

Question: "Women pastors / preachers? What does the Bible say about women in ministry?"

Answer from GotQuestions.org: There is perhaps no more hotly debated issue in the church today than the issue of women serving as pastors/preachers. As a result, it is very important to not see this issue as men versus women. There are women who believe women should not serve as pastors and that the Bible places restrictions on the ministry of women, and there are men who believe women can serve as preachers and that there are no restrictions on women in ministry. This is not an issue of chauvinism or discrimination. It is an issue of biblical interpretation.

The Word of God proclaims, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (1 Timothy 2:11-12). In the church, God assigns different roles to men and women. This is a result of the way mankind was created and the way in which sin entered the world (1 Timothy 2:13-14). God, through the apostle Paul, restricts women from serving in roles of teaching and/or having spiritual authority over men. This precludes women from serving as pastors over men, which definitely includes preaching to, teaching, and having spiritual authority.

There are many "objections" to this view of women in ministry. A common one is that Paul restricts women from teaching because in the first century, women were typically uneducated. However, 1 Timothy 2:11-14 nowhere mentions educational status. If education were a qualification for ministry, the majority of Jesus' disciples would not have been qualified. A second common objection is that Paul only restricted the women of Ephesus from teaching (1 Timothy was written to Timothy, who was the pastor of the church in Ephesus). The city of Ephesus was known for its temple to Artemis, a false Greek/Roman goddess. Women were the authority in the worship of Artemis. However, the book of 1 Timothy nowhere mentions Artemis, nor does Paul mention Artemis worship as a reason for the restrictions in 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

A third common objection is that Paul is only referring to husbands and wives, not men and women in general. The Greek words in the passage could refer to husbands and wives; however, the basic meaning of the words refers to men and women. Further, the same Greek words are used in verses 8-10. Are only husbands to lift up holy hands in prayer without anger and disputing (verse 8)? Are only wives to dress modestly, have good deeds, and worship God (verses 9-10)? Of course not. Verses 8-10 clearly refer to all men and women, not only husbands and wives. There is nothing in the context that would indicate a switch to husbands and wives in verses 11-14.

Yet another frequent objection to this interpretation of women in ministry is in relation to women who held positions of leadership in the Bible, specifically Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah in the Old Testament. This objection fails to note some significant factors. First, Deborah was the only female judge among 13 male judges. Huldah was the only female prophet among dozens of male prophets mentioned in the Bible. Miriam's only connection to leadership was being the sister of Moses and Aaron. The two most

prominent women in the times of the Kings were Athaliah and Jezebel—hardly examples of godly female leadership. Most significantly, though, the authority of women in the Old Testament is not relevant to the issue. The book of 1 Timothy and the other Pastoral Epistles present a new paradigm for the church—the body of Christ—and that paradigm involves the authority structure for the church, not for the nation of Israel or any other Old Testament entity.

Similar arguments are made using Priscilla and Phoebe in the New Testament. In Acts 18, Priscilla and Aquila are presented as faithful ministers for Christ. Priscilla's name is mentioned first, perhaps indicating that she was more “prominent” in ministry than her husband. However, Priscilla is nowhere described as participating in a ministry activity that is in contradiction to 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Priscilla and Aquila brought Apollos into their home and they both disciplined him, explaining the Word of God to him more accurately (Acts 18:26).

In Romans 16:1, even if Phoebe is considered a “deaconess” instead of a “servant,” that does not indicate that Phoebe was a teacher in the church. “Able to teach” is given as a qualification for elders, but not deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9). Elders/bishops/deacons are described as the “husband of one wife,” “a man whose children believe,” and “men worthy of respect.” Clearly the indication is that these qualifications refer to men. In addition, in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9, masculine pronouns are used exclusively to refer to elders/bishops/deacons.

The structure of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 makes the “reason” perfectly clear. Verse 13 begins with “for” and gives the “cause” of Paul’s statement in verses 11-12. Why should women not teach or have authority over men? Because “Adam was created first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived.” God created Adam first and then created Eve to be a “helper” for Adam. This order of creation has universal application in the family (Ephesians 5:22-33) and the church. The fact that Eve was deceived is also given as a reason for women not serving as pastors or having spiritual authority over men. This leads some to believe that women should not teach because they are more easily deceived. That concept is debatable, but if women are more easily deceived, why should they be allowed to teach children (who are easily deceived) and other women (who are supposedly more easily deceived)? That is not what the text says. Women are not to teach men or have spiritual authority over men because Eve was deceived. As a result, God has given men the primary teaching authority in the church.

Many women excel in gifts of hospitality, mercy, teaching, evangelism, and helps. Much of the ministry of the local church depends on women. Women in the church are not restricted from public praying or prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:5), only from having spiritual teaching authority over men. The Bible nowhere restricts women from exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). Women, just as much as men, are called to minister to others, to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and to proclaim the gospel to the lost (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 3:15).

God has ordained that only men are to serve in positions of spiritual teaching authority in

the church. This is not because men are necessarily better teachers, or because women are inferior or less intelligent (which is not the case). It is simply the way God designed the church to function. Men are to set the example in spiritual leadership—in their lives and through their words. Women are to take a less authoritative role. Women are encouraged to teach other women (Titus 2:3-5). The Bible also does not restrict women from teaching children. The only activity women are restricted from is teaching or having spiritual authority over men. This logically would preclude women from serving as pastors to men. This does not make women less important, by any means, but rather gives them a ministry focus more in agreement with God’s plan and His gifting of them.

Recommended Resource: Two Views on Women in Ministry, Revised by James R. Beck, ed.