

# Small Group Study

## The Role of Women in Church

From the sermon series, "Living a Christ-Centered Life"



*"Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time." Judges 4:4*

### SCRIPTURE

Have volunteers read the following scripture and introduction:

**1 Timothy 2:12**

**INTRODUCTION** *(Adapted from the book, "Ten Lies The Church Tells Women" by J. Lee Grady)*

Gender bias runs deep in the church and has historically prevented women from fulfilling their leadership call. It's time to dispel the myths about the role of women. Let's open our eyes to what the Bible really says.

When delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting gathered in 1929, leaders agreed to allow the president of the Women's Missionary Union (WMU) to address their group for the first time. But when she stood to speak, a number of male delegates got up from their chairs and stormed out of the room in protest. They caused such a commotion that the Baptists were forced to hammer out an odd compromise: They decided that the WMU

president could only speak if she gave her report in a Sunday school room rather than in the main hall.

The reason for this uproar was that certain male clergy were afraid that by allowing a woman to speak from a pulpit, she would violate what they called "the dictum of St. Paul"--the apostle Paul's directive in 1 Timothy 2:12 in which he prohibits women from having "authority over a man (NASB)." It isn't clear why this poor WMU president did not exercise as much authority over her male audience when she spoke in a smaller room. In fact, what the Baptists did in this case was irrational. The same can be said for how much of the church-world today views the issue of women in spiritual authority.

### Icebreakers

*Use the questions below to help people open up and to focus your meeting. It is very helpful to go around in a circle with the leader going first. (Remember if you have new members or guests you should take time to introduce everyone.)*

1. Apart from your mom or your wife (if married), who is the greatest woman you have ever met? In what areas was she special or a leader?
2. If you could meet any woman in history, who would you meet and what would you ask her?
3. What is the best piece of advice your mother ever gave you?



Today, because so many Christians have viewed 1 Timothy 2:12 ("I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man") as a universal injunction--to be applied to all churches at all times--we have cultivated a bizarre fear of strong women who preach or teach. This is a strange view indeed, for three reasons:

**First**, we know from Scripture that women held the office of prophet under the Old Covenant, and that under the New Covenant the apostle Paul himself placed women in positions of authority in the early church, even at a time when females in secular society were barred from pursuing education or leadership roles.

**Second**, the Bible challenges men and women alike to be strong and courageous in their faith and in their response to the Great Commission. There is no reason to assume that Jesus only intended males to evangelize the world. Both men and women are called to "go" and to "teach." Timidity is never portrayed as a virtue in the Scriptures, for either gender.

**Third**, the history of Christianity is full of examples of strong, godly women who achieved remarkable breakthroughs for the kingdom of God. To say that women should not display spiritual strength or do exploits in the name of Jesus is to discredit everything that Christian women have done throughout history to further the gospel.

If we want to stake a claim that women shouldn't lead the church, are we prepared to say that everything women have done to expand the kingdom of God was a mistake? Is the Salvation Army an illegitimate organization because a strong, vocal woman preacher was a driving force behind it? Do we really want to negate the countless missionary breakthroughs made in the 19th and 20th centuries in China and India, since so many women were responsible for the pioneering work there?

If we look at the history of revival movements, it is clear that whenever there has been a deepening of spiritual passion and holiness in the church, and a corresponding call to evangelism, women have responded to the call to ministry even when it was culturally unacceptable for them to do so. This was true during the Second Great Awakening in the United States, which unleashed an army of women to fund missionary movements and to lead the abolitionist cause. It was also obvious in the early days of the Pentecostal revival, which mobilized women preachers to blaze trails in foreign and domestic mission fields. These women started churches that still flourish today.

These women were not looking for a spotlight or a pulpit, nor were they out to win an argument or to

prove that women are better than men. They were prayer warriors who loved the Word of God and used it skillfully to combat the evils of their day. They were mothers of the faith who nurtured new converts with the milk of salvation and trained their disciples to pursue spiritual maturity.

Women who have given their lives to serve Jesus on the front lines deserve our respect. But in the American church, we typically have turned our backs on our sisters when they have dared to suggest that God has drafted them into His army. The strongest and most determined of these female warriors learned to endure the ridicule; but we will never know how many women gave up the fight and abandoned the call because the church required them to bury their spiritual gifts.

Adding insult to injury. Women in many denominations today have encountered rejection when they stepped out in public ministry. Jill Briscoe, a prominent evangelical author who pastors a church with her husband in Milwaukee, told Christianity Today in 1996 that she was silenced a few years ago when she began to teach the Bible to a group of 3,000 teen-agers at a youth conference.

"I introduced my subject and opened the Scriptures and read them and began to explain them," Briscoe said. "At that point a pastor stood up and told me, 'Stop! In the name of the Lord!' and said that I was out of order. He then rebuked my husband, saying that he should be ashamed to allow his wife to usurp his authority. He then took his young people out, and several other people followed."

In many churches in the United States, Christian men have developed a superstitious notion that if they listen to a woman preach, or if they attend a Sunday school class taught by a woman, or even if they allow a woman to provide any form of spiritual counseling to them directly, they are violating an unwritten law that forbids women from occupying a place of authority in their lives. They also fear that if they do this, they will come under some type of spell that leaves them deceived and spiritually weakened.

This is rooted in a fear that if a man submits to a woman even by listening to her counsel, his own maleness will be diminished. How foolish! If the Bible is our guide, and not cultural bias, then we need to consider the many times in Scripture when women influenced men or exercised godly authority over them.

Judges 4 tells us that at one time in history a woman held the highest position of spiritual authority in Israel. The Bible clearly states that God anointed Deborah as judge of Israel, gave her wisdom and prophetic counsel, and granted a 40-year period of

peace as a result of her effective leadership (see Judg. 4:1-5). And the men who honored her authority were blessed.

In Acts 18:24-28, we read that a skilled preacher named Apollos, a zealous convert from Judaism, was teaching the message of Jesus in Ephesus. But because he had never been instructed properly about water baptism or the infilling of the Holy Spirit, Paul's co-workers, Priscilla and Aquilla, took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately (v. 26)."

Was Apollos spiritually emasculated when he submitted to Priscilla's correction? Absolutely not. His ministry was strengthened because of the helpful input he received from this wise disciple, who most likely functioned in an apostolic role as a teacher and church planter. She is commended by Paul as one of his "fellow workers" in Romans 16:3. And in 1 Corinthians 16:16, the apostle urges his followers to submit to "everyone who helps in the work and labors." Since "everyone" in this passage obviously includes Priscilla as well as Junia, Phoebe and the other women who assisted Paul on his apostolic team, we can clearly see that he asked the early church to acknowledge the authority of the women who worked with him.

There are numerous other examples in the Scriptures of godly women who provided counsel, instruction or correction to men. Huldah the prophetess was sought out by King Josiah's top leaders for her advice about the spiritual condition of their nation (2 Kin. 22:14-20). When the elderly prophetess Anna recognized that the baby Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, she proclaimed his identity to his parents and to all who came into the temple. She was, in fact, one of

the first people on planet Earth to publicly proclaim the gospel of the new covenant (Luke 2:36-38). And the apostle Paul mentions a total of seven women when listing his trusted co-laborers; these were women who functioned as either pastors, evangelists, deacons or apostles.

Nowhere in the Bible are women called to be weak. A careful study of women in Scripture reveals that the godly women who served His purpose in their generation displayed courage, endured hardship and exercised the kind of faith that overcomes impossible odds. Righteous women in the Bible did not sit in the back of the church with their mouths shut or wait until they got permission to challenge injustice.

The great women of the Bible were fearless. Remember the Jewish midwives, who put their own lives in jeopardy in Egypt to protect the infants who had been sentenced to death by Pharaoh. Remember Rahab, who disobeyed the authorities in Jericho because she knew God was with the Israelite spies. Her faith saved her household and placed her in the lineage of Christ. Remember Esther, who placed her own life on the line because she believed God could use her to turn the heart of a king and save thousands of lives.

It's time for Christian women who have lived in the shadows of insignificance to arise and put on strength. This is the hour that Joel foretold (Joel 2:28-29), a time for both the sons and the daughters to prophesy. Women of God, you can't be silent anymore!

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## QUESTIONS

1. What are some of your initial thoughts having just read the article above?
2. How does a knowledge of the evidence of women leaders in the early church advance the cause of women in ministry today?
3. How do you think women pastors, teachers, and leaders are advancing the Kingdom of God today?
4. Read Galatians 3:28-29. What is Paul saying here?
5. How can we better encourage, empower, and equip those women in our midst who have a ministerial calling on their lives?

## FOR FURTHER READING...

Morphew, Derek. *Different But Equal*. Cape Town, South Africa: Vineyard International Publishing, 2009.

Williams, Don. *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church*. Sunrise Reprints, 2010.

Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

**Women's Task Force**, VineyardUSA website: <http://www.vineyardusa.org/site/task-forces/women>

God bless,

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