

A Debate Over Gender Equality in Scripture and the Early Church

Introduction

There is a longstanding debate over women's roles and status in the Christian Church that dates back to its earliest centuries; this essay elaborates on evidence, arguments, and conclusions around those issues. While I don't believe we can ever grasp all there is to know about New Testament – or that our salvation or faith depends on such absolute knowledge – I do believe each of us knows in part, aspiring to grow in understanding with holy spirit as our guide, remembering that knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. Years ago, as a member of a Church of Christ denomination in the Pacific Northwest, I learned an invaluable lesson about distinguishing “the letter of the law” from “the spirit of the law,” and that Jesus Christ consistently extolled agape over legalism. I continue to hope that, whenever we encounter perceived doctrinal differences between Christian denominations, we can allow the living and active Word to help us discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and continually build up our faith, each other, and the Church.

What We Can Learn from How Jesus Interacted with Women

Appreciating Jesus's interactions with women in the New Testament provides us with invaluable insight. Here is a brief recap of some of those events and the instruction we can derive from them:

1. Jesus praises the faith of a woman who had suffered from chronic bleeding for twelve years, and sought to merely touch his robe and be healed (Mark 5:24-34). In Jewish culture of that time, such a woman would be viewed as “unclean,” shunned, ostracized, and not be allowed to worship in the temple or atone for her sins under the Law. And yet Jesus responded to her secretive attempt to be healed by saying “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed from your illness.”
2. Jesus rebuked Simon the Pharisee – a man of standing in Jewish religion and culture – in his own home for not having as much love and devotion as the woman kissing Jesus' feet, who herself was “a notorious sinner in that city,” and whom Simon expected Jesus to revile. Instead, Jesus forgives her sins. (Luke 7:36-48)
3. Although Jews of that time – including Jesus' own disciples – would never even speak to such a woman, Jesus chooses the Samaritan “woman at the well” to be *the first person he reveals himself to as the Messiah* in the Book of John (Chapter 4). She is then the first person to share this good news with her community, many of whom then came to believe that Jesus was the savior of the world. It is notable as well that an entire chapter of John is dedicated to this one account.
4. Whether it is his mother Mary indicating he could turn water into wine for wedding guests (John 2:1-11), or a Gentile woman begging him to free her daughter from an evil

spirit (Mark 7:24-30), or the two sisters, Mary and Martha, saying he had the power to heal their brother Lazarus (John 11:1-44), *Jesus either fulfills the miraculous expectations of these women, or exceeds them.*

5. To whom does Jesus first reveal himself after his resurrection? According to John 20:11-18 and Mark 16:9, it was Mary Magdalene, whom he then instructs to “Go to my brothers and tell them....” Just as with the Samaritan woman at the well, *Jesus again chooses a woman to first reveal himself to the world.*

There are other passages that reflect the same theme and pattern – such as when Jesus saves the life of the adulteress and refuses to condemn her (John 8:1-11) – and it’s that theme and pattern I believe we need to fully comprehend. In short, Jesus was a liberator of women, frequently elevating them above the status everyone else assumed they should have in that time and culture. And, not infrequently, he elevated them above men. Jesus not only exemplified a depth of compassion, devotion, and appreciation for women, he also respectfully deferred to them, and did what they asked of him.

We do have accounts of Jesus acting this way towards men as well – for example, when Jairus or the official in Capernaum ask for their children to be healed, or the Centurion in Capernaum had faith that Jesus could heal his servant from afar. And Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, was incredibly patient with them, and consistently expressed his love for them in word and deed. Jesus even showed special deference to “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” who was able to ask him a touchy question that Simon Peter would not (John 13:22-26). Perhaps the strongest parallel we find for this theme and pattern is how Jesus repeatedly demonstrated – also contrary to Jewish expectations at that time – that Gentiles shared equal status in the Kingdom of God, and were just as deserving of salvation. But the quality of relationship and interaction Jesus demonstrates with women throughout the New Testament is just...*consistently different.* He not only is attentive and connected with their life situations, he also seems to be deliberately proving a point in many instances: that women have equal status and importance in his eyes.

For context, it should be noted that during this time in Jerusalem women had little power and fewer rights. In Roman culture, women were under the authority of their father until they married, at which point that authority transferred to their husband. Roman women did not receive the same level of education as men, and only a handful of documents written by Roman women have survived into modernity. In addition, although Roman women of the first century could own their own property and manage their own finances, they could not vote or hold political office.¹ In Jewish culture, women likewise passed from the authority of their father to their husband, but had far fewer rights, freedoms, or privileges. Under Levitical law, they were considered little more than slaves, and according to the Mishnah (a record of the oral traditions that would have pervaded Judea in the time of Jesus), women could be “obtained by intercourse, money, or writ” (*Qidd. 1.1*). They could not hold positions of power in a synagogue, could not be disciples of a rabbi, did not receive religious education, and were not expected to

¹ *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016

participate in religious festivals (*Qidd. 1.7*). Knowing this, it becomes obvious that Jesus's attitude and actions towards women in the Gospels is a radical departure from the norm for that time and place.

New Testament Church Leaders Who Were Women

Now let's review some of the prominent women featured in New Testament scripture, and see what we can learn from those examples.

Phoebe, a Deacon: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well." What is a deacon (*diakonos*)? About the most confident we can be is that she was "a servant of the Church." How Phoebe served we can learn at least in part from the verse above – but beyond that, there isn't much to go on. It is important to note, however, that *diakonos* is also translated as "minister" in the New Testament.

Priscilla (Prisca), a "Fellow Worker" and Teacher: Priscilla is mentioned multiple times in the New Testament. In Romans 16:3, Paul refers to her as a "fellow worker in Christ." This is significant, because Paul uses this term (*sunergos*) to refer to those who either worked alongside him to spread the gospel (as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers" per Ephesians 4:11), or started doing so before he did. Timothy, Urbanus, Epaphroditus, Philemon, Titus, and of course Prisca's husband Aquila are all named by Paul as "fellow workers in Christ."

In Acts 18, we learn that Paul live and worked in Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila, both of whom later travelled with Paul to Ephesus. But what happened in Ephesus is especially informative:

"Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:24-27)

Note that even though Apollos was "instructed in the way of the Lord" and "taught accurately the things concerning Jesus," he was still *corrected* by Priscilla, who informed him of "the way of God more accurately." Clearly, Priscilla was a teacher in the early Church, *and she taught men*.

Junia, an Apostle: Junia was a prominent female apostle. This has been debated by some who either haven't carefully studied the Greek, or who have a strong, dogmatic aversion to this conclusion. First, Junia was a very common woman's name in Greek literature for hundreds of

years – and was never used to refer to a man. Romans 16:7 is typically translated: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsfolk and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.” But you will also see translations that skew this verse to sound more ambiguous about whether a) Junia was actually a *kinsman*, or b) she was really just esteemed *by* other apostles rather than being one of them. But the Greek is pretty clear, because its literal translation is: “Greet Andronicus and Junias, the relatives of me and fellow prisoners with me, who are prominent among the apostles, who also before me were in Christ.” You could translate the phrase “prominent among” as “of note among” or “outstanding in,” sure, but you can’t really miss the meaning that Junia was herself *either a prominent apostle, an outstanding one, or an apostle of note*.

Philip’s Daughters, Prophets: A simple description in Acts 21:7-9 reveals that Paul stayed with Philip the evangelist in Caesarea, who “had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.” At first glance this isn’t all that earth shattering...until we appreciate the significance it had in the early Church. The New Testament speaks about the gift of prophecy many times, so let’s recap what that gift represented:

1. Prophecy could result in “knowing all mysteries and all knowledge.” (1 Cor 13:2)
2. It was the most superior spiritual gift, second only to love: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” (1 Cor 14:1)
3. Prophesying was to be conducted in an orderly fashion during church assemblies, and then carefully considered. (1 Cor 14:22-32)
4. Prophecy is never the product of human will, but of divine holy spirit. (2 Peter 1:21)

As for the impact of prophesying in the early Church, it was profound. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 14:24-24: “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”

So, if Philip the evangelist’s four daughters were prophets, they had a tremendously important role and status in the Church, and would prophesy for everyone in the assembly to hear – men and women alike – and for everyone visiting the assembly as well.

Chloe, an Authority: In 1 Cor 1:10-11 Paul writes: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you...” It does not require much reflection to realize that Paul is rebuking and instructing the entire congregation about a problem they are experiencing, based on what has been reported to him by two or more folks answering to a woman named Chloe (literal: “those of Chloe”).

This implies not only that Chloe has status in the church in Corinth, but that she has standing with Paul personally – and he not only heeds what she says, but acts upon it *and names her in*

the process. Why would Paul employ this approach unless doing so quelled pushback regarding what was being reported to him? Chloe was respected enough in that congregation that merely invoking her name made a powerful statement; it was as if Paul was saying: “Listen, Chloe says this is a problem, so this is a problem.” In addition, this appears to be Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth (per 1 Cor 5:9), and after a brief introduction Paul launches into what he prioritizes as a critical topic – and continues to discuss it over what became the next four chapters. All of this on the word conveyed to him at the direction of a sister in Christ? Chloe must have been very important indeed – important enough that Paul was clearly taking direction from her regarding the well-being and guidance of that church.

Throughout all of these accounts, we can also observe Paul exercising the same respectful deference towards women that Jesus exemplified, treating them as equals to men in their roles, spiritual gifts, and authority, as well as in their functional importance to the early Church.

Scriptural Emphasis on the Principle of Gender Equality

There are handfuls of verses of scripture that explicitly extol equality between men and women as a defining characteristic of Christianity. Here are the most direct of those:

“For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” (1 Cor 7:4)

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.” (1 Cor 11:11)

For those who would assert gender equality as a central tenet of Christian faith, this isn’t a lot to go on. Still, it is generally accepted in most denominations that men and women are *spiritually* equal in God’s eyes, but may have different roles in the Church. However, other language in the New Testament has been used to challenge the idea of gender equality, and therefore deserves our careful attention.

Weighing Two Places in Scripture That Seem to Undermine Gender Equality in the Church

Most will recognize the passages that undermine gender equality, as they are quoted frequently: 1 Timothy 2:11-12, and 1 Corinthians 14:34-45. These verses insist women must remain silent in the church, be in submission to men and have no authority over them, and never teach them. There are other verses in the New Testament that appear to support this

point of view, but it should be noted that they are restricted to the pastoral epistles, which will become important in the next part of our discussion. Okay...so what do we do with these four verses, since they so adamantly and clearly contradict both the spirit and letter of what we have uncovered in New Testament scripture so far? Well there are a few explanations. I'll focus on what I believe to be the most likely.

Interpolation

We know from comparing various ancient source materials, and studying the style and wording of the oldest manuscripts, that interpolation – the later insertion of new wording when passages were copied – occurred in some New Testament manuscripts. There are some passages that scholars have nearly always agreed were interpolated, such as Mark 16:9-20. Other passages are more disputed, with one of them being 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

Why do scholars suspect this? For one thing, these verses appear in different places in different ancient manuscripts – they are not always verses 34 and 35 in chapter 14, but sometimes verses 41 and 42 – which hints that they may have been added later, or were a margin note not in the main body of text. In addition, they exhibit a telltale “break in flow” in the Greek manuscript’s discussion of prophecy in that section, which further suggests a later insertion. However, for me the more important argument for interpolation is the notable contradiction between these verses and a passage earlier in the same letter. Here’s the problem:

1 Cor 14:34-35: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 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.”

1 Cor 11:5: “But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for it is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.”

Okay...so why would it matter whether a woman has her head covered or uncovered if she is only praying or prophesying *in private*? Doesn't Paul's entire discussion in 1 Corinthians have to do with communal life, communal worship, communal witnessing, communal interactions, and so forth? And, most importantly, isn't Paul primarily concerned with how all behaviors in the church impact fellow believers and visiting non-believers? Why, then, would Paul suddenly be interested in how someone prophesies unseen in private, especially since – as we discussed earlier – the whole purpose of prophesy, according to Paul, is for the *public edification* of the church and as a sign to non-believers? And if chapter 11 refers to public prophesy and prayer...well, then women were prophesying publicly in Corinth.

Paul's Authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (referred to as the “pastoral epistles” or “pastorals”) is Disputed

This is a prickly subject in some Christian denominations, to be sure. But the Biblical canon as we know it today wasn't established until the 4th Century AD – and by a church with very different cultural characteristics than when the earliest Christian manuscripts were written. That is, many different texts were circulating in earlier centuries that were considered scripture by early Christian churches, a number of which did not make it into the Bible we know. Those early assemblies were house churches and city congregations without a central authority or all-encompassing hierarchy. Although a unifying Church structure and hierarchy began to appear over the first two centuries of Christianity, it wasn't until the Council of Nicea in 325 AD that a formal hierarchy (with bishops and a Pope) was codified.

The earliest known attempt at a formal canon was Marcion of Sinope's list around 140 AD. This did not include 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, among other books, though this may be because he didn't like the anti-gnostic sentiments of the pastorals. Even as late as 350 AD, the Codex Vaticanus – considered one of the most authoritative copies of the New Testament – notably also lacked 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (among other books). Then, in 380 AD, Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire, which helped conclude debates about both hierarchy and the approved canon. And at the Council of Hippo in 393, the finalized biblical canon, including the 27 books now accepted most modern Christian denominations, was firmly established. Thus, deliberations and conclusions about which material was “authentic scripture” – and, in the case of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, whether they were written by Paul – wasn't completely settled until some **three centuries** after the material was authored.

That said, the reasons most modern scholars now doubt 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus were penned by Paul are numerous, and not invented out of doctrinal convenience or whim.^{2,3,4,5} Here are some highlights:

1. A different Greek vocabulary and writing style is used in the pastorals than what we find in Paul's other writings.
2. The hierarchical structure of the Church in these epistles represents later developments in Christian history that occurred after Paul's death in about 64 AD. For example, an *episkopos*, an overseer or “bishop” referenced in 1 Timothy 3, definitively emerged as having apostolic authority around 95 AD – with the position continuing to evolve into the 2nd Century.
3. Events of Paul's personal history described in the pastoral epistles do not line up with what we can cobble together from other New Testament accounts (Acts, etc.).
4. The warnings against Gnostic theology peppered throughout the pastorals seem to address heretical doctrines that evolved in the decades after Paul's lifetime.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/recent-study-of-the-pastoral-epistles/>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity/The-internal-development-of-the-early-Christian-church>

⁴ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/bible/new-testament/pastoral-epistles>

⁵ <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/11/>

5. In the Hellenistic world, students authoring a letter in the name of a revered teacher was a known practice. And, according to the Muratorian Fragment (170-200 AD), other letters “forged in Paul’s name” were circulating in the 2nd Century, such as those addressed to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians.
6. The construction, wording, reasoning, and sentiments of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, and 1 Corinthians 14:34-45 are oddly in parallel with each other – right down to the use of the phrase “not permitted” in both passages, which are the only two places in scripture this Greek phrase is ever used. For the suspected interpolation of 1 Corinthians 14 to echo 1 Timothy 2 in this way seems to reinforce doubts about them both.

That said, there are scholars who have attempted to counter all of these arguments – sometimes quite skillfully – and so the debate continues.⁶ However, in one thoughtful article I read, the author concludes: “**We should never make Pauline authorship of the pastorals a litmus test for faithfulness.**”⁷ And of course the 4th century Church believed these epistles were important enough to include in the canon at that time, and there is no reason not to weigh their content – especially the themes which are reinforced elsewhere in scripture – as we would the writing of the Church Fathers or other prominent works circulated in the early Church. Personally, I feel the Shepherd of Hermas is equal to the pastorals in its significance, edification, and support of Christian faith, and that it is regrettable it wasn’t included in the final canon. But are the pastoral epistles firmly Apostolic in their authority, or fully equal to other writings of the New Testament? Or were they instead “deutero-Pauline” – that is, written by followers of Paul after his death? We can’t know for certain, and that is really the point. The assembly of 27 books into the “New Testament” was a fallible human enterprise, just as the process of translation from the Greek has been. The Word of God is infallible – I personally have no doubts about that – but its conveyance to us by frail, imperfect vessels poses challenges. Interpreting, understanding, and applying scripture to our lives is therefore one more area of Christian faith that requires vigilance, discernment, and humility.

Conclusion

And so we arrive at what I hope will be a simple and acceptable conclusion: that the sentiments and evidence regarding women’s role and status in the Church, according to a New Testament canon finalized at the end of the 4th century AD, are indeed contradictory – but in a fairly lopsided way. Outside of two verses in 1 Timothy and two verses in 1 Corinthians that mirror each other, we have clear evidence that women had prominent and respected leadership roles in the early Church – as deacons, teachers, authorities, apostles, prophets, and “fellow workers in Christ” – and further, no evidence that these roles weren’t public in nature. We also have the frequent example of Jesus’s deference and respect for women, and his responsiveness to their

⁶ <https://iakobou.wordpress.com/2009/11/16/someone-other-than-paul-as-the-author-of-the-pastoral-epistles-the-arguments-rebuttals-and-conclusion/>

⁷ <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/did-paul-write-the-pastoral-letters-well-its-complicated/>

needs and requests throughout the Gospels, often elevating them above men who held positions of privilege. Additionally, we have ample reinforcement of the principle of gender equality described in the Apostle Paul's missives, and see Paul's respect for and deference to female leaders echoing Jesus's attitudes.

On the other hand, we have those four verses that clearly counter this seeming equality between women and men in the Church, treating women as subordinate in their contributions, authority, roles, and status. One way we can resolve this tension is to examine possible problems with those four verses – exploring whether they were written later and interpolated with the earlier text, or whether they were even written by the Apostle Paul. However, even if we set aside such disqualifying efforts for those four verses, the preponderance of evidence in the rest of the New Testament still heavily favors gender equality, and indeed shared authority and equivalent roles in the Church between men and women.

Can we resolve these contradictions with black-and-white certainty? Probably not, though we will undoubtedly have convictions one way or another. But, in addition to our ongoing prayerful consideration, there is an approach I believe is spiritually profitable in such circumstances, and that is to ask the following questions when working through conundrums that could divide the Church or undermine its purpose:

- What attitudes and actions will consistently harmonize our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ?
- Can we hold our ambiguity and uncertainty about a given topic lightly enough that it doesn't cause us to stumble or become contentious?
- What choices can we make that will expand and deepen our faith the most?
- What actions today can amplify our agape for each other and the world to the greatest degree?
- What is the evidence of holy spirit in our lives, and is it present for us *right now*?
- What carefully renewed intentions will help keep us perpetually grounded in the love of God?
- What specific things can we undertake tomorrow that heal and strengthen the Body of Christ?

In essence, we are filtering our intentions and choices through what builds up our faith, builds each other up, and builds up the Church. Answering these pivotal guiding questions has been the mission of Christianity in every age. But right now, in the face of persisting turmoil, unease, and division, it will be more important than ever for Christians to prioritize these considerations in all of our relationships, planning, and vision. And perhaps, if we allow the space in our hearts to do so, we can start by finding some common ground around challenging topics like gender equality in the Church.