

# The Role of Women in Ministry

## Introduction

West Ridge strongly believes in recognizing and supporting the contribution of women in the ministry of the church. We believe in the value of women in all aspects of ministry with the exception of those areas that exercise governmental authority within the church. Furthermore, we believe God has ordained the family unit to serve as a model for the entire church with the father as the head of the home and functioning as a servant-leader as described in Ephesians 5. We therefore believe that both men and women can reach their fullest potential in ministry within the structure of the biblical family model. We believe a woman can teach and lead within any of the vast array of ministry roles and positions as long as she demonstrates a biblically-qualifying lifestyle. She must also submit herself, along with other servant-leaders, to those leaders God has placed in positions of governing authority, specifically, the Senior Pastor or the Elders of the church. We believe that the positions of Senior Pastor and Elder are (because of their governmental responsibility) reserved only for men. With the exception of these two positions, we consider all ministry positions and opportunities to be open to women.

## Equality of Men and Women

The Bible clearly reveals that God is not a respecter of persons (Romans 2:11; Acts 10:34; Ephesians 6:9). At West Ridge, we ascribe to a belief in the equality of all men and women. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled both men and women alike without concern for gender (Acts 2:1–21). Both women and men are called to faithful service and good stewardship of all that God provides. We discover throughout the New Testament that both genders participated in a full variety of Christian service including prophecy, leadership and teaching (Acts 2:15–18; Acts 18:26; Acts 21:9; Romans 16:7; 1 Corinthians 11:5; 1 Peter 2:9–10).

## The Work of the Holy Spirit

One of the most quoted prophetic declarations is found in the book of Joel where the prophet writes that God will pour out His spirit “upon **all** flesh; and ... your daughters shall prophesy ... and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28–29; see also Acts 2:17). Ministry in the New Testament is defined within Spirit-empowered expressions of God’s wonderful gifts. Nowhere in the writings of the New Testament do we find conditions or exceptions placed on the distribution of spiritual gifts along gender lines. Thus, while some gifts are a spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit and others are recognized ministry gifts to the church, all gifts are given by God for His greater purpose and without regard to social, economic or gender demarcation (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 27–28; Ephesians 4:7–12; 1 Peter 4:10–11). We conclude, therefore, that women can serve in vital roles

in ministry and this position is further illustrated in the apostle Paul's many references to women serving with him in ministry throughout the church.

### **Controversial Texts Concerning Women in Ministry**

There are two often-quoted passages within the Pauline writings that have caused heated debate over many generations on the topic of women in ministry.

#### **1 Corinthians 14:34-35**

In the first passage Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "Let your women keep silent in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak ..." (1 Corinthians 14:34–35, KJV). Unfortunately, this passage has mistakenly been cited to justify a position that rejects the biblical role of women in ministry. Actually, when understood within the context of Paul's complete letter to a very troubled church, we gain a more informed perspective. Given that earlier in his letter Paul gave instructions regarding how women should pray and prophesy in public (1 Corinthians 11:5), it can be assumed that Paul must have meant something other than absolute prohibition for women in the public arena of ministry. Such an interpretation would simply fail to coincide with countless other Pauline writings that affirm the ministry contribution made by women. Therefore, we conclude that within the context of the situation at Corinth that prompted the letter to be written originally, Paul's admonition here is in reference to excessive disruptions and disorder taking place. Therefore this passage, like the rest of the chapter, is an attempt to bring correction to the chaos and to affirm that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

#### **1 Timothy 2:11–15**

Another challenging passage centers on Paul's instructions to his young apprentice, Timothy, when he writes, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man ..." (1 Timothy 2:12). This passage has troubled biblical scholars and church leaders for centuries. Was Paul offering some kind of transcultural mandate, or was he instead seeking to provide Timothy with spiritual counsel concerning the improper conduct occurring among some women in Ephesus (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Timothy 5:13; 2 Timothy 3:6)? A review of the entire text of Paul's letter gives a strong indication that he was offering advice to Timothy on how to confront the heretical teaching and misconduct occurring among a number of women within the church. To view this passage in any other context would require denying the legitimacy of Paul's other references to the work and ministry of women within the various churches of his day. Such a perceived contradiction is inconsistent with the proven principles of biblical interpretation.

## **Biblical Examples of Women in Ministry**

While the debate over the role of women in church ministry predominantly centers around the interpretation of two challenging New Testament passages (1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12), a fair and thorough review of biblical records reveals explicit and overwhelming evidence to support West Ridge's stated position affirming the role of women in ministry.

In the Old Testament, for instance, Miriam was used of God as a prophet during the time of the great exodus (Exodus 15:20). As both a prophet and a judge, Deborah was an instrumental leader in guiding God's army (Judges 4–5). And Huldah, another prophet, was a vital contributor to the powerful religious reform under King Josiah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34).

The New Testament also reveals the essential role women shared in the ministry of the early church. Contrary to the cultural norm of that time regarding the status of women in society, the apostle Paul frequently refers to the contribution made by women. For instance, Paul speaks of women who “worked hard with him” in the work of the gospel (Romans 16:6, 12; Philippians 4:3). At Philippi, Euodias and Syntyche were described as “fellow-workers” alongside Paul. This description is the same wording used to also describe other young ministers who served with Paul such as Timothy, Epaphroditus, Titus and Luke.

Furthermore, as a servant (*diakonos*) at the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1–2), Phoebe was obviously viewed as more than simply a helper. In fact, Paul uses the same word (*diakonos*) to refer to other ministers and leaders in a congregation, including himself. From these and many other writings, we discover that Paul was an advocate of women in ministry. And contrary to the social order of the day, he frequently recognized the Spirit-inspired work that many women shared as fellow-laborers. We can conclude, therefore, that Scriptural evidence affirms the call of women to spiritual leadership and vital ministry roles in the early church. Such divine acknowledgement provides us with the irrefutable evidence we need to believe that God continues to call women to serve alongside men in the vital work of ministry today.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that this equality of men and women represents the heart of God and the revelation of Scripture. While recognizing that certain governmental roles in the church do have some gender distinctiveness within the community of faith as it is true within the biblical construct of the home, we do affirm the tremendous contribution women have made in the early days of the church and must continue to make as we move forward in the ministry of West Ridge. The Spirit of God is being poured out on **all flesh** and we seek to walk in step with the Holy Spirit in power and practice until Christ returns.