

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Frequently Asked Questions

Have we stopped believing in headship authority?

No, we haven't. But we need to consider what the Bible means by "headship." Is "headship" a description of a strict hierarchical structure of authority with one person being "over" another? Is it a matter of one person being strictly "subordinate" to another? Or, does "headship" describe a kind and quality of relationship within the context of authority?

One of the key New Testament passages on headship is 1 Corinthians 11. In this passage Paul refers to a person being either "covered" or "uncovered." Clearly another biblical word for "headship" is "covering." This word seems to describe a certain protection and responsibility for another. In order for that "covering" to be effective a voluntary and humble response of cooperation on the part of the one being covered is required.

To clarify what he means Paul refers to the ultimate model of the Trinity when he says, "the head of Christ is God" (verse 3). To clearly understand the concept of headship then we must ask this question concerning the Trinity: Is God "over" Christ in any hierarchical sense? Is Christ strictly "subordinate" to God? To answer "yes" is heretical. The ancient creeds all declare that the Son is co-equal in every way with the Father.

Therefore, "headship" must refer to a quality of relationship within the context of authority and it must be relevant to anyone exercising authority, whether male or female.

Weren't men created to be over women in a position of "headship"?

A strict view of "male headship" is sometimes supported by referring to the Creator's statement in Genesis 3:16: *Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you* (NIV). This is supposedly a statement regarding "female subordination" to males. However, that interpretation forgets two very important observations of the text: 1) Genesis 3:16 is in the context of the curse God pronounced on mankind as a result of their rebellion. It is not a description of how things are to be. It is not some kind of an ideal. 2) The language of this statement is very harsh and hostile. A literal translation would be, "You will seek to control and dominate your husband but he will gain the mastery over you." In other words, one of the consequences of sin is the proverbial "battle of the sexes." This struggle between men and women is not a blessing. It's a curse—a curse Jesus came to reverse. In fact, even today the church should provide an example of the fact that men and women can work and lead together according to the divine pattern.

The issue of headship in the home is not always a matter of gender strictly speaking. In fact, a woman functioned as the head of her "home" in the case of widows and divorced women (Number 30:9). When a man had only daughters, he was to pass on the family inheritance to them (Number. 27:8-11). Being female did not disqualify them. In cases where a family was made up of a father and mother and children, the husband functioned as the "head" of the wife. But that relationship did not imply subordination. The husband and wife were to lead together, and in their leadership, the husband is to "cover" his wife. It's important to see that the quality and responsiveness of the relationship between husband and wife is to provide a model of how leaders are to work together in the Body of Christ.

Doesn't Paul's statement that in Christ, "there is neither...male nor female" apply only to salvation?

The context of Galatians 3:28 is the conflict between faith and works. The Galatian believers understood that Christ had died on the cross for their sins (3:1) and that they had received the Holy Spirit by faith, not by works (3:2). The power of God was at work among them because of their faith, not because they kept the Law (3:5). This formed a solid faith foundation for their lives. But they were unwilling to continue applying this principle to the rest of their lives (3:3). New life in Christ cannot be based on observance of the Law (3:10). In fact, the redemption accomplished by Christ has the effect of removing the curse of the Law (3:13).

Therefore, everyone who believes in Christ are adopted sons and daughters of God (3:26) and full members of his household (3:29). We do not earn a place in his house by way of ethnicity, social status or gender. We are all full heirs with Christ because of our faith in him (4:5-6). This certainly applies to our salvation, but to assume that it does not go beyond salvation in its implications is to make the same mistake the Galatians made. Our whole life in Christ is based on our faith in him.

Were there women “deacons” in the New Testament church?

The New Testament makes clear reference to women as deacons in the church. In Romans 16:1 Paul refers to Phoebe as a “servant of the church.” “Servant” is a translation of the Greek word *diakonia*, also translated “deacon.” Paul is not just saying that Phoebe is a servant but specifically a servant of the church, i.e. a deacon.

In 1 Timothy 3:11 Paul refers to “wives” functioning in the local church. This is quite probably a reference to women deacons. (A footnote in the NIV says “or *deaconesses*.”) Most commentators agree that women serving as deacons in the church was common.

It should be noted that local church deacons held positions of significant leadership responsibility along with the elders. As “deaconesses” women had governmental authority in the church.

Why then did Paul teach that women were not to “have authority over a man” in 1 Timothy 2:12?

All epistles are “occasional documents,” i.e. they were written to address a specific occasion or issue(s). The first epistle to Timothy is no exception. To understand Paul’s meaning, 1 Timothy 2:12 must be interpreted in its context.

Paul wrote the epistle to Timothy who was the chief elder of the church in the city of Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was affected by several things that greatly influenced the society as well as the new church. One thing that affected the society was the worship of Diana. Not only did the religion tie in with the economic stability of the region, it also greatly affected the thinking of the people. Diana was believed to be the creator of life. She was a fertility figure that was responsible for the creation of mankind. Therefore, all men owed their existence to her and came out of her. This places a female as the origin for men. She was believed to be the source of all wisdom and knowledge. Woman was seen as the wiser of the genders. According to their teaching, Adam was deceived and ate the forbidden fruit. It was not the fault of the woman. Interestingly, Eve and the serpent were the wise ones in the story. The presence of a female deity as the leading god of a region demonstrates the place of that gender in that society. The fact that the leading god was female showed a very high social status for females in that culture.

The Epistle to the Ephesians records that there was a group of very wealthy women in the church. They were allowed to function independently of any man. Therefore, in their thinking, no man had authority over them simply because he was a male. All these together produced in the women a strong sense of freedom and independence from men. This attitude would come into the church.

In this context Paul wrote that “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission” (v. 11). The word translated “quietness” means “as characterized by inward calm tranquillity, quietness; of giving calm attention, silence, quietness.” It refers to a demeanor of life free from anxiety or conflict. Paul’s use of this word in other passages shows that it’s not just refraining from speaking. Just as the men in verse 9 were not to fight and create doubts, so the women were not to create conflicts that give rise to questioning the things of God. In verse 12 the same line of thought continues. Note that the word translated “silence” was the same word used in verse 11. The point being made is that the teaching and authority that is prohibited are those not having this character quality. It appears not to be a prohibition to all teaching, but to that which is wrongly done. The word “teach” is a familiar word used many other places in the New Testament. The construction of the verse, however, links it with having authority over a man. Therefore, this is not just any teaching, but that which is connected with this authority issue.

The pivotal point in the passage is the phrase “have authority over a man”. The Greek word translated “have authority” is used only here in the New Testament. It literally means “to act on one’s own authority, autocrat.” It refers to “a person who takes arms into his own hands and exercised the power to kill another. It carries the idea of license, arbitrary, unauthorized, high handed, or tyranny. It is one who plays the despot.” The verse then connects the act of teaching to this quality. It’s not mere teaching but teaching that promotes one’s self or tears down another. When we consider back to some of the characteristics of Diana worship, such as a negative look on men and marriage, it’s easy to see where

these ideas could have originated. Therefore I don't believe Paul is saying no woman can teach or be in a position of authority over a man. It does mean a woman can't teach anything contrary to the good doctrine that had been given to them by the Lord or actively be involved in overthrowing a man in an authoritative position.

Were women allowed to prophesy in the New Testament church?

In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul makes clear that women can pray and prophesy in public (11:5). However, their public ministry could be done in an appropriate or inappropriate manner. (The same was true of men, v. 4). Women were exhorted to prophesy with their "head covered." This is an apparent reference to "headship" and must be read in the context of v. 3 (see question above). Those who prophesied or engaged in public ministry were to do so with an attitude of humility and respect and motivated by love. Since this is also true of men ministering in public we must assume that Paul is dealing with a specific problem in the Corinthian church.

Why then did Paul say that "women should remain silent in the churches" in 1 Corinthians 14:34?

First of all, note the use of the terms "all", "each", and "anyone". Throughout the context of chapter 14 these three terms are used in regard to people functioning in various public speaking giftings. The implication of the passage is that every member of the group that gathers has something to offer the group. The term "brethren" can refer to other Christians and not just males. Women don't appear to be restricted in this area. This would be consistent with 1Cor 11. So, to see women as part of the "all" in these other verses and yet bind them to a strict silence rule in verse 34 seems to be contradictory. The silence of the women is, therefore, situational. Earlier in chapter 14, people are told that under certain conditions they are to be silent in the corporate gathering. One, in verse 28, is if there is a message in tongues that is given with no interpretation, then that person is to keep silent. This is the same Greek word used for women in verse 34. Also, second, in verse 30, if a person is prophesying, and another person gets a word from God, then the first person that was speaking is to be silent. This is so one person does not dominate the ministry time and that all the various giftings can be used. Both of these prohibitions to speaking were given for the same reason. Paul wanted the whole group to be blessed by the ministry that was taking place. He in no way was banning tongues or prophecy in the meetings. He was only restricting their use when it was being detrimental to the group by how the gifts were functioning.

Therefore, this passage does not prohibit women from speaking in the corporate church worship service. Instead, it means that any interruption or misuse of a verbal gift was to be stopped, whether by man or woman, in order to preserve the edification of the whole group. When a woman was gifted by God, had the proper motive, and resulted in edifying the people; this passage does not limit her from speaking.

How does a believer qualify for ministry "ordination"?

What do we mean by "ordain"? Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 tell us of simply choosing or appointing someone to a place of leadership responsibility in the local church. In the New Testament church, elders were qualified for two simple reasons: character and charisma. These individuals had proven character and a proven leadership gift and anointing. There were no other criteria.

Overseers/elders in the local church qualified in part by their demonstrated character. The issue of leadership qualifications is dealt with by Paul specifically in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. A study of both lists shows an emphasis on the quality of a leader's relationships and personal character.

Doesn't Paul statement that local church overseers must be "the husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3:2 imply that only men should be ordained?

The phrase, "the husband of but one wife" is the traditional English translation of the original phrase. Its literal translation would be, "a one-woman man." If the traditional "the husband of but one wife" is completely accurate, it, by implication, leaves out several leadership candidates:

1. Unmarried men (thus disqualifying both Paul and Timothy).
2. Men with more than one wife.
3. Men who had been married more than once (either those who had been married, divorced and remarried, or those whose wives have died and had remarried).
4. Women.

The strictest interpretation would disqualify all four. However, the phrase "one-woman man" refers to a particular quality of relationship. It refers to someone who is presently faithful, someone who is capable of entering into a covenant relationship and participating consistently in that relationship. It's easy to see how this character quality would be necessary for an effective overseer/shepherd.

Paul goes on to describe the character qualities of deacons. It should be noted that deacons occupied a governmental area of responsibility in the local church along with overseers (cf. Philippians 1:1). Paul's description is almost identical with that of overseers. Thus, the "ordination" of deacons, not just of elders, would be of great concern to the local church. Deacons are also to be "the husband of one wife." However, we have already seen that there clearly women deacons in the church. If women are not eligible to be elders, then they cannot be deacons for the same reason. This results in a clear biblical contradiction. It's most consistent to see that the phrase "husband of one wife" is not designed to disqualify women from local church leadership.

Is it appropriate for a woman to function as a pastor or be called "pastor"?

The word "pastor" is found only once in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11). The word translated "pastor" is usually translated "shepherd" and refers to someone who has shepherding relationships with other people. Although we sometimes use the word "pastor" only to refer to the senior pastor of a local church, this is not it's original usage. It is appropriate to refer to anyone who has a shepherding role in the local church, no matter what their gender, as "pastor."

Why is it important for men and women to minister and lead together in the church?

To answer that question we need to ask why the Lord created a woman in the first place. He created the male first. With every other act of creation the Father declared it to be good. In this case he said, "It is not good" (Genesis 2:18). The male by himself constituted only a part of God's idea for humankind. The male "alone" did not reflect the glory of God's created intention. So the Creator purposed "a helper suitable" (NIV) for the man. This expresses God's original purpose for making a female. She was to be "a helper comparable to him" (NKJ), "a helper suitable for him" (NAS), "a helper fit for him" (RSV). In other words, the female was to be a strong associate that was the male's counterpart in every way. The male was not capable of fulfilling the purpose of God for mankind. The male by himself did not make up mankind. God's created formula was very simple: male plus female equals man.

Everyone appreciates the significance of this when it comes to function and ministry. Without women on the ministry team we're only getting half the job done. But what about leadership responsibility? What about decision making? Decisions made solely by men only take half of the human perspective into account. Taking responsibility for people and ministry without consideration of the female perspective only includes half of the heart of leadership. Both are needed for wise decision-making and effective leadership.

Would God call a woman to leadership in the local church? If so, how should we respond to that calling?

The leaders of the early church had to acknowledge that God had called and anointed Gentiles because of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Acts 11:16-18). Why would God call and anoint women to be leaders, including elders, pastors, teachers, evangelists, prophets and apostles, if he did not intend for them to function? Is he teasing them? Is he seeing how much frustration and aggravation that can endure as a test to their character?

It's obvious the Lord would not call someone to an area of service if he did not intend for them to fulfill their calling. And that must include women. So why aren't they fulfilling their calling? They may be called. They may be anointed. They may qualify in every way. But they are disqualified because of the situation of their birth, because God ordained them to be women. Let's be clear: it's not about specific women wanting more power. It's about telling them that no matter what the call of God on their lives, they will be allowed to go only so far in the fulfillment of that call. Just the fact of their gender creates an automatic limitation to potential. What does that say to those called and gifted women in the local church? What does it say to all women in the church? It clearly says that their gender limits their potential, even though that conclusion is in stark contrast with the message of God's Word. It removes the possibility of them ever having significant authority in the church.

Every woman must be free to function in the area uniquely designed for her by God. Those women of God who have received a high calling and a proven anointing from the Holy Spirit to minister and lead in the church will no longer be forbidden to do so just because they are women. As they qualify and are needed, they will be appointed.

Note: Complete research notes are available. If you want additional information please mail Larry Asplund larry@portlandbiblecollege.org or Lanny Hubbard lanny@portlandbiblecollege.org. Several excellent papers are also available at www.cbeinternational.org.