology, v. 12 appears to make no logical sense. If there is a causal relationship between v. 13 and v. 12, i.e., Eve must be silent because Adam was formed first, then why not prohibit women from a vast array of activity for the same reason – singing, working, cooking, driving, running errands?
- By the order of creation, women would be less superior than all the fish and animals, but this contradicts Genesis 1:26ff.
- Many versions of Gnostic myths circulated Ephesus. One presented Satan as beneficent and God as evil because He created the material world. Satan released Eve from her deception and she became the mediator who brought true knowledge to mankind. Another taught that Eden was ruled by a lesser deity who kept Adam and Eve in ignorance. Satan gave Eve *gnosis*, knowledge, which she gave to Adam. Others have Eve pre-existing Adam; some have Adam coming from Eve.
- Refutes Gnostic myths, which asserted that Eve was created before Adam and that the creator was a goddess; not God. Also, that Eve was all-wise.
- Gnostics did not originate the idea of woman's responsibility for the sins of the world. The earliest known recording of the myth of Pandora's box dates to 850 BC. The idea continues through Apocryphal writings of approximately 250 BC: *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Writings of Ben Sira*, "From woman a beginning of sin and because of her all die." The Babylonian Talmud contains the "10 Curses of Eve."

d. But the women shall be saved through childbearing.

- Appears to contradict Romans 10:9,10. Cannot possibly define salvation for women.
- Gnostics taught that anything corporeal was to be despised, and the physical body was evil. They believed that the soul was trapped in a body, as a “spark of the divine.” Their great goal was to re-unite all the sparks, restoring completeness to the great god. Childbearing was a deterrent to this goal. They taught that women led to marriage, marriage to birth, birth to destruction. Some Gnostic sects forbid marriage, held their women in common, and forcibly aborted women found pregnant (sometimes in a ritualistic manner). So, while in doctrine exalting woman as the dispenser of wisdom, they denigrated her in life.

In its proper interpretation, this is a tremendously compassionate and freeing section of Scripture. Unfortunately, it has been used throughout the ages as a curse and restraint to women. The early Church Fathers have used these verses to teach that women are more easily deceived than men, are responsible for all sin, and are therefore condemned to subservience. This flies in the face of the many scriptures that teach of salvation for all by Jesus Christ. It also contradicts the scriptures that specifically pin the responsibility for sin on Adam. “To make women subservient while exalting Adam to rule is to dishonor the atonement of Christ.” (Bushnell)

This section of 1 Timothy has been used to cut off women’s sphere of influence in the Church, by limiting it to bearing children. “The woman taught once, and ruined all. On this account, let her not teach...the whole female race transgressed...Let her not, however, grieve. God hath given her no small consolation, that of childbearing.” John Chrysostom, early Church Father, 400 AD.

While bearing and raising children is a great delight and privilege, this section of Scripture was never intended to command a limit on a woman’s Christian service.

e. Practical problems that arise from interpreting this as not allowing women to teach

The practical difficulties of applying an interpretation that says “women should not teach” are akin to the difficulties of determining how one should be water baptized! Churches and scholars disagree about the meaning of “teach,” who the pupils should be, and what the proper setting is. The various interpretations contradict other sections of Scripture.

- Is Paul commanding women not to teach in any setting?
Titus 2:4-5
- Is Paul forbidding women to teach men?
Acts 18:24-26, Priscilla teaching Apollos
Lois and Eunice teaching Timothy
- Is Paul forbidding women to teach in a church service?
1 Corinthians 14; Acts 21:9
- Does Paul mean women can speak in church only if they are not speaking authoritatively? How does one determine “authoritatively”?
- Is Paul’s instruction a blanket command for a woman never to hold any authority over a man? How would that notion be practically applied in secular life? Should a woman decline any job offer that puts her in a supervisory role over a man?
- Some churches teach that a woman needs to have a man “validate” her authority, but allow for exceptions if one isn’t available, e.g., the mission field.
- Some churches dispute where a woman is allowed to address a group - behind the pulpit, in front of the pulpit, not in the “sanctuary,” in a Sunday school room.
- Some churches uphold that a woman can’t teach or preach from the pulpit, but make allowances for Sunday school, women’s ministry, etc. Incidentally, these are usually areas of short-staffing, so exceptions are made.

2. Other difficult Scriptures

a. 1 Corinthians 11:11,12

b. 1 Corinthians 14:34,35

(See the references cited below for thorough and accurate understanding of these Scriptures.)

B. Translations that “water down” the significance of women or alter the meaning altogether.

- The translating of “Junias” in Romans 16:12 as a masculine form of the name, even though no masculine form is found elsewhere in the Bible or in secular writings.
- The translation of *presbutis* in Titus 2:3 and 1 Timothy 5:2 as “aged women.” The word is most frequently translated “elder”, with emphasis on dignity, wisdom, and office or ministry.
- The translation of *hagnos* in Titus 2:4-5 as “chaste” in the KJV, “pure” in the NIV. It is typically translated “holy.”
- The translation of *oikouros* as “busy at home” in the NIV. “Keepers at home” in the KJV is thought to better convey the idea. This is the word’s only occurrence in Scripture.

- The translation of *sophrosunes* in 1 Timothy 2:15 as “propriety” or “modesty” when referring to women, but “goodness” when referring to men.
- The translation of *kosmios* as “modest” when referring to women, but “of good behavior” when referring to men.
- The translation of *oikodespoteo* in 1 Timothy 5:14 as “manage their homes” NIV or “guide the house” KJV. It means “to rule or master the house.”
- The translation of Deborah as “mother” in Judges 5:7, while the Hebrew word used really means “female chief.”
- The consistent translation of the Hebrew word *cha-yil* as “virtuous” with respect to women. Proverbs 12:4, 31:10, Ruth 3:11. Elsewhere, the word is translated “army” or “war” 58 times; “host” or “forces” 43 times; “might” or “power” 16 times; “goods,” “riches,” “substance,” and “wealth” 31 times; “valor” 28 times; “strength” 11 times. “Powerful” or “capable” would also be appropriate translations.

Such translation patterns have come from erroneous theology with roots in mythology, Talmudic tradition, and Gnosticism that infested Christian teachings and blinded the minds of Church Fathers, translators, teachers, and ministers such as St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Origen, Jerome, Tertullian, Martin Luther, John Knox, and others up to our current time.

C. Confusing the role of women in the Church with the role of women in marriage and family.

1. Genesis 3:16, “your desire will be to your husband and he will rule over you.”

- Understood to be God’s will rather than a statement of the consequences of Adam’s disobedience and Eve’s deception.
- Generalized to the Church and society, though it is a statement about marriage.
- Leadership and accountability of the husband vs. unwarranted oppression. Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-25, Old Testament Law and the Church Epistles indicate that the man is the head of the family, but accountable to lead with love. The wife is accountable to submit to his leadership.

2. Old Testament Law – Does the Old Testament law support the servitude of women in society?

- Punishment for adultery same for men and women.
- Offering same for a male child as female.
- Women inherited property when there were no sons – Numbers 27:1-7.
- Many of the laws interpreted to support subservience really addressed protection and provision.

- Polygamy in question –
 - Practiced for protection and provision of otherwise destitute women.
 - Tolerated by God, but not written into the Law. Several passages indicate God’s acceptance of it.
 - Levitical law consistently addresses “wife,” not wives.

3. Old Testament cultures – Was a woman totally restricted socially and spiritually?

- She met and conversed with men in public.
- She could travel in a foreign country without suspicion of their character.
- She could appear in court.
- She entertained guests with banquets, etc, sometimes without her husband Present.
- She conferred with her husband regarding the marriage of their children.
- She had access to and use of the family resources.
- She managed great wealth and directed households with many servants.
- She heard from the Lord directly and acted on His instruction independently. of her husband.
- She spoke with angels.
- She held office and took part in matters of public interest.

IV. God’s Call to Women, as to any believer

Acts 2:17

Isaiah 32:9-15

Colossians 3:16,17,23,24

Author’s personal note: I do not believe that chauvinism or feminism has any place in the Church. I believe that, there is neither male nor female in service or calling. I believe that in a marriage relationship, both husband and wife have a commitment to each other and each must carry out his/her Christian service in light of that commitment.

Richard and Catherine Kroeger closed their book, *I Suffer Not a Woman*, with a salute to mothers as the great evangelists, because of their ability to instruct and influence the future leaders of the Church. I agree. Truly, motherhood is not a woman’s salvation nor her limitation. It is an awesome privilege, as are all her giftings in service to Christ.

References:

In addition to research tools such as Hebrew and Greek lexicons, Bible Dictionaries, concordances, and interlinears, the following books were invaluable:

10 Lies The Church Tells Women, J Lee Grady, Creation House, 2000

God's Word to Women, Katherine C. Bushnell, Good Shepherd Ministries, 1923

I Suffer Not a Woman, Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, Baker Book House Company, 1992