

The Role of Women in the Church?

Throughout church history women have traditionally joyfully served our Lord in supportive roles in keeping with their God-given purposes. Although women are seen in the Bible as wives and mothers the feminist movement has been successful in influencing many women to abandon God's plan for their life. Unfortunately, this harmful philosophy has infiltrated the church creating confusion regarding their roles both in ministry and in the home.

What can we learn from the women in the Old Testament?

The Bible begins by placing both sexes on equal ground. Beginning in Genesis, God's creation account stresses that both men and women are created equal in God's image (Gen. 1:27). As spiritual beings both men and women are considered absolute equal.

Despite this equality, there are differences in their God-given functions and responsibilities. In Genesis chapter 2, we are told that God created Adam first and Eve later for the specific purpose of being Adam's helper. Although Eve was equal, her function as a woman would be carried out in submission to her husband. Although the word "helper" carries very positive connotations, even being used of God Himself as the helper of Israel (Deut. 33:7; Ps. 33:2, it still describes someone in a relationship of service to another. The primary responsibility of wives to submit to their husbands was determined at creation, even before the fall of the human race. The earliest books of the Bible establish both the equality of man and women and also the support role of the wife (Exod. 21:15, 17, 28-31; Num. 5:19-20, 29; 6:2; 30:1-16).

Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's command not to eat of the tree resulted in certain consequences (Gen. 3:16-19). For the woman, God pronounced a curse that related to her God-given domain in the home and with her family. It included multiplied pain in childbirth and tension in the authority-submission relationship of husband and wife. Genesis 3:16 says the woman's "desire" will be for her husband but he shall "rule" over her. In Genesis 4:7 the author uses the same word "desire" to mean "excessive control over." Thus, the curse in Genesis 3:16 refers to a new desire on the part of the woman to exercise control over her husband by usurping his authority, but he will in fact oppressively rule and exert authority over her. Their disobedience and God's response of judgment would set in motion an ongoing struggle between the sexes, with women seeking control and men seeking dominance.

Were women leaders in the Old Testament?

Throughout the Old Testament, women were active in the religious life of Israel, but generally they were not leaders. Women like Deborah (Judges 4) were clearly an exception and not the rule. Isaiah 3:12 indicates that God allowed women to rule as part of His judgment on the sinning nation of Israel. Women never had an ongoing prophetic ministry. For example, no woman was ever a priest. No queen ever ruled Israel. No woman ever wrote an Old Testament (or New Testament) book.

How did Jesus Christ feel about women?

In the midst of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures, which considered women with contempt, Jesus showed love and great respect to women. Though Jewish rabbis did not teach women and the Jewish Talmud said it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman, Jesus never took the position that women, by their very nature, could not understand spiritual or theological truth. He not only included them in His audiences but also used illustrations and images that would be familiar to them (Matt. 13:33, 22:1-2; 24:41; Luke 15:8-10) and specifically applied His teaching to them (Matt 10:34ff.) To the Samaritan women at the well (John 4), He revealed that He was the Messiah and discussed with her topics such as eternal life and the nature of true worship. He also taught Mary and when admonished by Martha, pointed out the priority of learning spiritual truth even over “womanly” responsibilities like serving guests in one’s home (Luke 10:38).

Although men of Jesus’ day normally would not allow women to count change into their hands for fear of physical contact, Jesus touched women to heal them and allowed women to touch Him (Luke 13:10ff; Mark 5:25ff.). Jesus even allowed a small group of women to travel with him and his disciples (Luke 8:1-3), an unprecedented occurrence at that time. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and sent her to announce His resurrection to the disciples (John 20:1-18), despite the fact that women were not allowed to be witnesses in Jewish courts because they were considered liars.

Through our Lord’s treatment of women, He raised their station in life and showed them compassion and respect in a way they had never known. This clearly demonstrated their equality as God’s creation. At the same time, however, Jesus still did not exalt women to a place of leadership over men.

What do the New Testament Epistles say about women?

In the Epistles, the two principles of equality and submission for women exist side by side. Galatians 3:28 points to equality, indicating that the way of salvation is the same for both men and women and that they are members of equal standing in the body of Christ. It tells us “neither male nor female” are different because “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” It did not eradicate all the difference in responsibilities for men and women. This passage does not cover every aspect of God’s design for male and female.

What does Scripture say about women’s role in the family?

While Christian marriage is to involve mutual love and submission between two believers (Eph. 5:21), four passages in the New Testament expressly give to wives the responsibility to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18, Titus 2:5, 1 Pet. 3:1). The voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. It is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife’s equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ love the church (Eph. 5:25) and to serve as the leader in a relationship of two equals.

While husbands and fathers have been given the primary responsibility for the leadership of their children (Eph. 6:4, Col. 3:21, 1 Tim 3:4-5), wives and mothers are urged to be “workers at home” (1 Titus 2:5), meaning managers of the household. Their home and their children are to be their priority, in contrast to the world’s emphasis today on careers and fulltime jobs for women outside the home. Some use the Proverbs 31 woman to justify careers outside the home, the vast majority of her work was done inside her household. She did go to the town to sell her products, however, the context clearly emphasizes her responsibility to her husband, children, and ruling her domain of the home.

What role do women have in the New Testament Church?

From the very beginning, women fulfilled a vital role in the Christian church (Acts 1:12-14; 9:36-42; 16:213-15; 17:1-4, 10-12; 18:1-2, 24-28; Rom. 16; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 1:5, 4:19), but not one of leadership. The apostles were all men; the chief missionary activity was done by men; the writing of the New Testament was the work of men. The leaders of the church (Deacons, Elders) were entrusted to men.

Although the Apostle Paul respected women and worked side by side with them for the furtherance of the gospel (Rom. 16; Phil. 4:3), he appointed no female as pastors. In his letters, he urged that men were to be the leaders in the church and that women were not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). Therefore, although women are spiritual equals with men and the ministry of women is essential to the body of Christ, women are excluded from leadership over men in the church.

Men and women stand as equals before God, both bearing the image of God Himself. However, without making one inferior to the other, God calls upon both men and women to fulfill the roles and responsibilities specifically designed for them, a pattern that can be seen even in the Godhead (1 Cor. 11:3). In fulfilling the divinely given roles taught in the New Testament, women are able to realize their full potential because they are following the plan of their own Creator and Designer. Only in obedience to Him and His design will women truly be able, in the fullest sense, to give glory to God.