



Women In Ministry

What is the RBC leadership's
position on this contentious issue?

Women elders? Women pastors? Women preachers and teachers? The leadership at Ryde Baptist Church believe the bible does not exclude women from these roles.

In 1998 the Baptist Assembly of NSW and ACT voted to allow each congregation to decide on its own view concerning the ordination of women, the reason? Because after much debate and close scrutiny of the scriptures it was agreed that the Scriptures do not have a clear cut answer on this issue. At first glance it would seem at least two passages do exclude women, however, initially the bible would seem to endorse slavery, genocide and more! As mature Christians we are called to examine carefully and adhere faithfully to the scriptures. This is what we have done here at RBC and we will share with you our interpretations of these problematic verses.

But first it needs to be acknowledged that a lot of unkind and unhelpful things have been said during the course of this debate, concerning those who hold differing opinions. Some have said the debate has come about because of the influence of secular feminism, not true! The Wesleyan and holiness movements have been debating this issue well before feminism came into existence. Some have also said the Bible's authority is undermined if we accept women into leadership, not true! We at RBC believe the bible is our authority, the inspired Word of God, and we work hard at understanding it and whether easy or hard we will obey it.

Let's start with, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35,

As in all the congregations of the saints,³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵If 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. ³⁶Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. ³⁸If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. ³⁹Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. (NIV)

To start off we need to understand why this letter was written and how it is organised. This is essential to understanding its meaning and the message the apostle wants to convey. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians when he was working in Ephesus in response to two things - a letter from the Corinthian church with

specific questions (ch7:1 "Now for the matters you wrote about") and reports from 'Chloe's people' who had come to visit him (ch1:11 "some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."). That original letter has not been preserved, if it had been it would make it a lot easier for us to work out when he was responding to Chloe's people and when he was responding to the letter. Nevertheless with careful reading one can make an intelligent assessment. In chapters 1 through 4, the Apostle Paul is mainly writing about his ministry, reproof, his visit, explanations, and Timothy. In chapters 5 thru 6 he writes concerning things he heard were going on in the church at Corinth. And in chapters 7 through 14, Paul was responding to questions and statements that the Corinthians wrote to him.

Let's take a look:

1 Corinthians 7:1 Now for the matters you wrote about:

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now about food sacrificed to idols:

1 Corinthians 12:1 Now about spiritual gifts,

In 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul finally gets to the questions and matters about spiritual gifts, that is those issues concerning spiritual gifts which they had mentioned in their letter, "*Now concerning spiritual gifts...*" and states that the "*manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man* (every person male and female)" (verse 7). He mentions different types of manifestations including the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, tongues and the interpretation of tongues, etc. Pay particular attention to the words "every man, each man, all members" etc. In these cases, the Greek word for "men or man" means people, humans - not only males, but both genders. The word "all" in the Greek means ALL, not half, not a certain few, not just males, but ALL!

So as we come to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 it seems that the Apostle contradicts himself and forbids women to speak. However, ironically this is the climax to Apostles arguments thus far. You see the Apostle is using a technique whereby he is highlighting the Corinthians' ignorance by using their own words against them.

Here is the reason for the apparent contradiction: Those statements in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 never originated with Paul. Paul only reiterated them as a rebuke to the Corinthian church. The Corinthians originally wrote those words in the letter they sent to Paul. Paul lifted it out and placed it in his letter

after his teaching on spiritual gifts to highlight how wrong they were concerning their exclusion of women. Paul's intention is to show them how absurd it was for them to say that the Law commands women to be silent in the church - they are the church.

Ben Witherington (a prominent New Testament Scholar) adds to this a second Corinthian error which is seen in verse 34. Scholars have often pondered what in the world Paul is referring to in this verse, if it was he who commanded women to say silent, not allowed to speak and stay in submission "*as the law says*". Where exactly does the Old Testament law say that? The answer is; nowhere! On both accounts Paul is incredulous, that is why he responds in verse 36 with much sarcasm.

Paul responds to the Corinthian letter with its so called Old Testament claims with the sarcastic question: *³⁶Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?* The Kings James version (of v36) captures the Apostles intention beautifully with one single word: *What?* In the Greek, the word has a negative disclaimer. We could say, "**What, are you nuts?**" Paul said, "*What? Came the word of God out from you? Or did it come unto you only?*" (v36). Whichever way you translate the Greek, the intention is clear enough, that is, the previous statement that he lifted from the letter he received from them referring that women are to keep silent in the church, was **not from God at all**. In fact, it was pure silliness. He just finished writing in a few paragraphs before this in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, establishing that when women prophesy, teach or speak in the church they are to have their heads covered. "*But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered....*" needs to put on her head covering and then it would be acceptable (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Paul goes on to say, *³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.* In other words; *THE THINGS THAT I WRITE TO YOU ARE THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD, (NOT THE THINGS THAT YOU WRITE)*" (1 Cor 14:37). Paul was saying that he was appointed to write the Scriptures and the Commands of God, not the Corinthian church.

Finally Paul closes the subject by saying *³⁹Therefore, my brothers, be eager to*

prophecy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. The word “brothers’ in the Greek does not mean male, it means 'born out of the womb of God, born again' - males and females. In other words the issue is not women in leadership the issue is orderly worship. The services in the Corinthian church were disorderly, damaging and dishonouring to God. Some wanted to bring them back into line by banning the women from using their gifts but Paul says no! Gifts are to be used in a fitting and orderly way.

I guess some may read this commentary of 1 Cor 14:34-35 and say “surely if what you say is true the apostle would have expressed this more clearly”? Scholarship, such as the work being done by Ben Witherington and others, is showing that first Century writers used first century rhetorical methods to argue their case. From our 21st century perspective it is difficult and clumsy, but for them in their time it was clear and scholarly. As we come to terms with the way they wrote, we come to understand exactly their intent and the difficult, seemingly contradictory, passages such as 1 Cor 14:34-35 find their true meaning and consistency with the whole of scripture.

There are two main scriptures that seem to forbid women to lead and teach. The first is 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 and the second is 1 Timothy 2:11-15. I think everyone will agree that, of the two passages , it is Timothy that is the most problematic. Like the Corinthian passage, at first glance 1 Timothy 2:11-15 has an absolute ban on women being involved in teaching or leadership, however, is this really what Paul has in mind? Again on closer inspection, a lot of doubt is cast on a traditional interpretation.

The often quoted verse is verse 12, but we should quote all of verses 8-15 to see the context. (NIV): *8 I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. 9 I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,10 but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. 11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 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. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

There are a number of unusual features of the passage which must cause us to question the ban on women in leadership interpretation. First, it is curious that Paul prefaces his command (in verse 12) with 'I do not permit...'. He does not say 'A woman must not teach...', but, 'I do not permit a woman to teach...'. Could it be that Paul was simply giving a personal command to a specific situation?

It is sometimes argued that, since Paul was writing under God's inspiration, that His command is identical to God's command. But it's not that simple. Paul is careful with his words. He only says 'I' if there is a reason. A clear example of this is seen in 1 Corinthians 7:10 *¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): ¹²To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord):* and 1 Corinthians 7:26 *I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. ²⁷Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.* Clearly verse 27 is not a God given command for single people to remain single. No! It's Paul's preference and he makes sure his readers know it's his preference by saying "I think". So as we look through 1 Timothy (1:3, 1:18, 2:1, 2:8, 2:9, 3:14, 4:13, 5:14, 5:21, 6:13) we often see **his** commands have a personal or local connotation.

Second, the command is an absolute ban on women teaching anyone and everyone. It does not only forbid women from teaching men. It forbids them from teaching anyone at all. There are three reasons for this: a) It goes with the command to "learn in quietness and full submission" in v.11 and b) In the Greek, "teach" is at the start of the sentence but "man" is at the end. A word-for-word translation is: *"But to teach a woman not I permit nor to have authority over a man"*. c. The subject of the Greek verb "teach" should be accusative case, but "man" is in the genitive case.

With this in mind, the command must refer to some restricted context since women certainly may teach other women (Titus 2:3-4) or children (2 Tim 1:5, 3:15; Proverbs 1:8). And of course it contradicts numerous women teachers prophets and judges throughout the Old and New Testament who had significant teaching roles with men. Think about women such as Pheobe (Romans 16:1-2). This woman was a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea, who was beloved of Paul and many other Christians for the help she gave to them. She filled an important position of leadership. It would be a difficult stretch of the imagination to say that this woman fulfilled her duties without ever speaking in the church!

Priscilla (Acts 18:26): Priscilla and her husband Aquila are often mentioned with great respect by Paul. Together they were pastors of a church in Ephesus, and were responsible for teaching the full gospel to Apollos. We are informed that they both taught Apollos, and pastored the church together. In fact, Priscilla is sometimes listed ahead of Aquila when their names come up. This has led some to speculate that of the two, she was the primary teacher and her husband oversaw the ministry. At any rate, we see here a woman in a very prominent position of teaching and pastoring. (Other references to Priscilla and Aquila are Acts 18:2, 18; Romans 16:3, and I Corinthians 16:19).

Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3): Here we see reference to two women who were "true yokefellows" and who labored with Paul in the advancement of the gospel.

Junia (Romans 16:7): In this verse we see Paul sending greetings to Andronicus and Junia, his "fellow-prisoners" who are of note among the apostles. Junia is a woman's name. In some modern translations, an "s" has been added (Junias) because the translators couldn't accept that a woman could be an apostle, they assumed a copyist had accidentally dropped the "s." However the proper male ending would have been "ius," not "ias." The reality is the earliest manuscripts say Junia and every church commentator earlier than the Middle Ages never questioned that Junia was both a woman and an apostle.

Though there were other women throughout the Bible in positions of leadership, such as prophetesses, evangelists, judges, leaders, etc., the above references should be enough to establish that women were indeed a vital and normal part of church leadership.

Clearly then, a ban on women teaching found in verse 12 must refer to some restricted context. But there are still more problems which should be looked at carefully. Firstly, Witherington points out that the verb 'authentein' in vs. 12 occurs only once in the NT- just here. The verb is a strong one, and there can only be two possibilities for its meaning: it can be used to mean 'to domineer' 'to usurp authority over', but it also has the sense of 'to exercise authority over' as well. What determines the translation is of course the context- is the context one where a problematic use of power or authority is at issue? If the answer is yes, then the translation is normally 'to usurp authority over' or 'to domineer'. It refers to an illegitimate use of power or authority.

The importance of this fact is clear. Paul is not talking about occasions or instances where it is perfectly proper for women to teach or exercise authority over men, something he will mention elsewhere, for example in Romans 16. The issue here in Ephesus, is that there are some women who are seeking to teach or take authority over men, without first being quiet and learning about their faith. This of course, is inappropriate.

In short, 1 Timothy 2 is talking about silence and submission in the presence of authoritative teaching and teachers. One can understand why high status Gentile women in Ephesus might think they could immediately teach in their new chosen religion: 1) women were frequently priestesses and prophetesses in the religion they had come from; 2) if one already had an education, including some education in public speaking (rhetoric) one assumed that one was equipped to go ahead and speak or even teach, especially to teach those less literate and of lesser social status. Notice that Paul has restricted what these women are to wear in worship. Clearly enough, he is correcting high status women who actually had fine clothes and jewels to wear, and could come to worship with high coiffed hair. It is these sorts of women he has in mind in 1 Tim. 2; 3) the verb here is 'I am not (now) permitting'. As Philip Payne has shown, there is not a single instance of the use of this verb in Greek literature where this form means 'I am permanently banning women from teaching etc.' This is a verb which implies a ban for a specific period of time until the problem is remedied or the proper conditions are met for women having learned enough to be able to teach. Paul could have said "I will never permit women to teach..." but he did not, and for a good reason. He is correcting a problem.

The use of the example from Genesis 13 (*For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.*) presupposes that Timothy knows his Bible. In particular he knows the following - that in the original creation story, only Adam is alive when the instruction is given not to eat of the tree. Early Jewish teachers then assumed that this meant Adam had taught Eve about the ban, but clearly he had not instructed her well enough, since she goes on to say to the snake that they were not even to touch the fruit. It is interesting that the verb '*deceived*' (v14) is used elsewhere in Corinthians to once again refer to this story (see 2 Cor. 11.3). What does 'deceived' mean here? It is not a comment about the woman's nature or naiveté, but rather about her lack of adequate teaching. A person not properly instructed is much more easily deceived. Such was the case with Eve, and so, Paul

implies in 1 Timothy 2 such is the case with these high status women who are new converts, but who think they can immediately instruct others including men.

Finally, verse 15 has caused enormous headaches to commentators. Is Paul now an advocate of 'justification by grace through baby making' for women? Certainly not. To complicate things further the phrase in question says '*the childbearing*'. Most translations drop the 'the' but the Greek says: *But she may be saved through (the) Childbearing, if they remain in faith and love and holiness with sobriety/modesty.*" This is significant because it refers to a particular one, and there is the odd toggling in the Greek between the singular childbearing and the 'they' who are saved through this. Last I checked, multiple women cannot give birth to a single child! This means Paul is referring to a particular childbearing - namely the birth of Jesus through Mary. Mary is seen as Eve in reverse. Just as Eve disobeyed and the fall ensued, Mary consented to God's plan and salvation came through her into our world. The curse on us all, including the curse on women was reversed in Mary. I would add that we must remember that the original curse involved these words - 'your desire will be for your husband and he will Lord it over you'. To love and to cherish has been twisted into "to desire" and to 'dominate'. In other words, both lust and the domineering of men over women are a result of the fall, which Jesus, coming through Mary came to reverse!

It is important to acknowledge that you might never deduce some of this simply from reading the mere words in the passage above. Unless the text is studied in its historical literary, rhetorical, religious etc. contexts we are bound to distort its meaning and misuse it. A truism says: "a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean".

The only proper hedge against misuse of such controversial texts like this is careful detailed study of the text in its immediate context, in the context of the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus) (noting for example how elsewhere in these documents Paul talks about older women who are mature Christians doing some teaching), in the context of Paul's letters in general, and in the context of Ephesus and the social world to which these words were written.

I am sure this short article will not convince everyone, but I hope that I have demonstrated that there are significant problems with the traditional interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11-15; and that there are more plausible alternative explanations. I am confident that as modern scholarship gains a greater understanding of the socio-rhetoric influences at work in these few verses, the time will soon come when every church will truly practice that principle that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ.

In the meantime we at Ryde Baptist Church will be faithful to the scriptures to the best of our understanding, and in doing so we say “we see no reason why women should be excluded from teaching, preaching or pastoring in this church”.

Special thanks and acknowledgment to:

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Further reading:

Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians by Ben Witherington III

Letters And Homilies for Hellenized Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy And 1-3 John by Ben Witherington III



This booklet was written by Dean Moore
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