



*"Upon the return to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension, we see 11 and the 120 gathering to pray and among them are those who we may remember, but not recognize as disciples. Acts 1:14 mentions the women who were with them. What role did women play in Jesus' countercultural Kingdom? What role are they to play today? Join us this week as we look at the role of women in the early church and in our church today."*

### A Great Article by Bishop N.T. Wright

a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church'  
St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004  
by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright



<https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/womens-service-in-the-church-the-biblical-basis/>



### 1 Cor. 14 Explained by Dr. Tim Mackie:

Here is a great, short, video of Dr. Tim Mackie, from the Bible Project, giving further explanation of 1 Corinthians 14. <https://youtu.be/ZLVAOj2LvRo>

## Women in Church Leadership

This Article explores the interpretive options for the New Testament texts most relevant to the discussion of the role of women in the New Testament church.

This article focuses on the exegesis and historical background of the New Testament texts related to women in positions of church leadership. The goal is to survey the complexity of the New Testament textual evidence and introduce the main exegetical options that interpreters have offered for dealing with the evidence. It does not address the contemporary debate over applying such passages to the present-day church.

### The New Testament Evidence of Women in Church

Two factors contribute to disputes in scholarship regarding whether women held or could have held leadership roles in the New Testament church:

1. Some New Testament passages—such as Acts 18:24–28; Rom 16:1–7; and 1 Cor 11:2–11—appear to present women as occupying leadership roles and carrying out leadership functions in the church.
2. Other New Testament passages appear to prohibit, or at least severely restrict, the participation of women in the church, which would limit or remove their eligibility for serving in leadership roles. The texts commonly appealed to for this perspective are 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:8–15.

Reconciling these two categories of New Testament texts is not always easy, as Susan Mathew notes: “Women in Pauline church leadership have been a focus of much attention due to the incompatible statements Paul makes about the role of women in the church.... There seems to be a question of inconsistency in Pauline views on women” (*Women in the Greetings of Romans 16.1–16, 10*).

### *The New Testament Examples of Women Serving the Church*

As Paul concludes his letter to the church at Rome, he includes a list of noteworthy individuals, many of whom are women. It is significant that so many of these individuals are women. In fact, Massey notes that six of the 27 people mentioned by name are women and that the list also includes two other unnamed women (*Women*, 52). However, it is also important to note that many of the women are commended specifically for their service and contribution to the Christian church. These women, in the estimation of scholars such as Dunn, “evidently assumed roles of some prominence in the Roman churches” (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 900). To what extent, though, should these women be understood as occupying leadership roles? In this regard, it is necessary to look at how three of these women in particular are described.

**Phoebe.** In Romans 16:1 Paul writes, “Now I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a [διάκονον (*diakonon*)] [translated as “servant” in ESV, NASB, NET and as “deacon” in NIV, NRSV] of the church at Cenchreae.” There is ambiguity over the meaning of the term διάκονος (*diakonos*, “deacon, servant”) here. Should this term be understood in an “official sense,” or does it merely refer to “Christian service rendered spontaneously by Phoebe” (Massey, *Women*, 52)? The answer to this question is not immediately obvious. The inclusion of women like Phoebe and Junia in Rom 16 could indicate there were Christian women whose status in the church paralleled the growing status and “new roles for women” in Graeco-Roman society (Winter, *Roman Wives*, 204). Paul’s goal in Rom 16 is to commend these women for their service. He does not spell out the specifics of what that service entails. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity, some scholars have argued that Phoebe should be understood as a leader. First, the word *diakonos* is used by Paul to refer to himself, Tychicus, Timothy, and Epaphras (Massey, *Women*, 60). In these instances, *diakonos* is often translated “minister.” Massey contends that it is problematic to attribute “less weight” to the term *diakonos* when it is used to describe Phoebe. Second, and also significant, Phoebe is the only one mentioned from the church at Cenchreae (Massey, *Women*, 51). Thus, while it is difficult to comment on the specifics of Phoebe’s office or functions, it is at least clear that “she was an outstanding woman in Paul’s estimation and that she was of great value to the church” (Massey, *Women*, 51).

**Junia.** In Romans 16:7, Paul greets two people, a man named Andronicus and a woman named Junia, and describes them as ἐπίσημοι (*episēmoi*) [variously translated as “outstanding” (NASB, NIV), “prominent,” (NRSV), or “well-known,” (ESV, NET)] ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις (*en tois apostolois*) [usually translated as either “among the apostles” (NASB, NIV, NRSV) or “to the apostles” (ESV, NET)]. The initial interpretive issue is evident in the way that *episēmoi en tois apostolois* is rendered by the major English translations. Following the translation provided by the ESV and NET, Andronicus and Junia are “well-known to the apostles,” but they are *not* apostles themselves. Alternately, the translation option preferred by the NASB, NIV, and NRSV presents Andronicus and Junia as apostles themselves. The NASB, NIV, and NRSV translate both *episēmoi* (“outstanding, prominent”) and ἐν (*en*, “among” when it precedes a plural noun) according to their most natural sense. However, there is a second interpretive issue.

The names in Rom 16:7 are both in the Greek accusative case, meaning that the form Ἰουνίαν (*Iounian*) could be understood as the masculine name “Junias,” perhaps a shortened form of the name Junianus (see *BDAG*, s.v. Ἰουνιᾶς, *Iounias*). Perhaps recognizing the difficulty posed by the existence of a female “apostle,” the NASB and the RSV render the Greek name as Junias (the

masculine name), rather than as Junia (the feminine name). The ESV, NET, NIV, and NRSV, however, translate the name as Junia, taking the name as referring to a female figure. Reading “Junias” is problematic, however, because the masculine name is “unattested in hellenistic Greek” (Tetlow, *Women and Ministry*, 120). On the other hand, the feminine name “Junia” is “attested as a common name in contemporary hellenistic Greek” (Tetlow, *Women and Ministry*, 120). Moreover, most commentators, including many of the early church fathers, interpreted the Greek name as Junia, the name of a woman, until as late as the 13th century (*Women and Ministry*, 120). Thus it is not unlikely to suppose that a woman named Junia was recognized by Paul as an “apostle,” though it is still unclear what that term might have entailed at the time Romans was written. Dunn contends that Junia (a woman) was “one of the earliest and leading members of the larger group of apostles” (*Romans* 9–16, 900).

**Prisca or Priscilla.** Paul also mentions a woman named Prisca (or Priscilla) in Rom 16:3. (Priscilla is a diminutive form of the name Prisca.) Paul refers to both her and her husband, Aquila, as συνεργός (*synergos*, “coworker, fellow worker”). Prisca, and her work on behalf of the gospel, is mentioned by both Paul (compare 1 Cor 16:19) and by the author of Luke-Acts (compare Acts 18). The story involving Prisca in Acts 18 is particularly interesting. Acts 18:24–28 recounts the story in which Apollos, a native of Alexandria, arrives in Corinth and begins preaching in the synagogue. After Apollos addresses the synagogue, Prisca and Aquila approach him and they *both* “explained the way of God to him more accurately” (Acts 18:26 NRSV). The Greek word ἐκτίθημι (*ektithēmi*), translated as “explained,” is in its plural form. Thus in Acts 18:24–28, one of Paul’s female “coworkers” is instructing a man (Apollos) in the “way of God.” Moreover, Prisca does not appear to be a complete anomaly. In Philippians 4:2–3, Paul writes that two women, Euodia and Syntyche, “labored side by side with me in the gospel” (RSV). In Romans 16, Paul also names Mary (16:6), Tryphaena, and Persis (16:12), “all of whom he called ‘hard workers’ in the Lord” (Tetlow, *Women and Ministry*, 126).

**1 Corinthians 11:2–11.** Based on 1 Corinthians 11:2–11, Paul apparently did not explicitly disapprove of women praying and prophesying in public in the context of the church gathering (as long as they wore a head covering; Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969). This passage in 1 Corinthians also regulates how women should dress *when* they prophesy in church, but it does not prohibit them from prophesying. Moreover, Massey suggests that we should not distinguish too sharply between prophesying and teaching/preaching. As Massey contends, “Women who possessed prophetic gifts played an active role in inspired teaching and preaching, both in assemblies and in public evangelism” (*Women*, 84).

#### *The New Testament Restrictions on Women in Church*

The primary New Testament texts that seem to severely restrict the participation of women in public Christian worship or ministry are 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12. Due to the tension between these stark statements and the positive attitude toward women in other passages such as Rom 16, these texts have become a focal point for detailed exegesis. The exegetical issues are evident from an initial, surface-level reading of these two passages:

“As in all the churches of the saints, the women must be silent in the churches, for it is not permitted for them to speak, but they must be in submission, just as the law also says. But if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor 14:33b–35 LEB).

“A woman must learn in quietness with all submission. But I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Tim 2:11–12 LEB).

A straightforward reading of these passages suggests that women should remain silent in church, that their disposition should be characterized by submission, and that they should not occupy a place of authority over a man.

*Summary of Interpretive Difficulties*

The New Testament evidence is ambiguous, especially over the question of whether the ministry work of the women mentioned in Rom 16 (and elsewhere) implies they served in any capacity that could be construed as a formal leadership role. Paul does not flesh out exactly what he means by the term *synergos* (“coworker”). Paul may refer to certain women as “hard workers,” but he does not dwell on the specifics of what their “hard work” entailed. There is also ambiguity concerning whether Junia should be viewed as one of the apostles or simply as one who was well-known to the apostles. It is also not entirely clear if words like “deacon” (*diakonos*), “coworker” (*synergos*), or “apostle” (*apostolos*) should even be viewed as technical (or quasi-technical) terms referring to official leadership positions at the time that Romans was written. Nevertheless, the list in Rom 16 has led Dunn to conclude: “So far as this list is concerned, at any rate, Paul attributes leading roles to more women than men in the churches addressed” (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 900). It is at least reasonable to conclude, with Sampley, that women “were significant workers in the churches and in the gospel” (Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969). However, it is harder to determine the extent of their specific roles and the tasks they performed in the early church. At least one example of a woman engaging in evangelism is found in Acts 18:24–28, when Prisca (and her husband Aquila) “explained” to Apollos the ways of God (Massey, *Women*, 50; Tetlow, *Women and Ministry*, 126).

However, the explicit statements restricting the participation of women present a contradiction (or at least a strong tension) between the attitude toward women reflected in Rom 16 and the attitude reflected in 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12. The letter to the Roman church ends commending several women who are apparently serving in some sort of leadership position in the church. This list could be supplemented with texts such as Phil 4:2–3; 1 Cor 11:5; and the examples that Luke-Acts provides of female prophets (Anna at the temple in Luke and the daughters of Philip in Acts). Yet 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy demand silence and submission from women in church and restrict them from occupying a place of authority over a man. How do biblical scholars resolve or at least address this tension? What are the interpretative options?

**Proposed Solutions for the New Testament Evidence**

The main exegetical question concerning the role of women in the churches of the New Testament period is how passages like 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 should be reconciled with passages such as Acts 18; Rom 16:1–7; Phil 4:2–3; and 1 Cor 11:2–11.

One way to deal with an apparent tension in Scripture is positing that the passage in question that appears to reflect a different teaching may come from a different author. For this reason, some solutions hinge on conclusions about the authorship and date of these particular passages. While the authorship of 1 Corinthians is not disputed, the authorship of 1 Timothy is a matter of intense debate (see Mangum, *1 Timothy*, “Composition”). First Corinthians is recognized as one of the so-called undisputed Pauline letters (along with Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon), but some scholars, such as Conzelmann (*1 Corinthians*, 246), view 1 Cor 14:34–35 (and sometimes v. 36) as a late, non-Pauline interpolation (see Brown, *1 Corinthians*, “Did Paul Write 1 Corinthians 14:34–35?”). Some of the exegetical possibilities discussed below depend on both (1) a late date for and non-Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy and (2) 1 Cor 14:34–35 being a late, non-Pauline interpolation. Others assume or argue in favor of the Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy and/or the originality of 1 Cor 14:34–35.

The following four positions reflect the most common conclusions on the New Testament evidence for the role of women in the early church:

1. Women are always and without qualification prohibited from leadership roles.
2. Women were eventually prohibited from leadership roles, but this was a later development.
3. Women were generally prohibited from leadership roles, but there were some notable exceptions.

4. Women were not categorically prohibited from leadership roles, and the prohibitions in the New Testament are directed at specific situations that should not be taken as universal restrictions.

*Position 1: The New Testament Reflects an Unqualified Prohibition of Female Leadership*

This view claims that the New Testament *always* prohibits women from assuming roles of leadership, or at least roles that involve public speaking and teaching. This position is considered extreme by even many traditional, conservative-leaning biblical scholars. Reading texts such as 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 as unqualified prohibitions makes it difficult to explain the presence and role of women such as Phoebe, Prisca, Euodia, Junia, and others. How should the terms *synergos* (“coworker”) and *diakonos* (“deacon”) be understood when applied to such women? In explaining what he considers to be two dubious extreme ends of the exegetical spectrum, Towner contends, “These verses [1 Tim 2:11–15] have been overused in the modern church by some who have sought to demonstrate a return by one of Paul’s students to a patriarchal system inimical to the Pauline gospel, and by others to prove the unsuitability of women for the role of teaching in the church” (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 190). While Towner may too quickly dismiss the first of these two exegetical options, he rightly notes that texts such as 1 Tim 2:11–12 (and 1 Cor 14:34–35) have been “overused” by people attempting to “prove the unsuitability of women” for holding positions of church leadership. Sensitive readings of 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 must attend to the literary, historical, and social contexts of these passages.

*Position 2: Prohibitions against Female Leadership Are a Later Development*

This position argues that the church only began to ban women from leadership at a later point in its history. The earliest church did not prevent women from holding various leadership positions in the congregation. This position, as alluded to in the preceding section, depends on two key factors. First, it is argued that 1 Timothy (as well as 2 Timothy and Titus—the so-called “Pastoral Letters”) are later, non-Pauline texts. First Timothy was written by a disciple of Paul at some point after Paul’s death and reflects a more hierarchical, less egalitarian system of church governance. Second, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 is a late, non-Pauline addition to the letter of 1 Corinthians. While Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, a later compiler of his letters added 14:34–35 (and possibly 14:36) to the text.

This position merits consideration for a number of reasons. First, although Loader disagrees with this view, he summarizes one of its main arguments well: “The removal of the passage [in 1 Corinthians], or at least, 14:33b–36, would leave a smooth and coherent flow from 14:33a to 14:37” (Loader, *New Testament on Sexuality*, 383–84). The flow of the passage is not interrupted by the removal of 14:33b–36. This observation is certainly not decisive in and of itself, but, when combined with a number of other factors, it contributes to the overall force of the argument. Second, as Sampley contends, the content of 1 Cor 14:34–35 contradicts statements that Paul makes about women elsewhere, including statements that he makes about women in 1 Corinthians itself (Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969). As Bassler asks rhetorically: “How can women like Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2–3), Prisca (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19), Mary (Rom. 16:6), Junia (Rom. 16:7) and Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom. 16:12) function as co-workers in the churches if they cannot speak in those churches? How can Phoebe fulfill her role of deacon (Rom. 16:1–2) if she cannot speak out in the assembly?” (Bassler, “1 Corinthians,” 327).

In the same regard, it seems problematic that Paul would ban women from speaking publicly after he mentioned (without censure) the public prayer and prophesying of women only a few chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul assumes that it is “quite proper” for women to prophesy as long as it is properly regulated (Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969). First Corinthians 14:34–35, however, requires them to remain silent in church.

Finally, some who embrace this perspective note that 1 Cor 14:34–35 is the only passage in Paul’s undisputed letters (i.e., Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) that “suggests any limitation on the roles or functions of women in the Pauline

churches" (Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969; emphasis original). If 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 were to be removed from 1 Corinthians, nothing in the undisputed Pauline corpus would suggest that Paul prohibited women from engaging in public ministry and occupying leadership positions. In fact, as Rom 16:1–7 demonstrates, Paul seems to otherwise embrace female leadership in the church.

Thus, according to this position, women were free to hold leadership positions and speak publicly in the earliest Pauline churches. However, 1 Timothy (and the other "Pastoral Letters") reflects a very different situation in the late first century when the responsibilities of teaching and preaching were "being absorbed by the office of the presbyter" (Tetlow, *Women*, 127). Women were excluded from the office of the presbyter (as well as the office of bishop) and therefore were also excluded from teaching and preaching in the church (Tetlow, *Women*, 127). According to this view, 1 Cor 14:34–35 was added to the text in order to bring the letter into "conformity" with the perspective espoused in the Pastoral Letters (Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, 969). It is important to note here that this treatment of the issue of female leadership in the New Testament posits a genuine contradiction between the view presented in Rom 16 (and the rest of the undisputed Pauline letters with the exception of 1 Cor 14:34–35) and the view presented in 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12.

#### *Position 3: Female Leadership Was Generally Prohibited, with Some Exceptions*

This view holds that, generally speaking, the church's position was always to ban women from leadership positions, but the church recognized that certain women, specially inspired by the Holy Spirit, were qualified to lead. This position does not require that 1 Cor 14:34–35 be read as a later, non-Pauline interpolation and also allows the conclusion that, as a general rule, Paul (and other early Christians) restricted and even banned women from leadership. This, it is argued, is consistent with the many passages in the New Testament that seem to subordinate women to men. Some of these passages have been quoted above, but additional support for this view is also found in Col 3:18; 1 Cor 11:2–10; and Titus 2:4–9.

According to this position, the New Testament worldview is clear in its hierarchical orientation. As Loader argues, this hierarchical perspective is rooted in the account of creation in Gen 1–3 and is the perspective that Paul (and other early Christians) share in common with the wider Jewish milieu of this period (Loader, *New Testament on Sexuality*, 375, 388). As Loader notes concerning the general disposition of Pauline churches, "As in Jewish communities, normally women would be expected to be silent, so this was to apply in the churches, which, at least in the beginning, understood themselves as Jewish communities anyway" (Loader, *New Testament on Sexuality*, 388). However, Loader acknowledges that there are exceptions to this principle since Paul clearly names women who held leadership positions in the early church. Loader explains, "As in Jewish life there were exceptions where women were inspired to leadership, so in Christian communities there were inspired women exercising ministry, including that of prophecy.... Paul did not conclude that all women were so inspired, but apparently had no difficulties in the fact that some were, provided that they dressed appropriately" (Loader, *New Testament on Sexuality*, 388). Paul conceded that at times the Holy Spirit would transcend this general prohibition. However, even in such cases, Paul maintained the hierarchical order.

#### *Position 4: Prohibitions against Female Leadership Are Contextual*

This position asserts that the church never categorically banned women from leadership. The prohibitions against female leadership in the Bible were specific to each church's situation. This view does not necessitate reading 1 Cor 14:34–35 or 1 Tim 2:11–12 as late and/or non-Pauline. Proponents of this position do not see a genuine contradiction between passages such as Rom 16:1–7; 1 Cor 11:2–11 and 1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:11–12. While an initial, surface reading of the texts may suggest a contradiction, an analysis of the literary and sociohistorical context of each passage demonstrates that we are dealing with *apparent* contradictions, not genuine contradictions. In order to

do justice to this perspective, it is necessary to highlight a few of the exegetical and contextual strategies used to resolve and account for the *apparent* contradictions.

**1 Corinthians 14:34–35.** Scholars such as Thiselton note that Paul's letters address particular situations in particular places at a particular historical moment. Modern exegetes, however, only have access to Paul's words in his letters. Paul uses words and phrases in the context of specific situations. The situation that Paul is addressing (at any given time) was not necessarily elaborated upon or described at length because the original recipients of the letters would not have needed extensive elaboration or description of the situation. Thus, when Paul writes, "[Women] are not allowed to speak [λαλεῖν (*lalein*)]" (1 Cor 14:34), he assumes that his reader understands the point that he is making based on the "*context of the situation*" (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1147; emphasis original). Translation, then, is "immensely difficult" (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1147). What seems like an unqualified prohibition (i.e. "[Women] are not allowed to speak [λαλεῖν, *lalein*)]" is a more complex statement than the mere words suggest. Therefore, the statement ("[Women] are not allowed to speak [λαλεῖν, *lalein*)]" must be considered in light of the situation that Paul is actually addressing, as best as that context can be reconstructed.

When 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 is read in light of this larger context, it becomes evident that 1 Cor 11:2–11 addresses an entirely different situation from 1 Cor 14:34–35. Unlike those who see a genuine contradiction between 1 Cor 11:2–11 and 1 Cor 14:34–35, scholars such as Thiselton, Witherington, and Garland understand 1 Cor 11:2–11 and 1 Cor 14:34–35 as fundamentally compatible. However, this compatibility can only be recognized once the context of each passage is illuminated. As Thiselton argues, 1 Cor 11:2–11 deals with the issue of a "woman's praying (προσευχομένη, *proseuchomenē*) or using prophetic speech (ἡ προφητευσούσα, *ē prophēteuousa*)" (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1155). In the context of this specific issue, Paul declares that is "quite permissible" for a woman "to speak" (λαλεῖν, *lalein*), namely, to pray or prophesy in public (so long as her head is covered; 1 *Corinthians*, 665). However, when Paul says that it is *not* permissible for a woman "to speak" (λαλεῖν, *lalein*) in 1 Cor 14:34, he has a different type of speech in mind altogether.

When 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 is analyzed in light of its surrounding context, it becomes clear that Paul is addressing the issue of "weighing prophecy" (Witherington, *Earliest Churches*, 102). What Witherington means by "weighing prophecy" is "the *activity of sifting or weighing the words of prophets, especially by asking probing questions about the prophet's theology or even the prophet's lifestyle in public*" (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1158; emphasis original). In 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, Paul is not banning the public speech of woman as such (the public, prophetic utterances of women); rather, he is dealing with the very specific issue of questioning prophetic utterances. Therefore Paul is not giving an unqualified, general prohibition against the public speech of women (compare 1 Cor 11:5) but is attempting to prevent speech that is potentially disruptive (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1156). Moreover, according to this perspective, Paul is trying to prevent wives from "cross-examining" their husband's prophetic speech in public (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1156). Such cross-examination, if it is to be done, should be done at home (1 Cor 14:35).

**1 Timothy 2:11–12.** In their discussion of 1 Tim 2:11–12 both Towner and Winter appeal to the historical setting of this document in order to contextually explain the prohibition against female teachers. According to these scholars, 1 Tim 2:11–12 should be read in light of cultural trends concerning women in the Roman world. As Towner observes, "Recent assessments of epigraphic and literary evidence have documented the emergence of a 'new Roman woman'" (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 190). The "new Roman woman" is contrasted with the "traditional Greek woman" (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 190). According to their analysis, the "new Roman woman" enjoys a significant level of freedom and participates in public life far more than the traditional Greek woman (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 190). This new level of freedom and participation in the public sphere for women in the Roman world influenced the role and status of women in the Christian communities as well



(Winter, *Roman Wives*, 204). As Winter contends, “Limited though the evidence may be for Christian women, the filtering down of new roles for women enabled Christian women to contribute to a wider sphere of service” (Winter, *Roman Wives*, 204). Thus, as a result of “cultural shifts” in the Roman world in the first century, some wealthy Christian women were able to gain a noticeable amount of influence in the churches (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 191n2). Wealthy Roman (and, according to Towner and Winter, Christian) women were not necessarily relegated to the private sphere and played an increasingly important role in public life (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 191n2; Winter, *Roman Wives*, 204). First Timothy 2:11–12 must be read against the backdrop of these “cultural shifts.”

These scholars argue that, like 1 Cor 14:34–35, 1 Tim 2:11–12 addresses a particular historical situation in the life of a specific church, so the passage should not be understood as an unqualified prohibition against female leadership in general. In order to adequately understand 1 Timothy’s prohibition, then, two issues associated with these “cultural shifts” for women, which were plaguing the church at Ephesus, must be recognized. First, Towner claims that the author of 1 Timothy was concerned with the “outer adornment and apparel and arrogant demeanor” of certain women in the congregation (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 200). The adornment of these women, Towner argues, was associated with the transgression of sexual mores and the rejection of traditional family roles and structures such as childbearing (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 220). Second, Towner posits a situation in which certain wealthy women were embracing and promulgating a “heretical teaching” (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 200). Thus, the prohibition of female teachers, according to Towner, is not a general prohibition, but is rather specific to this historical and social situation. Therefore, 1 Timothy 2:11–12 does not contradict Rom 16:1–7 or Acts 18:24–28 and does not represent a blanket statement made by Paul (Towner argues for Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy) applying to all women, everywhere. Instead, the specific situation, namely certain wealthy women transgressing traditional family roles and espousing false teaching, “led Paul to put a stop to the teaching activities of Christian women” (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 220). Witherington comes to a similar conclusion regarding the sociohistorical context of 1 Timothy. According to Witherington, 1 Tim 2:11–12 contains no “universal prohibition of women speaking in church” (Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Early Christianity*, 196). Witherington also detects evidence that the author of 1 Timothy was responding to a situation of “women being involved in false teaching and being led astray into apostasy” (Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Early Christianity*, 196). Such a view takes seriously the contextual nature of the New Testament letters.

## Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, the evidence for (and against) female leadership in the New Testament church is complex and often ambiguous. Coming to a conclusion regarding the scope, specifics, and extent of the roles and functions available to women in the first-century church is extremely difficult and requires the careful exegesis of many complicated texts. Regardless of one’s position, it is important not to read texts such as 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 in isolation and without careful attention to vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and literary, social, and historical context. The list of women in Roman 16 alone should be enough to caution readers of the New Testament against overly simplistic interpretations of 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12.

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## APPLICATION QUESTIONS:



## Digging Deeper

1/9/22

1. If you grew up in the church, what was the view of a woman's role in that church? Why was it that way?
2. How does it make you feel that other brothers and sisters in Christ believe differently than we do on this issue of women in ministry? How does it make you feel that, likely, there are people in our own church who differ on how they understand the Scriptures to be teaching about women in leadership roles of the church?
3. What differences are there between men and women? Egalitarians believe that they are created different but still equal. In what ways are they different? Are the differences merely biological?
4. What is your attitude towards women in leadership positions? Is this something you need to repent of in light of this biblical teaching?

## CLOSING PRAYER ACTIVITY:

Invite someone to close the group in prayer.