

An open letter to the Church regarding women and ministry,
from the Bethel Little Rock Leadership Team

Beautiful Church,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We are both compelled and convicted to clearly address the issue of female leadership in the Body of Christ. Not to create or join a debate, and certainly not for the sake of politics, but rather to open and explore the Word which always gives life and truth. As a leadership team, we believe that men and women alike will be strengthened by looking into the Bible on this topic.

There are a handful of scriptures in the Epistles that give strong words about women. These few scriptures have formed a culture that politely (and often impolitely) refuses women to lead, to teach publicly, to teach men, or to have a meaningful voice in the Church at all. The goal of this letter is to address those scriptures specifically, while also considering the entire canon of scripture available to us. We will place a heavy emphasis on the life and words of Jesus. We will dive into the language, the context, and the cultures that Paul was confronting when he wrote these passages. We will do this all as concisely as possible.

As you may have guessed, we have already formed a conclusion on the matter. Here are two components of our statement of faith here at Bethel Little Rock:

“We believe that the Bible is without error in its original manuscript, and remains the only inspired, infallible, living, and eternally reliable Word of God. It is the final authority for us with regard to what is true and how we should live.”

“We believe that God designed the church to be led and equipped by teams that include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. We believe that women and men are equally called and gifted to serve, lead, and do all the works of the Kingdom.”

That said, there are four points that we will address regarding women and ministry.

1. The Bible is full of powerful women who lead. In both the Old and New Covenants, we see this reality so clearly. We have no reason to infer from scripture that God uses women in leadership or ministry only in absence of a man. Here is a sampling of important female leaders in scripture:

- Deborah was a prophet and a head of state (Judges ch. 4 & 5).
- Miriam was also a prophet, head of state, and worship leader in the company of Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4, Exodus 15:20).
- Anna was a prophet (Luke 2:36).
- Huldah was a prophet (2 Kings 22:14).
- Paul recognizes Phoebe as a deacon of the church in the book of Romans (16:1).
- Isaiah’s wife was a prophet (Is 8:3).
- Philip’s four daughters were all prophets (Acts 21:8-9).
- There is a female apostle named Junia in Romans (16:7).

- The woman at the well (John 4) was the first evangelist to carry the good news outside of Jewish culture, *the true first missionary to the Gentiles*. (Furthermore, she was regarded by the early church as an apostle. Her name was Photini, and she was named a saint).
- Priscilla and Aquilla (husband and wife) were early church leaders who taught Apollos (Acts 18:26).
- Nympha was a church leader in Colossia whom Paul greeted (Col 4:15-16).*
- (Did you know that Billy Graham's daughter, Anne Graham Lotz, is an evangelist? Her father and brother Franklin have both said that she is the best preacher in the family).

*Some Greek translations of the New Testament would later change Nympha's name, masculinizing it to read "Nymphas." The pronoun was changed from "her" to "his" so as to agree. This has been corrected by some of our most common translations:

- "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house" (Col 4:15, NASB).
- "Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house" (Col 4:15, NIV).

2. **Jesus went out of his way to esteem women.** Aside from the vast array of God-appointed female leaders throughout scripture, consider with me the way that Jesus approached women as important and powerful – whether in leadership or not.

Anointed for Burial

"While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; she broke the vial and poured it over His head Jesus said 'she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her'" (Mark 14:3, 8-9).

- Did you notice what Jesus said about the woman's act? Jesus chose specific language here (NASB) to identify that the woman had done a *priestly* service – *she had anointed him*. He validated her ministry, and without caveat.
- To whom was Jesus speaking to in these verses? Jesus is using the woman's ministry as a *teaching point* for the disciples in real time. He declares that her ministry will be highlighted *wherever the gospel is taught in the whole world*. This does not sound like the words of a man who would limit the influence of women in the church.

The Empty Tomb

"It is the women who come first to the tomb, who are the first to see the risen Jesus, and are the first to be entrusted with the news that he has been raised from the dead. This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles" (NT Wright, *Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis*).

Did you know that women could not testify in court in Jesus day? Their testimony was worthless in the eyes of Judaic culture. Yet God chose women to be first the witnesses of the resurrection:

the empty tomb (John 20). Think of what God was “un-doing” by resting the victory dance of Christianity, the resurrection, on a woman’s word in Jewish culture.

Commissioned by the Resurrected One

As compelling as their experience of the empty tomb is the women’s encounter with the resurrected Christ in Matthew 28:9-10. He *commands them* to “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” Think of what the church would have missed if Jesus had not imparted a value for women and their words – they would not have believed in the Resurrection.

3. **All scripture was given by God for teaching (2 Timothy 3:16).** Some of the most famous people in the bible are women. Have we considered that their words are forever *made authoritative* by virtue of their presence in the bible?

The Bible is the ultimate, infallible Word of God. Truly, the wisest men and women in the earth are those who allow themselves to come under the Word for instruction. We have a God-breathed Bible full of powerful women like Mary the Mother of Jesus, Deborah, King Lemuel’s Mother (who taught King Lemuel all that he wrote in Prov 31), Mary of Bethany, and so many others. These women stand right alongside our male bible heroes as those who have been clearly chosen for you and for me *for our teaching* (2 Tim 3:16). Their lives are marked as authority *forever* by Holy Spirit via inclusion in scripture.

It would not be possible to approach the Bible as Paul instructed in 2 Timothy 3:16 and, simultaneously, refuse to be taught by a woman.

4. **Context and culture.** The apostle Paul penned some clear and strong instructions regarding women. In this final section, we will dive into the details of the Bible’s most challenging verses about *how women are to be* in the Church. As with all Bible study, we have to zoom out on the verses themselves and see their context in order to appreciate their meaning.

*We would like to pause here and recognize the work of Loren Cunningham, David Joel Hamilton, Danny Silk, and Kris Vallotton (references at conclusion). Their work was particularly helpful to us as we looked into the issues of culture and context.

Different Cultures, Different Approaches

Paul’s strongest and most frequent instruction about women was directed to the new churches that were planted in *Greek culture*. The New Testament letters addressed to people or churches in Greek culture include 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus.

To the Roman cultures and the Jewish cultures, however, we will not find any limiting instructions regarding women. Isn’t that interesting? The three letters that seem to limit women (1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Timothy) are all written to churches in Greek cultures. Consider two brief examples of what Paul said to non-Greek cultures:

- *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 (Galatia was a Roman province)).*
- *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house” (Romans 16:1-5).*

Did you notice that Paul goes out of his way to recognize Phoebe as a deacon, and that Priscilla leads a home church with her husband? We must reconcile Paul’s clear approval of these female leaders with his instructions later in 1 Corinthians 14: “Women should remain silent in the churches.” How should we interpret this contrast? Either Paul is mad, or he had an important reason to speak differently in these different letters. The reason for the contrast is found in the cultures of those whom he was addressing.

Judaism and Women

While Jewish culture and the roots of God’s dealings with the Jewish people date to creation, the *religion of Judaism* was invented during the 400-year period of God’s silence between the end of Malachi and the beginning of Matthew. It is important to note that this religion was created from the OT Covenant between God and Israel, *but it was not the same*. It had morphed during those 400 years.

In other words, the Judaic religion came *out* of the Law of Moses, but much of it was not taken directly *from* the Law of Moses. For instance, the laws and restrictions had more than doubled. What happens when people create a religion while God is not actually speaking? You guessed it. Tons of bad rules.

- Levitical Law and commandments (Old Testament): 252 total laws.
- The religion of Judaism: 613 laws,
- Nearly 100 laws in the religion of Judaism were specifically written against women.

Pharisees hated women! This is the religious culture that Jesus was born into. In Jesus time, women were the most oppressed people on the planet. The plight of a woman in Jesus’ day and in Paul’s day was similar to current day Afghanistan. For instance, women could not eat with men, they could not vote, and they could not divorce a man (but were easily divorced by a man.) And they could not be taught the Torah, because only men “mattered.”

Picture Jesus as He “stood up where He came up” in Luke 4, announcing His mission statement. Correcting an oppressive religious system was undoubtedly part of His intention as He read the scroll of Isaiah 61, and announced that “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...to set the oppressed free...” Whom was this system most oppressive toward? Women, unequivocally.

In this same oppressive religious culture, Paul was trained to become a “Pharisee of Pharisees.” He was an expert woman-degrader. With that in mind, let’s revisit Galatians 3 and give it the “Wow!” that it deserves. As a new creation in Christ, Paul demonstrates a 180-degree turn from

his training as a Pharisee as he proclaimed "...nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Wow!

Roman Culture and Women

Like Judaic culture, Roman culture was not ideal for a woman. Females were essentially regarded as property. Cato said, "If you catch your wife in adultery, you can kill her with impunity; she, however, cannot dare to lay a finger on you if you commit adultery, nor is it the law" (Cato, *On Dowry*).

On the other hand, Ovid writes "...this I do advise, have two mistresses at once; he is stronger who could have more... if you are wise, cheat women only. Deceive the deceivers, they are mostly in an unrighteous sort" (Ovid, *The Art of Love*).

So we see the way that the Judaic and Roman cultures regarded women, generally. Perhaps their oppressive approach toward females sheds some light on why Paul would go out of his way to greet the female church leaders in Romans 16, and emphasize the equality that women are meant to enjoy alongside men in Christ in Galatians 3.

The Greek Churches

What about the Greeks then? Why did the churches in Greek culture require specific instruction regarding women? Jesus always modeled counter-cultural and radical love that gave recognition, honor, grace, and empowerment toward women. Paul's words to Greek cultures were his attempt to bring order and honor to an out-of-balance culture that came from polytheistic religion. Here are some keys that I have pulled from my own study of Greek culture and Paul's letters:

- What we all learned about in grade school as "Greek Mythology" was a very real, very demonic polytheistic religion upon which Greek culture was centered.
- The expression of this polytheistic religion in Ephesus and Corinth (both Greek) was especially women-centered. Unlike Jewish and Roman cultures, Greek cultures regarded women as eminent. So we might expect that Paul would give more specific teaching about women in the church in these places.
- How were these two places so 'women-centered?' Because the chief spiritual deities of Corinth and Ephesus were two of the most well-known and important of all the Greek deities. And they were both quite *sexual* 'goddesses.'
 - Corinth: Aphroditus (goddess of love)
 - Ephesus: Diana/Artemis (goddess of fertility)
- Paul was trying to get the Greek polytheism out of the Greek converts to Christianity. This involved addressing the unbalanced way that women were powerfully central to polytheistic worship rituals.
- Most importantly, Greek religion in these two cities was hyper-sexual. The pinnacle of religious experience for a man would be to sleep with the prostitutes / priestesses of the temple. This was a championed aspect of religious life.
- Paul gave some specific instruction regarding women to the churches in Greek culture (Corinth and Ephesus). The need for instruction was not based on gender, but on the leftover filth from a demonic religion that they had been saved out of.
- Women needed instruction about being loving and being honoring. They needed to know that Christlike character consists of humility and modesty and inner beauty.

- On the other hand, they also needed permission and freedom to participate in powerful ways in the church, despite the sinful ways that they may have participated in the polytheistic system which they came from.
- And, at least as much as women, men needed instruction. They needed clarity regarding how to relate to women in a Christian way. They needed to appreciate that women are holy and made in the image of the one true God. Men needed to be shown that women are not sexual stepping stones to spiritual experiences or blessing.
- Men and women alike needed to see that a woman's value and power comes from her identity in Christ, not her identity in Aphrodite or Diana. Men needed to know how to give women an equal place in the family of God, neither shaming women nor elevating them to an unhealthy place of dominance. After all, it was in Paul's second letter to this same Corinthian church where he wrote that "...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17).

With this cultural and contextual foundation, let's look at two of Paul's "most limiting" admonitions to churches in Greek cultures: 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2.

The Hard Scriptures?

A) Women must remain silent

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:34-35).

To contextualize this passage, first consider that much of 1 Corinthians consists of Paul answering *specific* questions that were asked of him. For instance:

"Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman...'" (1 Cor 7:1).

The Corinthian church is asking Paul specific questions about their new faith. As we see in chapter 7 above, Paul was quoting back what the church had asked him in a previous letter – in this case, about sexual relations. Initially, Paul will reiterate the question and then give his answer. But Kris Vallotton points out that by chapter 8, Paul stops restating the questions clearly, so that questions and answers run together. And unfortunately, Greek language does not offer punctuation which would so easily clear this issue up for us.

The importance of the "Q&A" format of 1 Cor is this: the "women must remain silent" passage (v 34 – 35) is most likely *not the words of Paul himself*. It is far more likely that this statement is part of a statement/question that he was re-iterating prior to answering it. His answer, of course, follows:

- *"Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues"* (1 Cor 14: 36-39, emphasis mine).

- His answer to the idea of women remaining silent is *specifically not to forbid* women to minister (this would certainly include speaking). How could Paul forbid women to speak, and then command women to be eager to prophesy seven sentences later? Was he crazy, or was he answering a repeated question?
- (Keep in mind that this letter is written to the Corinthian church, whom Paul established and ministered to with a team that includes Priscilla.)

The book of 1 Corinthians is full of teaching about orderly worship, how to pastor spiritual gifts, and what love looks like when God is moving in the church. How could Paul address “brothers and sisters,” indicating that *each one* has a teaching, if women are forbidden to speak or forbidden to teach a man?

“What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a teaching, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (1 Cor 14:26).

So this “women must remain silent” passage, taken into the context of the entire letter, is really not so hard after all. Paul was trying to bring order into the cultural chaos that is leftover from polytheism by answering questions about males/females and how to worship as equals in the church. In fact, the men in the Greek church were likely over-doing restrictions on women in a corrective whiplash – Paul was reminding them of what love and equality look like (vs 26).

B) What Paul discussed with Timothy

“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 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. But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint” (1 Timothy 2:9-15).

This passage is a dense one. Paul wrote the letter to Timothy while he was in Ephesus, and therefore, is addressing the challenge of finding beauty out of the chaos of Greek polytheism. Because of the length of this passage, we will go verse by verse.

- V. 9-10: Women should avoid old patterns of provocative lifestyles and appearances. Don’t draw attention to yourselves as the temple prostitutes / priestesses would. Be a picture of humility when receiving correction.
- V. 11-12: A woman shouldn’t teach or “usurp” (KJV) authority. Some scholars believe that this passage is addressing a specific individual. Whether addressing one person or the body at large, Jesus Himself said something similar about authority and leadership to his male disciples:

“Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, ‘You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not

this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

In light of Jesus’ admonition about servant leadership, we should recognize this passage in 1 Tim as the type of counsel a godly leader might give any disciple who is willing to listen. Furthermore, after reading Jesus’ instructions, what male pastor ever showed up on Sunday morning and preached, “Men cannot be leaders in church or have authority, because Jesus told a group of men that they were to be slaves and not leaders!”

This word about women not exercising, dominating, or usurping authority is no different from the teaching that Jesus gave his disciples. No person is ever meant to dominate another in the body of Christ. Paul was simply reiterating this same principle to a culture where sensual dominance had mingled with religion in a nasty way.

- V. 13-14: A conclusion of men’s pre-eminence or superiority by birth-order should not follow, because we see that men and women were equally created “in God’s image.” Our best understanding of this scripture is that it serves as an encouragement to women to remain humble and teachable. Strong teaching on humility would be ‘par for the course’ for Paul – male, female, Greek, Roman, etc. Consider Philippians 2:1-8.
- V. 15: This is one of the most encouraging revelations that a woman could receive in this day. As previously mentioned, the chief pagan deity over the city of Ephesus (where Timothy was) was Diana, the “goddess of fertility.” Women in Greek culture were in the habit of travelling to Ephesus to bear children to receive protection from Diana, so that they would not perish during childbirth. Paul is telling women, “You don’t need to go to Ephesus to have children under protection of Diana, because God will preserve you and protect you far better in childbirth than the fertility goddess could!”

There are a few other scriptures could be examined here in similar fashion. However, most of them are specific to the marriage relationship (Ephesian 5, for instance). This is not a letter about the dynamics of marriage, so we will save that for another time.

In summary

In closing, we recognize these patterns in scripture:

- God created men and women “in His image” and commissioned them equally to reign prior to the fall.
- The Bible is full of powerful men and women whom God is pleased to use for his purposes in the earth.
- Jesus placed great value on men and women alike, and went out of His way to recognize women on multiple occasions.
- Paul’s letters which were written to the most hedonistic, pagan cultures (the Greek epistles) gave more instruction regarding women, marriage, authority, and what love looks like. Paul was speaking in response to a church with very twisted roots, which had likely even whiplashed into overly restrictive patterns while searching for a ‘new norm’ outside of its polytheist background. Paul is trying to bring them back to love. Keep in mind that while 1 Corinthians 13 remains one of the most frequented selections of the

entire Bible, the passage is actually an admonition about spiritual gifts and how to honor one another while Holy Spirit is moving – male and female.

- The gospels and the epistles that addressed Judaic or Roman cultures were extremely liberating toward women.
- *God is using the life of Jesus and the epistles to bring order where there is a specific and women-centered chaos (Greek cultures), and freedom where there is bondage (Jewish and Roman cultures).*

Thank you for your time and participation in this letter. We pray that you are blessed and challenged to seek God for His heart for all people in your life and in your local church.

In Him,

Bethel Little Rock Leadership Team

For more reading we recommend:

Why Not Women? by Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton

Powerful and Free by Danny Silk

Fashioned to Reign by Kris Vallotton

“Women’s Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis,” Dr. N. T. Wright.

<http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/womens-service-in-the-church-the-biblical-basis/>

“A Study of the Role of Women in the Church, by the Doctrinal Advisory Group.”

<https://oakhillschurch.com/Content/ExternalSite/A-Study-of-the-Role-of-Women-in-the-Church.pdf>

“Women in Ministry: The Father’s House position paper on the ordination of women.”

<http://www.tfh.org/-/doc/papers/women-in-ministry-tfh.pdf>