

Exploring Scripture: Women & Eldership - Session 3

Intro

In our previous sessions, we examined God's design for humanity in creation, the effects of the Fall, and God's work of restoration throughout Scripture. We've also seen how God called and equipped women for leadership throughout the Old Testament, how Jesus elevated women beyond the cultural limitations of his day, and how women served in ministry in the early church.

This week, we'll focus on four passages from Paul's letters to specific early church communities that speak to women's involvement in the church, its mission, and its worship. These passages have been interpreted in varying ways throughout church history and continue to be central to discussions about women in church leadership today.

Reading Paul's letters requires careful attention to their historical, cultural, and literary context. Epistles (letters) were written to specific communities with particular messages for their context, to build them up and encourage them, to help them navigate a challenge, to help them apply the gospel to their situation as a newly forming church family. Paul wasn't writing systematic theology but rather addressing specific people, often people he knew well and dearly loved, and offering pastoral guidance rooted in gospel principles. This is even more the case in the pastoral epistles (1&2 Timothy, Titus) which were written to individual church leaders close to Paul. Understanding this will help us discern how and when Paul is drawing on universal principles from the narrative arc of Scripture and pastorally applying them to specific situations. As you read different interpretations, remember that our goal is not to pick the view that feels most comfortable, but to seek the one that best reflects the gospel story, honors the biblical text, and builds up the church.

As we continue our discernment journey together, let's remember our commitment to respectful dialogue, careful study, and unity in Christ. Even as we may arrive at different interpretations, we remain one body seeking God's wisdom together.

Session 3: Paul's Letters - Understanding Women's Roles in the Early Church

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Creation, Fall, Restoration and God's Design for the Church	Women Breaking the Mold - Called by God Throughout Scripture	Paul's Letters - Understanding Women's Roles in the Early Church	Elders in the Early Church & Discernment

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we study the writings of your servant Paul, grant us wisdom and discernment. Help us understand the cultural context of his day while seeking the timeless principles that apply to our lives today.

Guide us by your Spirit as we seek to be faithful to your Word and your calling. May our study deepen our love for you and for one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Readings

- Galatians 3:25-29
- 1 Corinthians 11:2-16
- 1 Corinthians 14:26-40
- 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Part 1: Reading Paul's Letters in Context

Paul's Missionary Approach

Paul had an incredible ministry! He was tasked by God to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, doing the groundbreaking work once dreamed of by Old Testament prophets - he is at the forefront of an incredible part of God's redemption plan for the world!

This made his life and ministry exciting, dangerous, and very messy. He was seeing the gospel bring together new communities of poor and rich, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, women and men. They learned how to worship together, share their lives with one another, support each other, and proclaim the gospel to the world together. Paul's wisdom was vital to these communities as they lived out their new identities. This joyful life they shared is the context into which Paul offers instruction.

Paul's primary goal was for the new communities across the Roman world to embody the gospel, even as that gospel challenged the values and practices of their cities. As we saw in Session 1 with Ephesians, Paul often engaged with existing cultural structures, such as the Roman household code, while subtly transforming them through gospel principles. This allowed new believers to remain in their society while blessing it through the redeeming power of the gospel.

The Challenge of Reading Letters

When we read Paul's letters, we're listening to one side of a conversation. We don't know all the specific questions or concerns Paul was addressing, the cultural practices assumed by both writer and readers, or the common knowledge shared between Paul and his audience.

This means we must carefully reconstruct the context as best we can, using context clues within the passage, other references in Scripture, and other historical and literary resources we have, before drawing conclusions about Paul's teaching. This is actually quite fun! And a very rewarding part of Bible study that can help passages of Scripture come alive to us as we understand the story behind the letters and appreciate the writing all the more. In turn, practicing this process helps us learn to discern God's will and wisdom for many kinds of situations that we face which are unique to our time and place.

Reflection Questions:

1. Think about letters or emails you've written to address specific situations. Have you had the experience of being misunderstood? Imagine someone in the year 4050 got ahold of your letter or email. What process or steps would you recommend they take to ensure they accurately understand your letter?

2. What helpful practices can we adopt when reading Paul's letters to understand his message clearly?
3. If Paul's goal was establishing gospel-centered communities in diverse cultural contexts, how might that shape our understanding of his instructions about church practice?

Part 2: Paul's Vision of New Creation Community

Read Galatians 3:25-29

Galatians opens dramatically with Paul's astonishment that this new community of Christ followers were so quickly influenced by a group insisting that Gentile Christians needed to follow Jewish law to be fully accepted. Paul's response is a stirring and passionate insistence that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection opened the way for Gentiles to be part of the family of God. Unity comes through faith in Christ and God's grace, not by adding requirements like circumcision. He fears these requirements undermine the sufficiency of Christ's work. He concludes that the gospel of grace breaks down barriers and hostilities that separate people from full inclusion in God's family. Interestingly, in Acts 16:1-3, Paul has Timothy circumcised.

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Imagine yourself in ancient Galatia. Based on what you know about the Roman world of the first century, how do you think this statement would be received and how might it shape your Christian community? If you are stuck, think about practical matters of running your house church and issues of identity and status.

How then do gospel-shaped communities look different to those in the world around us?

If this passage represents Paul's fundamental view of men and women in Christ, how might this perspective shape our understanding of his specific instructions in other letters?

How does this passage connect with the creation and restoration themes we explored in Session 1?

Part 3: Women in Worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

The Corinthian church was situated in a cosmopolitan, honor/shame, patriarchal and sexually permissive culture. Many issues Paul addresses in this letter relate to how this new Christian community should distinguish itself from surrounding culture while still engaging with it effectively, speaking to tensions between Christian freedom, gospel contextualization, and cultural propriety. In this particular passage, Paul addresses proper decorum in worship, focusing on head coverings for women and proper hair length for men.

What elements of this passage do you find tricky to understand?

Some readers see Paul concerned with maintaining hierarchy. Others see him primarily concerned with appropriate cultural expressions of worship. What do you think Paul's main concern is in this passage? One of those, or something else?

Notice vs 5, where Paul addresses women who pray and prophesy in the worship gathering. How does this fit with our reading of Joel 2 and Acts 2 over the past two weeks?

Scholars have long and vigorously debated the meaning of "head" (kephalē) in vs 3. In Greek, this word can mean "authority over", "source/origin," "prominent/honorable," or other nuances between all of these. (Think how many definitions there are of the word head in English!) How might each interpretation change our understanding of this passage? The verse encourages us to meditate on Christ as our head so consider how he used his authority/prominence/position in the world.

In verses 8-15, Paul appeals to both the creation order and natural interdependence between men and women. How does he draw on the Genesis story here and what does it have to do with hair and head coverings? What do you think he wants to see change about their worship?

What do verses 11-12 contribute to our understanding of the relationship between men and women in Christ? How might these verses give context to enhance our understanding of verses 3-10?

Part 4: Order in Worship (1 Corinthians 14:26-40)

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Similar to the passage above, this passage is part of a section addressing disorderly worship practices in Corinth. He identifies three disorderly practices, each with an instruction for silence (sigaō): 1) vs28 silence regarding speaking in tongues when no interpreter is present, 2) vs30 silence when multiple prophets are speaking in a church gathering, and 3) vs34-35 silence regarding women making inquiries during the church gathering.

What appears to you to be the main concern of this chapter? Paul ends with "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (v. 40). What do verses 39 and 40 suggest about his primary concern? What principles seem to be guiding Paul's instructions?

In verses 34-35, Paul instructs women to be silent in the churches. How do we reconcile this with his earlier instructions that women wear head coverings when they pray and prophesy in church (11:5)? What might this tell us about the specific situation he's addressing?

How does "everything done to build up" vs26 mirror the heart of the gospel? How does a worship space of mutual submission, listening, and peace reflect the restored community God is building?

How might principles of order and mutual edification apply to our church today, beyond our position on women's roles? What other situations or groups might these principles relate to in our context?

Part 5: Teaching and Authority (1 Timothy 2:8-15)

As we turn our attention to 1 Timothy 2:8-15, we face what many consider to be one of the most challenging passages in the New Testament. This text has generated significant debate throughout church history and continues to be a focal point in discussions about men's and women's roles in the church. When approaching this passage, we must acknowledge that nearly every verse contains words, phrases, and concepts that can be interpreted in different ways. Words like "permit," "teach," "exercise authority," and even the reference to "childbearing" have multiple possible meanings, and scholars of equal commitment to Scripture have arrived at different conclusions.

In this session, we'll give room for several interpretive options for key verses, with the understanding that any interpretation we choose must form a coherent whole—not just within this passage, but also within Paul's broader teaching and the full testimony of Scripture. Rather than jumping immediately to verse 12

(the most contested verse), we'll work our way through some of the challenging verses first, considering their historical and literary context, especially in light of the false teaching crisis occurring in Ephesus where women were being particularly targeted (2 Tim 3:6-7). As we proceed, remember that our goal is not to isolate individual verses but to synthesize the entire passage in a way that honors both the immediate context of Paul's letter to Timothy and the broader biblical witness to women in ministry that we explored in Session 2.

Read 1 Timothy 2:8-15

The letters to Timothy address a specific situation in Ephesus, where Paul left Timothy to combat false teaching (1 Tim 1:3-4) and a quarrelsome culture (1 Tim 2:8, 3:3, 6:4, 2 Tim 2:14-24). Throughout these letters, Paul identifies specific false teachers by name who had "shipwrecked their faith" (1 Tim 1:19-20) and were teaching that "the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Tim 2:17-18). Women were particularly vulnerable to this false teaching, with Paul noting that these teachers were "worming their way into homes and gaining control over gullible women" (2 Tim 3:6-7). The situation was complicated by other issues Paul addresses: younger widows becoming "idle" and "busybodies, saying things they ought not to" (1 Tim 5:13), some forbidding marriage (1 Tim 4:3), and wealthy believers displaying their status inappropriately (1 Tim 2:9, 6:17-19). This context from within the letters helps us understand what issues Paul is addressing.

What specific behaviors does Paul instruct for both men vs 8 and women vs 9-10 in this passage? How might these relate to specific cultural issues in Ephesus?

The Greek word for "quiet" (hēsuchia) in vs 11 and vs 12 is the same word used for "quiet lives" in vs 2. It often describes a peaceable demeanor rather than absolute silence. How might this nuance affect our interpretation? How might it relate to the context?

Verses 11-12 have been interpreted in several different ways, here are two:

- As establishing a universal principle prohibiting women from teaching or having authority over men in the church
- As addressing a specific situation in Ephesus where women without access to formal education were being influenced by false teachers

What contextual factors from 1 Timothy might support each interpretation?

From a modern Western perspective, what often stands out in vs 11 is the instruction for women to be quiet, but from a Greco-Roman perspective, since formal religious education was typically denied to women the stand out element would likely have been Paul's instruction for women to learn! How does this historical context help you consider Paul's primary concerns and objectives in this passage? What might this suggest about Paul's vision for the church?

Paul references the order of creation and deception (vs. 13-14) to support his instruction. Here, some see Paul establishing enduring principles based on creation order. Others see Paul using Adam and Eve as an illustration of a parallel situation, (a woman being deceived by a false teacher and sharing this false teaching with others) noting that when the snake deceived Eve, Adam missed an opportunity to offer a correct understanding of God's command, which he had been privy to before she was made. How do you understand the purpose of this reference? Is Paul focussing on hierarchy? Is he comparing women deceived by false teachers who then pass on this false teaching to the deception story in Genesis 3? Or is he doing something else entirely? How might different understandings of this appeal to creation affect our interpretation of the scope and application of Paul's instruction?

What questions do you have about v15? It is challenging to interpret. Are there meanings you can eliminate based on the testimony of the rest of Scripture?

These verses present many interpretive choices to us. How do you now synthesize the passage as a whole? How does it fit within the context of 1 Timothy, Paul's wider writing, and the overall arc of scripture?

Application Questions

1. How might our understanding of the big Bible story of creation, fall, and restoration (Session 1) help us interpret these passages about women?
2. How does your understanding of Paul's teaching in these passages compare with what we noticed about the practice of the early church in Session 2?
3. If Paul were writing to our church today, what cultural influences might he address? How might he leverage the same gospel principles and the big story of the Bible to address those issues?

4. Many interpreters follow the principle that clearer biblical passages should help us understand more difficult ones, however, people debate which passages are clearer!
 - a. Which passages about women in ministry from our sessions so far seem most clear to you?
 - b. How might the clearer passages help inform your understanding of the challenging ones?
5. When facing apparent tensions between different biblical passages on women's roles, what approach helps you maintain both interpretive consistency and respect for the whole of Scripture?
6. As our church considers whether women will serve as elders, what principles from Paul's letters seem most relevant to this decision? How do these interact with what we've learned in previous sessions?