

Voices: Why I support women in ministry, Part 1

May 21, 2019

I believe wholeheartedly that women are equal to men in the realm of Christian ministry. This means I believe women can and should preach to mixed-gender audiences, and women can and should serve as senior pastors, denominational leaders, Bible professors, etc.

I didn't always think this way. I grew up in a church tradition that restricted such ministries only to men. But in recent years, the influence of friends, mentors and teachers has led me to revisit Scripture on this issue and reconsider the views I learned growing up.

Although there have been significant exceptions throughout the history of Christianity, most Christians in both the past and the present have advocated the gender-restrictive view. This does not necessarily make their perspective correct, but I would be dishonest not to acknowledge that I am advocating a minority view.

Some of the most faithful, loving and intelligent Christians I have ever known disagree with me on women's roles in ministry. I am not writing to malign their character or their intelligence. I am writing to encourage them to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture on an issue that—although not essential for salvation—still is incredibly important.

The Old Testament

The first 39 books of our Bible report horrifying examples of the subjugation and degradation of women. For this reason, the Old Testament is not a place to which people usually turn when they want to endorse and

empower women. This is unfortunate since the Old Testament is home to some of the Bible's most incredible female figures.

Three women serve as prophetesses: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). In the Bible, prophets are not those who peer into crystal balls and predict the future. Prophets are those who are commissioned and inspired by God to deliver his authoritative word to his people for instruction, correction and exhortation.

In addition to being a prophetess, Deborah serves as a judge—the divinely appointed human political leader of Israel before the time of the monarchy. Huldah's preaching helps spark one of the most intense periods of revival in the entire Old Testament. She authenticated an entire section of the Scriptures when it was rediscovered after being lost.

The prophet Joel spoke of a day when the Lord would pour out his Spirit on all humanity—regardless of gender—and this pouring out would cause men and women to prophesy (Joel 2:28-29). Acts says this prophecy came true on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21).

The New Testament

In John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman at the well shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with numerous Samaritan men and women who believed the woman's testimony (John 4:7-42). Luke and its sequel Acts highlight the many women who served Jesus during and after his earthly ministry (Luke 2:36-38; 8:1-3; 24:49, 55; 24:10; Acts 9:36; 16:14-15, 40; 18:26; 21:9).

Moreover, it is women who were given the news of the resurrection first and were sent to proclaim it (Luke 23:49, 55-56; 24:1). This is despite the fact that in their culture the testimony of women was not accepted as valid evidence in court. It is also worth noting that Jesus never taught certain ministries are restricted to men—his calling of the Twelve notwithstanding.

In Romans 16:2, Paul refers to Phoebe as a “deacon” and as a *prostátis*—usually translated “patron” or “helper,” but which Philip Payne in *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* states may designate a position of authority.

Both Paul and Acts depict Prisca/Priscilla as a teacher and always mention her name *before* her husband’s, in contradiction to patriarchal social custom (Acts 18:18, 26-28; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

In Romans 16:7, Paul refers to Junia—a woman—as “outstanding among the apostles.” While ambiguous in English translation, the construction in Greek most likely means that Junia was herself an apostle. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul encourages women—and men—to pray and prophesy publicly during worship.

Paul describes the ministries of Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis—all women—with the word *kopiaō*, which means “to work hard,” and its derivatives. Paul frequently used this same word to describe his own ministry and used it in 1 Corinthians 16:16 when he commanded the Corinthians to subject themselves “to everyone who helps in the work and labors.” And in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul used this word, wrote Payne, when he “associates those who so labor with those in authority.”

I have scratched only the surface of the biblical data. I also have been unable to give a treatment to the handful of texts that appear to restrict women’s roles in ministry and church leadership (1 Corinthians 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

My goal here is not, however, to settle the debate. My goal is to *unsettle* the debate for those who may have reached a conclusion without considering the full range of biblical evidence.

Women ministers of the present and future

In my brief life, I have encountered numerous women with incredible gifts, women whose ministries will be an incredible blessing to the church. This especially has been true since I started attending Truett Seminary, an institution that explicitly and strongly affirms women in ministry.

One of my favorite classes at Truett has been a course on the Reformation taught by a woman. One of the brightest up-and-coming professional biblical scholars at Truett is a woman. One of the best sermons I've heard in the past year was preached by one of my close female friends—during her first time preaching outside a seminary classroom, I might add.

The church is bursting at the seams with women who are gifted and called by God. If we keep restricting women from certain ministries, we not only are doing a disservice to them, but we are doing a disservice to ourselves. We are robbing our churches of great riches God wants to bestow on us through his daughters.

Part 2 of this article can be read here: [Voices: Why I support women in ministry, Part 2](#)

I also recommend *Women in Ministry: Biblical, Theological & Practical Reflections* by Todd Still and the chapter titled “The Biblical Case for Ordaining Women” in *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* by N.T. Wright.

Joshua Sharp is a Master of Divinity student and graduate assistant in the Office of Ministry Connections at [Truett Seminary](#) in Waco, Texas.