

What limitations are there on women's ministry?

Though this is a heated topic today, historically it was not so. Many women had very effective ministries, within Biblical confines, without aspiring to positions of authority. Today, the demands of feminism have made this controversial.

There are denominations that forbid women to speak in church. This is based on a misunderstanding of 1 Cor 14:34-35 & 1 Tim 2:11. There are other denominations that not only have women preachers but also women bishops, apostles, prophets and so on; though these offices are not Biblical, they represent positions of authority in churches. Both these extremes are false.

There is no doubt that the apostles allowed women to participate in the gathered church. Paul explains (in the context of four chapters on church ministry) that a woman can pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5, 13). He also explains in 1 Cor 12 that the gifts of all members are vital. Luke tells us that Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). The New Covenant was the outworking of the promised outpouring of the Spirit in Joel 2:28; this expressly states that women will prophesy in the New Covenant age. Now this particular expression of the Spirit has passed. This aspect of prophecy was vital when the early church had no scripture available, apart from the occasional scroll from an apostle copied around. Nevertheless, the point is that if Paul allowed women to minister, within certain limits, then his statement that they should be silent a few pages later cannot mean utter silence and no ministry.

There are many ways to explain 1 Cor 14:34-35, which cannot be treated here. One explanation is that Paul means speaking to judge prophecy given by others. The reason for this statement is explained by another: 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.' (1 Tim 2:12). Paul's point is that women are not allowed to exercise authority over men in God's church order; they learn from men in silence. He states that women have a propensity to be deceived in doctrine (1 Tim 2:14) and history reveals that this has been common. Unless restricted the result can be Rev 2:20-23. Regarding authoritative matters, women should be silent: not teaching, not disputing, not arguing or presenting another case. Their arguments should be done at home (1 Cor 14:35).

Teaching and judging other ministry carries implicit authority and women are prohibited from doing this. Thus they are also forbidden to exercise eldership office [the only church leadership office]; especially as this involves teaching and correction of men [note that a qualification of an elder is to have one wife]. So there are limitations to women's ministry - they cannot exercise authority - but within their sphere they should be encouraged to share.

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Understanding Ministries

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