

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Part 1 - A Biblical Basis for Affirming Women in Ministry

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Woodman, Simon
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-04 06:25:04
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159772

A Biblical Basis for Affirming Women in Ministry Part 1

Simon Woodman, South Wales Baptist College

Introduction

My first thought on coming to prepare this paper was, 'what right do I have to pass judgement on whether women can minister in Christ's church?' I am a white, (aspiring) middle-class male, and as such have not faced the frustration of having my own ministry rejected through reasons I can do nothing about. However, what I believe I can do is to provide a biblical basis for my own opinion on this controversial subject. I am an evangelical, a Baptist minister, and wholly committed to the Bible as holy scripture. I also have a strong concern for issues of justice, righteousness, and liberation, and it seems to me that where injustice and oppression are present, there the gospel is distorted. It has never struck me as a reasonable argument to suggest that one's gender should provide a suitable means for determining one's suitability for ministry. The Bible is quite clear on the qualities that are required for Christian ministry,¹ and provided an individual, of whatever gender, satisfies these requirements it is my belief that they are suitable to minister in the church. As a colleague of mine remarked when I asked his opinion on whether women should be ministers: 'It depends on the woman.'

Biblical Support for Women in Ministry

Galatians 3:26-29

Galatians 3:28 reads, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'² Paul's grand statement to the Galatian church of the value-base of the new community of Christ's people is a natural starting point for this discussion of women in ministry. Paul has just outlined his doctrine of justification by faith,³ and has explained Christian freedom from the law.⁴ He then goes on to spell out the implications for Christian believers of their being justified by faith and not by the law. He says that those who are 'in

Christ',⁵ those who have been 'baptised into Christ',⁶ have been brought into a series of new relationships.⁷ They have new relationships spiritually,⁸ racially,⁹ socially, economically,¹⁰ and sexually.¹¹

For Paul the old, law-based, divisions in humanity have been rendered inapplicable to those who are in Christ.¹² Paul envisages a new humanity coming into being through Christ, in which all persons are equal in the sight of God.¹³ Hence, it is inappropriate within the Christian community to distinguish one person from another using divisions based on race, class, or gender. In this way, Paul is setting out his ideal for Christian relationships and behaviour, and it is the position of this author that

Paul's ideal holds as true within the contemporary Christian church as it did in the embryonic one.

However, as Paul is well aware, this new humanity of those who are in Christ still has to live in the midst of the old humanity comprised of those who are under the law. He recognises that his ideal is not yet fully achievable. Hence, just a few paragraphs later in his letter to the Galatians, Paul is able to say, 'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.'¹⁴ In Christ there is neither slave nor free, yet those who are in Christ must become slaves to one another. Paul does not shy away from asking Christians to sacrifice the freedoms that are theirs in Christ, for the sake of the unity and public witness of the church.

We will be looking shortly at three notorious instances where Paul asks the women of the Christian community to sacrifice their freedom in Christ, in order that the unity and witness of the church be preserved. But before turning to these passages, we will first look at some biblical examples of women ministering in the community of Christ's people.

Women ministering in the Bible

The Old Testament contains a number of examples of women fulfilling significant leadership roles. Miriam the Prophetess is listed alongside Aaron and Moses as one sent to lead

Israel;¹⁵ Deborah is described as a judge of Israel, and her military and spiritual authority are clear to see;¹⁶ and Huldah the prophetess provided divine instruction to Josiah, the king of Judah.¹⁷

In the gospels, Jesus is seen as accepting and affirming women,¹⁸ teaching them and including them among his disciples.¹⁹ Women also participated in the proclamation of the gospel,²⁰ and many are specifically named.²¹ Too much significance should not be attached to the fact that women are not named among the twelve disciples, as it would have been culturally impossible to have women as part of such an intimate group of men.²² What is significant and remarkable in the gospels is the extent to which women were included in the life and ministry of Jesus, and the roles they are given at key points in the story. This pattern continues in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, where he includes miraculous stories about women,²³ and portrays women as patrons,²⁴ church hosts,²⁵ and prophets.²⁶

In Paul's life and ministry as recorded in the New Testament, twelve women are named as Paul's co-workers in ministry.²⁷ It needs to be remembered that Paul's context is one where most people were functionally illiterate, and that those with sufficient education to teach and lead were almost always men.²⁸ Hence, to have this number of women working alongside him marks Paul as highly progressive in terms of the standards of his day.

In Romans 16:1-2, Paul commends Phoebe, the bearer of his letter and a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, as someone the Romans may trust to explain the letter to them.²⁹ Later in the same passage Paul also mentions Prisca,³⁰ who ministered alongside her husband,³¹ Tryphaena and Tryphosa who are described as workers in the Lord,³² and Junia who he includes as one of the apostles.³³ In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul speaks of Euodia and Syntyche as his co-workers.³⁴ Paul also expects that women will fulfil the role of prophet,³⁵ which he ranks second only to the role of apostle.³⁶ It appears that Paul took seriously his statement of Galatians 3:28, that in Christ there is no longer male and female, and that he welcomed the ministry of women in the normal course of his pastoral practise.

The Difficult Passages

There are three key difficult passages that need consideration in any biblically-based discussion of women in ministry. Within the scope of this paper, it will not be possible to do a full exegesis of each of these, so greater attention will be given to 1 Cor 11:2-16, which is the primary text. Comments will then be made about the other passages, to indicate ways in which they may also be interpreted.³⁷

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Central to any debate about this passage is the conclusion reached concerning Paul's use of the word

'head' in verse 3.³⁸ In modern usage, 'head' implies a sense of authority, as is seen in the sentence: 'He was promoted to become the head of the company.' However, in Paul's time 'head' did not automatically imply a sense of authority. Anatomically, people were not understood as thinking with their heads – rather, conscious and emotive thought were understood to originate in the breast or the stomach.³⁹ The head was the place through which nourishment entered the body⁴⁰ and from which speech flowed, and in this way it was frequently seen as the *source* or *origin* of life and relationship.⁴¹ Therefore the head was not seen as directing the body in the way in which we would understand it today, and we need to be careful not to impose our modern perspective upon Paul's usage.

So, if it is unlikely that Paul was intending his use of 'head' to indicate a relationship of authority, what did he mean when he said that, 'Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ'? Paul appears to have in mind the understanding of 'head' as *source* and *origin*, something which becomes clearer in verses 8 and 12 where he speaks twice more of man as the source of woman. Paul is obviously here drawing on the story of creation, where woman originated from man, just as Paul would see the Son originating from the Father, and all creation originating from the Son.⁴² Paul is putting forward here, not an argument for authority, but a series of three analogous relationships to try

and explain to the Corinthian church that man and woman relate to each other as the head relates to the body, as the Father relates to the Son, and as the Son relates to humanity. His point is that just as humanity found its source in Christ, and Christ found his source in God, so woman finds her source in man, as is evidenced in the order of creation.⁴³ Paul is not here suggesting an ordering based on dominating authority, with superior and subordinate. Rather, he is likening the relationship of man and woman, with that of Christ and humanity, and of God and Christ. The relationship between the Father and the Son functions, in Paul's mind, as an image for the way in which Christ and humanity, and man and woman, relate to each other. This relationship is not one of subordination, but is rather a relationship of interdependence and unity.

Some have argued that there is an inherent subordination in the relationship between the Father and the Son, and that this provides a model for a relationship of subordination between man and woman. This is not a new argument, as discussions on the power relationships within the Trinity occupied the minds of many of the early church fathers. The orthodox position⁴⁴ was that the Son and the Father are coequal, rather than superior and subordinate. Scriptural backing for this position can be found in a number of key texts,⁴⁵ and John Chrysostom (Archbishop of Constantinople AD 398-404) used the word 'heretic' to describe those who

would seek to understand 'head' in terms of authority, preferring instead to see headship as denoting origin and source.⁴⁶ If, therefore, it is not appropriate to try and understand the Father-Son relationship in terms of a divinely ordained hierarchy, neither is it appropriate to extrapolate from this to see unequal submission as part of the natural order of male-female relationships.⁴⁷

The broader context of 11:3 is a passage which is primarily concerned with hairstyles and propriety in worship, and an obvious link can be seen between Paul's discussion of head-coverings and hairstyles, and the relationship of 'head'-ship that he has proposed between Christ, man, woman, and God. To understand Paul's logic here, it is necessary to realise that Paul was writing to a specific situation, and was therefore using the arguments which he thought would best convince the intended recipients of his letter.⁴⁸ His logic may seem convoluted to the modern reader, because we are reading his words in a context far removed from that of the original recipients. It is important to note that Paul refrains from giving instructions as to how women should dress, and neither does he argue that woman is subordinate to man. Rather, he draws supporting arguments from creation and nature⁴⁹ to convince the Corinthian Christians that, for the sake of propriety, certain head-coverings were appropriate in worship and some were not. In Jewish custom, a woman's head covering was indicative of her commitment to her husband,

and in Roman culture, women would cover their heads for worship, whereas Greek women would not.⁵⁰ Women's hairstyles could also make both social and sexual statements, and in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth, where class conflict and sexual politics were rife, it is easy to see why Paul was concerned that this should not become a controversial issue in the church.⁵¹ However, as is clear from verse 16, Paul is not here seeking to make a grand theological point. Rather, he is concerned to avoid controversy and preserve propriety.

Overall, then, 1 Cor 11:2-16 does not lend itself to an understanding of male authority. It recognises that the male-female relationship parallels those between God and Christ, and between Christ and humanity, in terms of interdependence and unity. Paul is using this parallel to make an intensely pastoral point about propriety in public worship, and his intention in writing was not to deal with gender issues, but to provide pastoral instruction in a specific context. Paul's priorities were love, unity and good witness,⁵² and whilst the freedom of Galatians 3:28 may be his ideal, this freedom didn't mean that the believers were free to throw off all customs to the detriment of the church's unity and public witness.

In the next issue, we will be looking more briefly at 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 before drawing some conclusions.

- 1 Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 3:1-13; 1 Pet 5:1-4.
- 2 All Bible references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.
- 3 Gal 3:1-14.
- 4 Gal 3:15-25. See Caird, *Paul and Women's Liberty*, 1972, 271.
- 5 Gal 3:26.
- 6 Gal 3:27.
- 7 Longenecker, *Galatians*, 1990, 159.
- 8 As 'children of God' Gal 3:26, and as those who have been clothed with Christ Gal 3:27.
- 9 Gal 3:28, 'there is no longer Jew or Greek'.
- 10 Gal 3:28, 'there is no longer slave or free'.
- 11 Gal 3:28, 'there is no longer male and female'. Jesus' comments about resurrected humans being like angels, and not given in marriage, are of relevance here. Jesus does not say that the resurrected are without sexual identity, but rather that identity is transformed and presumably finds expression in other ways. See Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-35.
- 12 For further examples of Paul's radical revising of human boundaries, see 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:14-15; and Col 3:11.
- 13 Eph 2:15.
- 14 Gal 5:13.
- 15 Exodus 15:20-21; Micah 6:4.
- 16 Judges 4:4-10.
- 17 2 Kings 22:14-20.
- 18 See, for example, Matt 8:14-15; 9:18-26; Luke 13:11-17. Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 881.
- 19 See Matt 27:55-56; Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Acts 1:14. Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 882.
- 20 See the roles played by Elizabeth; Mary, and Anna in Luke 1:5-2:40. See also John 4:39; Matt 28:1-10. Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 883.
- 21 There are seventeen named women in the gospels. Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 884-885.
- 22 Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 886.
- 23 Acts 9:32-42; 16:16-18. Keener, *Woman and Man*, 1997, 1206.
- 24 See Tabitha in Acts 9:36, 39 who supported widows, and Lydia in Acts 16:15. Keener, *Woman and Man*, 1997, 1206.

- 25 Acts 12:12.
- 26 Acts 2:17, 18; 21:9.
- 27 See Acts 16:14-15, 40; Rom 16:1-16; 1 Cor 1:11; Phil 4:2-3; Col 4:15. Scholer, *Women*, 1992, 886.
- 28 Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 589.
- 29 Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 589.
- 30 Rom 16:3.
- 31 See also their joint ministry in Acts 18:26, where they are together instructing Apollos. See also 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19.
- 32 Rom 16:12.
- 33 Rom 16:7. Scholars are generally agreed that Junia is a female name. Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 589. Richard Bauckham intriguingly suggests that she may be synonymous with the Joanna of Luke 8:1-3. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 2002, 109-202.
- 34 Phil 4:2-3.
- 35 1 Cor 11:5.
- 36 1 Cor 12:28. Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 590.
- 37 The three passages covered in this paper are those which have typically been used to justify restricting the ministry of women in the church. There are other difficult passages concerning the role of women within the household which are beyond the scope of this paper. These would include Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Tim 5:14; Titus 2:1-14; 1 Peter 3:1-7. It is worth noting that it is the view of this author that these passages have been similarly misunderstood, and that it is inappropriate to argue on the basis of them for anything other than absolute equality within male-female relationships.
- 38 I am particularly grateful to Liz Woodman for allowing me to draw on her unpublished research on this passage.
- 39 See Gen 6:5 and Gen 43:30 (KJV) for examples of this.
- 40 See Eph 4:15-16; Col 2:19 for examples of Paul using 'head' in this way.
- 41 Kroeger, *Head*, 1993, 375.
- 42 See Col 2:15-18 for a passage where Paul spells out clearly his understanding of Christ as the source of creation, and as the head, or source, of the church.
- 43 Gen 2:21-23. This passage needs to be read alongside Gen 1:26-27, where male and female are both created in the image of God. To argue on the basis of the Genesis 2 creation account that woman is an inferior helper to man would be to take it out of context: Woman is created in the image of God just as man is.
- 44 As argued by Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Basil, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Eusebius. Kroeger, *Head*, 1993, 377.
- 45 John 1:1-3; 10:30; 14:9, 11; 16:15; 17:11, 21.
- 46 Kroeger, *Head*, 1993, 377.
- 47 Paul speaks of mutual submission as integral to his understanding of Christian marriage. Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18.
- 48 Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 585.
- 49 Paul's statement in verse 10, 'because of the angels' most likely refers to the angels who will be judged by the believers (1 Cor 6:3). If this is the case, then Paul's concern here is that propriety not be breached in such a serious matter. Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 586.
- 50 Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 585.
- 51 See 1 Cor 11:21-22 for an example of how Paul is concerned about class conflict in the church. Keener, *Man and Woman*, 1993, 585.
- 52 See 1 Cor 10:32-33; 14:40.