

Women in Ministry in the Bible – An Overview and Discussion of Implications

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Quail Lakes Baptist Church supports the ordination of women into the Christian ministry in what is termed a “Complementarian Ordination.” This position paper is written to enable us to think clearly about what this means.

Baptists adhere to two basic principles that underscore our operation in ministry:

- 1. As much as is possible, we wish to operate our ministry practices in keeping with the practice that we see in the Bible.**
- 2. As much as is possible, we hold loosely on to man-made non-biblical traditions and practices, feeling free to change them when called for so as to not confuse any man-made practice with a God-given biblical standard.**

Thus, for example, the first principle causes us to conduct baptisms by immersion since the word “baptizo” that we have brought into the English language as the word “baptize” means “to dunk.” The second principle is illustrated in the variety of ways in which communion is conducted across the spectrum of Baptist churches. Many, like Quail, share communion monthly, but some do so more regularly. Many pass two plates - one with the juice and another with the bread, while we feel free to pass one plate with two cups. Some practice a common loaf approach and many, like Quail, feel free to alter our method from time to time.

Both of these basic principles must be kept in mind when it comes to understanding what the Bible teaches about women and ministry, and the implications of that teaching for church practice.

So, of first importance is finding the answer to the question, “What does the Bible show us about women in ministry?”

What often happens when we ask this question is that our minds go to 1 Timothy 2:12-13.

1 Timothy 2:12-13 (NIV) ¹² “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

This passage seems to present a purposely closed door for women in ministry. However, we are wrong to jump to this conclusion, because this is the final verse in a long list of verses that deal with women in ministry across the spectrum of Scripture. Instead of starting with the last verse, we feel it is wise to start with the first verse and trace the issue through all of the Bible to see what is actually taught.

Here are some principles that will govern our Bible study on this topic:

- 1. The Bible is consistent.**
- 2. The Holy Spirit is consistent.**
- 3. Paul is consistent.**

Thus, where it seems like we are encountering an inconsistency, further study is needed.

It is helpful to set this discussion in the context of what the Bible teaches regarding church leadership. Back in 2007, the Elders commissioned a task force to study the question of whether or not Quail Lakes Baptist Church should have women Elders, or if the pattern of male-only Elders was to be continued based on our interpretation of the relevant Bible passages. It was an exhaustive study and was distributed to the congregation in September of that year, and it is still available at QLBC.org in its entirety. However, for our purposes, here are the conclusions from that 2007 study...

“Having reviewed the issue before us in these ways, it is prudent that we reference once again the three questions we noted in the beginning of this document:

1. Does the Bible teach a hierarchical structure of male and female relationships?

(Answer – Yes, as it pertains to the home and church, but always in an ethic of self-sacrificial love and mutual submission.)

2. Do we find women in leadership positions in the Bible?

(Answer - Yes, with the exception of one position retained for male headship in each era of biblical history.)

3. Does the Bible limit women from filling some leadership roles?

(Answer – Yes, there is a limitation.)”

It should be noted that in the congregational form of church government such as is in force here at Quail, while the congregation is the highest human decision-making body, operational authority and leadership is delegated by the congregation to the Board of Elders who govern the church. Therefore, the conclusion was that this Board would remain male in composition.

We come to today’s topic with the awareness and conviction that the overriding model for leadership in the Bible is male governance. Male governance (top-level leadership) is modeled in the priesthood in the Old Testament, the Apostles in the New Testament, and headship in the home and church. Thus, it is our conviction and operational position here at Quail that Elders in the church, as well as the Senior Pastor, are to be male.

The question before us is, “Under the authority of the male-led governance structure, what roles in ministry are open to women?” In addition we ask, “Is it appropriate to ‘ordain’ a woman to such roles?”

We answer that not by looking to our culture, but by looking at the Bible. So, let’s consider the verses in question:

Women in ministry in the Old Testament:

1. Exodus 15:20 (NIV)

²⁰ “Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.”

Miriam is the first woman mentioned with the position of prophet or prophetess in the Bible. Prophet is a speaking ministry. The Hebrew word for prophet could be translated “mouthpiece.” In this case, she is vocalizing in song; however, she could not function as a prophetess (female prophet) if she did not speak in some fashion. A silent prophet is not a prophet at all.

2. Judges 4:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ “Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.”

Deborah - Prophetess and Judge (speaking and leading role). She was functioning both as a spokesperson for God and as a leader in Israel, holding court and deciding rulings that governed the people.

3. 2 Kings 22:14 (NIV)

¹⁴ “Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.”

Huldah- Prophetess. Here the High Priest and his associates seek out Huldah, a prophetess, for advice. Sometimes it is surmised that the reason they are doing this is that there were simply no male prophets around at the time so this is a “settling for second best” situation. However, Huldah was a contemporary of Jeremiah, who functioned in Jerusalem, as did Zephaniah and Nahum. All were regarded prophets.

4. Micah 6:4 (NIV)

⁴ “I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.”

Here we see Miriam counted as one of the leaders that God used to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. So she, along with Deborah, is stated to be both prophet and leader.

So, as we leave the Old Testament, we see that even though the over-arching principle is that of male top-level governance, there are women who function as part of the leadership at times as well as prophets.

We also see that it can't be supported that this was because there were not male leaders willing to step up as we see Miriam serving alongside Moses and Aaron, who were active, as well as Huldah, who is active in the days of other male prophets. However, this list of Old Testament verses portraying women in ministry and leadership shows us that they are certainly the minority. But a minority is not zero and, thus, their function is not ruled out. This was the Scriptures that our New Testament authors had as their Bible.

Now, as we move into the New Testament, we must remind ourselves of our background principles. The Bible is consistent; the Holy Spirit is consistent; Paul who writes on this issue in the New Testament is consistent and where a seeming inconsistency is discovered, further study is called for.

So, what about the New Testament?

1. Acts 2:17-18 (quoting Joel 2:28)

¹⁷ “In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

We did not stop to consider this in Joel, because we knew we would encounter this here. Note that the speaking gift of prophesying is specifically said to be given to both sons and daughters. However, it could be that Joel, and again Peter in his quotation to Joel, is intending to illustrate an incidental speaking forth for God and not an official function of spokesman with a title of prophet or prophetess. For that we will have to move on to our next example.

2. Luke 2:36-38 (NIV)

³⁶ “There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks

to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna is identified as a prophetess and is one of the first to realize the significance of the baby Jesus. Specifically, she spoke about the child using the speaking ministry that was hers.

3. Acts 18:24-26 (NIV)

²⁴ “Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”

These events occur in Ephesus (which will matter later) and we note that Priscilla is part of the team with her husband, Aquila, that teaches Apollos proper doctrine. She has a teaching role and is specifically teaching a man.

4. Acts 21:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ “Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.”

This is a scene in the journey by Paul to Jerusalem for the last time. He encounters the daughters of Phillip who prophesied. It is important to remember that Agabus was an active male prophet in the same region at the same time.

5. Romans 16:7 (NIV)

⁷ “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”

Here the fact that we are using a 1984 translation of the NIV does not serve us well. Since then (and even then, it was well-known), the best scholarship realizes that “Junias” should be translated as “Junia.” She is female, most likely the wife of Andronicus “outstanding among the apostles.” Thus, she was a woman serving in a missionary ministry role.

6. 1 Corinthians 11:5 (NIV)

⁵ “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head - it is just as though her head were shaved.”

Paul is teaching about propriety in public worship. Note that he expects that women will pray and prophesy (speak) as a part of the worship in Corinth. He counsels them on what they ought to wear when doing so. His counsel is that they must conform to what would be considered modesty standards as they participate in the worship services.

7. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NIV)

³⁴ “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

Here we seem to run into a consistency problem on the part of the Apostle Paul. Women are to be silent?

Is it possible that Paul is so inconsistent that after having coached women in what to wear when they speak in chapter 11, Paul reverses himself in chapter 14 of the same letter and says they must be silent?

More study is needed. And when we look into it, his further comments help us understand the issue. He says, “Ask your husbands at home.” Note the heading over verse 26 (in NIV): “Orderly Worship.”

Paul is consistent. The situation was one where loud interruptive questions from boisterous women were becoming a disturbance to the church service. That is ruled out; the call for silence here is not a total ban, but a ban on boisterous interruptions.

8. 1 Timothy 2: 12-13 (NIV)

¹² “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

Paul is writing to Timothy in Ephesus, where we saw Priscilla was part of the team that taught Apollos. Is Paul inconsistently applying this “no teaching or leading” rule when he allows women to prophesy in Corinth and evidently is okay with Priscilla teaching Apollos in this very city of Ephesus? Is the Holy Spirit inconsistently allowing some women to teach sometimes, but here making a firm, overarching no?

No, Paul is consistent, as is the Holy Spirit. “Teach or lead” is to be understood as two sides of the same coin, a position of governance that is restricted to men (that is, the Elder or Senior/Solo Pastor role). This principle is precisely what we discovered in our 2007 study, which was referred to as we began this paper.

It doesn’t mean that woman can’t speak at all – that would make the Bible and the Holy Spirit inconsistent. It doesn’t mean that women can’t speak with authority, in that Paul specifically allows prophecy by women in Corinth and prophecy is authoritative speech. It doesn’t mean that women can speak but just not from behind a pulpit or lectern - for all we know, these churches did not have pulpits.

It does mean that our starting principle of male headship is correct. The top position of primary teacher and/or leader is restricted to men.

So, what practical considerations do we derive from this?

1. Women function in speaking and leading roles as a minority in both the Old and New Testaments, but a minority is not zero.
2. In both the Old and New testaments, there is male top-level authority.

Therefore, under the authority of the male-led governance of the church, the Elders are free to mobilize any willing individual, both male and female, into roles of service, teaching or leading to which they are gifted and called.

This brings us to the question of female ordination, which returns our thoughts to our second basic principle:

“As much as is possible, we hold loosely on to man-made non-biblical traditions and practices feeling free to change them when called for so as to not confuse any man-made practice with a God-given biblical standard.”

The practice and process of ordination as we have it today is not observed in the Bible. However, we do see that certain individuals are set apart and chosen or appointed for special acts of service.

Exodus 30:30 (NIV)

³⁰ “Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so they may serve me as priests.”

Luke 6:13 (NIV)

¹³ “When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.”

Acts 6:2-4 (NIV)

³ “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

Acts 13:2 (NIV)

² “...the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

These will serve as examples. However, this is not equivalent to the current ordination practice, which includes:

1. Writing a theological paper.
2. Having that paper scrutinized by a Board of Review.
3. Defending that paper orally in an Examination Council.
4. The ceremony of laying on of hands before the church.

This process is good and useful, but it is a human development meant to ensure that those ordained to the ministry have sound doctrine and are called of God. But, we have to admit, this is a human development. In short, we have made this up!

The NAB Conference, of which we are a part, considers churches to be the ordaining body with the Conference fraternally recognizing these ordinations. This allows the churches freedom to ordain as they see fit. And importantly, for our question, it eliminates the one-size-fits-all approach to ordination, which assumed that an ordained person automatically is eligible for a senior or solo pastor role.

We are now able to offer what we term a “Complementarian Ordination.” This is an ordination that recognizes the minister’s call, education and effectiveness, and ordains that person to function in a staff role other than senior or solo pastor.

With regard to the ordination of women, this “Complementarian Ordination” fits nicely into our biblical view that there is a limitation of senior governance to males, while at the same time honoring a woman’s ministry call and preparation. This is what the Elders here at Quail have determined to be allowable in our understanding of ordination.

Why have we not done this before?

We have not previously envisioned a way to ordain women without opening the door to what we would consider to be an inappropriate role for women in that in the past we were operating with a one-size-fits-all model for ordination. That has now changed.

What about allowing a woman to have the title “Pastor”?

Here again is where we appeal to the first basic principle. What do we see in the Bible? It may surprise you to learn that no one in the New Testament is specifically referred to with the title “pastor.” In fact, the word used in this way only appears once, and there it is in the plural in Ephesians 4:11-12 referring to the offices of pastor and teacher, but not to a specific person. In other words, we do not get a lot of guidance for this from the Bible. We have just human tradition regarding who we call pastor.

Here at Quail, we have refrained from putting the title of pastor in a woman’s job description up to this point because we note that some liberal churches who have female pastors take less care about how the Bible is interpreted and follow the societal trends rather than thinking issues through in a biblical manner. We did not want to appear to be in that category. But also, it must be admitted that this move represents change and sometimes change is resisted simply because it is change.

However, the Elders have rightly pointed out that if we allowed “Complementarian Ordination” for a woman but did not permit her have the title “pastor,” we would be in the silly position of having a woman on our ministry staff who would rightly be able to carry the title “reverend” but not be able to be called “pastor.” That seems contradictory and inconsistent.

Within the staff of Quail Lakes Baptist Church, all ordained ministry personnel, except the Senior Pastor, have titles that read “Associate Pastor of...” They do not sit on the Elder Board and are not part of the top-level governance of the church. Going forward, this would apply to both males and females. We would need to educate ourselves to the fact that simply because we have not done it that way before, does not mean that the way we have always done it is equivalent to a biblical standard.

For many of us, this is new thinking – but it is good thinking. We must analyze why we do what we do and what principles of operation will guide us. And in all of this – God gets the glory!