

Can women serve as pastors and elders in the church?

Scripture: Proverbs 31:10–31; Titus 2:4–5; 1 Timothy 2:15; Ephesians 5:22–33

Code: QA127

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Many today are thinking through and discussing the issue of women in leadership in the church; and many churches are even ordaining women for pastoral ministry. Some of the largest Christian denominations believe Scripture permits church leaders to be either male or female. Perhaps you attend or have visited one of those churches and are wondering what the Word of God teaches on this topic.

Knowing specifically what ministries God intends women to perform in the church can be a challenge. For instance, can a woman teach the Bible in a high school or college Bible club meeting? Should men read Bible-study books, commentaries, or theology books written by women? Is a woman permitted to lead and teach in the church youth group or lead the singing in the main service? Many people also wonder why women who are just as gifted and productive as men shouldn't be allowed to use their abilities in the church. Some women are able to teach, preach, and lead better than many men. Why should we not let them bless the church in those ways? These are important and challenging questions, and Scripture gives us clear principles to follow as we answer them.

While the ministry of women is essential to the church's proper working and health, only men are given the responsibility to serve as pastors and elders. Although Scripture is quite clear on this point, there are many individuals, churches, and denominations that choose to disobey the Lord's will in this regard and allow women to function in pastoral and teaching roles. But God's church will be blessed and will honor Him only as it follows the plan He has revealed in the Bible.

The clearest biblical teaching on this issue is found in 1 Timothy 2:12: "But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet." This command comes in a section of 1 Timothy which teaches about the functioning of a local church. Some people believe when the apostle Paul wrote that a woman should not "teach or exercise authority over a man," he was conforming to a unique situation in the city of Ephesus or to the cultural value system of the time, but that is not the case. Notice in the next verse Paul refers back to God's original design for man and woman: "For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve" (1 Timothy 2:13). This proves God wants His created design of male leadership and female submission in the family to extend into the functioning of the church.

On certain issues, the concerns and goals of the modern feminist agenda are in agreement with God's standards. For instance, they agree women should not be discriminated against in the workplace but should be afforded equal opportunities with men. They also rightfully condemn violence against women. At the same time, however, the modern feminist movement frequently contradicts Scripture regarding the roles of women. For instance, some of the key goals of feminism are to protect a woman's right to abort her baby, to affirm lesbianism, and to promote the idea that

there is no distinction between men and women's leadership roles in the family and the church.

These contradictions with God's Word are not incidental but evidence a fundamental error in feminist philosophy which can be traced back to the original fall of mankind into sin. The events recorded in Genesis 3 explain how the feminists' opposition to God's plan began. When God created Adam and Eve, He designed a productive and perfect balance between the nurturing leadership of a man and the supportive following of a woman in marriage. After God created Adam, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). A few verses later we read how God created Eve: "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:21–24).

When Adam and Eve sinned, God's perfect plan was perverted by the depravity in the hearts of men and women. Adam sinned by stepping out from under God's authority when he ate the divinely forbidden fruit, and Eve chose to reject the authority of both Adam and the Lord. One of the consequences of their sin was the corruption of the complementary relationship between man and woman. Genesis 3:16 records what the Lord told Eve: "Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." The desire Eve would have toward Adam is not a good kind of desire but a desire to conquer or overcome. You can see this in Genesis 4:7 where the same word describes what sin would do to Cain: "Sin is crouching at the door; and *its desire is for you*, but you must master it" [emphasis added].

From that time on, one of the expressions of sin in women would be the tendency to break out of God's intended supporting and following role. At the same time, men's sinful tendency would be to neglect their responsibility to love and lead their wives, dominating them instead. God's perfect plan can be implemented and enjoyed in marriages and churches only when sinners receive new hearts of humility and obedience. It is only when men and women submit to God's way that they will experience the greatest blessing.

The differing roles of men and women in marriage and the church should not lead us to believe there is any kind of inequality personally or spiritually between the genders. In the Word of God the principles of gender equality and women's submission exist side by side. Genesis 1:26–27 reads, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Men and women are created equally with a likeness to God. They share dominion over all creation and are both commanded to rule over it.

The second chapter of Genesis contains a more detailed recounting of the creation of Adam and Eve in which we see the divinely ordained functional ordering of leadership and submission between man and woman. Adam was created first (2:7), and Eve was created later in order to be a complement and helper to him (2:20–23). It is this creation order Paul mentions to support God's intention for male leadership in the church (1 Timothy 2:13). This is the reason why the roles of pastors and elders are limited to men in the church.

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