

WOMEN'S MINISTRY

Are Women Allowed to Be Ministers?

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1 Framing the Question

- Christians hold differing views on Paul's teaching about women's ministry. We can dialogue about them from Scripture.
- The differences usually start from different passages. Where does the biblical evidence actually point?
- Texts used *for* women's ministry: women prophets (Miriam, Huldah, Deborah, Isaiah's wife, Anna, Philip's daughters, Acts 2, 1 Cor 11), a woman judge (Deborah), a woman apostle (Junia), and women named as Paul's fellow workers and ministers.
- Texts used *against* women's ministry: 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12, both telling women to keep silent.
- Three common ways to relate these texts:
 1. Paul opposed women's ministry generally but allowed exceptions, so exceptions should be allowed today too.
 2. Paul supported women's ministry generally but limited it for specific cultural situations.
 3. Paul let women do some things but not others. This view is common, but Paul's own wording calls for total silence, not a partial ban.
- Almost nobody today argues women can't give financially (Rom 12:8) or share their faith (Eph 4:11). The real question is whether women can publicly speak God's message.
- Across the whole Bible, the most prominent way people spoke God's message was through the office of prophet.

2 Women Who Spoke for God

Prophets in the Old Testament

- Miriam led all of Israel in worship (Exod 15) and is called a prophetess. All Israel mourned when she died.
- Huldah was the most prominent prophetic voice in Josiah's reign. Josiah sent to her exactly as Hezekiah had sent to Isaiah a century earlier (2 Kings 22-23).
- Isaiah's wife is called a prophetess (Isa 8), which may explain how she put up with Isaiah's unusual, years-long prophetic sign.
- Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge (Judg 4:4), one of the few judges Scripture records no fault against. She judged all of Israel with God's authority.

- Old Testament prophet-judges are the closest equivalent to New Testament apostles. Besides Deborah, only Moses and Samuel clearly held that combined role.

Prophetesses in the New Testament

- Luke-Acts often pairs men and women in prophetic roles: Simeon and Anna (Luke 2), Agabus and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21).
- Joel's promise that "your sons and daughters will prophesy" is fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2) and applies today.
- Paul himself assumes women pray and prophesy in church (1 Cor 11:4-5), and ranks prophecy above teaching (1 Cor 12:28).
- Male prophets outnumbered female ones, but given the culture, the surprise is how many women appear. Scripture never applies a quota excluding them.

A Woman Apostle: Junia

- No women were among the Twelve, but no Gentiles were either. That limit reflects the moment, not a permanent rule.

Romans 16:7

"Greet Andronicus and Junia... outstanding among the apostles... in Christ before I was."

- Junia is a woman's name throughout ancient sources. The older theory that it contracts a male name "Junianus" has no ancient support and does not work grammatically with a Latin name.
- Paul never elsewhere appeals to the apostles' collective opinion, so this reflects her real standing among them, not merely their high opinion of her.
- Paul does not reserve "apostle" for the Twelve. He applies it to himself, Timothy, Silas, and James. Are these ranked below elders and pastors?

3 Women as Paul's Fellow Workers

- Paul's two common terms for coworkers are *diakonos* (minister, servant) and *synergos* (fellow worker).
- Paul applies *diakonos* to Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2). As the one carrying his letter to Rome, she likely served as its first interpreter to that church.
- Paul applies *synergos* to Priscilla, naming her before her husband Aquila, an order used at the time only when the wife held the more prominent role (Rom 16:3-4). Acts 18 shows the couple team-teaching Apollos.
- Romans 16 greets twice as many men as women, but commends twice as many women as men for ministry work: Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, Mary, Junia, and Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis.
- Philippians 4:2-3 names Euodia and Syntyche as having "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel."
- Ministry by women shows up most in Paul's letters to Rome and Philippi, two cities where women held unusual freedom in the empire. Perhaps women pursued ministry more openly where it was welcomed.
- In practice, Paul plainly affirms women in ministry, which makes a universal silencing rule hard to sustain.

4 The Two “Problem” Texts

- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 tells women to remain silent in church, in submission, and to ask questions of their husbands at home.
- 1 Timothy 2:11-12 tells a woman to learn quietly and in full submission, and states that Paul does not permit a woman to teach or, in the debated phrase, to seize authority over a man.
- Almost no church today practices these fully. Women sing and often make announcements, yet Paul's words call for silence. That mismatch means the texts need explanation, not just quotation.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in Context

- Paul cannot mean total silence. A few chapters earlier in the same letter, he assumes women pray and prophesy aloud (1 Cor 11).
- The specific issue Paul names is asking questions: “if they want to inquire, ask their husbands at home.”
- Interrupting a public lecture with questions was normal in Greek, Roman, and Jewish settings, but unlearned questions were considered rude.
- Women in this era had roughly a tenth the access to formal education that men of the same social class had. That gap, not any lesser ability, explains why their questions were often unlearned.
- Both restricting texts mention learning directly: “if they desire to learn” (1 Cor 14:35) and “a woman should learn” (1 Tim 2:11). Quiet, submissive learning was simply how all new students were expected to learn.
- Paul's short-term fix was to stop the disruptive questions. His long-term fix was private tutoring at home, since most women over 18 were married and husbands averaged twelve years older.
- The moralist Plutarch thought it progressive to educate wives, then undercut himself by claiming women left alone would fall into “base passions and folly.” Paul does not add that insult.
- The problem in Corinth was never that women were teaching. It was that they were learning too loudly.
- A further concern may have been the church's reputation in the wider community, since a woman speaking in front of other women's husbands was culturally shameful at the time. Today the concern reverses: restraining women's ministry is now often the worse public witness.

1 Timothy 2:11-12

- This is the only biblical text that might restrict women from teaching the Bible to men. It says nothing about pulpits, since house churches had none. It says silence.
- The disputed Greek word *authenteo* is rare and debated. It may mean “have authority” or “seize/usurp authority.” If the latter, the verse warns against a power grab, not against teaching itself, and would apply to men as much as women.
- This is also the one letter set, 1 and 2 Timothy, where Paul specifically describes false teachers targeting women: gossiping “busybodies” going house to house (1 Tim 5:13), and false teachers who “worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women” (2 Tim 3:6).
- If the ban were universal, Timothy, who had long ministered alongside Paul, would already know it. Instead, Timothy knew Paul had women serving in ministry.

Paul's Two Stated Reasons (1 Tim 2:13-14)

- Reason one: Adam was formed first. Paul uses this same argument for head coverings in 1 Cor 11. If churches treat head coverings as cultural, consistency raises the same question here.
- In Genesis itself, the creation order does not restrict women from speaking. Man and woman together are given dominion (Gen 1:26-27). “Helper” (2:18) is a term of strength, most often used of God. Adam addresses Eve as one like himself before the fall, and only applies the animal-naming pattern to her after it (3:20).
- The power struggle in marriage, “he will rule over you” (3:16), belongs to the judgment of the fall, not the created order. Nobody argues we should intensify other effects of the fall.
- Reason two: Eve was deceived. Read universally, this would mean all women are more easily deceived than men, an idea with no support elsewhere in Paul, who uses “deceived like Eve” for the whole Corinthian church, not women specifically (2 Cor 11:3).
- Read locally, “Eve” stands for those in Ephesus who lacked biblical training and were, in that setting, easily misled. That reading fits every other passage where Paul affirms women's ministry.
- Dr. Keener notes that decades of testing his own students on biblical interpretation show no predictable gender gap, and that his own daughter is an engineer, a reminder that broad averages do not describe individuals.

5 Reading Paul Consistently

Household Codes: Was Paul Pro-Slavery?

- Nineteenth-century Americans debated slavery on both sides using the Bible. Pro-slavery arguments quoted verses directly. Anti-slavery arguments read for Paul's underlying principles.
- First-century household slavery was not race-based and included frequent paths to freedom and even social advancement, unlike slavery in the American South.
- Slaveholders quoted “slaves, obey your masters” (Eph 6:5) while skipping the next verse, where Paul tells masters to treat slaves the same way and stop threatening them (Eph 6:9).
- Paul's instruction that masters answer to the same heavenly Master, with no favoritism, was among the most radical antislavery statements of his century.

Mutual Submission in Ephesians

Ephesians 5:21 & 6:9

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ...” “Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them... he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

- Paul frames the entire household code, wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters, under one command: “submit to one another” (Eph 5:21).
- The verb “submit” does not even appear again in verse 22. It is borrowed from verse 21, so it cannot suddenly mean something different for wives alone.

- Paul addresses wives, children, and slaves directly, something Aristotle's household codes never did, and instructs husbands only to love their wives as themselves.
- A century and a half after the end of slavery in the United States, we agree Paul addressed a specific cultural situation there. It is worth asking why the same reasoning meets more resistance when applied to gender roles.

6 Why This Matters Today

- Most Christians worldwide who affirm women in ministry do so because they trust Scripture, especially across Pentecostal, holiness, and charismatic traditions. Close to 29 percent of Assemblies of God ministers in the US are women.
- History includes ordained women from the early church, women preachers in the 1700s and 1800s, a woman megachurch pastor on the west coast in the 1920s, and founders such as Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army.
- The transcultural principle in 1 Timothy 2 is not “women should not teach.” It is “those without adequate biblical training should not teach,” a standard that can apply to men or women in any culture.
- Paul consistently worked against the exploitation common in his day, of both slaves and women. The same instinct should shape how the church protects and includes its most vulnerable members today.
- Cultures differ, and couples work out mutual submission in their own context. The constant across every culture is Jesus' call to serve one another.