

BIBLE STUDY ON WOMEN IN MINISTRY

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Both women and men need to learn a whole array of academic, interpersonal and leadership skills in order to be prepared to serve as effective American Baptist pastors. There is one area for which women need to be extra-prepared: fielding questions about why it is not a sin for women to answer God's call to serve in pastoral ministry. Not only do we need to know the Biblical answers; we also need to be able to deliver those answers without rolling our eyes in disgust and without getting defensive. In other words, a "calm, non-anxious presence" is needed to put questioners at ease, so they will be able to hear something new.

Although not all evangelicals believe it is wrong for women to serve in pastoral ministry, the predominant view of the ones most people hear in the Christian media is that women should be silent in church and never teach or have authority over men.

Is this really what the Bible teaches about women in ministry? The real truth is that women were very much present and accepted as followers of Jesus and leaders in the early church. Difficult passages take on a new perspective, once we understand the history, culture and meaning of critical words.

You have heard it said that Jesus had no women disciples, but I say unto you...

Read Luke 8:1-3. In addition to the twelve there were three women named and many others who provided for them out of their resources. In Mark 15:40-41 the women are described as having traveled with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. In Luke 24:1-8, at the empty tomb, two men in dazzling clothes ask the women if they remember how Jesus had told them "while he was still in Galilee" that the Son of man would be crucified and rise again. They did remember his words. Looking back to Luke 9:18-22 we learn that the foretelling occurred "when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him." Women are not always mentioned in the gospels, even when they were present. Generally speaking, 'disciples' refers to all Jesus' followers, while the Twelve identify the inner circle.

You have heard it said that the apostles were all men, but I say unto you...

Read Romans 16:7, where Paul sends greetings to "Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was." Junia is the only woman named in the New Testament and affirmed by the early Church fathers as a notable apostle. The word apostle means 'one who is sent' on a mission. Romans 16 also contains the names of several other women who served in leadership roles in the early Christian movement: Phoebe, a deacon or minister (v.1); Prisca (v.3); Mary (v.6); Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (v.12); Julia, and Olympas (v.15). Philip the evangelist has four daughters who all have the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:8-9). Mary Magdalene has traditionally been called 'the apostle to the apostles', since Jesus sent her to tell the others that he had risen from the dead (John 20:17). Women are the first to discover the empty tomb; their witness is essential to the proclamation of the gospel story.

On the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-18) Peter preaches to the crowd to explain how a handful of Galileans is able to tell about God's deeds of power in the native languages

of all the foreigners who are present in Jerusalem that day. Peter proclaims that what they are witnessing is a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, ... Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy (Joel 2:28)." If no women believers had been present and speaking in tongues, would the prophecy have been fulfilled? Obviously not.

Were there women believers present? In Acts 2:1 "*they* were all together in one place." Does *they* refer to the 11 apostles + Matthias from the previous verse, or could we look back a little further to Acts 1:12-15? The believers who wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father include: the eleven (all named), "together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers ... (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons)." In order for the prophecy of Joel to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, there may well have been 120 men *and women* believers present and praying together, when the Holy Spirit filled them. In Acts 5:14, we learn that believers were added to the Lord in great numbers, both men *and women*; in Acts 8:3 it is both men *and women* Saul drags off to prison when he persecutes followers of Jesus.

You have heard it said that women should be silent in church, but I say unto you...

In 1 Corinthians 14:34 Paul advises women to 'be silent' (Greek *sigao*), voluntary silence. When a speaker holds up a hand to quiet the audience, he or she is asking for *sigao*. The problem Paul was addressing in the church at Corinth was great disorder in the worship service resulting from the free expression of spiritual gifts. When gifts of prophecy and tongues were all being employed at the same time, the worship service ceased to be edifying. Paul calls for a voluntary silence, so all may worship and learn.

Women are singled out and "not permitted to speak" (Greek *laleo*). There are 30 different words for 'speak' in the Greek language. Five of them mean to preach or proclaim, but Paul does not use any of them. *Laleo* is a word that just means 'to talk', perhaps about things that did not contribute to the worship service, but only added to the confusion.

It is clear in 1 Corinthians 11:5 that women did pray and prophesy (or preach) in the Corinthian church; the question being asked of Paul is whether or not a woman may pray or prophesy *with her head unveiled*. Paul answers that women should be sensitive to cultural issues about being veiled (*katakalypto*). Jewish Christians wore prayer shawls on their heads as a sign of humility before God; Greek women wore veils in public to indicate that they were married. He states in 1 Cor. 11:10 that "a woman ought to have [a symbol of] authority on her head..." [A symbol of] is in brackets, because those particular words do not appear in the Greek text; they have been added by those translating the Greek into English. If we read the sentence without [a symbol of], we read that a woman ought to have authority on her head (that is, the power to make her own decision about wearing a head-covering).

In 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul writes to Timothy to “Let a woman learn in silence (Greek *hesuchia*) with full submission (Greek *hupotassomai*). *Hesuchia* silence means a restful, meditative silence in which the believer is listening for God’s truth to be revealed—not disagreeing, but listening respectfully. *Hesuchia* was a valued trait cultivated by students preparing to become rabbis. Notice that Paul instructs Timothy to let the women learn, despite the fact that women never received a public education in any ancient society. But, the early church was a place where women and men could worship and learn together, for the first time in history. Paul wanted the women to learn, so they could know exactly what the Hebrew Scriptures taught; only by knowing the truth could they avoid being led astray by false teachings. The church in Ephesus was struggling to assert Biblical truth in a culture where Gnostic influences were widely accepted. Two men have already been “shipwrecked in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:20). Timothy needs to educate the church members in Biblical truths to prevent the confusion caused by false teachings. For this reason, Timothy is encouraged to “let the women learn in silence and with full submission.” The Greek term for submission is sometimes translated ‘subordination,’ but the Greek term does not imply male superiority. *Hupotassomai* means a voluntary willingness to be responsive to the needs of others. Paul is encouraging Timothy to let the women learn quietly, listening respectfully, so others may also learn.

You have heard it said that women are not permitted to teach or have authority over men, but I say unto you...

1 Timothy 2:12 is an extremely difficult verse to translate. The Greek term for authority (*exousia*) is not even used in this verse! Furthermore, if Paul had wanted to forbid women from having authority over men, the Greek term for men would have been *andron*, not *andros*. The original Greek term, which has been translated into ‘authority’ or ‘to usurp authority’, is actually *authenthein*—a word used nowhere else in the entire Bible. No one really knows what the common meaning was in the ancient world. But, given the context of the letter to Timothy, and the meaning of the other verses in 1 Timothy 2:12-15, we might consider a much different understanding.

1 Timothy 2:13-14 are offered as an explanation of why women should not be permitted to teach *authenthein*: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” This set of facts is designed to correct misunderstandings commonly declared by Gnostic Christians. Gnostics believed that the original human being was androgynous and that when she/he was divided in two, it was the woman who was formed first, and the man emerged from her. Gnostics also believed that the serpent was the great Enlightener, who saved the human race by getting the woman to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (secret knowledge or *gnosis*). What Genesis 2:21 tells us is just the opposite: man was formed first, and woman was made from one of his ribs. The woman was *deceived* by the Serpent; she ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge *of Good and Evil* and so became a transgressor; Adam, of course, followed suit.

1 Timothy 2:15 also appears to be a correction for common Gnostic ideas. Even though the Bible tells us that the woman was deceived and became a transgressor, “Yet she

will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” The term ‘she’ in verse 15 refers to Eve; the term ‘they’ likely refers to women believers in the church at Ephesus. Even though “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith (Romans 3:23-25).” Paul could not possibly have meant that women are saved by bearing children, rather than by faith. In fact, the attributes listed in 1 Timothy 2:15 focus on the fruits of the Spirit one might expect to find in a Christian woman—faith, love, holiness, and modesty. Once again, the reason Paul even mentions childbearing is to correct a false Gnostic teaching. Gnostics believed that all matter is evil and that in order to make one’s way back through the *archons* to the original creator (*Authentes*), women should never give birth to children, but seek to escape the material world altogether. Paul asserts that women who bear children will be saved, just as men are—by faith, regardless of what the Gnostics teach.

If each of these verses is a correction to false Gnostic teachings, it is likely that 1 Timothy 2:12 is also designed to correct a false teaching. Richard and Catherine Kroeger¹ suggest that “The original sense [of *authentēs*] is ‘one who accomplishes an act, who is its author, who is responsible.’” If we were to read 1 Timothy 2:12 as ‘I do not allow a woman to teach nor to proclaim herself *author of man*,’ we can understand that women were not being allowed to teach the Gnostic belief that *woman was the author of man*. *Authentein*, then, has nothing to do with authority over men; *authentein* is the content women are not being permitted to teach—the Gnostic concept that woman is the originator of man. And rightly so.

You have heard that Jewish men once thanked God for not making them women, but I say unto you...

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28). First century Jewish men did pray daily, “Blessed art thou who hast not made me a Gentile,...an uneducated man (slave), ...a woman.” Gentiles, slaves and women did not have the privilege of studying Torah and being a part of the covenant community. Now that we are baptized and have put on Christ we have all become spiritual equals. The ancient differences between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female no longer apply to believers within the body of Christ. All may study Scripture; all may be baptized into the new covenant, and all receive gifts of the Holy Spirit for serving in the name of Christ!

For more in-depth coverage of the Bible study passages about women in ministry, see *JUNIA: A Bible Study and Storytelling Resource for the Church*. The resource contains directions for telling Junia’s story and six reproducible units of Bible study. Junia was a first century female apostle (Romans 16:7). The resource may be ordered at www.abwim.org, via the link to Interim Ministries; OR by calling 1-800-ABC-3USA, extension 2064. Cost is \$18.00 plus shipping.

¹ Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I SUFFER NOT A WOMAN: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p. 99.