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## Paul Supported the Ministry of Women<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

When Paul writes to former colleagues in Rome, he commends the ministries of more women than men; one of those he commends he even labels a fellow apostle. Paul, who ranks apostles and prophets as the most prominent ministries, allows for women to prophesy. His most common terms for ministry, *diakonos* (“minister,” “servant”) and *sunergos* (“fellow worker”), he applies to women as well as men. So why do two passages seem to limit the ministry of women? Although Mediterranean antiquity provided women less access to learning, Paul in both passages invites women to learn. The one passage that grammatically *might* prohibit women from teaching appears in the one set of letters where we know that false teachers were targeting women with their teaching. In general, then, Paul affirmed women in ministry; he restricted it only where necessary for specific situations.

**Key Words:** *diakonos*, Early Church views of female leaders, female apostles and prophets, gender and authority in the New Testament, interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14, interpretation of 1 Timothy 2, Junia, Pauline restrictions and cultural context, Phoebe, Priscilla, *synergos*, women in ministry

The question of ministry by women is a pressing concern for today’s church. It is paramount, first because we need the gifts of all members God has called to serve the church; now the concern, however, has extended beyond the church itself. Increasingly, secular thinkers today attack Christianity as “against women” and thus as irrelevant to the modern world.

Yet the Assemblies of God and most other denominations birthed in the Holiness and Pentecostal revivals affirmed women’s ministry long before the role of women became a secular or liberal agenda.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in the historic missionary expansion of the nineteenth century, two-thirds of all missionaries were women. The nineteenth-century women’s movement that fought for a woman’s right to vote originally grew from the same revival movement led by Charles Finney and others that advocated the abolition of slavery. By contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> I modify here my “Was Paul for or against Women’s Ministry?”, originally published in the Assemblies of God’s *Enrichment* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 82-86.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Eerdmans, 1971), 188-89.

those who identified everything in the Bible's *culture* with the Bible's *message* were obligated to both accept slavery and reject women's ministry.<sup>3</sup>

For Bible-believing Christians, however, mere precedent from church history cannot settle a question; we must establish our case from Scripture. Because the current debate focuses especially on the teaching of Paul, I focus on his writing, after I briefly summarise some other biblical teachings on the subject.

### Ministry of Women in the Rest of the Bible

The Ancient West Asian world of which Israel was a part was definitely a "man's world." Because God spoke to Israel in a particular culture, however, does not suggest that the culture itself was holy; the culture included polygamy, divorce, slavery, and a variety of other practices we now recognise as less than ideal.

Despite the prominence of men in ancient Israelite society, God still sometimes called women as leaders. When Josiah needed to hear the word of the Lord, he sent to the most prominent prophetic figure of his day, namely Huldah (2 Kgs 22:12-20). Deborah was not only a prophetess but a judge (Judg 4:4) – that is, she held the place of greatest authority in Israel in her day. She is the only prophetic judge in the Book of Judges, and one of the few judges of whom the Bible reports no failures (Judg 4–5).

Although first-century Jewish women rarely if ever studied with teachers of the law the way male disciples did,<sup>4</sup> Jesus allowed women to join his ranks (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3) – something the culture could regard as scandalous.<sup>5</sup> As if this were not scandalous enough, he allowed a woman who wished to hear his teaching to "sit at his feet" (Luke 10:39) – taking a posture normally reserved for disciples (Acts 22:3). Disciples were potentially teachers in training!<sup>6</sup> To send women out on the preaching missions (e.g., Mark 6:7-13) might have proved too scandalous to be practical, but the gospels nevertheless unanimously report that

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<sup>3</sup> See Stanley Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (InterVarsity, 1995), 42-62; Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness* (Abingdon, 1984); Glenn Ustry and Craig Keener, *Black Man's Religion* (InterVarsity, 1996), 90-94, 98-109.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism* (Scarecrow, 1976), 97-111; Craig Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives* (Baker, 1992), 83-84. The one exception apart from Jesus's disciples is Beruriah (second century), who confronted prejudice from most male rabbis.

<sup>5</sup> See Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford, 1989), 202; John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Westminster, 1986), 104; Walter Liefeld, "The Wandering Preacher as a Social Figure in the Roman Empire" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1967), 240. Critics often maligned movements supported by women (E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* [Penguin, 1993], 109).

<sup>6</sup> To "sit before" a teacher's feet was to take the posture of a disciple (m. Ab. 1:4; Ab. R. Nat. 6, 38 A; 11, §28 B; b. Pes. 3b; y. Sanh. 10:1, §8). On women in Jesus's ministry, see especially Ben Witherington, III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, SNTSM 51 (Cambridge University, 1984).

God chose women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, even though first-century Jewish men often dismissed the testimony of women.<sup>7</sup>

Joel explicitly emphasised that, when God poured out his Spirit, women as well as men would prophesy (Joel 2:28-29). Pentecost meant that all God's people qualified for gifts of God's Spirit (Acts 2:17-18), just as salvation meant that male or female would have the same relationship with God (Gal 3:28). Outpourings of the Spirit in recent centuries have often led to the same effect.

### Ancient Mediterranean Prejudices<sup>8</sup>

Some of Paul's contemporaries argued that women had less intelligence or were more easily deceived than men.<sup>9</sup> Juvenal ridicules women who seek advanced education (*Sat.* 6.434-56). The Greek moralist Plutarch considers himself exceptional for advocating a husband's care for his wife's learning; he believes this training would protect her from following nonsense and immorality (*Bride* 48, *Mor.* 145C). Yet even Plutarch adds that, if left only to themselves, women produce only unhealthy passions and foolishness.<sup>10</sup> Judeans raised boys but not girls to recite Torah.<sup>11</sup>

Conservative tradition disapproved of women's public speech<sup>12</sup> and mistrusted their counsel.<sup>13</sup> With only a handful of exceptions throughout antiquity, mostly in select philosophic schools, women barely ever taught men.<sup>14</sup>

### Passages Where Paul Affirms Women's Ministry

Paul often affirms the ministry of women despite the gender prejudices of his culture. With a few exceptions in some philosophic sects, advanced education was a male domain. Because most people in Mediterranean antiquity were functionally illiterate, those who assumed teaching roles were generally those

<sup>7</sup> See Josephus *Ant.* 4.219; m. Yeb. 15:1, 8-10; 16:7; Ketub. 1:6-9; t. Yeb. 14:10; Sipra VDDeho. pq. 7.45.1.1; cf. Luke 24:11. In Roman law, see similarly Jane Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (Indiana University, 1986), 165.

<sup>8</sup> See, much more fully, Craig S. Keener, "Women's Education and Public Speech in Antiquity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 747-59.

<sup>9</sup> On their cognitive limitations, see e.g., Valerius Maximus 9.1.3; Plutarch *Bride* 48, *Mor.* 145CD; *T. Job* 26:6/26:7-8. For "old wives' tales" (cf. 1 Tim 4:7), see Cicero *De Nat. Deor.* 1.20.55; Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 94.2; Philostratus *Vit. apoll.* 5.14; *Vit. soph.* 1.25.541; Iamblichus *Vit. Pyth.* 32.227; *Jos. Asen.* 4:10/14.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch *Bride* 48 *Mor.* 145DE; cf. Publilius Syrus 365, 376.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., m. *Ab.* 5:21 (cf. *Jos. Life* 9-12; *Ant.* 20.264-65); S. Safrai, "Education," in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, 2 vols. (Fortress, 1974-76), 955.

<sup>12</sup> Soph. *Ajax* 293; Valerius Maximus 3.8.6; Plutarch *Bride* 32, *Mor.* 142D; Heliodorus *Eth.* 1.21; Sir 9:9; *Ps.-Phoc.* 215-16.

<sup>13</sup> Babrius *Fable* 16.10; Avianus *Fables* 15-16; Phaedrus 4.15; Fronto *Ep. Graec.* 2.3; Josephus *Ant.* 18.252-55.

<sup>14</sup> See also Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Eerdmans, 2003), 115-16.

who could read and speak well and, with rare exceptions, these were men.<sup>15</sup> In the first centuries of our era, most Jewish men, such as Philo, Josephus, and many later rabbis, reflected the prejudice of much of the broader Greco-Roman culture.<sup>16</sup>

Women's roles varied from one region to another, but Paul's writings clearly rank him among the more women-affirming, not the more restrictive, writers of his day. Many of Paul's co-labourers in the gospel were women.

Thus, Paul commends the ministry of a woman who brings his letter to the Roman Christians (Rom 16:1-2). Phoebe is a *diakonos*, or "servant," of the church at Cenchrea. *Diakonos* may refer to a "deacon," a term sometimes designating administrative responsibility in the Early Church (1 Tim 3:8, 12); in his epistles, however, Paul most frequently applies the term to any minister of God's Word, including himself (e.g., 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; Eph 3:7; 6:21). He also calls Phoebe a "benefactor" or "helper" of many (16:2); this term technically designates her as the church's "patron" or sponsor, most likely the owner of the home in which the church at Cenchrea was meeting. This was an honoured position in ancient associations, including synagogues and churches.<sup>17</sup>

Nor is Phoebe the only influential woman in the church. Whereas Paul greets about twice as many men as women in Romans 16, he commends the ministries of about twice as many women as men in that list. (Some use the predominance of male ministers in the Bible against women's ministry, but that argument could work against *men's* ministry in this passage!) These commendations may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly frequently faced for their ministry and are remarkable given the prejudice against ministry by women that existed in Paul's culture.

If Paul follows ancient custom when he praises Prisca, he may mention her before her husband Aquila because of her higher status (Rom 16:3-4). Elsewhere we learn that she and her husband taught Scripture to another minister (Acts 18:26). Paul also lists two fellow apostles,<sup>18</sup> Andronicus and Junia. Although "Junia" is clearly a feminine name, writers opposed to the possibility that Paul could have referred to a female apostle have sometimes suggested that "Junia" is a contraction for the masculine "Junianus." Yet Junia is *always* a woman's name in ancient inscriptions; this suggestion that Junia is male rests not on the text itself but entirely on the presupposition that a woman could not be an apostle.

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<sup>15</sup>Although inscriptions demonstrate that women filled a prominent role in some synagogues (see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* [Scholars, 1982]), they also reveal that this practice was the exception rather than the norm.

<sup>16</sup>E.g., Philo *Prob.* 117; see further Safrai, "Education," 955; Richard Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female* (AZLGHJ 3; Brill, 1970).

<sup>17</sup>See further Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 237-40.

<sup>18</sup>Because Paul nowhere else appeals to commendations from "the apostles," most scholars recognise that "notable apostles" remains the most natural way to construe this phrase. See further Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Fortress, 2005); Linda Belleville, "Ιουνίαν ... ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: A Re-examination of Romans 16.7 in Light of Primary Source Materials," *NTS* 51, no. 2 (2005): 231-49.

Elsewhere, Paul refers to the ministry of two women in Philippi, who, like his many male fellow ministers, shared in his work for the gospel there (Phil 4:2-3). Because women typically achieved more prominent religious roles in Macedonia than in most parts of the Roman world,<sup>19</sup> Paul's female colleagues in this region may have moved more quickly into prominent offices in the church (cf. also Acts 16:14-15). Is it a coincidence that Paul commends women in ministry especially in two cities in the Roman Empire – Rome and Philippi – where women had more freedoms to speak than in some other locations? What might that mean for us today, in societies where women may be educated and speak in public?

Although Paul ranks prophets second only to apostles (1 Cor 12:28), he acknowledges the ministry of prophetesses (11:5), following the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod 15:20; Jud 4:4; 2 Kgs 22:13-14) and early Christian practice (Acts 2:17-18, 21:9). Clearly women do speak God's message. In Scripture as a whole, prophets are the most common agents of God's message. Thus, those who complain that Paul does not specifically mention "female pastors" by name miss the point. Paul never mentions any "male pastors" by name, either; he most often simply mentions his travelling companions in ministry, who were naturally men. His two most common titles for such fellow ministers are *diakonos* ("minister," "servant") and *sunergos* ("fellow worker") – both of which terms he also applies to women (Rom 16:1, 3; Phil 4:3). Given the culture that Paul addressed, it was natural that fewer women could exercise the social independence necessary to achieve positions of ministry. Where they did so, however, Paul commends them, and includes commendations to women apostles and prophets, the offices of the highest authority in the church!

While passages such as these establish Paul among the more women-affirming writers of his era, the primary controversy today rages around other passages in which Paul seems to oppose the ministry of women. Before turning there, we should examine one passage where nearly everyone today acknowledges that Paul addresses a local cultural situation.

### Paul on Head Coverings

Although Paul often advocated the mutuality of gender roles,<sup>20</sup> he also worked within the boundaries of his culture where necessary, for the sake of the gospel. We begin with his teaching on head coverings because, although it is not directly related to women's ministry, it will help us understand how he contextualised universal principles for cultural situations. Most Christians today agree that women do not need to cover their heads in church in all cultures, but many do not recognise that Paul used the same kinds of arguments for women covering their heads as for women refraining from congregational speech. In both cases, Paul uses some general principles but addresses a specific cultural situation.

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Valerie Ann Abrahamsen, "The Rock Reliefs and the Cult of Diana at Philippi" (ThD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., comments in Craig Keener, "Man and Woman," in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (InterVarsity, 1993), 584-85.

When Paul urged women in the Corinthian churches to cover their heads (the only place where the Bible teaches about a woman's "covering"), he follows a custom prominent in the Eastern Mediterranean milieu of his day.<sup>21</sup> Although women and men alike covered their heads for various reasons,<sup>22</sup> married women specifically covered their heads to prevent men other than their husbands from lusting after their hair.<sup>23</sup> A married woman who went out with her head uncovered was considered promiscuous, and could be divorced as an adulteress.<sup>24</sup> Because of what head coverings symbolised in that culture, Paul asks the less-restricted women to cover their heads so as not to scandalise the others. Among his arguments for head coverings are the fact that God created Adam first; in the particular culture he addresses, this argument would make sense as an argument for women wearing head coverings.<sup>25</sup>

### Passages Where Paul May Restrict Women's Ministry

Because Paul in other cases advocated for the ministry of women, we cannot read his restrictions on their ministry as universal prohibitions. Rather, as in the case of head coverings in Corinth above, Paul is addressing a specific cultural situation. This is not to say that Paul here or anywhere else wrote Scripture that was not for all time. It is merely to say that he did not write it for all *circumstances*, and that we must take into account the circumstances he

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<sup>21</sup> Among Jewish people, see, e.g., Sus 32; m. B. Qam. 8:6; Sipre Num. 11.2.2; Ab. R. Nat. 3, 17A; 3 Macc 4:6. Elsewhere in the East, cf. e.g., Ramsay MacMullen, "Women in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 29 (1980): 209-10; more widely, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise: The Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece* (Classical Press of Wales, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes men (Plutarch *R.Q.* 14, *Mor.* 267A; Chariton *Chaer.* 3.3.14) and women (Plutarch *R.Q.* 26, *Mor.* 270D; Chariton *Chaer.* 1.11.2; 8.1.7; Ab. R. Nat. 1A) covered their heads for mourning. Similarly, both men (m. Sot. 9:15; Epictetus *Disc.* 1.11.27) and women (Ab. R. Nat. 9, §25B) covered their heads for shame. Roman women normally covered their heads for worship (e.g., Varro 5.29.130; Plutarch *R.Q.* 10, *Mor.* 266C), in contrast to Greek women, who uncovered their heads (*SIG* 3d ed., 3.999). But in contrast to the custom Paul addresses, none of these specific practices differentiates men from women.

<sup>23</sup> Hair was the primary object of male desire (Apuleius *Metam.* 2.8-9; Chariton *Chaer.* 1.13.11; 1.14.1; Ab. R. Nat. 14, §35B; Sipre Num. 11.2.1; y. Sanh. 6.4, §1). This was why many peoples required married women to cover their hair, but allowed unmarried girls to go uncovered (e.g., Charillus 2 in Plutarch *Sayings of Spartans*, *Mor.* 232C; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 3.56).

<sup>24</sup> E.g., m. Ket. 7:6; b. Sot. 9a; R. Meir in Num. Rab. 9:12. For a similar custom and reasoning today in traditional Islamic societies, see Carol Delaney, "Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David Gilmore (American Anthropological Association, 1987), 42, 67; cf. Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Prentice Hall, 1989), 165.

<sup>25</sup> On Paul's various arguments here, see more fully Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 31-46; or more briefly, in "Man and Woman," 585-86. For a similar background for 1 Timothy 2:9-10, see David Scholer, "Women's Adornment: Some Historical and Hermeneutical Observations on the New Testament Passages," *Daughters of Sarah* 6 (1980): 3-6; Keener, *Women*, 103-7.

addressed so we can understand how he would have applied his principles in very different situations.

*Let Women Keep Silent (1 Cor 14:34-36)*

Two passages in Paul's writings at first seem to contradict those that affirm the ministry of women. We should keep in mind that these are the only two passages in the Bible that could remotely be construed as contradicting Paul's endorsement of the ministry of women elsewhere. Beyond ministry, they mandate *silence* (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11-12). Since almost no churches anywhere today take that literally, if they allow women to sing in church, all churches should welcome exploring what these passages really *did* mean in their contexts.

First, Paul instructs women to be silent and save their questions about the service for their husbands at home (1 Cor 14:34-36). Yet Paul cannot mean silence under all circumstances, because earlier in the same letter he acknowledged that women could pray and prophesy in church (11:5), and he ranked prophecy even higher than teaching (12:28).

Here, knowing ancient Mediterranean culture helps us understand the passage better. Scholars have proposed various explanations, many of which other scholars have found dissatisfying. Some hold that a later scribe accidentally inserted these lines into Paul's writings,<sup>26</sup> but many consider the textual evidence for this proposal too slender. Others think that churches, like synagogues, were segregated by gender, somehow making women's talk disruptive. This view falters on two counts: first, scholars debate when gender segregation began in synagogues; second, the Corinthian Christians met in homes, whose architecture would have rendered such segregation impossible. Some also suggest that Paul addresses women abusing the gifts of the Spirit, or a problem with judging prophecies. But while the context addresses these issues, Paul explicitly allows women to pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5). Ancient writers commonly used digressions, and the theme of church order is sufficient to unite this digression to its context.

I find another explanation more likely. Paul elsewhere *affirms* women's role in prayer and prophecy (1 Cor 11:5), and the only kind of speech he directly addresses in 14:34-36 is wives asking questions.<sup>27</sup> In ancient Greek and Jewish lecture settings, advanced students or educated people frequently interrupted public speakers with reasonable questions. Yet the culture had deprived most women of education and considered it rude for uneducated persons to slow down lectures with questions that betrayed their lack of training.<sup>28</sup> Raising the question of women's education in antiquity is not reading into the text. There is a reason why women *learning* is an issue in *both* 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12;

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<sup>26</sup> E.g., Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987), 699-705.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Kevin Giles, *Created Woman: A Fresh Study of the Biblical Teaching* (Acorn, 1985), 56.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., Plutarch *On Lectures* 4, 11, 13, 18, *Mor.* 39CD, 43BC, 45D, 48AB; compare t. Sanh. 7:10.

meanwhile, learning *quietly* was considered the appropriate way for *all* new learners to learn.

So, Paul provides a short-range solution: don't interrupt with questions; and a long-range solution: husbands should take a personal interest in their wives' learning and catch them up privately. As noted, most ancient husbands doubted their wives' intellectual potential, but Paul here supports their learning. By ancient standards, far from repressing these women, Paul was supporting them!<sup>29</sup>

This text cannot prohibit women announcing the word of the Lord (1 Cor 11:4-5), and *nothing* in the context here suggests that Paul specifically prohibits women from Bible teaching. The *only* passage in the entire Bible that one could directly cite against women teaching the Bible is 1 Tim 2:11-15.

### *In Quietness and Submission (1 Tim 2:11-15)*

In this passage, Paul might forbid women to teach and exercise authority (or teach in such a way as to exercise authority) over men. Most supporters of women ministering think that the latter expression means "usurp authority,"<sup>30</sup> something Paul would not want men to do any more than women, but the matter is disputed.<sup>31</sup> Yet even if the passage forbids women to "teach" or "exercise authority," it is the *only* passage in the Bible that does so (contrast Deborah as prophet-judge). And if this is Paul's universal practice, why does not Timothy, who has long ministered with Paul, already know about it?

More importantly, if this were a universal prohibition, it would make Paul look hypocritical – since he endorses the ministries of a number of his female friends elsewhere (Rom 16:1-7; Phil 4:2-3). Thus, he presumably addresses the specific situation in this community; because both Paul and his readers knew their situation and could take it for granted, the situation that elicited Paul's response is thus assumed in his intended meaning.

Paul's letters to Timothy in Ephesus provide us a glimpse of the situation: false teachers (1 Tim 1:6-7, 19-20; 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:17) were misleading the women (1 Tim 5:13;<sup>32</sup> 2 Tim 3:6-7) – presumably the most susceptible to false teaching because they had been granted the least education. This behaviour was bound to bring reproach on the church from a hostile society already convinced that Christians subverted the traditional roles of women and slaves.<sup>33</sup> *Is it just a*

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<sup>29</sup> For more detailed documentation, see Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 70-100; similarly, Ben Witherington, III, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, SNTSM 59 (Cambridge University, 1988), 90-104.

<sup>30</sup> See further discussion in Linda Belleville, "Lexical Fallacies in Rendering ἀθροεντεῖν in 1 Timothy 2:12: BDAG in Light of Greek Literary and Nonliterary Usage," *BBR* 29, no. 3 (2019): 317-41.

<sup>31</sup> For noteworthy arguments in favour of "exercise authority," see the articles in Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (Baker, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> The Greek expression for the women's activities here probably refers to spreading false teaching; see Gordon Fee, *1&2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1988), 122.

<sup>33</sup> Given Roman society's perception of Christians as a subversive cult, false teaching that undermined Paul's strategies for the church's public witness (see Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 139-56) could not be permitted (cf. 1 Tim 3:2, 7, 10; 5:7, 10, 14; 6:1;

coincidence that the one passage in the Bible that might exclude women from teaching the Bible appears in the one set of letters where false teachers were explicitly targeting women? So again, Paul provides a short-range solution: “Do not teach” (under the present circumstances); and a long-range solution: “Let them learn” (1 Tim 2:11).

Today we read “learn in silence” and think the emphasis lies on “silence.” That these women are to learn “quietly and submissively” may reflect their witness within society (these were characteristics normally expected of women). But ancient culture expected all beginning students (unlike advanced students) to learn silently; for that matter, the same word for “silence” here is applied to all Christians in the context (1 Tim 2:2). Paul specifically addresses this matter to women for the same reason he addresses the admonition to stop disputing to the men (v. 8): they are the groups involved in these issues in the Ephesian churches. Again, it appears that Paul’s long-range plan is to enable, not subordinate, the ministry of women. The issue is not gender but learning God’s Word.

What particularly causes some otherwise sympathetic scholars to question this otherwise logical case is Paul’s following argument, where he bases his case on the roles of Adam and Eve (1 Tim 2:13-14). Paul’s argument from the creation order here, however, is one of the very arguments he earlier used to contend that women should wear head coverings (1 Cor 11:7-9). In other words, Paul sometimes cited Scripture to make an ad hoc case for particular circumstances that he would not apply to all circumstances. His argument from Eve’s deception is even more likely to fit this category. If Eve’s deception prohibits all women from teaching, Paul would be claiming that all women, like Eve, are more easily deceived than all men. If, however, the deception does not apply to all women, neither does his prohibition of their teaching. Paul probably uses Eve to illustrate the situation of the unlearned women he addresses in Ephesus; but he elsewhere uses Eve for *anyone* who is deceived, not just women (2 Cor 11:3).<sup>34</sup>

Because we do not believe that Paul would have contradicted himself, Paul’s approval of the ministry of women in God’s Word elsewhere confirms that 1 Timothy 2:9-15 does not prohibit women’s ministry in all situations but addresses a particular situation.

Some have protested that women should not hold authority over men because men are the “head” of women. Aside from the many debates about the meaning of the Greek term “head” (for instance, some translate it as “source” instead of “authority over”),<sup>35</sup> Paul speaks only of the husband as head of his wife, not of the male gender as head of the female gender. Further, we Pentecostals and

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Titus 1:6; 2:1-5, 8, 10; cf. Alan Padgett, “The Pauline Rationale for Submission: Biblical Feminism and the *hina* Clauses of Titus 2:1-10,” *EQ* 59, no. 1 [1987] 52; David Verner, *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles*, SBLDS 71 [Scholars, 1983]).

<sup>34</sup> 1 Tim 2:15 may also qualify the preceding verses; see Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 118-20.

<sup>35</sup> With Gordon Fee, I suspect that ancient literature allows both uses of the term, but that Paul uses an image relevant in his day (see further, Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 32-36, 168).

charismatics affirm that the minister's authority is inherent in the minister's calling and ministry of the Word, not the minister's person. In this case, gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry – for us as it was for Paul.

Should we allow background to influence our understanding? Nearly everyone takes into account background and local situations when they read biblical texts<sup>36</sup> – although they sometimes do so selectively. To take examples just from two letters cited above, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy: do we all set aside money for the Jerusalem church each Sunday (1 Cor 16:2)? Do we all drink wine to solve our stomach problems (1 Tim 5:23), or are antacids allowed? Do our churches always support eligible widows, on the condition that they have washed the saints' feet (1 Tim 5:10)?

Expanding to 2 Timothy, how many of us have travelled to Troas, excavated there, and looked for Paul's cloak so we can bring it to him (2 Tim 4:13)? We of course recognise such a reading as absurd. We can learn principles from all texts – in that case, from the trusted mentor–mentee relationship between Paul and Timothy – but we cannot apply the text without taking into account the specific situation that it addresses. Why then do some interpreters press two passages that seem to mandate women's silence in church against the many other passages that support them speaking for God?

### Conclusion

Today we should affirm those whom God calls, whether male or female, and encourage them in faithfully learning God's Word. We need to affirm all potential labourers, both men and women, for the abundant harvest fields.

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<sup>36</sup> This is the reason I worked to supply it in my *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (InterVarsity, 2014).

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# **Response to Dr. Craig Keener’s “Paul Supported the Ministry of Women”**

Daniel Lim

## **Introduction**

Thank you, Dr. Keener, for the opportunity to engage with your excellent chapter. Your scholarly work is an invaluable gift to our generation. As a father of two daughters, I deeply resonate with the release of women into ministry and how the full participation of Spirit-gifted women is essential for the building of the global church and our Christian witness in the world.

In my response, I would like to offer three observations: first, Dr. Keener’s hermeneutical framework. Second, the theological and historical Pentecostal foundations on women in ministry. Lastly, I would like to highlight a few critical challenges faced by Pentecostal churches today.

## **Contextualising Pauline Advocacy and Prohibition**

First, Keener’s chapter pivots on contextualising Paul’s voice. He states that despite Paul’s conservative Jewish background, he followed Jesus’s example and demonstrated an exceptional level of support for women’s public ministry. Paul’s commendation of women in the concluding salutations in Romans 16:1-16 is evident as he names seven women alongside five men as co-labourers, calling them “women who work hard in the Lord” (v. 12).<sup>1</sup> These women bore significant leadership titles such as deacon, apostle, and prophet. In particular, Junia’s identification as a female apostle (v. 7) further solidifies the case for women holding foundational apostolic authority in early Christianity.<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, an Early Church father, writes, “To be an apostle is something great ... They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version. Peter Lampe and Marshall D. Johnson, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Continuum, 2003), 169.

<sup>2</sup> See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Bible Commentary 38B (Word, 1988), 895, where Dunn states that Junia is regarded as “one of the foundation apostles of Christianity [who] was a woman and wife.”

deemed worthy of the title of apostle.”<sup>3</sup> Keener prioritises these clear commendations of women over the debated restriction passages. This insight underscores his hermeneutical methodology – to interpret the ambiguous texts through the lens of the unambiguous.

Second, the two isolated restriction passages, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, are critically re-examined as pragmatic, short-term solutions addressing specific, cultural issues, and not universal bans on female speech or authority. The long-term solution in both contexts is not subordination but empowerment through education: “Let the woman learn in silence” (1 Tim 2:11, KJV). This reframes Paul’s instruction from a gender-based subordination to an act of nurturing informed participation. The “silence” described a posture of humility and readiness to learn, applicable to all believers, male and female, before God calls them to speak or lead.

### Our Pentecostal Foundations

The Pentecostal concept of women in ministry is rooted in the theological implications of Pentecost – restoration and new creation.<sup>4</sup> The Spirit’s outpouring in Acts 2:17-18 is explicitly egalitarian and inclusive: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy ... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Social theologian Doug Petersen characterises Pentecost as “a theological justification for diffusion of leadership, a division of labour”<sup>5</sup> where the Spirit dismantles restrictive social and gender inequality. The equality of male and female in Christ (Gal 3:28) affirms that sexual differentiation is no barrier to full participation in ministry. Women at Pentecost are liberated and their contributions affirmed as needful and valued alongside men.<sup>6</sup>

### Retracing Azusa Street

Historical early Pentecostalism attests to this egalitarian stance. Arising often from marginalised communities, the movement did not initially discriminate genders in ministry. Anyone “anointed by the Spirit” was free to preach, teach, prophesy, or pray for the sick.<sup>7</sup> The Azusa Street revival (1906-1909) serves as a powerful testament to a radical “embracive *koinonia*” where racial and gender lines were demolished not only at the pew level but at the pulpit; the racially

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 31 on Romans, Rom XVI ver. 7.* in *The Complete Works of the Church Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Public Domain, 2016), loc. 402133, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Doug Petersen, *Not by Might nor by Power: A Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern in Latin America* (Regnum, 1996), 130.

<sup>6</sup> MayLing Tan-Chow, *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-First Century: Engaging with Multi-Faith Singapore* (Ashgate, 2007), 136.

<sup>7</sup> Marius Nel, “Pentecostal Hermeneutical Considerations about Women in Ministry,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 43, no. 1 (2017): 122-37,

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/2126/1514>.

diverse leadership team at Azusa Street Mission, which included seven women elders and five men, serves as historical proof of a practical, lived egalitarianism.<sup>8</sup> With the accomplishment of the USA women's suffrage movement in 1920, women have served in almost every type of ministry position available. This Pentecostal legacy continued with women serving as missionaries, pastors, evangelists, and teachers.<sup>9</sup>

### Our Asian Pentecostal Roots

Early Pentecostalism in Asia also featured dynamic female leaders such as Pandita Ramabai, who led the Mukti Revivals in India (1905).<sup>10</sup> Dora Yu, a revivalist preacher in China, would also become the only Chinese woman invited to speak at the Keswick Convention in 1927.<sup>11</sup> Kong Mui Yee, a converted Hong Kong film actress, sparked a significant revival in 1963 that resulted in the birth of numerous independent Pentecostal churches.<sup>12</sup> Evangelist-turned-pastor, Naomi Dowdy, whose thirty-year tenure as the founding pastor of Trinity Christian Center, one of Singapore's largest Assemblies of God churches, demonstrates the practical acceptance of women as the spiritual authority in the highest pastoral role.<sup>13</sup> These examples remind us that the Spirit who once called women to rise within the restrictive Asian culture is still speaking. However, is the church still listening? Various ecclesial and cultural factors have left women subordinated under their husbands in their homes and under the leadership and authority of males in the churches.<sup>14</sup> I propose that the challenges facing Pentecostal women in ministry today are largely internal rather than external.

#### *Alignment with Non-Pentecostal Traditions*

As Pentecostal churches institutionalise, there is increasing alignment with North American evangelicalism, driven by the adoption of a more literalist, Bible-centred piety. This has resulted in the loss of our distinct Pentecostal witness. A

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<sup>8</sup> Tan-Chow, *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, 45-48. When asked about the results of the outpouring, William Seymour was quoted as saying, "The priority of love, i.e., embrace *koinonia*, is the definitive evidence ... that the love of God was to be demonstrated in unity across boundaries of colour and gender."

<sup>9</sup> Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 191-93.

<sup>10</sup> Shane Clifton, "Empowering Pentecostal Women," *Australasian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 12, no.2 (2009): 171-79, <https://aptspress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/09-2-Shane-Clifton.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Chow, "The Remarkable Story of China's 'Bible Women'", *Christianity Today*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2018/03/christian-china-bible-women/>.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Tan, "Singapore," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. van der Maas (Zondervan, 2002), 224-25.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret English de Alminana and Lois E. Olena, eds. *Women in Pentecostal and Charismatic Ministry: Informing a Dialogue on Gender, Church, and Ministry*, vol. 21 of *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* (Brill, 2017), 389-90.

<sup>14</sup> Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 191.

key consequence is the gradual alignment with evangelical complementarianism, leading to a perceptible “eroding and silencing of women’s voices.”<sup>15</sup> This alignment often adopts the flawed premise that women are permanently “deceived” (derived from Eve’s frailty mentioned in 1 Tim 2:14). This undermines Christ’s atonement and the Spirit’s outpouring in women as incomplete and relegates women to only certain ministry roles.<sup>16</sup> As Amos Yong contends, “Full salvation includes the redemption of women and of the fallen social structures that have conspired to prohibit women’s full realization of the image and calling of God in their lives.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, our refusal to welcome women’s full participation makes us complicit in this conspiracy.

### *Ambivalence in the Ordination of Women*

The institutionalisation of Pentecostalism has also been accompanied by a decline in the number of women in ministry and their subsequent marginalisation from positions of authority. With the rise of liberal hermeneutics carrying feminist undertones, conservative Pentecostals are drawn to adopt an evangelical, restrictive ministry model where women can be active as long as they *do not have authority over men* (1 Tim 2:12).<sup>18</sup> This understanding has led to pervasive “glass ceilings” for women ministers.<sup>19</sup> Gender gaps still exist in some contemporary Pentecostal churches that constitutionally limit women’s roles, permitting titles like “missionary” or “mother” but forbidding the title of “pastor” and demanding women to operate under the spiritual “covering” of a man should she “temporarily” pastor.<sup>20</sup> This inconsistency causes Pentecostal women to struggle to reconcile their call to ministry with the prevailing expectations of their times, their churches, and even their spouses.

### *Contextual Challenges of Traditions*

Contextual challenges of traditions in Asia are compounded by Confucian-influenced patriarchal and hierarchical traditions. The idea of men as “sky” and women as “earth” forces women to subordinate societal and ecclesial roles, often

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<sup>15</sup> Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 192.

<sup>17</sup> Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Yong, *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 193.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Wingfield, “Saddleback and Fern Creek Churches Face off against Al Mohler at SBC Meeting,” Baptist News Global, June 14, 2023,

<https://baptistnews.com/article/saddleback-and-fern-creek-churches-face-off-against-al-mohler-at-sbc-meeting/>. In upholding the decision to disavow Saddleback Church after they had ordained women pastors in top positions, Mohler said that “the clause affirms that women can work as assistant pastors, but, ‘there is no doubt that in the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul,’ that men and women’s roles are ‘not identical but complementary.’ ... ‘For nearly 2,000 years, Christian churches unanimously understood the preaching office as restricted to men,’ he said.”

<sup>20</sup> E. J. Dabney, *What It Means to Pray Through* (Church of God in Christ Publishing Board, 1987), 45.

restricting their identity to “wife” and “mother.”<sup>21</sup> Asian Pentecostals must recognise that many restrictive church traditions passed down are often conflated with our unredeemed culture and human prejudices. Therefore, the need for a revision of our church traditions is not a concession to culture but a reflection of biblical truth.<sup>22</sup>

### Pauline Advocacy for Asian Women in Ministry

The issue of women in ministry is not simply a matter of ethics or politics, whether secular or ecclesial; it is essentially theological.<sup>23</sup> Keener states, “The minister’s authority is inherent in the minister’s calling and ministry of the Word, not the minister’s person. In this case, gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry – for us as it was for Paul.”<sup>24</sup> How then, can we imitate Paul within the boundaries of Asian culture to advocate for women in ministry? I would like to offer two reflections:

First, we must safeguard our Pentecostal witness by constantly articulating the theological and pneumatological basis for women in ministry. The Pentecost event serves as a divine, “prophetic destabilizing voice” that transcends all traditional and cultural hierarchies.<sup>25</sup> Pentecost provides the theological authority to challenge our traditions and to promote women in ministry as a Kingdom ideal – not as a cultural preference.

Second, we need to critically examine and dismantle structural and cultural biases within our church governance that limit women’s access to authority. Like Paul, we can create advocacy and practical pathways for women’s ordination and placement at all levels. This involves the intentional use of positional authority in the church to open doors for the nurturing of female ministers and to allow their full release in their ministry giftings, letting their ministry fruit become the evidence of their divine calling.

### Conclusion

The whole biblical narrative reveals women’s crucial role in salvation history. The criterion for spiritual leadership is based not on gender, but on character, lifestyle, and the recognition of God’s calling and gifting for the flourishing of the church. Pentecostal ecclesiology requires us to have a renewed desire to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church today. Have we considered this

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<sup>21</sup> Julie Ma, “Women’s Leadership in Asia and Their Influence on Global Christianity,” in *Voices Loud & Clear*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum Books International, 2024), 228.

<sup>22</sup> Craig S. Keener, “Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian View,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. Linda L. Belleville and Craig L. Blomberg (Zondervan, 2001), 130-93.

<sup>23</sup> Tan-Chow, *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Craig S. Keener, “Paul Supported the Ministry of Women,” in *Asian Voices Amplified*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum, 2026), 289.

<sup>25</sup> R. M. Gabaitse, “Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Marginalisation of Women,” *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 114 (2015): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.7833/114-0-1043>.

question: why is the church comfortable with women leaders in the world, but hesitant to see them as leaders within its own walls? Perhaps it is time for both women and men, especially men, to listen, to “learn in silence,” and to restore women in ministry. Let the church embody that which was affirmed on the Day of Pentecost – to see female empowerment not as a loss of authority but as a participation in God’s justice and his ecclesial vision. May the “Marys” who sit at the feet of Jesus walk boldly in full pursuit of their calling as the Holy Spirit beckons them until the Lord returns.

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