

# Women in Ministry

By Chad Sparks, 1999

“Do you believe that women should be in ministry?” This is a question that we have been asked many times in the past few years. The answer I give is an enthusiastic “Yes!” The Bible is clear on many issues pertaining to this question.

## Men and women are equal in the sight of God

The first and most important truth for us to understand is that men and women have equal standing and importance in God’s sight. In Galatians 3:28, Paul under inspiration of the Holy Spirit writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Just as God is no respecter of persons with regard to one’s race or social status, he shows no favoritism with regard to one’s sex. Think of how revolutionary this statement must have been to the often chauvinistic and exclusivist culture (both Jews and Greeks had a low view of women and slaves) of the first century who were the original readers of Paul’s letter! Spiritually speaking, we are completely equal before God. All he sees are highly valuable souls—not men or women—who have been washed by the atoning blood of Jesus and, therefore, are his adopted children.

## What is ministry?

A lot of what follows in answering the question of women in ministry lies in how one defines ministry. We believe that ministry is the job of all God’s children. We are told that Christ “himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). Since the word “saint” is used over 40 times in the New Testament as a synonym for believers, it is clear that the reason God gave some the role of pastor, teacher, evangelist, et. al., is to equip the believers so that they could do ministry. This is why we (and many others in the Evangelical community) say often, “every member is a minister,” regardless of one’s sex. There are a lot of women doing ministry in the New Testament. Evidently, women can teach men individually, as Priscilla seemingly did with her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26). And women apparently prophesied in a respectful way (1 Corinthians 11:5-6, Luke 2:36 speaks of Anna the prophetess). Women can evidently address both male and female believers (1 Corinthians 14:3). They are encouraged to teach women (Titus 2:3-4), children (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14), and take part in all other ministries! So what is ministry? It is “anything done for the cause of Christ” (Providence 101 notes, page 11). By this we should conclude that ministry, in the purest sense of the word, is for all Christians.

## Women preachers?!

For some people, however, the word “ministry” has taken on a different meaning. “You know what I mean.” They might say, “Should a woman preach?” Again, I hate to split hairs over semantics, but the word “preach” in the New Testament simply means “to proclaim truth” and again, this is the job of all Christians as we see throughout the New Testament. Women preachers? You bet. In fact, if a believing woman is not proclaiming the truth of the gospel to others around her, she is not living the way Christ commanded; and the same applies to men.

## God loves strong women

A common stereotype is that the Bible teaches that women must be puny, weak-willed, passive people that get run over all the time. Contrary to popular belief, God’s Word shows that throughout the ages God has chosen several women for epic tasks. Some notable examples include Deborah (Judges 4), who performed the duties of Judge over the nation of Israel; the women who were among the main followers of Jesus (they were the last present at the cross and the first to witness his resurrection); and the woman of excellence described in Proverbs 31 as an exceptionally disciplined, industrious, creative, strong, and godly person who deserved much praise.

## Embracing God-given roles

“Okay Chad, you’re killing me. What I am trying to ask is, can a woman be a pastor?” Most of the time this is the real issue on the minds of those who are asking. Once again, it is what God’s Word has to say about this (and every) issue that really matters, and we would be wise to agree. In the Bible, we read a lot about roles. Anyone who has been through pre-marital counseling here at Providence knows how we stress the importance of husbands and wives embracing one another as equals, while also embracing God’s specific roles for them as husbands and wives. A married couple that does not embrace both equality and each other’s given roles will struggle to find fulfillment. The wife, who has been made by God to be female, and to possess certain traits specific to her femaleness, brings these essential elements to the union as “the two become one flesh” in marriage. She is different than the man in many respects, and this is a good thing. It is rather humorous that some in our day are just figuring this out and at great expense (e.g. a multi-million dollar government study in the 1990s cited by CNN concluded that “men and women really are different”)! I am glad God made us different, and gave us different roles. A mother’s compassion usually balances a man’s sternness in parenting. A wife’s gentleness and grace usually balances a husband’s lack of the same. Examples abound.

As key as it is to understand the God-given biblical roles with a man and his bride, the same is true with the church—the Bride of Christ. Just as a man's selfless headship in the home is ordained in the Bible, so it is in the church. This in no way means that women must resign themselves to a lesser spiritual place—not at all—only a different functional role. This role can have myriad facets, but it does not include serving as a pastor/elder. Titus 1:5-9 reads, "...An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe.... Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless.... Rather he must be hospitable.... He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (emphasis added, see also 1 Timothy 3:1-7). There are simply no Scriptures that allude to women filling the office of pastor/elder/overseer, either prescriptively or descriptively. More than this, we are told in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that men are the ones to occupy the office of teaching pastor because of the authority that is bequeathed to that position. To do otherwise, Paul illustrates, would violate the roles given to us from the time of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve.

What about the "s" word (submission)?

I sense the need at this point to deal generally with several other passages in the Bible that get a lot of bad press on the one hand; and can be abused when misapplied on the other. These are the passages that mention voluntary submission as a part of a woman's role. This idea of submission is not some slap in the face, as some would have us believe. Even the Trinity is an illustration of equality of persons and differing roles. Jesus is fully equal to the Father in terms of his being, but he has voluntarily submitted to the Father's leadership. This is not a contradiction, nor is it demeaning. In fact, as a result of Christ's voluntary submission, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord..." (Philippians 2:9-11). There are many passages in the Bible that affirm the fact that only men are to serve as elders, that women are not to have ecclesiastical authority over men, and that men are to embrace the role of headship in the home (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Genesis 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33b-36; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Peter 3:1-7). These and other passages make it clear that, roles are important to God; not for the purpose of keeping a segment of people down—not at all. Rather, male and female roles play at least two very important parts in human institutions, from families to churches: 1) They give order; and 2) they paint a rich picture of some greater truths.

Order

Every human group (yes, even every grouping in the animal kingdom) will follow a certain practical semblance of order. Because our make-up and giftedness is so different, there are clear ways God has created males and females to operate with regard to one another. To reject this obvious natural truth would in itself bring about disorder. Countless studies and experts have observed devastating effects in our generation of rejecting God's roles for men and women in the family, in society, and in the Body of Christ. Clearly, when we embrace the unique aspects of our given roles, the church functions in an orderly, efficient, and effective way.

Picturing some great truths

Paul says that the husband/wife relationship points to a great profundity: How Christ relates to his bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5:32). In some of the previously cited passages that deal with roles in the church, embracing given male or female roles as individuals illustrates this same loving, giving, trusting kind of relationship. Just being a part of a marriage where God-given roles are upheld gives a person great practical insight with regard to the way a Christian is to relate and respond to his or her God. If I resist God's role for me in marriage, I will have trouble relating properly to God himself and his headship over me directly, as well as the authority of his Word regarding the way he intends for his church—the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth—to be operated. This "profound mystery" is worth pondering.

Be liberated!

God knew exactly what he was doing when he created us either male or female. We each have a unique part to play in his kingdom. This is to be celebrated! Elisabeth Elliot once wrote, "true liberation...comes with humble submission to God's original design."<sup>1</sup> Real freedom comes when we realize God's plan for us and find our ultimate fulfillment in pleasing him. Celebrate how God has made and gifted you! Thank him that there is a purpose that only you can fulfill (read Psalm 139 for more)!

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *What's the Difference?* (Wheaton, IL: The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1989), p.3.