



What *does* the Bible say about... women in ministry?

Chester Road Baptist Church settled the question of women's ministry way back in February 1929. All ministry and leadership positions are open to all; men and women. No small print.

Nationally, the picture is even clearer. The first female Baptist Minister, Revd Edith Gates, was appointed in 1918; in 1986 Revd Margaret Jarman became the first female President of the Union; in 1998 Revd Pat Took was appointed the first female Regional Minister, and then, since 2013, Revd Lynn Green has been the first female General Secretary of the Baptist Union.

Whilst there has been much to celebrate, and the ministry of women is now firmly a settled matter within the Baptist movement, regrettably, there is still need to affirm and advocate for women in ministry. Whilst the intellectual argument is largely won, sexist attitudes still pervade. Of the 1,362 Baptist Ministers on the Register of Nationally Accredited Ministers ('the Accredited List'), only 304 (22%) are women. Anglicans are nearer to parity, despite only opening up for women in 1992. Less than 5% of larger Baptist churches are led by women, and there is also a noticeable disparity in pay between male and female ministers that can't all be explained by the size of churches and teams they lead. The Baptist 'norm' is still Revd Norm - male.

Some in other churches maintain this is how it should be, believing God calls men, not women, to lead and minister. They cite from the Bible the male-led tribes of Israel and the male prophets, priests and kings; that Jesus only appointed male disciples; that Paul required women to remain silent in church and not to teach, with husbands having headship over their wives.

As always, our purpose is not to evade the Bible; rather to engage at a deeper level with it, to better understand what it *does* and does *not* say about women in ministry. First, it's to show our 'workings out' and why we hold this approach. Second, it's to encourage women to pursue with confidence God's call. Third, it's to engage with some of the Bible passages that are sometimes mistreated as evidence that leadership is male. It isn't!

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament era was heavily patriarchal; it was presumed that God was male, His representative priests and prophets were male. Certainly, the surrounding cultures, such as the Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians and Persians, with their myriad gods, were patriarchal.

Genesis 1-3

Genesis matters because it is the story of us, all of us, not just of two individuals. Whilst the Hebrew *Adamah* (meaning 'earth') can be the name of a *man* [Gen.2:16], it can also refer to all *mankind* (representative of all humanity – both men and women) [Gen.1:27].

First, “God said, ‘Let us make mankind [humanity] in our image...’ [Gen.1:26] and, “So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female he created them.” [Gen.1:27]. Both men and women are made in the image of God. Both are image-bearers of the Divine. We get a more complete image of God with the inclusion of women, not just that of men. In a patriarchal world, this was radical.

Second, both men and women were created and called “so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” [Gen.1:26]. Women, as well as men, were created, as co-workers with God, to rule and exercise authority. Leadership is not just male. In the Garden of Eden there was to be no gender imbalance, just equal partnership. To deny the ministry of women is to deny something of their God-given humanity.

Third, male-only rule or ministry was neither satisfactory nor sufficient. “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” [Gen.2:18]. The Hebrew word אֵזֶר ‘ê-zer, that some translate as ‘helper’, is also used of God: “The LORD is our אֵזֶר ‘ê-zer (helper) and shield.” [Ps.33:20]; “God, you are my אֵזֶר ‘ê-zer (helper) and my deliverer.” [Ps.70:5]. Women are neither lesser nor subordinate to men, just as God isn’t to humanity. They are partners. They are strong and assertive. If chronology and source determine status, then men would have to be lesser to dirt. Man was incomplete and insufficient for the task of leading and caring (ministry) for all that God had made; hence why wo-man was also required to ‘save Adam’.

Patriarchal sexism ‘ducks and dives’, tactically conceding the odd point and finding ever-new disguises, in order to retain its strategic grip on male privilege and power. A recent patriarchal disguise is complementarianism, popularised by John Piper, Tom Keller, the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), and New Frontiers (& its off-shoots) among others. It claims, whilst men and women have equal *worth*, equally made in the image of God, they have different God-ordained *roles*. It claims, whilst men-alone must lead and exercise authority – in church, home and work – women’s role is to *complement* men by doing only what men can’t e.g. child birth, ‘home making’. Some complementarians concede that women can plug leadership gaps, but only on a ‘needs must’ basis if men aren’t available. They cite as evidence that Eve was created after Adam as his helper. Complementarianism tries to sound egalitarian, but is anything but.

Men and women were both declared by God to be very good. God derives pleasure from His Creation.

Just as Adam blamed Eve and even God [Gen.3:12], so patriarchy has claimed throughout history that women are weak and easily deceived, and so biologically - as well as spiritually - unsuited to leadership. (As if the evidence of history is that everything has gone just fine when men have been in charge!) What’s more, citing Eve, women have been blamed and shamed for the wrongs of humanity, often at the hands of privileged and powerful men. Instead, the Bible holds Adam to account [Job 31:33; Hos,6:7; Rom.5:12-19]. When humanity, as revealed in Adam and Eve, deviates from God’s design, the co-equal relationship between men and women is corrupted: man names (and so claims power over) woman; woman is cursed in childbirth (more severe than man’s curse or ‘work’); woman is rendered submissive to, and dependent upon, man. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God reverses the curse and restores humanity (men and women) back into right relationship with God, each other, and the rest of creation.

Naming a person is an act of domination and ownership, so it’s worth noting that Adam only named Eve *after* ‘the Fall’ [Gen.3:20], not during the Eden-state of Shalom. Dominion was a consequence of sin.

When patriarchy was the ‘norm’, the Hebrew God was different. When ‘two became one’, it was the man who left his birth-family home to move in with his bride and her family. “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” [Gen.2:24]. In the absence of legal rights, this afforded her greater respect and protection; less risk of domestic abuse. This was strengthened with the Law.

The Old Testament includes many examples of strong women who led men as well as women.

Sarah, partner with Abraham, is often translated as ‘Princess’. But אַרְבַּע (Sarah) equally derives from אַרְבַּע (sar) meaning Chief/ chieftain/ ruler. God respected Sarah more than Abraham did, even directing Abraham to *obey* Sarah in whatever *she* said [Gen.21:11].

Deborah was not just a prophet, but also *the* Judge of Israel, in the Hall of Fame with the likes of Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. She was strong, fierce in battle, the leader of Israel [Jud.4:4] who ruled on their disputes. Despite the overwhelming strength shown by Deborah in Judges 4, most Bible translators till credit men: “When the אַרְבַּע (princes) in Israel take the lead...” [Jud.5:2] – even though the Hebrew uses the feminine. It is more accurately, “When the princesses in Israel take the lead...”

Ruth is another strong woman. She is a אַרְבַּע ha-yil woman [Ruth 3:11]. Used 242 in the Old Testament, mostly denoting war, might, and power, it describes *strong* women. Why is it that a male leader is congratulated for being assertive, but a female leader judged to be aggressive or pushy? The Old Testament celebrates strong women.

“The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it.” [Ps.68:11] Most Bible translations translate אַרְבַּע as ‘company’, failing to acknowledge that אַרְבַּע (which appears 24 times in the Old Testament) is in the feminine – air-brushing out the strategic role of women. How is God’s word here proclaimed or command given? Through the ministry of women!

Good News Translation	The Lord gave the command, <i>and many women carried the news</i>
King James Version	The Lord gave the word: <i>great was the company of those that published it</i>
New International Version	The Lord announced the word, <i>and great was the company of those who proclaimed it</i>
New International Version updated	The Lord announces the word, <i>and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng</i>
Revised Standard Version	The Lord gives the command; <i>great is the host of those who bore the tidings</i>
The Message	The Lord gave the word; <i>thousands called out the good news</i>

NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus

Jesus was particularly good news for women. Whilst Rabbis would not speak to, let alone accept hospitality with, women, Jesus was different. Jesus encouraged ‘Bethany Mary’ to come out of the kitchen, sit at His feet and be with the other disciples as He taught them. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna went from city to village with Jesus [Lk.8]. Jesus spoke with ‘*that Samaritan woman*’ [Jn.4].

Whilst Peter disowned Jesus, it was women who kept vigil at the Cross [Mk.15:40-41]. Again, it was women, not men, who were the first witnesses or apostles to the resurrection of Christ. Jesus Himself commanded Mary Magdalene to instruct the men [Mt.28:10; Jn.20:17-18]. The men were to receive and act on the instruction they received from her and the other women. God still calls women today to tell the story of resurrection; to preach, teach, and minister.

Luke, in particular, was careful to balance illustrations featuring men with women. In Luke 15 a shepherd’s search for a lost sheep is followed by a woman’s search for a lost coin; both reflecting God’s heart for the lost. In Luke 18 a persistent widow seeking justice is followed by a contrasting Pharisee and tax collector (male) – both conveying that God hears and answers prayer. In Luke 20 Jesus warns against the manipulation of the (male) Scribes and Pharisees, contrasted with a woman who sacrificially

gives her only two coins; both demonstrating the power of money. Then there's the woman healed of her gynaecological condition, followed by the healing of Jairus' daughter. A man who plants a mustard seed is followed by a woman putting leaven in the dough; both conveying the growth of God's Kingdom. Jesus sees women and *includes* their stories.

Jesus chose twelve male Apostles. Why? Was He tactically accommodating the prejudices of the day, knowing *in that culture*, women would not be listened to? It's rather that Jesus was strategically heralding in a new world order, the New Israel – the heaven-on-earth Kingdom of God. The twelve apostles were symbolically replacing the twelve tribes of Israel. That metaphor would have been lost on the Hebrew population had women been included in the Twelve. In any case, Jesus didn't just have twelve disciples, he had at least seventy and these, as we'll see in Acts, were a mix of men *and women*.

Acts

From the outset, this new community was built on women as well as men [Ac.1:14]. Peter addressed both 'brothers *and sisters*' as he taught them both the Scriptures [Ac.1:16] – challenging the cultural norm that typically excluded women.

On the Day of Pentecost, filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed, "In the last days, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons *and daughters* will prophesy. . . Even on my servants, both men *and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days'" [Ac.2:16–18]. God had enabled women, as well as men, to 'speak in tongues'. Quoting Old Testament Joel, this had always been God's plan. What Jesus had commanded [Mt.28:19-20] of *all* His followers - discipling others, baptising, and teaching - was being fulfilled by women, as well as men. Later, when Paul refers to the gifts of the Spirit [1Co.12:4-11], he said, "Now to *each one* (i.e. women as well, not just men) the manifestation of the Spirit is given" [1Co.12:7] and the gifts are distributed to all, as the Spirit determines. That includes the gifts of prophecy, wisdom, teaching...

In Philippi, only women turned out to hear Paul. Lydia, a successful businesswoman who supplied purple cloth to the Roman Empire, believed and ensured (without any reference to a man) she and her whole household/ staff were baptised [Ac.16:11-15].

Correcting false doctrine by Apollos, a well-educated *man*, fell to *Priscilla and Aquilla* [Ac.18:24.26]. Significantly, Priscilla, a woman, was named before her husband. Throughout, the church is referred to as the 'brothers *and sisters*'.

Paul

Jesus was the New Israel. He declared, the Kingdom of God (Heaven) was coming, hence why we pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven..." Whatever Heaven - God's domain - is like, is what we are to strive to bring to earth – heaven on earth.

We all wear different and multiple labels; some we choose for ourselves, others are projected onto us. These stem from, the likes of, our biology, culture, upbringing, circumstances, and social norms. With a growing sense of self-identity and worth, as well as social, political and spiritual awareness, we discover there is so much to celebrate in ourselves and one another. Furthermore, what unites us is our shared humanity. And yet, Paul goes further. When we become a follower of Jesus, we join a new community (Christ's body, the Church) and are given a new super label that identifies us as being 'in Christ'. Hence why Paul declares, "***There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.***" [Gal.3:28] It's not that we are to become blind to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or other identity labels, but 'in Christ', there is no place for hierarchies, divisions, oppression.

What's more, this was always God's plan, because, as Paul, says, "*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*" [Gal.3:29] What Abraham and Sarah had hinted at, is now fulfilled in Christ.

Despite this, Paul is often caricatured as giving primacy to men, and silencing women. Certainly, this would have been the view he inherited from his strict Hebrew upbringing and Pharisee status. Every Jewish man prayed each day, "Blessed are you, our G-d and King of the world, who did not make me a gentile, a slave or a woman." But then Paul had encountered Jesus, and everything changed for him. He was taken back to Kingdom-of-God basics and given a more complete understanding on faith. Let's go deeper on some of Paul's sayings that are sometimes misquoted or misunderstood.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Ephesians 5:22-23

Paul is specifically addressing *husbands* and *wives*, not a general gender hierarchy within society or Church between all *men* and *women*, *per se*. He doesn't say, *women* submit to *men*; rather, "*wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as you do to the Lord.*" But why?

Paul begins by stating, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" [Eph.5:21] It is mutual submission, expected of husbands as well as wives, just as love is expected from wives, as well as husbands. Submit to one another. Love one another. Bible publishers reveal their own bias with their add-in headings. For example, the NIV used to insert a "Husbands and wives" heading only before verse 22, not verse 21, as if "*Submit to one another*" does not apply to husbands and wives.

Then Paul says, "*The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.*" [Eph.5:23]. We often equate 'head' with rank or position e.g. *Head Teacher, Head of Department*. But 'head' can also mean 'source' e.g. the head of a river is its source. Hence, why, "*A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.*" [Gen.2:10] When twins are born, one is born before the other. To venerate one over the other would now seem archaic. Lordship might be about authority, but headship is about servanthood.

Jesus is the *head* of the Church because He is the *source* of it's being, just as He is the source of all creation.

The role model Paul wants husbands to follow is not the bossy/ domineering/ coercive-controlling male – it is Jesus Christ. "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church.*" How did Christ love the Church? Not by lording over it, but by sacrificially laying down His life for her. Husbands, love your wives by sacrificially laying down your 'self', your 'ego'. Wives, do the same for your husbands.

Paul's thrust was about the primacy of Christ and His Church, less about gender roles. He was using the marriage relationship as an analogy for the relationship Christ, the Bridegroom, wants with His Bride, the Church. As the perfect Groom, Christ gave himself totally and unreservedly for His Bride, us, His Church. That's why Church is not an optional extra to faith. We can't say, we want His head, but not His body, and still expect a full Christian experience. That's why Paul says, "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.*" [Eph.5:31] There's an intimacy when 2 people become one flesh.

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Whilst the 'norm' back then was exclusion, Paul said women should be included and INSIDE the church. For its time and culture, this was radical inclusion. Having been excluded and silenced all their lives, the women *in this specific church* were full of joy and unfamiliar with proceedings. Unsurprisingly, they were λαλεῖν 'lalein' chattering' or 'babbling' with excitement. Paul *wants* them to learn. How else will they discover their new freedom in Christ? To do that, they need to stop talking and engage. In effect, he says, 'Women, don't assume this faith is just for men'. With so much suspicion about their inclusion, it was important they didn't play into the hands of cynics by asking questions that revealed their

ignorance/ lack of knowledge. Having been excluded for so long, they had some catching up to do! And Paul would have known, nowhere in the Law are women commanded to remain silent.

In chapter 11 Paul says women can pray and prophesy in church [1Co.11:5], and yet in chapter 14 he says they must remain silent. Either Paul is contradicting himself or one of the passages is limited to a specific context, whereas the other is for everyone, everywhere. Given that chapter 14 is specifically addressed to (these) women who have husbands who believe in Jesus, this would seem the more likely context-specific instruction. In any case, would Paul really have said half of all those made in the image of God couldn't sing in praise of, or pray to, their Creator God?

Of course, it wasn't just women who Paul said needed to modify their behaviour. He warned brothers, as well as sisters, to respect the Lord's Supper. But again note: Paul expected women's participation in Communion, as much as men's [1Co.11:33].

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. " 1Timothy 2:11-15

First, it's unclear whether Paul is here referring to a *woman* or a *wife*. In any case, counter the cultural norm, Paul says, she *should* learn. If he wanted women to learn, it must have been for a purpose.

Second, Paul does not make clear the context. Does this mean women should not be school teachers, driving instructors, police officers, politicians, supervisors/ managers in the work place..? Even those that oppose women in ministry do not take these verses literally. In any case, Paul would have known that God *had* given authority to women like Deborah, the Judge [Ju.4-5], and Huldah, the Prophetess (2Ki.22). Some churches that don't permit a woman to teach a *man*, nevertheless, encourage women to teach 'Sunday School' to *boys*. As well as being inconsistent and disrespectful of women, this also devalues children as being of lesser worth than adults (even though they are arguably more vulnerable to possible heresy than adult males.)

Third, Paul was speaking into a specific cultural context that is different to our own. To Timothy, two thousand years ago in Turkey, Paul said prayer must be with raised hands (mirroring the cultural norm of the day) [1Tim.2:8]. Likewise, women were not to wear jewellery or have 'fancy hairstyles' [1Tim.2:9]. We take neither of these literally, and mustn't be selective about what else we do.

Fourth, surely Adam was as culpable as Eve; both were deceived and both sinned. Paul can't be claiming only men can lead because Adam was innocent.

Fifth, Paul preaches Christ crucified; he can't be claiming women's salvation is earned through child - birth, whereas men are saved through faith in Jesus. Rather, it was through a woman's child-bearing (Mary) that the Second Adam would eventually come, the Saviour of all humanity, both men & women.

Whilst is some *specific contexts* like this with Timothy, Paul did reign-back women (just as he sometimes also reigned back men, like Timothy), only he and his hearers would have known the full missional reasons. Yet, throughout Paul's ministry he frequently and radically championed women in ministry. Just read the final chapter of Romans, **Romans 16**.

Phoebe ♀ was a Deacon or Minister [Rom.16:1-2] Paul gave the same title to Jesus [Rom.15:8] and to himself [1Cor.3:5]. When Paul wrote to Timothy about the requirements for Elders and Deacons, he said women were to have the same qualifications/ criteria/ call as men [1Tim.3:11]

Priscilla ♀ was a fellow worker in Christ [Rom.16:], who also taught Apollos [Act.18:26].

Junia ♀ was named as an Apostle [Rom.16:7]

Tryphena ♀ and **Tryphosa** ♀ were they friends, sisters or a couple? [Rom.16:12]

In all, Paul names ten women, with seven in leadership roles. By contrast, he names 19 men, but only three in leadership roles. Paul was clearly making a point about this 'in-Christ community'.

“Here is a trustworthy saying: ‘If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled...” 1Timothy 3:1-2. Similarly, Titus1:6,9

Paul addresses the leaders in this specific church and, yes, *they* are male. That was the cultural ‘norm’ of the age. Paul was not saying all Christian leaders must be male, just that these were.

Similarly, Paul was not saying all Christian leaders must be married husbands, simply that those who are married, can’t be married to more than one person at a time. After all, celibacy was a spiritual call for some [1Cor.7:8,26-27], and Jesus was single. It doesn’t matter if you are married, single, bereaved, even divorced... Leaders must not be *promiscuous* (don’t have an affair, don’t ‘sleep around’) or *polygamous* (married to a number of people at the same).

Conclusion

We, as a church, are committed to calling and affirming women, as well as men, into ministry. Everyone wins when women are able to thrive, unhindered in their God-given call to lead and minister.

Men have an important role as allies, to call-out publicly and privately other men whenever they observe injustice, oppressive behaviours, or unequal treatment of women, and to better understand their own privilege. Feminist and womanist theology is not just for women.

Many Christians today instinctively believe there should be equality between the sexes, that God calls women as well as men. They might not always *practice* it, but they *believe* it. They do this, *despite* what others tell them the Bible says about God supposedly only calling men to lead. They haven’t engaged deeply enough with the Scriptures to counter such simplistic and sexist narratives. Nevertheless, their instinct and what they know of God leads them to affirm women. We say as a church, we are affirming of women in ministry *because* of the Bible, not *despite* it. By the way, if we can so readily *and rightly* do this with and for women (despite what some erroneously claim the Bible says), then we can do the same for others who have also found themselves similarly misrepresented and oppressed by ‘the norm’. There is a growing realisation of ‘intersectionality’ that calls for us all to stand as allies against oppression, whatever form that takes.

It’s one thing to sign-up for the *theory* of gender justice, it’s another to *live* it. Now, it’s for all of us to practice what we preach, so that all women experience Christ’s New Creation as surely as do men.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

Further reading

7 Deadly Sins of Women in Leadership by Kate Coleman (Next Leadership, 2010)

A Year of Biblical Womanhood by Rachel Held Evans (Nelson, 2012)

Daughters of Eve by Esther Whittock & Martin Whittock (Lion, 2021)

Introducing Womanist Theology by Stephanie Mitchem (Orbis, 2014)

Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: fresh perspectives on disputed texts by Lucy Peppiatt (IVP, 2019)

The Blue Parakeet: rethinking how you read the Bible by Scott McKnight (Zondervan, 2020)

The Making of Biblical Womanhood by Beth Allison Barr (Brazos Press, 2021)

What’s Right With Feminism by Elaine Storkey (SPCK, 1985)

Women and the Kingdom by Faith & Roger Forster (Push, 2010)

Women in a Patriarchal World by Elaine Storkey (SPCK, 2020)