

# Role of Women

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to clarify the proper role for women in the church and family, so they can serve God with absolute confidence and freedom, exercising their spiritual giftedness to the fullest extent possible within the God-ordained parameters for the church and the home.

There is probably not a more controversial issue in our present culture than the role of women in society, the family, and the church. Even those outside the church have recognized that the last fifty years in America have hallmarked a huge shift in the “traditional” roles of men and women in these areas. Accompanying this shift we have seen complete disintegration of the family and moral chaos has developed in almost every area of our culture. The church has not been immune to these effects, and there is great need for an exact clarification of the proper Biblical role for men and women within the family and the church. We trust that given the biblical boundaries presented here, God’s Spirit will work within the heart of each individual as to how to properly fulfill their role in every situation.

*The following is an outline of the document below.*

- I. Biblical Perspective on Equality of Men and Women
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- II. Unique Biblical Role of Women
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## Biblical Perspective on Equality of Men and Women

### Shared Equality among Men and Women

As we look at God’s Word, Genesis 1:27 states that men and women were created equally in the image of God. Neither received more of the image of God than the other received. Women are seen in scripture as having all the blessings of salvation (Galatians 3:28), and are partakers of the gifts of the Spirit alongside men. Therefore, we must affirm that men and women have equal value to God, and we should recognize that equal value in all aspects of our culture, including the church.

Jesus Himself is our best example of the equality of men and women before God. In the midst of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures, which viewed women almost on the level of possessions, Jesus showed love and respect for women. Though Jewish rabbis did not teach women and the Jewish Talmud said it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women, Jesus never took the position that women, by their very nature, could not understand spiritual or theological truth. He not only included them in His audiences but also used illustrations and images that would be familiar to them (Matthew 13:33; 22:1-2; 24:41; Luke 15:8-10) and specifically applied His teaching to them (Matthew 10:34ff). To the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), He revealed that He was the Messiah and discussed with her topics such as eternal life and the nature of true worship.

He also taught Mary, and when admonished by Martha, pointed out that learning spiritual truth could even take priority over the important feminine role of serving guests in one's home (Luke 10:38). Although men in Jesus' day normally would not allow women to even count change into their hands for fear of physical contact, Jesus touched women to heal them and allowed women to touch Him (Luke 13:10ff; Mark 5:25ff). Jesus even allowed a small group of women to travel with Him and His disciples (Luke 8:1-3), an unprecedented happening at that time. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and sent her to announce His resurrection to the disciples (John 20:1-18), despite the fact that women were not allowed to be witnesses in Jewish courts because they were considered liars. In Jesus' treatment of women, He raised their station of life and He showed them compassion and respect in a way they had never known. Jesus' own actions plainly demonstrated their equality in God's sight.

## Misapplication of Equality

Due to a lack of understanding of the unique roles God has assigned to men and women, our society has embraced the logical fallacy: "Equality of personhood **must include** equality of roles." That this is not necessarily so is plainly seen from the very nature of the relationship that exists among the Trinity. Though the Scripture plainly presents the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as equally Divine (John 14:9, Acts 5:3-4), there exists a uniqueness of roles, and even a subordination of the Son to the will of the Father (John 8:28, 1 Corinthians 11:3) and the Spirit to the will of the Son and the Father (John 16:13-15). So that while the Spirit and the Son are equal in person with the Father, they fulfill a different role.

Similarly, Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:12-25 shows that though all are equal within the Church, and equally important, individuals do have differing roles. Understanding this relationship between equality of personhood and yet distinction of roles, we can confidently conclude: **Each individual is equally important in the eyes of God and in the church, even though we each have different roles and gifts that God has given us.** As we seek to please God in the role He has designed for each of us in the church, family, and culture, we must accept from Him the teaching of His Word on this issue and resist the pervasive opposing influence from our culture.

## Unique Biblical Role of Women

### Role of Women in the Family

The woman has a unique, God-ordained role within the family. Marriage was designed by God to exhibit the relationship between Himself and His church. In living out this picture, the husband is called to tenderly love, care for, and lead his wife (Ephesians 5:22-33, 1 Peter 3:7), and the wife is to submit to her husband's leadership (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1). This voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for and obedience to God's design for marriage as revealed in His Word, and is never pictured as demeaning, or in any way diminishes the wife's equality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though the roles in marriage were designed by God for the mutual benefit and delight of each partner, sin has corrupted the beautiful relationship dynamics of marriage. Before sin entered the world, all of God's creation, which included Adam and Eve in their relationship, was perfect and good (Genesis 1:31). Sin, however, produced dire consequences for all of creation (Romans 8:22) including men, women, their relationships, and roles. An interesting part of the curse pronounced on Adam and Eve for their sin is found in Genesis 3:16b, "Your **desire** shall be for your husband, and He shall **rule** over you." The Hebrew word translated **desire** is used by Moses in Genesis 4:7 to express sin's desire to "rule over" Cain. "If you do well, will you not be accepted: And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its **desire** is for you, but you should rule over it." Therefore, from since the fall, a woman's natural tendency is to rule over and manipulate a man just as sin tries to rule over and manipulate a person. The Hebrew word translated **rule** in Genesis 3:16 means to reign over, to govern, to have dominion over another - usually in a high-handed, autocratic way. Therefore, since the Fall, men tend to rule over, reign over, have dominion over, and govern their wives in an ungodly way. Understanding these two sinful tendencies helps us realize how **wise** are God's instructions that govern the relationships and roles of men and women in marriage and in the church.

In addition to their unique role in the family as wives, women also are uniquely called to be a diligent manager of their home (Proverbs 14:1, 31:10-31). While husbands and fathers have been given the primary responsibility for the leadership of their home and children (Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, 1 Timothy 3:4-5), wives and mothers are urged to strongly support their husband in this task by being called to love and to nurture their children and to be “workers at home” (1 Thessalonians 2:7, Titus 2:4-5). This is a profound calling to support their family by being a diligent manager of the household. Despite the multitude of activities women may engage in, whether in church or in society, the Scriptures are clear that their husband, home, and children are to be their priority.

## Role of Women in Biblical History

Throughout the Scriptures it is clear that women were active in the religious life of Israel and the Church in various ways. Many women such as Sarah, Rahab, Hannah, Ruth, Abigail, Anna, Tabitha, and Priscilla are recorded in Scriptures as outstanding examples of personal faith, who played a unique part in the fulfillment of God’s divine plan. These women were used powerfully by God in varying ways. A notable exception to the role women played in biblical history is that throughout the Bible, reflecting God’s prescribed order for the home, the overwhelming pattern is of male leadership. There is no indication that women ever served as priest, had a public prophetic ministry, wrote a book of the Bible, or were given governance over Israel.<sup>2</sup> Women like Deborah and Huldah (Judges 4, 2 Kings 22:14-20) were clearly the exception in unique circumstances and not the rule. Biblical history shows the pattern of significant involvement of women in God’s plan, but not in the role of leadership of His people.

## Role of Women in the Church

The record of the role of women as described within the early Church follows the biblical pattern in presenting women fulfilling a vital role in the early life of the church through the exercise of various spiritual gifts,<sup>3</sup> and yet not in the area of teaching or governance. In keeping with the biblical pattern, God chose to use male leadership in the areas of apostleship, primary missionary activity, the writing of the New Testament, and the ongoing leadership in the churches.

As we look at the role of women in the church today, it is important to properly understand the implications of **three primary passages** that relate to this restriction of women from exercising certain leadership functions within the church, so that women can confidently fulfill their many God-given responsibilities within the prescribed order God has set for the church.

**1 Timothy 2:11-14** – *“A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.”*

In verse 12, God tells us through Paul “I do not allow a woman to **teach** or exercise **authority** over a man.” The word **teach** is from the Greek *didaskein*, from where we get our word didactic. It refers to those recognized by

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<sup>2</sup> Only one queen ever ruled Israel, and this only after attempting to murder all the royal sons and usurp the throne. Her sinful reign ended after the high priest returned the rightful king to the throne and ordered her and all her followers executed (2 Kings 11:1-20). Isaiah 3:12 indicates that when God allowed women to rule over the nation, it was part of His judgment on the sinning nation. <sup>3</sup> Acts 1:12-14; 9:36-42; 16:13-15; 17:1-4, 10-12; 18:1-2, 18, 24-28; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 1:5; 4:19.

the Church as having authority to instruct the entire Church in matters of doctrine and interpretation (Ephesians 4:11; Acts 13:1, 1 Corinthians 12:28 & 29). The word **authority** means to “to exercise dominion over”, and refers to being in a position of general authority in the church.

In verses 11 & 12 the women are instructed to “**learn in silence**” and “**be in silence.**” The idea of silence in the New Testament always has contextual limitations. The restriction can be either temporal (time-related) or contextual (topic-related). In the case of the former, someone is to be silent while someone else is speaking (Acts 12:17; 15:12-13; 1 Corinthians 14:30). In the latter, the one who is silent does not speak in a certain manner or on a certain topic, but he/she can speak in other ways and on other issues. The context of this passage can be found in 1 Timothy 3:15, “*that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God*” (not a building, but the assembled body of believers). So, we would understand the silence of women here to be “contextual,” specifically related to teaching the general assembly. Therefore the **silence** Paul requires of them in Church would not include things such as singing, praying, or the reading of Scripture when believers gather together.

This understanding of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 fits well with what we see as the Biblical pattern of male leadership. Although the Apostle Paul respected women and worked side by side with them for the furtherance of the gospel (Romans 16:1-16; Philippians 4:2-3), considered them spiritual equals, and saw their ministry as essential to the body of Christ, his instruction was that they were not to exercise leadership over men in the church.

**1 Corinthians 14:34-35** – “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.”

Understanding the context of this passage gives great insight into what context women are to be “silent,” and what they are learning when they “ask their own husbands at home.” This instruction is given in the midst of a whole section discussing order in church gatherings (1 Corinthians 12-14), and we can see how instructions to women in this passage mesh well with the passage in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. The first issue regulated for “when the church assembles together” (14:23) is speaking in tongues (14:27-28), and instructions are given on how to properly do so in the church gathering (only 2 or 3, each in turn, interpreter needed, silence if no interpreter, etc.). The next issue regulated is the exercise of prophecy in the church gathering. As the gift of prophecy was exercised by an individual, others would evaluate and pass judgment on the authenticity of this “revelation” (14:29-33). The prophecy was a direct revelation from God designed to guide each a particular church in the absence of New Testament revelation, and the “judgment” was designed to authenticate the message and “exhort” the Body, causing everyone to “learn” the specific application of what was prophesied (14:31). Since this role of evaluating prophecies and exhorting based on them would necessarily put one in a position of “authority” in the church, it is clear why women are commanded to “be silent” in this part of the service, and this is exactly the instruction of 1 Timothy 2:11-14.

Like 1 Timothy 2:11-12, the “silence” of women here is not universal within the church, but simply a restriction on taking part in the public judging of prophetic utterances in the early church. Though we believe this specific gift of prophecy is inactive in the church today (1 Corinthians 13:8-10), Paul’s teaching would still apply in today’s church gatherings to women taking a public role of disputing or questioning a teaching. If a woman has a concern over something being taught, she is to discuss the issue at home with her husband, allowing him to bring the matter of concern to the church, and thus be the conduit for her “learning.” If unmarried, a woman may of course bring her concerns privately to an elder or church leader.

There are times of informal meetings or Bible studies where it is entirely proper for men and women to share equally in exchanging questions and insights. In an interactive teaching environment (adult Sunday school, Sunday night teaching, etc.), it is perfectly appropriate for women to ask questions of clarification of the teacher, but 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 would restrict her from a public questioning or disputing with the teacher about some area of concern, or seeking to somehow control the direction of the teaching by her comments or questions.

**1 Timothy 3:11** – "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things."

This passage appears in the statement of qualifications for church leaders and is commonly used to justify the office of **deaconesses** as a position of church leadership. Many versions translate this as being "their wives" meaning wives of the deacons. This does not appear to be the correct interpretation for three reasons. First, the word "their" is not in the text. If it was referring to the deacon's wives, to make the sentence comprehensible the possessive pronoun should have been used – yet it was not. Second, the word translated "women" is from the Greek word *gunē*, which can be translated "women" or "wives," but is most naturally translated "women" unless the specific context demands otherwise (which it does not here). Third, the verse starts with the word "likewise" which is the Greek word *hosautos* which means the second or third in a series. It was also used when Paul started discussing deacons in verse 8. So it seems that Paul is simply giving qualifications of a third group that serves in the church – women.

So are these "women" **deaconesses**? It does not seem this is what Paul had in mind for several reasons. When qualifications are given for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, men are specifically mentioned. In Acts 6:3 when the apostles needed someone to lead in "deacon" activities, men were appointed. When one reads Philippians 1:1 as Paul addressed the leadership groups at the church of Philippi, deaconesses were not mentioned. Finally, when Paul pronounces a blessing on the deacons in 1 Timothy 3:13 the masculine noun for deacons is used. If deaconesses were an office on the same level as deacons, it seems implausible that Paul would have intentionally left them out of this special blessing. But, being imbedded in the discussion of the qualifications of deacons, the context would seem to indicate that those whom Paul was referring to were women who helped the deacons in their tasks. These women would serve a tremendous function in assisting the deacons in carrying out specific functions relating specifically to women, and would give assistance in many ways to the deacons' work in the church. As these women would administer various areas of church ministry, they would need be restricted by not being in a position of exercising governing authority over or teaching a man.

## Specific Applications

As we study all of the passages on this issue, The Bible Church of Owasso makes the following applications regarding the Role of Women.

1. We believe God has ordained only men to preach or teach or exercise spiritual authority in the "assembled body of believers." This would include church services, adult and high school ministry, church promoted home Bible studies and other church promoted gatherings of the BCO saints where men are present.
2. We believe God has ordained only men to serve as elders or deacons.
3. We encourage women of BCO to exercise their spiritual gifts by praying, giving testimonies, giving ministry reports, participating in choir and other musical ministries, administering various programs,

and taking part in group discussions in the “assembled body of believers.” The vast majority of BCO ministries provide opportunity for both men and women to participate as we serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

4. We encourage the women of BCO spiritually gifted to teach to exercise this gift by teaching other women and children in the church.
5. We encourage BCO women to assist their husbands as he teaches “the assembled body of believers,” and by giving practical application in areas of a woman’s Biblical responsibility in the home, church, and society.
6. We encourage BCO women to participate in group discussions in such a way that does not usurp or undermine their husbands’ authority in their marriage, nor the position of the one leading the discussion.
7. We will not separate ourselves from materials from other ministries that model women teaching men simply for that issue. We can easily point out that this model is not scriptural, but the material certainly may have merit in other areas for the lives of those 8) We encourage the women of BCO to directly engage their community and the world with the gospel ministry in a manner consistent with the biblical pattern of femininity.