

Was Paul For or Against Women in Ministry?

By Craig S. Keener

The question of a woman's role in ministry is a pressing concern for today's church. It is paramount first, because of our need for the gifts of all the members God has called to serve the Church. The concern, however, has extended beyond the Church itself. Increasingly, secular thinkers attack Christianity as against women and thus irrelevant to the modern world.

Increasingly, secular thinkers attack Christianity as against women and thus irrelevant to the modern world.

The Assemblies of God and other denominations birthed in the Holiness and Pentecostal revivals affirmed women in ministry long before the role of women became a secular or liberal agenda.¹ Likewise, in the historic missionary expansion of the 19th century, two-thirds of all missionaries were women. The 19th-century women's movement that fought for women's right to vote originally grew from the same revival movement led by Charles Finney and others who advocated the abolition of slavery. By contrast, those who identified everything in the Bible's culture with the Bible's message were obligated both to accept slavery and reject women's ministry.²

For Bible-believing Christians, however, mere precedent from church history cannot settle a question; we must establish our case from Scripture. Because the current debate focuses especially around Paul's teaching, we will examine his writings after we have briefly summarized other biblical teachings on the subject.

WOMEN'S MINISTRY IN THE REST OF THE BIBLE

Because Paul accepted both the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' teachings as God's Word, we must briefly survey women's ministry in these sources. The ancient Near Eastern world, of which Israel was a part, was a man's world. Because God spoke to Israel in a particular culture, however, does not suggest that the culture itself was holy. The culture included polygamy, divorce, slavery, and a variety of other practices we now recognize as unholy.

Despite the prominence of men in ancient Israelite society, God still sometimes called women as leaders. When Josiah needed to hear the word of the Lord, he sent Hilkiah the priest and others to a person who was undoubtedly one of the most prominent prophetic figures of his day: Huldah (2 Kings 22:12–20). Deborah was not only a prophetess, but a judge (Judges 4:4). She held the place of greatest authority in Israel in her day. She is also one of the few judges of whom the Bible reports no failures (Judges 4,5).

Although first-century Jewish women rarely, if ever, studied with teachers of the Law the way male disciples did,³ Jesus allowed women to join His ranks (Mark 15:40,41; Luke 8:1–3)—something the culture could have regarded as scandalous.⁴ As if this were not scandalous enough, He allowed a woman who wished to hear His teaching "sit at his feet" (Luke 10:39)—taking a posture normally reserved for disciples. Other Jewish teachers did not allow women disciples; indeed, disciples were often teachers in training.⁵ To have sent women out on the preaching missions (e.g., Mark 6:7–13) might have proved too scandalous to be practical; nevertheless, the Gospels unanimously report that God chose women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, even though first-century Jewish men often dismissed the testimony of women.⁶

Joel explicitly emphasized that when God poured out His Spirit, women as well as men would prophesy (Joel 2:28,29). Pentecost meant that all God's people qualified for the gifts of His Spirit (Acts 2:17,18), just as salvation meant that male or female would have the same relationship with God (Galatians 3:28). Subsequent outpourings of the Spirit have often led to the same effect.

PASSAGES WHERE PAUL AFFIRMED THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

Paul often affirmed the ministry of women despite the gender prejudices of his culture. With a few exceptions (some women philosophers), advanced education was a male domain. Because most people in Mediterranean antiquity were functionally illiterate, those who could read and speak well generally assumed teaching roles, and—with rare exceptions—these were men.⁷ In the first centuries of our era, most Jewish men—like Philo, Josephus, and many later rabbis—reflected the prejudice of much of the broader Greco-Roman culture.⁸

Women's roles varied from one region to another, but Paul's writings clearly rank him among the more progressive, not the more chauvinistic, writers of his day. Many of Paul's collaborators in the gospel were women.

Paul commended the ministry of a woman who brought his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 16:1,2). Phoebe was a servant of the church at Cenchrea. "Servant" may refer to a deacon, a term that sometimes designated administrative responsibility in the Early Church. In his epistles, however, Paul most frequently applied the term to any minister of God's Word, including himself (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; 6:21). He also called Phoebe a "succorer" or "helper" of many (Romans 16:2); this term technically designated her as the church's patron or sponsor, most likely the owner of the home in which the church at Cenchrea was meeting. This entitled her to a position of honor in the church.⁹

Phoebe was not the only influential woman in the church. Whereas Paul greeted about twice as many men as women in Romans 16, he commended the ministries of about twice as many women as men in that list. (Some use the predominance of male ministers in the Bible against women in ministry, but that argument could work against men's ministry in this passage.) These commendations may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry and are remarkable, given the prejudice

against women's ministry that existed in Paul's culture.

If Paul followed ancient custom when he praised Priscilla, he may have mentioned her before her husband Aquila because of her higher status (Romans 16:3,4). Elsewhere we learn that she and her husband taught Scripture to another minister, Apollos (Acts 18:26). Paul also listed two fellow apostles, Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7). Although Junia is clearly a feminine name, writers opposed to the possibility that Paul could have referred to a female apostle,¹⁰ suggest that Junia is a contraction for the masculine Junianus. This contraction, however, never occurs, and more recently has been shown to be grammatically impossible for a Latin name like Junia. This suggestion rests not on the text itself, but entirely on the presupposition that a woman could not be an apostle.

Elsewhere Paul referred to the ministry of two women in Philippi, who, like his many male fellow ministers, shared in his work for the gospel there (Philippians 4:2,3). Because women typically achieved more prominent religious roles in Macedonia than in most parts of the Roman world,¹¹ Paul's women colleagues in this region may have moved more quickly into prominent offices in the church (cf., Acts 16:14,15).

Although Paul ranked prophets second only to apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28), he acknowledged the ministry of prophetesses (1 Corinthians 11:5), following the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:13,14) and early Christian practice (Acts 2:17,18; 21:9). Thus those who complain that Paul did not specifically mention women pastors by name miss the point. Paul rarely mentioned any men pastors by name, either. He most often simply mentioned his traveling companions in ministry, who were naturally men. Paul's most commonly used titles for these fellow laborers were "servant" and "fellow worker"—both of which he also applied to women (Romans 16:1,3). Given the culture he addressed, it was natural that fewer women could exercise the social independence necessary to achieve positions of ministry. Where they did, however, Paul commended them and included

commendations to women apostles and prophets, the offices of the highest authority in the church.

While passages such as these establish Paul among the more progressive writers of his era, the primary controversy today rages around other passages in which Paul seemed to oppose women in ministry. Before turning there, we must examine one passage where Paul clearly addressed a local cultural situation.

PAUL ON HEAD COVERING

Although Paul often advocated the mutuality of gender roles,¹² he also worked within the boundaries of his culture where necessary for the sake of the gospel. We begin with his teaching on head coverings because, although it is not directly related to women's ministry, it will help us understand his passages concerning women in ministry. Most Christians today agree that women do not need to cover their heads in church, but many do not recognize that Paul used the same kinds of arguments for women covering their heads as for women refraining from congregational speech. In both cases, Paul used some general principles but addressed a specific cultural situation.

When Paul urged women in the Corinthian churches to cover their heads (the only place where the Bible teaches about this), he followed a custom prominent in many Eastern cultures of his day.¹³ Although women and men alike covered their heads for various reasons,¹⁴ married women specifically covered their heads to prevent men other than their husbands from lusting after their hair.¹⁵ A married woman who went out with her head uncovered was considered promiscuous and was to be divorced as an adulteress.¹⁶ Because of what head coverings symbolized in that culture, Paul asked the more liberated women to cover their heads so they would not scandalize the others. Among his arguments for head coverings is the fact God created Adam first; in the particular culture he addressed, this argument would make sense as an argument for women wearing head coverings.¹⁷

PASSAGES WHERE PAUL MAY HAVE RESTRICTED WOMEN'S MINISTRY

Because Paul, in some cases, advocated women's ministry, we cannot read his restrictions on women in ministry as universal prohibitions. Rather, as in the case of head coverings in Corinth, Paul addressed a specific cultural situation. This is not to say that Paul here or anywhere else wrote Scripture that was not for all time. It is merely to say that he did not write it for all circumstances and that we must take into account the circumstances he addressed to understand how he would have applied his principles in very different situations. In practice, no one today applies all texts for all circumstances, no matter how loudly they may defend some texts as applying to all circumstances. For instance, most of us did not send offerings for the church in Jerusalem this Sunday (1 Corinthians 16:1–3). If our churches do not support widows, we can protest that most widows today have not washed the saints' feet (1 Timothy 5:10). Likewise, few readers today would advocate our going to Troas to pick up Paul's cloak; we recognize that Paul addressed these words specifically to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:13).

LET WOMEN KEEP SILENT

Two passages in Paul's writings at first seem to contradict the progressive ones. Keep in mind that these are the only two passages in the Bible that could remotely be construed as contradicting Paul's endorsement of women in ministry.

First, Paul instructed women to be silent and save their questions about the service for their husbands at home (1 Corinthians 14:34–36). Yet, Paul could not mean silence under all circumstances, because earlier in the same letter he acknowledged that women could pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:5); and prophecy ranked even higher than teaching (12:28).

Knowing ancient Greek culture helps us understand the passage better. Not all explanations scholars have proposed have proved satisfying. Some hold

that a later scribe accidentally inserted these lines into Paul's writings, but the hard evidence for this interpretation seems slender.¹⁸ Some suggest that Paul here quoted a Corinthian position (1 Corinthians 14:34,35), which he then refuted (verse 36); unfortunately, verse 36 does not read naturally as a refutation. Others think that churches, like synagogues, were segregated by gender, somehow making women's talk disruptive. This view falters on two counts: First, gender segregation in synagogues may have begun centuries after Paul; and, second, the Corinthian Christians met in homes, whose architecture would have rendered such segregation impossible. Some also suggest that Paul addressed women who were abusing the gifts of the Spirit or a problem with judging prophecies. But while the context addresses these issues, ancient writers commonly used digressions, and the theme of church order is sufficient to unite the context.

Another explanation seems more likely. Paul elsewhere affirmed women's role in prayer and prophecy (11:5), so he cannot be prohibiting all kinds of speech here. (In fact, no church that allows women to sing actually takes this verse to mean complete silence anyway.) Since Paul only addressed a specific kind of speech, we should note that the only kind of speech he directly addressed in 14:34—36 was wives asking questions.¹⁹ In ancient Greek and Jewish lecture settings, advanced students or educated people frequently interrupted public speakers with reasonable questions. Yet the culture had deprived most women of education. Jewish women could listen in synagogues, but unlike boys, were not taught to recite the Law while growing up. Ancient culture also considered it rude for uneducated persons to slow down lectures with questions that betrayed their lack of training.²⁰ So Paul provided a long-range solution: The husbands should take a personal interest in their wives' learning and catch them up privately. Most ancient husbands doubted their wives' intellectual potential, but Paul was among the most progressive of ancient writers on the subject.²¹ Far from repressing these women, by ancient standards Paul was liberating them.²²

This text cannot prohibit women's announcing the word of the Lord (1

Corinthians 11:4,5), and nothing in the context here suggests that Paul specifically prohibited women from Bible teaching. The only passage in the entire Bible that one could directly cite against women teaching the Bible is 1 Timothy 2:11–15.

IN QUIETNESS AND SUBMISSION

In 1 Timothy 2:11–15, Paul forbade women to teach or exercise authority over men. Most supporters of women in ministry think that the latter expression means "usurp authority,"²³ something Paul would not want men to do any more than women, but the matter is disputed.²⁴ In any case, here Paul also forbade women to "teach," something he apparently allowed elsewhere (Romans 16; Philippians 4:2,3). Thus he presumably addressed the specific situation in this community. Because both Paul and his readers knew their situation and could take it for granted, the situation which elicited Paul's response was thus assumed in his intended meaning.

It is probably no coincidence that the one passage in the Bible prohibiting women teaching Scripture appears in the one set of letters where we explicitly know that false teachers were targeting and working through women. Paul's letters to Timothy in Ephesus provide a glimpse of the situation: false teachers (1 Timothy 1:6,7,19,20; 6:3–5; 2 Timothy 2:17) were misleading the women (2 Timothy 3:6,7). These women were probably (and especially) some widows who owned houses the false teachers could use for their meetings. (See

1 Timothy 5:13. One of the Greek terms here indicates spreading nonsense.)²⁵ Women were the most susceptible to false teaching only because they had been granted the least education. This behavior was bound to bring reproach on the church from a hostile society that was already convinced Christians subverted the traditional roles of women and slaves.²⁶ So Paul provided a short-range solution: "Do not teach" (under the present circumstances); and a long-range solution: "Let them learn" (1 Timothy 2:11).

Today we read, "learn in silence," and think the emphasis lies on "silence." That these women were to learn "quietly and submissively" may reflect their witness within society (these were characteristics normally expected of women). But ancient culture expected all beginning students (unlike advanced students) to learn silently; that was why women were not supposed to ask questions (as noted above). The same word for "silence" here is applied to all Christians in the context (2:2). Paul specifically addressed this matter to women for the same reason he addressed the admonition to stop disputing to the men (2:8): They were the groups involved in the Ephesian churches. Again it appears that Paul's long-range plan was to liberate, not subordinate, women's ministry. The issue is not gender but learning God's Word.

What particularly causes many scholars to question this otherwise logical case is Paul's following argument, where he based his case on the roles of Adam and Eve (1 Timothy 2:13,14). Paul's argument from the creation order, however, was one of the very arguments he earlier used to contend that women should wear head coverings (1 Corinthians 11:7—9). In other words, Paul sometimes cited Scripture to make an ad hoc case for particular circumstances that he would not apply to all circumstances. Although Paul often makes universal arguments from the Old Testament, he sometimes (as with head coverings) makes a local argument by analogy. His argument from Eve's deception is even more likely to fit this category. If Eve's deception prohibits all women from teaching, Paul would be claiming that all women, like Eve, are more easily deceived than all men. (One wonders, then, why he would allow women to teach other women, since they would deceive them all the more.) If, however, the deception does not apply to all women, neither does his prohibition of their teaching. Paul probably used Eve to illustrate the situation of the unlearned women he addressed in Ephesus; but he elsewhere used Eve for anyone who is deceived, not just women (2 Corinthians 11:3).²⁷

Because we do not believe Paul would have contradicted himself, his approval of women's ministry in God's Word elsewhere confirms that 1 Timothy 2:9—15 cannot prohibit women's ministry in all situations; rather, he addressed a

particular situation.

Some have protested that women should not hold authority over men because men are the head of women. Aside from the many debates about the meaning of the Greek term "head" (for instance, some translate it "source" instead of "authority over"),²⁸ Paul spoke only of the husband as head of his wife, not of the male gender as head of the female gender. Further, we Pentecostals and charismatics affirm that the minister's authority is inherent in the minister's calling and ministry of the Word, not the minister's person. In this case, gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry—for us as it was for Paul.

CONCLUSION

Today we should affirm those whom God calls, whether male or female, and encourage them in faithfully learning God's Word. We need to affirm all potential laborers, both men and women, for the abundant harvest fields.

Craig S. Keener, Ph.D., is professor of New Testament at Eastern Seminary, Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. He is the author of 10 books, including, *Paul Women & Wives*, and 2 books that have won the highest biblical studies awards in *Christianity Today* in 1995 and 1999: the IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (InterVarsity) and a Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans).

ENDNOTES

1. Victor Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 188,89.
2. See S. Grenz and D. Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 42—62; N. Hardesty, *Women Called To Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984); G. Usry and C. Keener, *Black Man's Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 90—94, 98—109.

3. Ibid.

4. See G. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford, 1989), 202; J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 104; W. Liefeld, "The Wandering Preacher as a Social Figure in the Roman Empire" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1967), 240. Critics often maligned movements supported by women. See E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 109.

5. To "sit before" a teacher's feet was to take the posture of a disciple (Acts 22:3; m. Ab. 1:4; ARN 6, 38 A; ARN 11, §28 B; b. Pes. 3b; p. Sanh. 10:1, §8). On women in Jesus' ministry, see especially B. Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, SNTSM 51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984).

6. Jesus' contemporaries generally held little esteem for the testimony of women (Jos. Ant. 4.219; m. Yeb. 15:1, 8–10; Ket. 1:6–9; tos. Yeb. 14:10; Sifra VDDeho. pq. 7:45.1.1; cf., Luke 24:11). In Roman law, see similarly J. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 165.

7. Although inscriptions demonstrate that women filled a prominent role in some synagogues (see B. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* [Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982]), they also reveal that this practice was the exception rather than the norm.

8. E.g., Philo Prob. 117; see further Safrai, "Education," JPFC 955; R. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, AZLGHJ 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

9. See further Keener, *Women*, 237–40.

10. Because Paul nowhere else appeals to commendations from the apostles,

"notable apostles" remains the most natural way to construe this phrase (see, e.g., A. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989], 102).

11. See V. Abrahamsen, "The Rock Reliefs and the Cult of Diana at Philippi" (Th.D. dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1986).

12. See, e.g., comments in C. Keener, "Man and Woman," pp. 583–92 in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 584–85.

13. Jewish people were among the cultures that required married women to cover their hair (e.g., m. B.K. 8:6; ARN 3, 17A; Sifre Num. 11.2.2; 3 Macc 4:6). Elsewhere in the East, cf., e.g., R. MacMullen, "Women in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 29 (1980): 209–10.

14. Sometimes men (Plut. R.Q. 14, Mor. 267A; Char. Chaer. 3.3.14) and women (Plut. R.Q. 26, Mor. 270D; Char. Chaer. 1.11.2; 8.1.7; ARN 1A) covered their heads for mourning. Similarly, both men (m. Sot. 9:15; Epict. Disc. 1.11.27) and women (ARN 9, §25B) covered their heads for shame. Roman women normally covered their heads for worship (e.g., Varro 5.29.130; Plut. R.Q. 10, Mor. 266C), in contrast to Greek women who uncovered their heads (SIG 3d ed., 3.999). But in contrast to the custom Paul addressed, none of these specific practices differentiates men from women.

15. Hair was the primary object of male desire (Apul. Metam. 2.8,9; Char. Chaer. 1.13.11; 1.14.1; ARN 14, §35B; Sifre Num. 11.2.1; p. Sanh. 6:4, §1). This was why many peoples required married women to cover their hair but allowed unmarried girls to go uncovered (e.g., Charillus 2 in Plut. *Sayings of Spartans*, Mor. 232C; Philo Spec. Leg. 3.56).

16. E.g., m. Ket. 7:6; b. Sot. 9a; R. Meir in Num. Rab. 9:12. For a similar custom and reasoning today in traditional Islamic societies, see C. Delaney, "Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame," pp. 35–48 in *Honor and Shame and the*

Unity of the Mediterranean, ed. D. Gilmore, AAA 22 (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 42, 67; cf., D. Eickelman, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 165.

17. On Paul's various arguments here, see more fully Keener, *Women*, 31–46; or more briefly, in "Man and Woman," 585–86. For a similar background for 1 Timothy 2:9,10, see D. Scholer, "Women's Adornment: Some Historical and Hermeneutical Observations on the New Testament Passages," *Daughters of Sarah* 6 (1980), 3–6; Keener, *Women*, 103–7.

18. G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699–705. Fee may be right that the entire Western tradition displaces this passage, but this might happen easily with a digression (common enough in ancient writing), and even in these texts the passage is moved, not missing.

19. E.g., K. Giles, *Created Woman: A Fresh Study of the Biblical Teaching* (Canberra: Acorn, 1985), 56.

20. See, e.g., Plut. *On Lectures* 4,11,13,18, Mor. 39CD, 43BC, 45D, 48AB; cf. tos. Sanh. 7:10.

21. One of the most progressive alternatives was Plut., *Advice to Bride and Groom*, 48, Mor. 145BC, who, nevertheless, ended up accusing women of folly if left to themselves (48, Mor. 145DE).

22. For more detailed documentation, see Keener, *Women*, 70–100; similarly, B. Witherington, III, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, SNTSM 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 90–104.

23. See further discussion in Keener, *Women*, pp. 108,9.

24. For recent and noteworthy arguments in favor of "exercise authority," see the articles by Baldwin, Köstenberger, and Schreiner in *Women in the*

Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

25. The Greek expression for the women's activities here probably refers to spreading false teaching; see G. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), 122.

26. Given Roman society's perception of Christians as a subversive cult, false teaching that undermined Paul's strategies for the church's public witness (see Keener, *Women*, 139–56) could not be permitted (cf., 1 Timothy 3:2,7,10; 5:7,10,14; 6:1; Titus 1:6; 2:1–5,8,10; A. Padgett, "The Pauline Rationale for Submission: Biblical Feminism and the hina Clauses of Titus 2:1–10," *EQ* 59 (1987) 52; D. Verner, *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles*, SBLDS, 71 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1983]).

27. First Timothy 2:15 may also qualify the preceding verses; see Keener, *Women*, 118–20.

28. Catherine Clark Kroeger and others believe it implies "source," Wayne Grudem and others that it implies "authority over." With Gordon Fee, I suspect that ancient literature allows both views but that Paul used an image relevant in his day (see further Keener, *Women*, 32–36, 168).