

Women as church leaders: defensible from an Evangelical perspective?

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Church leadership discussions are complicated because there are so many cul-de-sacs that distract from the discussion. It is difficult to discount elements such as an individual's call, personal experience of priests, church tradition, what "seems" right or correct, women's equality issues and the legal position in a country, yet all of these are secondary to the bible. Even when we keep strictly to the bible – as we shall do here – it is tempting to interpret some biblical instructions in the light of cultural norms. For example, few would argue that 1 Tim 6:1 ("those who are slaves must consider their masters worthy of all respect") means that God is in favour of slavery: here the bible is regulating the norms of the day. It is always tempting to interpret the bible from an "I" perspective – what I think the bible ought to say on a given subject based on my cultural understanding – and this is relevant to both sides of this discussion.

The bible does not address the question of whether women can be priests, pastors, preachers or church leaders. There are however two specific passages which appear to forbid this, so we will look first at these.

1 Corinthians 14: 34-35

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.

It would appear from this passage that the question is conclusively answered. Things look less certain, however, as soon as we put this verse back into the context of the rest of the letter. Firstly, during the previous three chapters Paul has described in detail how men and women are to behave while they pray or deliver prophecy in church (11: 4-5). Paul considers prophecy to be a gift of the Spirit (12:10) and continues " But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort ... the one who prophesies edifies the church" (14:3-4) – and he wants women to do it. Does that therefore mean that by 14:34-35 Paul has changed his mind and women are not now allowed to speak? In addition, chapter 14 is about how a congregation is to behave during worship ("For God is not a God of disorder but of peace", verse 33). This is nothing to do with leadership. Why would Paul – a very organised and systematic author – suddenly change the direction and turn to a discussion on leadership (a topic that he does discuss elsewhere without mentioning gender) in the middle of an argument about something else?

We read in the NIV translation “They (women) are not allowed to speak”. The word “speak” is often used in English in connection with preaching or a formal speech. In everyday language when we describe an informal conversation we would use the word “talk”. Similarly, biblical Greek uses several different words for this, of which the two most common ones are:

- *laleō* (to talk, use mouth, make sounds, converse, the opposite of quiet). This word points to the mere fact that someone is talking, not to the content or to the words that are being said. This word is used 308 times in the New Testament.
- *legō* (to speak, hold forth, teach, encourage, preach). This word refers to what is being said, where the actual words or content is significant. This word is used 1349 times in the New Testament.

Let us look at an example. In Mark 7:37 “they were astounded beyond measure, saying, (*legō*) ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak (*laleō*).’” The use of *legō* here tells us that the text is quoting *what* the people said. The people however were primarily interested in the fact that the man could speak (what he said was not relevant) – hence the use of *laleō*. The word used in 1. Cor. 14 is *laleō*. Women should not chat during the service. Paul does not say that women should not *legō* – preach / teach etc.

The relevance of the difference between the meanings of these two words is not news. Amongst others the American anti-women-priests author Benjamin Warfield wrote harsh comments about this in an article in *The Presbetyrian* in 1919 – an article still quoted today in some American church movements. Warfield's argument is that although the verse (“They are not allowed to speak,”) does not forbid women to preach or teach, the second half of the verse (“Women should remain silent”) does because it is not possible to remain silent and preach at the same time. This argument however overlooks the fact that biblical Greek habitually uses a standard literary device of saying the same thing twice but in opposite ways: “You are not to go; no, you are to stay”). In other words, we can translate our verse into modern English as “women are not allowed to chat; no, they should stay quiet” – evidently a reference to chatting and not to formal speaking. The context, too, is concerned with behaviour during services and not with the leader’s role, making it clear that this verse is not about women preachers at all.

But if the word *laleō* refers to talking or chatting and not to preaching, what then is Paul trying to say? The theologian Dr Kenneth Bailey explains that in the biblical Middle-East it is the norm that men and women are separated in church (something which still happens in many places). The service were in classical or formal Arabic, a language with which the men, not the women, were familiar (women, having little education, spoke the local dialect). It is a female trait to do things together, to discuss, to support one another. It is therefore natural that the women, who understood very little of the sermon and bible readings, would start to discuss amongst themselves and share what they understood. That would lead to a gradual increase in noise from the women's side, meaning that the leader would have to constantly interrupt and ask for quiet. Under these circumstances it seems quite

natural that Paul, in the middle of a chapter where he is talking about one ought to behave during a service, should comment that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home”. Should women then be subordinate to men? The text does not say that: simply that they should be subordinate. To whom? Amongst the church leaders Paul writes about or to in the first letter to the Corinthians are Nymfe, who has a house church in Laodicea, Chloe and Stephanas and in 16:16 Paul writes to Christian men and women that they should “put themselves at the service of such people”. Christians are subordinate to the Word and to the church.

Bailey's explanation may be regarded as speculative, but one thing is certain – the text cannot mean that women must remain silent with regard to taking part in the service, simply because that interpretation would be the opposite of everything else Paul writes in the same letter.

Now we have come to the other difficult text: 1 Timothy 2. With the previous text in mind, the first part of it presents no difficulties.

Verses 8-11

“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence in full submission.”

In the same way as we have discussed in the previous letter, Paul gives a balanced picture of both men and women in verses 8-10. The men are warned against anger or argument and the women are warned “in the same way” against becoming focussed on clothes and jewellery. Verse 11 is similar to the text we have studied in 1 Corinthians and the same points are being made. For the same reasons as before it is not possible that Paul is saying women must remain silent in church. We see from 1 Cor. that women pray out loud and give words of prophecy; we see here that they also study. Men and women here have the same function but from different angles: “men should pray...without anger... also that the women learn in silence in full submission”.

The text starts to become challenging in verses 12:15:

“I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

We notice here that Paul uses “I”, as he does when stating personal opinions as opposed to biblical principles. But there is a more important point here, which again concerns both the context and one translated word.

A familiar tool in biblical interpretation is to look for the “elephant in the room” - something unexpected but so dominating that we do not notice it. What then is the elephant here? It is why in the world Paul would drag Adam, Eve and the background to God instituting childbirth into this argument. As a result of what happened in the Garden of Eden, women are not allowed to “teach or have authority over a man”. The word translated here as “authority over” is *authenteō* - a word so unusual that it is only used this once in the whole bible. It means an autocrat who forces his will and power on others. It is closely associated with a word which means to murder. The choice of this word - a unique word where other more common words might have been used - reinforces the view that there is something to take note of here: perhaps something as strong as to trample over, obliterate - kill - the influence of someone else. Why does Paul believe there is a danger that women will so forcibly remove all the influence of men in the church? And why include childbirth, as though this should be relevant to the discussion? Since it is Adam and Eve who are used to introduce this whole issue, this question must provide the key to understanding what Paul is trying to say. It is accepted that the letter is written to Timothy in Ephesus, a town dominated by the great Artemis-Temple, the most famous of the Asian centres of worship to the fertility goddess Diana or Artemis. It cannot therefore be a coincidence that Paul writes about women and how God ordained childbirth, when we place this letter in the context of Ephesus and the cult of the fertility goddess, which was based on the legend of Artemis and magical births. Paul emphasises that childbirth was established by and is controlled by the one true God, not by Artemis, and that God has created both men and women. All the priests in the temple of Artemis were, of course, women, who exercised absolute control over the temple. In this letter Paul is writing to a small, comparatively new, religious group in a town where all the religious power is in the hands of women. Paul points out that both men and women are to be allowed to study (and to pray and prophesy, as pointed out in the letter to the Corinthians). Therefore it is not unreasonable to add: “I do not allow women to take over and remove all authority from men” and to put that in a biblical perspective of the circumstances under which the relationship between man and God had broken down in the first place - due to human disobedience in Eden. The Christian church is absolutely not the same as other religions in Ephesus - led by a female autocracy on principles that are the direct opposite of God's word in Genesis 3.

Whether or not these particular interpretations are correct, we have to accept that when looking at difficult issues we must look at the whole of the bible and not just take verses out of context in order to use them without reflection as the ultimate answer in a discussion.

As well as these two texts it is sometimes pointed out that Paul in 1 Tim. exhorts both deacons (*diakonos*) and bishops (*episkopos*) to be “the husband of one wife” (3:2 and 3:12 - King James translation). In Romans 16.1 Paul commends “our sister Phoebe” and describes her as a deacon (*diakonos*) in the church at Cencreae - exactly the same word, used here in just the same way. It is therefore impossible that Paul in this sentence intends to exclude women - it is polygamy that is forbidden.

It is often and rightly pointed out that Jesus was a man and that the twelve he chose as his closest workers were also men. Of course we could also say that all twelve were Jews, without this necessarily meaning that all priests must be Jews. The fact that there were exactly twelve of them is highly symbolic (the twelve tribes of Israel) and this symbolism implies that the twelve had to be men (the tribes of Israel always followed the male line of descent). It is also said that the Old Testament sign of belonging to God's chosen people, circumcision, was only for men. But for Christians, baptism has replaced circumcision as a sign of belonging to God - and baptism includes both men and women, Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free. One might also notice that no women were priests in the Old Testament. Priesthood in the Old Testament, however, is something entirely different from what we refer to as Christian priesthood, or as church leadership in the New Testament. The priest's role in the Old Testament is associated with sacrifice (slaughter of animals) and with instruction in the law. The functions covered by what we term Christian priesthood were in the OT covered by a number of other callings of which women were a natural part - amongst others, prophets who spoke God's word. Strictly speaking the New Testament makes no reference to Christian priests at all (male or female). The two leadership roles mentioned are deacons (*diakonos*) and bishops (*episkopos*) (see 1 Tim 3), but *diakonos* is a general word meaning servant or helper (for instance the servants at the wedding feast in John 2 were referred to as *diakonos*) and the Greek word *episkopos* means overseer (although each of the 7 times it is used in the NT it refers to a church leader).

If we look at the role of women in the OT and the NT we find that these cover the whole spectrum of what we now understand to be the role of the priest / pastor / church leader. Preaching or teaching belonged to the prophet. A prophet in the OT is described by God as follows: "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who will speak to them everything that I commanded. Anyone that does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable" (Deut. 18:18-19). As we have seen, Paul writes "Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation ... those who prophesy build up the church" (1 Cor. 14:3-4). Amongst female prophets in the OT we can mention Miriam (Exodus 15:20) who was given the job of leading Israel (Micah 6:4), Deborah, "a prophetess ... was judging Israel ... the Israelites came up to her for judgement" (Judges 4:4-5), Hulda (2 Kings 22:11-14), the prophetess who was with Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3) and many more. In the NT we see that among the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah was "a prophet, Anna" (Luke 2:36) (not to mention two other women who did not have the title of "prophet" - Elizabeth (Luke 1:41-43) and Mary the mother of Jesus) as well as other women prophets (eg Acts 21:9).

In Romans 16:6-7 Paul sends greetings to "Mary, who has worked very hard among you" and to Junia who has been in prison with Paul and who is "prominent among the apostles". That Junia can only be a woman's name has led some bible translators to change the name to the male version Junias because "it must be a mistake", but changing the biblical text to bring it in line with our views is extremely poor and dangerous theology. We should also not forget that it was women that Jesus chose to be the first witnesses of his resurrection, although they have not

been called apostles.

In the NT the boundaries between evangelist, teacher, church leader and other titles are less precise than in our understanding. As already observed, we do not find “priests” in the NT church at all. We have already seen that Paul values Phoebe's work as a deacon. That a deacon could be a leadership role is clear from 1 Tim 3:2-12 and from external sources. There exists, for instance, a letter from Plinius the Younger (63 - about 113) to the Roman Emperor Trajan in which he mentions two female deacons in a court case where it is clear that he regards them as the responsible leaders of a congregation. It is important to note that Junia was “a fellow prisoner” with Paul. Unless she was seen as a leader this would not have happened. Saul had “imprisoned both men and women” (Acts 8:3, 9:2, 22:4) because he regarded both as a threat to Judaism. As previously discussed, Paul in 1 Cor describes a list of female church leaders such as Nymphe who has a house church in Laodicia, Chloe (in 1:11 Paul refers to Chloe's people) and Stephanas (a female name), and in 16:16 Paul writes to Christians, both men and women: “I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people and everyone who works and toils with them”. Evangelists include Priscilla and her husband Aquila (named in that order, which in itself is unusual and striking) who travelled with Paul to Ephesus and who Paul appointed to teach others there (Acts 18:18-26). Priscilla and Aquila also founded a church in Rome (Romans 16:3-5) and risked their lives for Paul. Paul also writes about two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, who “have struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel” (Phil 4:3) (the word *synathleō*, used here by Paul, makes it clear that this was a significant evangelistic collaboration).

In other words, we find throughout both the OT and the NT women carrying out roles which today belong to the priest or pastor (jobs which did not exist in these terms in the early church). Even though tradition in the Roman Catholic Church forbids women priests, the bible simply does not do so. Although Paul is often interpreted as not permitting women to preach in church he approvingly describes situations where women speak during services for the building up of the congregation as well as referring to women who are both deacons and congregation leaders. It may appear that individual verses in Paul's letters contradict this, but unless Paul is being self-contradictory we have to consider other explanations for what he means in these places. The explanations put forward here are not necessarily correct, but they are reasonable and if nothing else show that these verses can be interpreted in different ways.

This is a difficult topic and we have to acknowledge that different individuals will read the text and conclude differently. We must pray that even if we cannot all agree, we can respect and take seriously other people's biblical interpretation, so that we can live faithfully and present to the world a good testimony of Jesus Christ.