

# “Lies Women Shouldn’t Believe” – Week 6

Dec. 16, 2016

## Women in Ministry

The ancient Near Eastern world, of which Israel was a part, was a male dominated world. Because God spoke to Israel in a particular culture, however, does not suggest that the culture itself was holy. The culture included polygamy, divorce, slavery, and a variety of other practices we now recognize as unholy.

Despite the prominence of men in ancient Israelite society, God still called women as leaders. When Josiah needed to hear the word of the Lord, he sent Hilkiah the priest and others to a person who was undoubtedly one of the most prominent prophetic figures of his day: Huldah (2 Kings 22:12—20). Deborah was not only a prophetess, but a judge (Judges 4:4). She held the place of greatest authority in Israel in her day. She is also one of the few judges of whom the Bible reports no failures (Judges 4,5).

Although first-century Jewish women rarely, if ever, studied with teachers of the Law the way male disciples did,<sup>3</sup> Jesus allowed women to join His ranks (Mark 15:40,41; Luke 8:1—3)—something the culture could have regarded as scandalous.<sup>4</sup> As if this were not scandalous enough, He allowed a woman who wished to hear His teaching "sit at his feet" (Luke 10:39)— *“Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. <sup>39</sup> And **she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word.** – taking a posture normally reserved for disciples.*

Other Jewish teachers did not allow women disciples; indeed, disciples were often teachers in training.<sup>5</sup> To have sent women out on the preaching missions (e.g., Mark 6:7—13) might have proved too scandalous to be practical; nevertheless, the Gospels unanimously report that God chose women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, even though first-century Jewish men often dismissed the testimony of women.<sup>6</sup>

The prophet Joel explicitly emphasized that when God poured out His Spirit, women as well as men would prophesy (Joel 2:28,29). Pentecost meant that all God’s people qualified for the gifts of His Spirit (Acts 2:17,18), just as salvation meant that male or female would have the same relationship with God (Galatians 3:28). Subsequent outpourings of the Spirit have often led to the same effect.

## Paul in agreement with Women in Ministry and Leadership

Paul commended the ministry of a woman who brought his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 16:1,2). **Phoebe** was a servant of the church at Cenchrea. "Servant" may refer to a deacon, a term that sometimes designated administrative responsibility in the Early Church. In his epistles, however, Paul most frequently applied the term to any minister of God's Word, including himself (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; 6:21). He also called Phoebe a "succorer" or "helper" of many (Romans 16:2); this term technically designated her as the church's patron or sponsor, most likely the owner of the home in which the church at Cenchrea was meeting. This entitled her to a position of honor in the church.<sup>9</sup>

Phoebe was not the only influential woman in the church. Whereas Paul greeted about twice as many men as women in Romans 16, he commended the ministries of about twice as many women as men in that list. (Some use the predominance of male ministers in the Bible against women in ministry, but that argument could work against men's ministry in this passage.) These commendations may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry and are remarkable, given the prejudice against women's ministry that existed in Paul's culture.

If Paul followed ancient custom when he praised Priscilla, he may have mentioned her before her husband Aquila because of her higher status (Romans 16:3,4). Elsewhere we learn that she and her husband taught Scripture to another minister, Apollos (Acts 18:26). Paul also listed two fellow apostles, Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7). Elsewhere Paul referred to the ministry of two women in Philippi, who, like his many male fellow ministers, shared in his work for the gospel there (Philippians 4:2,3). Because women typically achieved more prominent religious roles in Macedonia than in most parts of the Roman world,<sup>11</sup> Paul's women colleagues in this region may have moved more quickly into prominent offices in the church (cf., Acts 16:14,15).

Although Paul ranked prophets second only to apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28), he acknowledged the ministry of prophetesses (1 Corinthians 11:5), following the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:13,14) and early Christian practice (Acts 2:17,18; 21:9). **Thus those who**

**complain that Paul did not specifically mention women pastors by name miss the point. Paul rarely mentioned any men pastors by name, either. He most often simply mentioned his traveling companions in ministry, who were naturally men.** Paul's most commonly used titles for these fellow laborers were "servant" and "fellow worker"—both of which he also applied to women (Romans 16:1,3).

**Given the culture he addressed, it was natural that fewer women could exercise the social independence necessary to achieve positions of ministry.**

**Where they did, however, Paul commended them and included commendations to women apostles and prophets, the offices of the highest authority in the church.**

### **Paul on “Head Coverings” in the Church**

Although Paul often advocated the mutuality of gender roles,<sup>12</sup> he also worked within the boundaries of his culture where necessary for the sake of the gospel. We begin with his teaching on head coverings because, although it is not directly related to women's ministry, it will help us understand his passages concerning women in ministry. Most Christians today agree that women do not need to cover their heads in church, but many do not recognize that Paul used the same kinds of arguments for women covering their heads as for women refraining from congregational speech. In both cases, Paul used some general principles **but addressed a specific cultural situation.**

When Paul urged women in the Corinthian churches to cover their heads (the only place where the Bible teaches about this), he followed a custom prominent in many Eastern cultures of his day.<sup>13</sup> Although women and men alike covered their heads for various reasons,<sup>14</sup> married women specifically covered their heads to prevent men other than their husbands from lusting after their hair.<sup>15</sup> A married woman who went out with her head uncovered was considered promiscuous and was to be divorced as an adulteress.<sup>16</sup> Because of what head coverings symbolized in that culture, Paul asked the more liberated women to cover their heads so they would not scandalize the others. Among his arguments for head coverings is the fact God created Adam first; in the particular culture he addressed, this

argument would make sense as an argument for women wearing head coverings.<sup>17</sup>

### **Paul on Women being “Silent in the Church”**

First, Paul instructed women to be silent and save their questions about the service for their husbands at home (1 Corinthians 14:34—36). **Yet, Paul could not mean silence under all circumstances, because earlier in the same letter he acknowledged that women could pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:5)**; and prophecy ranked even higher than teaching (12:28).

Some have protested that women should not hold authority over men because men are the head of women. Aside from the many debates about the meaning of the Greek term "head" (for instance, some translate it "source" instead of "authority over"),<sup>28</sup> Paul spoke only of the husband as head of his wife, not of the male gender as head of the female gender.

### **CONCLUSION**

So we conclude that gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry—for us as it was for the Apostle Paul.

Today we should affirm those whom God calls, whether male or female, and encourage them in faithfully studying and learning God’s Word. We need to affirm all potential laborers, both men and women, for harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few.