



Women in Ministry at Agape Christian Church

The issue of what role women should play in the ministry of the church has been one shrouded in controversy. The Church was born in a patriarchal society where women were not valued and equality between men and women was a foreign notion. In the last century or so, our world has experienced a revolution in how women and their roles are viewed. This understandably brings into question what women's role should be in the church of the 21st century.

To that end, the elders of Agape Christian Church have been working to determine a theology of women in ministry for Agape Christian Church that is biblically sound. In doing so, we have been careful to make sure we are not allowing the myriad of opinions and voices of our culture to keep us from following what is laid out for us in the truth of Scripture. We have also been careful to consult the whole counsel of Scripture, not just selected texts.

There is no doubt that in the early church women taught, preached, led, prophesied, and had great influence on the church as it grew. This is evident when Peter quotes the prophet Joel saying, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17, ESV)

Paul writes of women praying and prophesying in worship in 1 Corinthians 11:5. We are told that Philip also had four daughters who prophesied in Acts 21:9.

Jesus often broke through cultural and social barriers to speak to and teach women directly. Women were often the ones who took the message of the Gospel directly to others and were even the first to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus (John 4:28-29, John 20:17-18). Jesus commended Mary for sitting at Jesus's feet learning with the rest of the male disciples, presumably to then become a teacher of others herself (Luke 10:39-42). Paul mentions no less than 12 women in his letters who are coworkers with him in the Gospel. Phoebe specifically is called a deacon in the early church and given the task to take Paul's letter to the Romans, which means she likely was the one to explain his letter to them as well (Romans 16:1-2).

There is no question that women preached, taught, organized, and led ministries in the early church. It should be the same today. Women are capable of and should be allowed to participate in any ministry in the church (leading ministries, leading worship, teaching, preaching, organizing, administering, evangelizing). Women are greatly valued and prized in the Lord's eyes and they should

be in ours as well. Women provide a vast amount of influence and leadership in the life of the church today, without which most churches would not survive.

The one limitation that Paul makes of women in ministry is in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. He discusses the issue of a woman exercising authority over a man. This issue is not just dealing with cultural norms. Paul goes beyond culture and cites the order of creation and Eve's sin as precedence for men being in authority.

With that limitation in mind, we must conclude that women can do everything men can do in the church with the exception of being in spiritual authority. This authority is given to men and it is their responsibility to fulfill it. In our church today those roles of spiritual authority are fulfilled by the ordained elders and ministers. Men given these roles of spiritual authority are given greater responsibility, which requires greater accountability. They also must be in submission to God and practice servant leadership.

Therefore, the position of Agape Christian Church is that according to Scripture, women may participate in any ministry except the roles of ordained elders and ministers.

Biblical Foundation

Much biblical study, thought, and prayer was poured into this decision and the elders of Agape Christian Church are confident that we have come to a biblical conclusion based on our study of the following Scriptures.

1 Corinthians 11:3-7

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. (1 Corinthians 11:3–7, ESV)

When we study any passage of Scripture, we need to first consider its context. Looking at both the Biblical context and the cultural context of a passage helps us to understand what the original intent of the Scripture was.

The context of this passage is 1 Corinthians 11-14 where Paul discusses orderliness in worship. Therefore, this passage needs to be interpreted in light of that context. In 1 Corinthians 11:3-7, Paul discusses the proper way for women to participate in worship. Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey gives us several keys to understanding what Paul meant here in his books *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* and *Paul Through Middle Eastern Eyes*.

Bailey tells us, “In English, we commonly use the word *pray* to refer to private devotion and the word *worship* to refer to what a community does together. In Semitic speech, whether Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac or Arabic, “to pray” is used for both.”¹ Therefore, Paul’s statement of women praying in verse 5 could be taken as private devotional prayer or leading the church in prayer during worship. The biblical context of orderliness in worship suggests the latter. Paul’s statement about prophesying cannot be taken as anything but a participation in and leading of public worship.

In the Middle East, even today, the covering of a woman’s head was a sign that she was respectable and that she had a family who cared for her, either a husband or father who was watching out for her and responsible for her.² This was true in Paul’s time as well. In light of these contexts, we can conclude that Paul’s admonition here is to make sure that when women were participating in worship, they were being respectable in the eyes of their culture

Things to take note of:

- Paul clearly had in mind that women were to participate in leading worship in the church. His concern is that it be done in a decent and orderly fashion.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 346.

² Kenneth E Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 300.

1 Corinthians 14:33–35

... As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14:33–35, ESV)

Taken out of context, this passage seems to indicate that women should never speak in worship at all. We must remember to consider this passage both in its biblical context of orderliness in worship, and its cultural context. Paul cannot mean that women should never speak in worship, because he already made mention of women praying and prophesying during worship in 1 Corinthians 11:5. (Note: Prophecy is proclaiming God's Word, whether a spoken word directly from God, or his written Word. Today, we do this through preaching. Also see Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18, Acts 21:9.)

That being the case, this prohibition of women speaking in worship is within the context of orderliness in worship only. It does not mean that women must never speak in worship, only that they must be silent when they would be disruptive or make worship disorderly. In fact, just a few verses before, Paul urged those who speak in tongues and those who prophesy to be silent when others are speaking in worship. The same is true here as well.

Kenneth Bailey give some further historical context on this passage. During this time, a very small percentage of people were literate, maybe even as low as ten percent. Women were usually uneducated. Speakers such as the highly educated Paul or Apollos, who we are told was an eloquent man (Acts 18:24), would speak formally instead of in the colloquial languages the uneducated would more readily understand.³ Worship services were sometimes even in languages some would not understand, like Latin or Greek. Corinth being a very multicultural city, there would be many who spoke different languages and dialects in the church.

Kenneth Bailey notes that in Middle Eastern church services women are often seated on one side of the church, the men on the other. In many cases an actual wooden partition separated them. The same was true in the Jewish Temple, where there was a separate court for women and men. The children would be seated with the women and, along with the fact they often could not understand the formal language of the speakers, the women would not understand something and they would talk amongst themselves asking questions of each other, thus disrupting worship.

In that context, Paul was telling the women of the church to be quiet during worship and ask their husbands questions if they didn't understand something that was said instead of disrupting worship. Again, all of this must be taken in the context of orderliness in worship. Paul's entire plea here is summed up in 1 Corinthians 14:40: *But all things should be done decently and in order. (ESV)*

³ Bailey, 413–14.

Things to take note of:

- Paul is clear here that women should not try to take over the role of men. They are expected to be in submission to those in authority in the church.
- This shows the headship that God intended for the church and how he expects women to be involved in it. This issue of headship is dealt with later in this study.

1 Timothy 2:8–15

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 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—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Timothy 2:8–15, ESV)

The word Paul uses here for ‘authority’ (v. 12) is the word *αὐθεντέω* (*authenteo*), which means to assume a stance of independent authority, to give orders, or to dictate. This word is only used here in the New Testament. Nowhere else does Paul use this word when he talks about authority. Therefore, a good translation of this verse would be “I do not permit a woman to exercise independent authority over a man” or “to order a man around” or “be in authority over a man”.

The idea of a woman teaching here is surely not a prohibition on women teaching at altogether, because Paul is clear that spiritual gifts are given to all to build up and encourage the church (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). There is no indication anywhere in Scripture that some spiritual gifts are reserved for men. If God gifted women to teach, preach, or prophesy, why would He then not allow them to use their gifts within the church they are meant to build up? Again, Paul specifically gave instructions for women prophesying (proclaiming the word of God) in Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:5), so there were women doing so in the early church.

This verse must be in the context of misused authority, or women attempting to usurp authority outside of God’s created order. That kind of misused authority denies the headship of men in the church that Paul goes on to talk about in the created order of things (1 Timothy 2:13–15), and is the opposite of the submission that Scripture calls us to (Ephesians 5:22–33).

The historical context of this passage tells us that Ephesus was the home of the Temple of Artemis, which was a pagan cult that only permitted women. The city of Ephesus was one that was used to seeing women take the lead in matters of religious belief, and Timothy would certainly face that issue as he led a church in which biblical male headship was the standard.

Because Paul uses the created order of things as his example or explanation of his statement, this goes beyond a cultural norm. Paul's statement here transcends culture and applies to people of all eras. This puts a limitation on women of exercising authority over a man in the church, establishing that men are to be the ones in positions of spiritual leadership and authority. This authority is given to men and it is their responsibility to fulfill it.

Things to take note of:

- Paul speaks of the inappropriate use of authority by women in the church. This is not about having no authority or leadership at all. Women can still lead and administrate ministries. Paul is concerned with the authority of the men who lead the church and are responsible for shepherding and pastoring the church.
- There is nothing to indicate that only men are given the gifts to preach and teach. Women are specifically mentioned as prophesying in Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:5).
- There is clearly a model of headship or authority in place here that is not culture bound, but inherent in God's created order.
- All teaching and preaching in the church are always done under the authority and headship of the elders of the church. The elders are ultimately responsible for safeguarding the teaching of the church no matter who is doing the teaching. Anyone who teaches, preaches, or otherwise serves in the church does so under the authority of the elders.
- This prohibition against using authority outside of God's created order applies to anyone who would try to usurp authority and take the authority of the elders. It also applies to any who would step into an inappropriate role of authority because that authority was abdicated by men who are responsible to lead. It is inappropriate for anyone to try to go against the authority and leadership of the elders. Paul specifically speaks of women here because that was the most probable issue Timothy would face in the cultural context of Ephesus where women were typically the leaders of religious groups.

Headship

The issue of headship is seen throughout Scripture and is grounded in God's created order, not any kind of cultural norm. This created order is established in the following verses:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. (Genesis 2:18–20, ESV)

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own

image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27, ESV)

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; (1 Corinthians 11:8–11, ESV)

Humanity was made in the image of God, which includes both male and female. While both are equally the image of God and equal in Christ (in terms of salvation), there remains a distinction between the two.

God established an order to humanity at creation, that men and women are fully equal, interdependent, and meaningfully distinct, which is preserved throughout Scripture. God intended male and female to be equal, yet distinct in roles. Male and female were meant to work in concert with one another, complementing each other's weaknesses.

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3, ESV)

So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. (John 8:28, ESV)

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are equal yet distinct in role. The same idea of headship carries on into our families and into the church

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:22–33, ESV)

Headship does not imply superiority and submission does not imply inferiority. They are a part of how we reflect the image of God by cooperation in the accomplishment of God's work.

The headship of a man over a woman is to be like that of Christ over the church, which means it is an exercise of authority, but exercised with servant leadership and sacrifice. Male leadership exercised with a sense of dominance is unbiblical. Men are to give themselves up for their wives and for the church they lead.

Mutual submission within marriage is the background for the distinction in roles between a husband and wife. The goal of mutual submission is to edify each other. It does not mitigate the distinction in roles. The submission of a wife to her husband affirms his God given calling to be the leader of his family and encourages him to lead. The headship men are to give their wives is patterned after Jesus, which means they must both be a servant leader and lead sacrificially. When spouses embrace their equal yet distinct roles in marriage, they experience the fullness of God's intention for marriage.

These same principles also apply to the church (Ephesians 5:32). When we embrace our equal yet distinct roles in the church, we experience the fullness of God's intention for the church. The goal of mutual submission is still to edify each other. It does not mitigate the distinction in roles in the church any more than it does in marriage. Submission to the elders of the church affirms their God given calling to be the leaders of the church and encourages them as they lead. The headship of the elders is to be patterned after Jesus, which means they must both be servant leaders and lead sacrificially.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

One of the most important aspects of our roles in the church is how we have been gifted by the Holy Spirit. Paul talks a lot about how we are gifted by the Holy Spirit to do the work of God's Kingdom and to build up and encourage the church.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7, ESV)

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:1–5, ESV)

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4–8, ESV)

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10–11, ESV)

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift... And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:7,11–16, ESV)

Ephesians 4:13 does contain the Greek word for man but could just as easily mean person. The NIV, NLT, and NRSV all reflect that just saying 'mature'.

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13, NIV)

This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13, NLT)

until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13, NRSV)

This is the strongest biblical argument for women being able to participate in all kinds of ministry. Nothing in Scripture says that men are given certain spiritual gifts that women are not. Multiple times Paul uses the word 'all' or 'every one' when speaking of who the Holy Spirit gives these gifts to.

Since women are given the same spiritual gifts as men, it follows that they should be able to use them in the church whether they be teaching, prophesying, etc. In some cases women have been allowed to teach and lead only other women and children, but nowhere in Scripture does it say that women are limited in how they can exercise their spiritual gifts, only that they do so under the authority and headship of the elders.

Why can't women be elders?

Keeping in mind the biblical view of equal but distinct roles, the created order of headship, and the fact that spiritual gifts are not limited in any way, we must conclude women are capable of doing anything in the church with the one limitation Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 2:11-14.

There he discusses the issue of a woman exercising authority over a man. This issue is not just dealing with cultural norms. Paul goes beyond culture and cites the order of creation and Eve's sin as precedence for women not exercising authority over men.

This puts a limitation on women of exercising authority over a man in the church, establishing that men are to be the ones in positions of spiritual leadership and authority. This authority is given to men and it is their responsibility to fulfill it.

In our church today those roles of spiritual authority are fulfilled by the ordained elders and ordained ministers who are responsible for spiritual leadership. These are the roles which have the responsibility of spiritual leadership, shepherding, and pastoring the church. Men given these roles of spiritual authority are given greater responsibility, which requires greater accountability. They also must be in submission to God and practice servant leadership.

This is not to say that women cannot lead and administrate ministries within the church. They may do so under the authority of the elders, as does everyone else who leads within the church.

In addition to Paul's prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-14, we are also given the defining character qualities that elders must possess in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-4. In all three passages, it is clear that Paul and Peter are speaking of men. We have no such list of character qualities that might apply to women in the role of elder or shepherd of the church.

Taking all these Scriptures into consideration, the elders of Agape Christian Church have determined that according to Scripture, women may participate in any ministry except the roles of ordained elders and ministers.

Galatians 3:28-29

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28–29, ESV)

Sometimes this verse is used as a proof that we should make no distinction between men and women in the church at all. There are two problems with this view. First, this goes against God's created order and the equal but distinct roles He gave to men and women. Second, it doesn't fit the context of this Scripture.

This passage is in the context of salvation, not ministry or leadership, therefore doesn't really come into play in the issue of women in ministry. Here Paul insists that we all receive the grace of Jesus equally, and there is no hierarchy of who can be saved and who cannot. Paul is noting the equal availability of grace to everyone and laying out who can be a part of the family of God.