

Women, Authority, and Leadership in the New Testament

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Women, Authority, and Leadership in the New Testament

I. Introduction

The question of women pastors, women preachers, and women in church leadership is not a question of intelligence, devotion, or usefulness. Scripture honors women as disciples, servants, teachers, and examples of faith. The issue is authority—who is authorized by God to lead the church, teach with authority over men in the assembly, and exercise oversight. When the world argues from feelings, fairness, and culture, God argues from creation, command, and apostolic order. We do not get to re-draw lines God drew. We either submit to the teaching of Christ or we go beyond it.

“Whoever goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God” (2 John 9, NASB 1995). That one sentence kills the modern method: “I think,” “I feel,” “it seems fair,” “times have changed.” The question is not what we can get away with. The question is what God has authorized.

II. Women Pastors

A. The New Testament office of shepherd

In the New Testament, the local church is overseen by elders—also called overseers and shepherds. Paul called for the elders of Ephesus and then told them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Peter speaks the same way: “I exhort the elders... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight” (1 Peter 5:1–2). This is not a vague “leadership vibe.” This is a defined work: oversight, shepherding, guarding, watching souls, guiding the flock.

That office carries authority. Hebrews says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17). That is not talking about informal influence. That is spiritual oversight. A “pastor” in the New Testament sense is a shepherd—an elder.

B. Qualifications and the language of the office

God did not leave the qualifications of elders open to preference. He nailed them down. “An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife...” (1 Timothy 3:2). Titus is even more direct: “If any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife...” (Titus 1:6). The Spirit did not say “spouse of one spouse.” He said “husband.” This is not grammar games. The qualifications match the work: leadership in the home and leadership in the church are connected. The man who is to shepherd must first demonstrate godly leadership at home (1 Timothy 3:4–5; Titus 1:6).

And elders must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Titus adds: “holding fast the faithful word... so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). Shepherding is not just administration. It is doctrinal protection. The office involves public teaching and correction with authority.

So when someone says “women can be pastors,” they are not asking for a harmless title change. They are asking to place women into an office that Scripture defines as male, qualified in ways Scripture states as male, and required to exercise authority and teaching within the flock.

C. Creation-grounded order, not culture

The popular escape hatch is “that was cultural.” But Paul does not ground the order in Greco-Roman culture. He grounds it in creation. In the key passage on authority in teaching, Paul says, “For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13). That is not Corinth. That is Genesis. And creation order is not a local custom. The same is true in 1 Corinthians 11: “Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:3). Paul anchors headship in a chain that reaches into the Godhead. Culture did not invent that.

If culture can cancel creation order, then the door is open for culture to cancel anything it dislikes. That is not Christianity. That is surrender.

III. Women Preachers

A. Women are commanded to teach in authorized settings

Scripture plainly authorizes women teaching. Titus commands older women to be “teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women...” (Titus 2:3–5). Timothy’s faith was shaped by his grandmother and mother (2 Timothy 1:5), and he was taught Scripture from childhood (2 Timothy 3:14–15). Women taught privately, too. Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos

aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). That is teaching. It is approved teaching.

So the argument is not “women must never teach.” That is false. The argument is about teaching that carries authority over men in the assembly.

B. The line God draws on teaching and authority over men

Paul states it plainly: “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Timothy 2:12). The world hates how direct that is. But Scripture is not embarrassed. The Spirit links teaching and authority in the assembly context. This is not about a woman knowing something. It is about a woman exercising an authoritative teaching role over men in the public worship setting where the church is being instructed and governed by the word.

Paul then grounds it, again, not in local tradition but in creation (1 Timothy 2:13). That means the rule is not temporary. It is rooted.

Some try to narrow the verse to “no abusive teaching.” But the text does not say “abusive.” It says “teach or exercise authority.” Others try to reduce it to “no women teaching at all.” But Titus 2 and Acts 18 will not allow that. Scripture draws a line: women teach in many vital settings; women do not teach as authoritative leaders over men in the assembly.

C. Preaching as authoritative proclamation in the assembly

Preaching in the assembly is not casual conversation. It is authoritative proclamation of doctrine and application, binding the conscience only insofar as it is faithful to Scripture (2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:15). In the assembly, preaching functions as public instruction and exhortation—work that ties directly to the teaching authority and governance God assigned to qualified men.

That is why the New Testament pattern is consistent: men lead the assembly instruction. When Paul describes the assembly order in 1 Corinthians 14, he commands that everything be done “properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Corinthians 14:40). In that same context he addresses women’s speaking in ways that would overturn the order (1 Corinthians 14:34–35). The point is not that women have nothing to contribute. The point is that God assigned public, authoritative teaching and governance of the church to men.

IV. Women in Church Leadership Roles

A. Service and influence in the early church

Women were not sidelined in the New Testament. They served with strength and impact. Phoebe is called “a servant of the church” (Romans 16:1–2). Women labored in the gospel (Philippians 4:3). They supported the work, strengthened disciples, encouraged saints, and taught the word in proper settings.

But none of those texts place women into church rule.

B. Leadership of service versus governance and rule

Scripture distinguishes influence from oversight. Many can influence; few are authorized to oversee. Elders “rule” (1 Timothy 5:17). They exercise “oversight” (1 Peter 5:2). They guard doctrine (Titus 1:9). They watch for souls (Hebrews 13:17). Those are governmental responsibilities in the church, not merely helpful tasks.

Women lead through faithful service, teaching where authorized, and godly example. That is real leadership. But it is not the same thing as taking the overseer’s office or the assembly’s authoritative teaching role.

C. What women did and did not do in the New Testament pattern

Here is what the New Testament shows:

- Women taught other women (Titus 2:3–5).
- Women taught privately with their husbands (Acts 18:26).
- Women labored for the gospel (Philippians 4:3).
- Women served the church (Romans 16:1–2).

Here is what the New Testament does not show:

- A woman serving as an elder/pastor.
- A woman ruling a church.
- A woman preaching as the authoritative instructor over the assembly.

If we respect Bible authority, absence matters. We do not build new offices and call it progress.

V. Gender Roles in the New Testament

A. Equality of worth and distinction of role

Galatians 3:28 teaches equal access to salvation and covenant standing in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek... neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” That is

about who can be saved and who inherits the promises. It is not a blueprint for church offices.

If Galatians 3:28 erases functional roles, then it erases every distinction God gives—parent/child, citizen/government, elder/member. But the New Testament repeatedly teaches role distinctions while affirming equal worth before God.

B. Headship as a Bible principle

Headship is not hatred. It is order. “Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:3). That is the Spirit’s order. And note the highest example: Christ submits to the Father. Submission does not equal inferiority. It equals order.

C. Submission without inferiority

The Son is not less than the Father in divine nature, yet He submits (John 5:19; 1 Corinthians 15:28). That proves the principle: submission can exist within equality of worth. When Scripture calls for women to accept God’s order in the assembly, it is not saying women are lesser. It is saying God is Lord and His arrangement stands.

VI. Answering Modern Arguments

A. Junia

Romans 16:7 is a favorite text: “Greet Andronicus and Junias... who are outstanding among the apostles.” Two points must be kept straight.

First, the text does not say Junia was one of the apostles. The phrase can mean they were “well known to the apostles,” or “highly regarded among the apostles.” The wording allows the idea that apostles knew and respected them, not that they held the apostolic office.

Second, even if someone insists Junia was a woman, that still does not create authority to place women into the office of elder/pastor or into authoritative teaching over men in the assembly. Scripture does not build church order on one disputed phrase. It builds order on repeated commands and qualifications (1 Timothy 2–3; Titus 1; 1 Corinthians 14).

If Junia were an apostle in the same sense as the Twelve and Paul, then she would have had to meet apostolic qualifications tied to eyewitness testimony of the risen Christ and direct commissioning, and that would overturn the consistent pattern of the New Testament. The safer, text-driven reading is that Andronicus and Junia were well known and respected by the apostles as faithful workers.

B. Deaconesses in the New Testament

The New Testament has an office of deacons (1 Timothy 3:8–13). The question is whether Scripture authorizes women to hold that office.

Romans 16:1 calls Phoebe a “servant” of the church. That word can mean a servant generally, or it can be used for the role of a deacon in certain contexts. But the text does not prove she held an office identical to the male deacon role described in 1 Timothy 3.

1 Timothy 3 presents deacons with qualifications that include “husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12), which points to male office-holders. The passage also speaks of “women” in verse 11, which can be read as either deacons’ wives or women who served in a supporting capacity. Regardless of how one takes verse 11, the office qualifications given to deacons include male-specific language.

The New Testament absolutely recognizes women servants doing vital work for the church, including service that supports widows, families, and saints (Romans 16; 1 Timothy 5). But “women servants” is not the same thing as “women holding the office with governing authority.” Scripture gives the office qualifications. We do not expand them.

C. The gift argument

A common argument is: “Some women have been given the gift of public speaking, the gift of leadership, the gift of counseling, the gift of pastoring. God gifted them, so the church should recognize it.”

Two things have to be said plainly.

First, gifting is not the same as authorization. A person can be talented and still be unauthorized to hold a role. A man may be persuasive, but if he is not qualified, he cannot be an elder (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). Ability does not overrule qualification.

Second, Scripture teaches that roles in the assembly are regulated by God’s order, not by who has the most skill. “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man” (1 Timothy 2:12). The text does not say “unless she is gifted.” It lays down a boundary. The same principle applies to worship patterns: not everything that seems effective is authorized.

God absolutely uses women mightily. He also gives women real strengths: teaching, counseling, discipling, mercy, wisdom, organization, courage. The church should put those strengths to work in every authorized place: teaching women (Titus 2), teaching children (2 Timothy 3), private instruction (Acts 18:26), personal evangelism, hospitality, service, and strengthening families. But gifting never grants permission to take an office or a function God restricted.

D. Some men do not want to lead, so women are forced into leadership

This is real life, and it is shameful. When men will not lead, the church suffers, families suffer, and women get overloaded. But sin and laziness do not change God's order.

If men refuse responsibility, the solution is not to overturn Scripture. The solution is to call men to repentance and growth. God holds men accountable for spiritual leadership in the home (Ephesians 5:25–27) and expects qualified men to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–3). If there are no qualified men, the answer is not to appoint unqualified men or to replace the office with women pastors. The answer is to build men—teach, train, discipline, and develop them—until qualified leadership exists.

Emergency does not authorize innovation. Shortage does not create a new law. When people argue, “We have to do it,” they are admitting they are acting without authorization. Necessity is not authority.

E. Education and silence

Some claim women were restricted because they were uneducated. Scripture refutes that. Women clearly learned doctrine and taught it (Acts 18:26; Titus 2:3–5). The restriction is not about intelligence. It is about authority in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:12).

F. Deborah and narrative arguments

Deborah was a judge in Israel (Judges 4–5), but that is a national, civil leadership context during a time of crisis. Narrative describes what happened; it does not automatically authorize what should happen in the church. The church is governed by apostolic teaching, not by pulling isolated narratives out of Israel's history and using them to rewrite New Testament order.

G. Spiritual gifts and role boundaries

Some appeal to spiritual gifts: “Women prophesied, therefore women can preach today.” But even in the age of prophecy, order remained. Women could prophesy, yet headship was still taught and required (1 Corinthians 11:3–5). Gifts never erased order. And gifts were not permanent (1 Corinthians 13:8–10). The presence of a gift never gave permission to overturn God's structure.

H. Galatians 3:28 cancels roles

Galatians 3:28 does not cancel roles any more than it cancels marriage roles, parental roles, or civil roles. It teaches equal standing in Christ. Order in the assembly is taught elsewhere with equal clarity (1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

I. Love and gifting override order

Love never authorizes disobedience. Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). The church does not honor women by giving them unauthorized roles. The church honors women by honoring God’s word and encouraging women to serve powerfully in every place God authorizes.

J. Culture changed, so the rule changed

Scripture does not hand doctrine to culture for revision. Paul grounds the order in creation (1 Timothy 2:13). Creation did not change. God did not revise His structure because the modern West is offended.

VII. The Silence of Scripture and Bible Authority

A. Abiding in the teaching of Christ

The dividing line is 2 John 9: remain within the teaching of Christ. When the Bible authorizes a thing, we can do it. When the Bible is silent, we do not invent permission.

B. No authorization for women pastors

There is no command authorizing women elders. There is no example of women elders. There is no necessary implication that women may serve as shepherds. The qualifications and the work consistently describe men (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–3).

C. No example of women ruling churches

The New Testament assigns church oversight to elders who rule well (1 Timothy 5:17). It never assigns that work to women. That absence is not an accident. It is pattern.

D. Silence does not give permission

To treat silence as permission is to create a new religion. Faith respects what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6). When people demand women pastors, they are demanding what Scripture does not authorize. That is not courage. That is presumption.

VIII. Conclusion

God's design is not a punishment. It is protection and order. It honors Christ's headship, preserves peace in the assembly, and keeps the church from being governed by the spirit of the age. Women are essential to the strength of the church—teaching, serving, evangelizing, counseling, building families, and strengthening saints. But the church cannot honor women by dishonoring God's authority. When Scripture draws a line, faith does not smudge it. Faith submits.

“Let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment” (1 Corinthians 14:37).