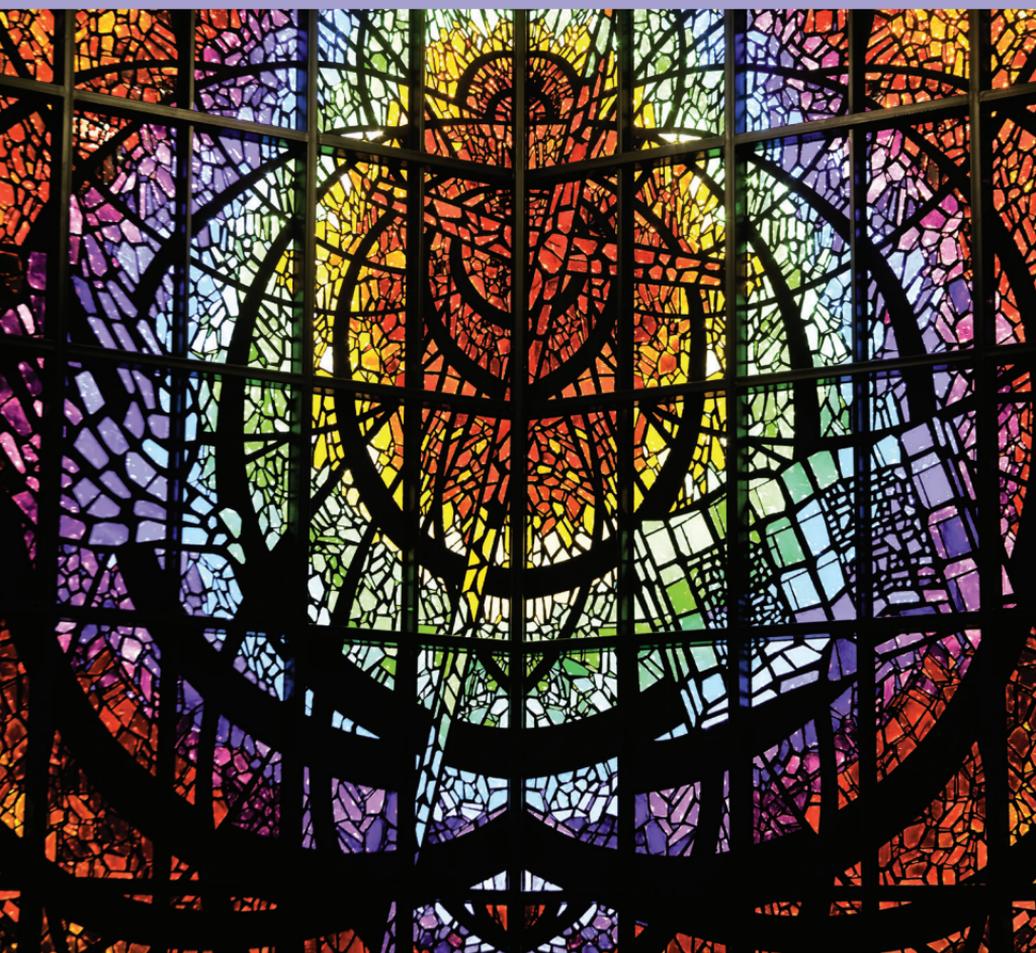


A BAPTIST REFLECTION ON
**THE BIBLE
& WOMEN**
IN MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP



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Atlanta, Georgia

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Printed in the United States of America.

Designer: Lisa Tondino

Front cover photograph: Logsdon Seminary Chapel Window,
Abilene, Texas
Photo credit: Kristen Harris-Bridwell

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For many Baptist churches today, how women serve in ministry leadership roles continues to be a debated topic. Can women serve as deacons? Can women be ordained? Can women have leadership or teaching roles over men? Can women preach or be pastors? These are questions that have been the source of conflict for decades, and at the heart of the matter is how we interpret biblical passages related in women's roles and leadership.

Baptists have many different interpretations in regard to how women should serve in ministry leadership. The Baptist distinctives of the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church invite each of us to acknowledge that every person, as a priest, has the right and responsibility to interpret the Bible and that every congregation has the right and responsibility to make its own decisions concerning its leadership.

The perspective that I will offer is one that demonstrates how the Bible can be interpreted to affirm women's full participation in ministry leadership. My hope is that this explanation will serve as clarification of how some Baptists, as priests and autonomous congregations, exercise their rights and responsibilities in choosing to ordain women and call them to positions of leadership in ministry.

In recognizing that this interpretation is one among many, the acknowledgement must be made that scriptural interpretation is a complicated task that involves much thought and discernment. While some passages seem to have clear and direct application to the lives of individuals and congregations today, others involve more intentional study and consideration by the faith community.

For example, when interpreting many of the Old Testament laws or even the particular practices that New Testament congregations were exhorted to perform (the holy kiss,

Rom. 16:16; men lifting their hands in prayer, 1 Tim. 2:8), we seek to understand the cultural context of those practices so that we might uncover the principles underlying them, and then we apply those principles to our current context.

Because the Bible presents many different kinds of passages that speak to women's roles and leadership, we approach these passages with recognition of the complicated nature of interpretation and an awareness of the context in which scriptures were written.

Women in the Bible

A good place to begin is to consider the stories told about women in the Bible. While some women in the Bible exist in submissive roles to men, other women have authority and are prominent leaders.

In the Old Testament, Deborah is a military and judicial leader for the all Israelites—men and women (Judg. 4:4-15). Huldah is a prophet to whom King Josiah sends messengers so that she can instruct them in relation to what is written in the Book of the Law that they have found (2 Kgs 22:11-20). Esther is a queen who successfully saves her people from annihilation (Esth. 5:1-9:19). Zelophehad's five daughters stand up to Moses for their right to own land and in doing so they are able to affect positively a new law that gives other women the right to own land (Num. 27:1-11).

In the gospels, women are significant participants in Jesus' ministry. His mother, Mary, nurtures his faith and sense of calling (Luke 1:46-55; 2:39-40), and nudges him toward his first miracle (John 2:1-11). A prophetess, Anna, recognizes the child Jesus at the Temple and affirms that he will bring about the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). Many women follow Jesus and join him on his journey, financially supporting his ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

Other women provide faithful examples of discipleship throughout the gospels (Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 26:6-13, among others). Matthew (27:55-56) and Mark (15:40-41) specifically record that women witnessed Jesus' crucifixion even though the twelve disciples deserted him after his arrest. Mary Magdalene and other women are the ones who find Jesus' empty tomb on the third day and are told to go and tell people that Jesus is risen (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18). These women are the first evangelists, sharing the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

In Acts and the epistles, Lydia is a woman of wealth, who becomes a believer in Christ and starts the church at Philippi in her home (Acts 16:14-15, 40). Priscilla is a co-worker of Paul, who teaches others in the ways of God (Acts 18:26, Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19). Phillip, one of the original seven deacons, is father of four prophesying daughters (Acts 21:8-9).

Certainly there are others in the Old and New Testaments, but these are few examples of women who inform how we interpret the Bible with regard to the leadership of women.

Women and Creation

The story of creation and the fall of Adam and Eve are often cited to explain why women should be submissive to men and thus should not be in authority or leaders over men. Three specific points are a part of this argument—the order of creation, the order in which Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree, and the consequences God spoke over Adam and Eve after the event.

When considering the order of creation, we must look at both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. In Gen. 1:1-2:4a, the six days of God's creative activity are presented in their entirety with God's completion and rest on the seventh day. As a part of

this complete account of creation, God creates humans in Gen. 1:26-27, and the text specifically states that God creates women and men at the same time, and that both female and male are created in God's image.

In Gen. 2:4b-25, the reader finds another complete account of creation with a different order and structure. In this account, God created man (or human since the Hebrew word for human is the same word which is also translated/interpreted as the name—Adam). God then creates a garden and trees, then the animals, and finally a second person, woman, who is made from the man. If order of creation is determinative of authority in this second account of creation, then it would appear the animals would even have authority over the woman.

In addition to the order, some scholars note that the woman is created to be a “helper” (Gen. 2:20) for the man, not to be his equal. Yet, the woman is created from the man's rib, not his foot, so that they would stand side-by-side instead of him ruling over her. Further, the Hebrew word “helper” is most often found in the Old Testament in reference to God (for example: Hos 13:9, Ps 70:5, Ps 40:17), and is a designation that does not seem to indicate that God is unworthy of authority or leadership.

In contemplating the order of their sin in Genesis 3, the woman eats the fruit first, but the man does not seem to have any reservations about eating the fruit himself (Gen. 3:6) even though he is the one to whom God spoke the command about not eating from this tree, a command given before the woman is formed (Gen. 2:16-17).

A passage in Timothy uses the creation order and states that the woman being the one deceived first is a basis for women to not assume authority over men (1 Tim. 2:13-14), while a passage in Romans places the blame for this event

squarely on the man, explaining that sin came into the world through the trespass of one man—Adam (Rom. 5:12-19). Additionally, no other biblical passages seem to indicate that the order in which sins are performed by people necessitates greater punishment or hierarchy.

Finally, in God's encounter with Adam and Eve after their sins, God describes the consequences to each. For some, these consequences are prescriptive—rules being prescribed and commanded for all people, for all time. But others read them as descriptive—a description of the consequences of sin, though not necessarily a prescription of God's desires for humanity.

In the descriptive interpretation, when God says to the woman, “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16), God is describing the consequences of sin entering into the world with a result that men will rule over women, rather than God prescribing that men are meant to rule over women. God's actual desire is for unity between the two humans, the oneness that they had with each other before their sins (2:23-25). Ultimately, God's hope is that the woman and the man experience an unhindered relationship with each other and with God. If God had wanted a hierarchical arrangement for their relationship, then it would seem more fitting for God to arrange it this way from the beginning, rather than imposing it as a consequence for their sin.

Affirmation of Equality of Women and Men in the New Testament

While Paul's epistles present challenging passages that will be discussed subsequently, the apostle also offers affirming presentations of the equality of women and their inclusion in the leadership of the church.

Gal. 3:28 states that in Christ there is no male and female, an affirmation that division and power between people should no longer exist for those in Christ. 1 Cor. 11:11-12 declares that while woman came from man, man is also born of woman, but ultimately everything comes from God. Further, in the same passage, Paul instructs that every woman who prays or prophesies must cover her head (1 Cor. 11:4). Praying and prophesying are both forms of public speaking that were apparently occurring in the Corinthian congregations. In Romans 16, Paul sends greetings to those whom he regards as friends and co-workers. Of the twenty-eight people mentioned specifically in the chapter, nine are women, including Junia who Paul calls an apostle.

Additionally, the gospels never present Jesus limiting women's participation in his ministry or making public statements that promote hierarchical relationships between women and men. In contrast, Jesus includes women among his followers, sees and meets their needs, and entrusts them with the gospel message. Women are integral and important to Jesus' work.

Women as Wives in Submission to Husbands in the New Testament

Several passages in the New Testament that seem to prescribe wives' submission in marriage are used by those who argue that wives' submission has a direct link to women's ability to lead in the church.

Four different passages in the epistles direct wives to be submissive or subject to their husbands (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). Those who hold an interpretation that affirms women's full participation in ministry leadership in the church believe that the instructions in these passages were written for the particular wives in those specific congregations,

which existed in a particular culture. Three of the primary reasons for this interpretation are as follows.

First, while the passages mentioned instruct in wives' submission, other New Testament passages specify mutuality among husbands and wives (1 Cor. 7:3-4; Eph. 5:21).

Second, those who penned the letters in the New Testament often addressed particular issues in individual congregations (lawsuits among believers, 1 Cor. 6:1-8; wearing gold jewelry, 1 Pet. 3:3; drinking a little wine instead of only water, 1 Tim. 5:23), rather than only writing instructions intended for all people in all times.

Third, some of the same passages that commend wives to submit to their husbands often also address slaves submitting to their masters (Col. 3:22-25; Eph. 6:5-9) and seem to condone the hierarchical relationship of slavery. Rightfully, the majority of believers have come to acknowledge such an arrangement of power over other people as sinful even though scripture includes instructions for existing within those relationships.

Specific Limitations on Women's Leadership / Public Speaking in the New Testament

Two specific passages have been considered most important in terms of limitations placed on women's authority and leadership in the church—1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15.

1 Cor. 14:34-35 states, "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."

The context of this passage is that Paul is addressing the need for orderliness in worship, specifically in terms of how the congregants speak in tongues (14:26-40). But even

though most Baptists do not regard Paul's instructions in terms of the order of how people speak in/interpret tongues as relevant, some still follow the instructions concerning women which are embedded in this passage.

One way that some interpret verses 34-35 is in connection to the verse that follows. Verse 36 begins with a Greek particle that normally begins a question for which the expected answer is no, but the participle can also function to negate the statement that precedes it. Thus, some interpreters see Paul's statement regarding women's silence as a practice of the Corinthians, which the Corinthians had written Paul about, or about which he heard, and Paul is refuting their practice of women's silence in the churches. Paul also does this in 1 Cor. 7:1 when he refutes the Corinthians' idea that it is good for a man not to have sex with a woman, and he provides further instruction on the matter of sexual relationships. For Paul to negate the idea that women need to remain silent would be consistent with the fact that Paul gives instructions just three chapters earlier in the same letter for how women should speak publicly in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:4).

1 Tim. 2:11-15 states, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man, she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety."

Two key points about this passage:

First, the Greek word for "to assume authority" is used only here and nowhere else in the New Testament, and thus, we cannot infer that Paul refers to the same kind of authority about which he writes in other passages with regard to

church leaders. Instead, his use here of the word "authority" seems to indicate an assumption of inappropriate power over others given that God alone is the ultimate authority. Thus, interpreters presuppose that there may have been certain women in that particular congregation who were trying to exercise authority over others in ways that were similar to how women exercised authority in some of the cults of the Greco-Roman world.

Second, the literary context of the passage must also be considered. These verses appear as a part of a passage in which Paul is exhorting men to pray lifting up holy hands without anger (1 Tim. 2:8) and women to dress modestly without pearls, gold, or expensive clothing (1 Tim. 2:9). Both of these instructions are not regarded as for all people and all time, but are thought to represent principles of praying respectfully and reverently, and demonstrating modesty in a way that is appropriate in one's culture.

Further, the literary context of the passage also addresses salvation in way that most would not find to be consistent with an understanding of being saved by grace through faith. 1 Tim. 2:15 states that women are saved through childbearing, although only if they continue in faith, love, and holy living. Many women (as well as men) have navigated the difficult road of infertility, and we cannot imagine that the church would tell them that they are unable to be a part of the community of God because they cannot reproduce.

Since we find several portions of these two passages to be culturally conditioned, or addressed to particular people in a particular place, and/or inconsistent with other biblical passages, those who affirm women's leadership in the church do not regard the instructions concerning women in these passages to be universal regulations for all churches throughout the ages.

Theological, Practical, and Historical Considerations

Theological, practical, and historical considerations can also inform the church's conversation on the role of women in the church. Three key points are included here.

1. Increased women's presence in leadership roles expands our imagination of God's nature.

Even though Baptists hold the distinctive of the priesthood of all believers, the practical reality of our churches is that leaders "speak for God." Leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of revealing God and God's purposes to congregations, and thus it is inevitable that the leaders' characteristics end up being associated with God as well. Since both women and men are created in the image of God, all people exist as a reflection of God in the world. God's infinite nature cannot be captured by one gender. When women serve in leadership roles, including as preachers and pastors, people are able to imagine a more complete picture of God's infinite nature captured in the perspectives and voices of women.

2. When women serve in more ministry and leadership roles in the church, the needs of more than half of our church populations can be better understood and served.

More than half of the participants in churches are women. Women are more likely to be regular attenders and volunteers in church ministries. When more than half of our church population is not represented among the church's leadership, the church's vision and work may not accurately represent its full membership. Further, there are many issues, such as domestic and sexual abuse, for which women will not seek the help and counsel of male leaders. As the #metoo and #churchtoo movements have revealed, abuse is

far more common in our society than we would ever hope, and survivors cannot have too many advocates, especially in the church.

3. Women have been leading and preaching since the beginning of the church.

Women were the first evangelists, were prophesying (another word for preaching) in the church at Corinth if not other churches as well, and were taking on the leadership of new church starts. But women's involvement in the preaching of God's word and leadership of God's church did not stop at the end of the New Testament era. Early Christian documents reveal that women such as Thecla, Perpetua, Proba, Macrina, and Paula were leaders of the new faith movement. In the newly formed Baptist tradition, women began preaching in the 1630s. Anne Hempstall, Mary Bilbrow, Joane Bauford, Susan May, Elizabeth Bancroft, and Arabella Thomas preached throughout England during those years, and in the mid-1640s, Mrs. Attaway, a lace-maker and member of a General Baptist church in London, was derisively labeled as the "mistress of all the she-preachers on Coleman Street" by a vocal Baptist opponent. Women leaders and preachers are not a new phenomenon.

Conclusion

As Baptists, we affirm the right and responsibility of each person and each congregation to consider and decide for themselves about the appropriate roles of women in the church and to do so based on serious study of scripture.

Those who interpret the Bible in a way that affirms women's full participation in the leadership of the church find biblical passages that denote equality and mutuality and that present women as leaders to be equally as important to the conversation as the passages that seem to limit women's

leadership. We have come to interpret any scriptural limitations on women's leadership roles to be intended for particular circumstances, churches, or people, and not as universal prohibitions for all women in all times. Further, we see the theological and practical value in women having increased leadership roles in congregational ministry.

Baptist women ministers are faithfully sharing the love and grace of Christ to a world in need of redemption. With the perspective on the interpretation of scripture offered in the booklet, it is our hope that more women will be able to fully embrace and embody their callings so that the work of God might increase through a rising number of workers for the plentiful harvest (Luke 10:2). If you and/or your congregation are exploring the issues raised in this booklet and need further resources or desire more conversation, visit the Baptist Women in Ministry website or contact the BWIM staff.



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