

# What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## God's Design for Women (and Men) in the Church: Equality and Differentiation

Why does the Apostle Paul say in his letters to Timothy and Titus that women should be silent and not to teach or have authority over men?

The Bible is somewhat unusual among ancient texts in that it tells the stories of many heroic women, chosen by God to carry His Word to His people, and to carry out His plan for salvation. Some do this via remarkable feats of determination, tenacity, and courage. Some are clearly chosen to carry out a specific act of God. Some are identified as being leaders -- in their own households, or even over the entire nation of Israel. And some even lead, teach, and preach!

But still, we must consider what Paul said to his young pastors-in-training. How do we reconcile this? What is the Biblical view of women, and their role in the life of God's people? Let's review some examples of women who are called out in Scripture.

Old Testament:

- **Sarah** gives birth to a nation -- at the age of 90! (Genesis 21:1-7)
- Miriam's mother **Jochebed** defies Pharaoh to rescue Moses (Exodus 1:22; Exodus 2:1-10)
- **Miriam** prophesies and sings as God conquers Pharaoh's army (Exodus 15:20-21)
- **Miriam** is identified as a leader along with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4).
- **Deborah** (but not her husband Lappidoth) is a prophet and a judge over Israel (Judges 4:4)
- **Jael** assassinates an enemy (Judges 4:17-22)
- **Jehosheba** saves Joash, and with him the lineage of David (2 Kings 11:2)
- **Huldah** prophesies to (and warns!) Josiah the king (2 Chronicles 34:21-28)
- **Rahab** is a prostitute who not only protects Israel's spies, but also gets in the spy game herself (Joshua 2)
- Queen **Esther**, formerly a lowly orphan, saves her people, the Jews (Esther 8)

New Testament:

- **Mary**, an unwed virgin, accepts her role as **Theotokos**, or “God-bearer” (Luke 1:26-38)
- **Anna**, a widow and prophet, prophesies that the Messiah has come (Luke 2:36-38)
- **Mary of Bethany** bathes her Messiah with expensive perfume, confounding (and teaching by example) the disciples (Matthew 26:6-13)
- **The women at the tomb** are the first humans to bear witness of Jesus’ resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10)
- **The women present at Pentecost** prophesy and speak in other languages (Acts 1:14; 2:1-18)
- **Lydia** led a household of converts (Acts 16:13-15)
- **Priscilla** instructed Apollos (Acts 18:24-26)
- **Chloe** leads a “house church” (1 Corinthians 1:11)
- **Phoebe** is identified as a deacon at Cenchrae (Romans 16:1)
- **Junia** is an apostle who served time in prison with Paul (Romans 16:7)

There are others. It’s clear, God uses women according to His plan in ways that are not always expected, culturally normed, or even “acceptable” to contemporary or even modern Christian sensitivities and proclivities.

### **Did Paul Really Say...?**

Two passages in particular from the New Testament are often cited as justification for prohibiting women to serve or minister, even in ways that are similar to the examples we’ve just noted from the Bible. St. Paul, being raised and educated to the level of a good Pharisee, knew of all those Old Testament women, and in fact refers to specific women in some of his own epistles as “coworkers” in spreading the Gospel.

What on Earth was Paul talking about he wrote the following passages?

### **1 Corinthians 14:34-35:**

“...the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

## 1 Timothy 2:11-12:

“Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

Much has been written about patriarchal societies, the cultural context of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., and so on. Two of the great ancient Greek philosophers reflect, and perhaps influence our perception of, 1<sup>st</sup> century attitudes.

Plato tells us that **Socrates** argued that “being born a woman is a divine punishment, since a woman is halfway between a man and an animal”.

**Plato** himself was of the same mind, writing that corrupt men were “transformed, at their second incarnation, into women.... In this fashion, then, women and the whole female sex have come into existence.” (Plato, *Timaeus*, 42a <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0180%3Atext%3DTim.%3Apage%3D42>) Yikes!

But we find nothing like that sentiment in the Old Testament (well, Proverbs has some interesting things to say about nagging wives, but I digress....)

Such background and history regarding the treatment of -- and disposition towards -- women in ancient history provides useful background, but few authors on the subject dig beneath the surface to uncover the root cause of the problems Paul was addressing in I Corinthians, or the problem (note: singular – more on that later!) that he appears to be addressing in his letter to Timothy.

### Can women prophesy? Should they?

To say that Paul through inspiration imposed a strict moratorium on any women speaking in the church at any time is not only inconsistent with the whole of Scripture; it is inconsistent within *the same letter to the Corinthians!*

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives both men and women instructions on how to pray and prophesy in the church assembly (**1 Corinthians 11:4-5**).

Of course, one can pray silently, but that's not what he's addressing here, as prophesy is *always* audible, and very often public. When Paul instructs women how to prophesy in the church, he's not expecting them to be silent as they do so.

It is both logically and biblically inconsistent to suggest that Paul in the above verses is requiring all women to always be silent in the church, just paragraphs after instructing women on how to NOT be silent, but instead how to prophesy.

One of our foundational principals for Bible study and Biblical interpretation is to **let Scripture interpret Scripture**. If something appears to be inconsistent, the problem just might lie in our understanding, not in God's design or intention.

In the New Testament church there was an unprecedented elevation of women compared to the rules of the Jewish synagogue; for the first time in their lives women were allowed to participate (at all!) in the worship service. A survey of the Old Testament reveals that while women were indeed active in the religious life of Israel, it was never in the role of Nazarite, priest, chief priest, etc. In fact, in **Isaiah 3:12**, to have women *ruling* is called a curse on the nation.

### **Equality of the Sexes? Really?**

Yes. The Bible begins with the *equality* of the sexes. In Genesis 1 men and women were equally created in the image of God (v. 27). Neither sex has "more" of the image of God in him/her than the other, or any less. As people of God, as His beloved creatures, as spiritual beings standing before their Creator, men and women are absolutely, eternally equal, even though they do not serve the same roles or functions.

In **Ephesians 5** Paul speaks of the mystery of marriage being reflective of the relationship between Christ and the Church. In that same chapter he identifies the will of God for both husbands and wives, which are both shared ("be subject to one another in love") and distinct ("wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord", and "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church....")

Back to the OT for a moment, **Genesis 2** offers a more detailed account of the creation of man and woman, including differences in their God-given functions and responsibilities. God did not create Adam and Eve at the same time; He created Eve after Adam, for the specific purpose of being Adam's helper. Eve was *equal* to Adam, but she was given the role and duty of submitting to him. Note, the word עֵזֶר ("ezer")

in **v. 18** means “helper”, not “slave”, not “employee”, not “property”. In fact, the word “helper” is a positive one; even being used of God Himself as the “help” or “helper” of Israel (e.g. **Deuteronomy 33:7, Psalm 33:20**). It describes someone in a relationship of service to another.

We see all over the Bible that the responsibility of wives to submit to their husbands was part of the plan from creation, even before the fall and its attendant curse. The Bible establishes both the *equality* (e.g. **Exodus 21:15, 17, 28–31**) and the *differentiation* (**Numbers 5:19–20, 29; 6:2; 30:1–16**) of man and wife. In the curse God pronounced after the fall in **Genesis 3**, *both* man and woman were punished, but in *distinct* – differentiated – ways. Those ways were in accordance with the roles that God established for each.

Ever since, the result of the fall on marriage has been an ongoing struggle between the sexes, with women seeking control (the Hebrew for “your desire will be for your husband” in **Genesis 4:7** means this, perhaps better translated “against” instead of “for”!) and men seeking dominance (“but he will rule over you”).

### **But Didn’t Paul Really Say...?**

So back to our friend St. Paul, who knows all of this (and lots more than I do!)

The words that Paul uses in **1 Corinthians 14** are instructive, helping us to get down to the meaning of this “silence” he’s insisting on. Rather than using a verb like φιμώω (*phimoo*, “force one to be silent”), Paul uses the verb σιγάω (*sigao*, “to be in [voluntary] silence”). Just like in a courtroom scene from *Law & Order*, when the judge pounds the gavel demanding “Silence!” in the courtroom, it is not because everyone must be silent all the time, but that when people are speaking out of turn or on top of each other, order must be restored, for the benefit of all. Σιγάω is this kind of silence – the kind requested (or demanded) in the midst of disorder or commotion.

The Greeks in particular loved speech and speaking; open discussion was a much larger component of Greek culture than Jewish culture. This is reflected in their language: they had several different words describing different types of verbal interaction. When Paul said “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church,” he could have chosen any one of a number of Greek words that refer to speaking publicly, or one of the five that denote preaching or proclaiming, or one of twenty-five other words are translated as ‘say,’ ‘speak,’ or ‘teach’ in a particular way, or with a particular force. No, Paul didn’t

use any of those words. He instead chose the word λαλέω (*laleo*, "talk"), which can mean to speak something of importance, but most often was used to refer to **just talking or chatting**. It's casual, common discourse.

So why would women be singled out for this chit-chat that was disrupting the worship gathering? Why would they be asking questions in this context? In part because their husbands and fathers had forgotten – or abdicated – their God-ordained role as spiritual head and teacher of the family!

The church in Corinth was populated with sinners not so different from us today. **Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Proverbs 20:7, Proverbs 22:6, Joshua 24:15, 1 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Peter 3:7, Ephesians 5:25, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, Titus 2:3-5** and more speak to God's desire that men be spiritual leaders in their households. When they leave a vacuum, who in the family takes up their slack? Their wives, of course -- and sometimes their mothers (the Titus passage!)

Good for them, but as much as Paul seems to be seeking orderliness in worship, I think his restriction about women is actually a more serious indictment of the men/husbands/fathers in Corinth. If they were doing their job at home, the women wouldn't have any need to be talking and asking questions when the community gathered for worship.

The silence required in chapter **1 Corinthians 14** is a voluntary silence in accordance with the need for order in the church service. It was not intended to silence all women at all times.

As we've already seen, women had been given instructions by Paul on how to pray and to prophesy in the service, but this privilege had become a disruption. The women were "chatting" and asking questions, which is precisely why, in the midst of the admonition to stop disturbing the service, Paul says, "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home" (**vs. 35**).

Paul was seeking to prohibit not all women, but disruptive chatter and questions that interrupted the service.

Let's also paleo keep in mind that in Christian gatherings, women were allowed to participate in the church service for the first time. They were no longer relegated to a separate room, or hidden behind a curtain. They were in the same space as the men.

This itself was revolutionary for the Jews, and no doubt a source of contention for some. And in this I Corinthians passage, note that Paul is encouraging women to learn theology – at all! This was not a common cultural aspect for the Jews and other ancient cultures. Again, revolutionary, but completely consistent with God’s design for true equality of the sexes.

Men are to lead, but women are also permitted to learn, to prophesy, and to fully participate in the life of the Christian church in accordance with God’s Word.

Let’s now address a couple of unique aspects of the I Timothy passage. Given all these things I’ve already presented, is that passage inconsistent with the rest of scripture?

Context matters (Again! And always!) Note that in this same passage, women are told not to wear gold or pearls, or to braid their hair (v. 8). Was this because God desires women to be homely? I mean, he made them hot in the first place, didn’t He??? Okay, that’s not a serious question (well....) In the culture of the day we know that such ornamentation was typical of the powerful, ostentatious and promiscuous parts of the Greek culture. Temple courtesans were pictured as having braided gold jewelry in their hair styles. In other words, Paul could be addressing problems that either did, or could, arise for Timothy if/when women in the church dressed according to the norms of the culture. In verse 15 he says that women “...will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety”. Wait, what??? Did Paul change the criteria for women to be saved here? No, of course not.

The scriptures, including many passages written by Paul himself, tell us that salvation comes through faith, not childbirth. (Mark 16:16, Luke 7:50, John 5:24, Acts 10:30-31, Romans 10:9-10, Ephesian 2:8-9) Some scholars have suggested that this verse is referring to a woman being saved from dying in childbirth, but that seems oddly out of place here. Other commentators (especially Roman Catholic ones) suggest that Paul is referring to salvation, which comes through the birth of Christ, but that doesn’t track logically with Paul’s train of thought as he gives these instructions.

Linguistically, there is a broader meaning of the Greek word “sozo” (σωθήσεται here, “will be saved”) that makes more sense in light of all the things Paul is teaching Timothy, namely that just as they should avoid the trappings of the world in appearance, women are saved from worldly deceptions when they understand and live their life in accordance with God’s will for the family and home. After all, Paul has just recounted how Eve was deceived, and here he tells Timothy that the “daughters” of Eve

are saved from that same deception by “continuing on” (living) in faith, love and holiness with self-control. Childbearing here is used as what translators and linguists know as a *synecdoche*, a figure of speech where the part cited stands for a larger whole. In this case, childbirth is a part of a larger role God has designed for women, which includes care for the family and home, but also to live a life in accordance with His Word as a witness to it. This passage, with that understanding, is no longer a mystery or a contradiction, but instead is consistent with what Paul writes in **Titus 2:4-5**: “*Young women are to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.*”

There’s another linguistically interesting aspect of this **I Timothy 2** passage. After discussing women in general, Paul suddenly switches to the singular in these two verses, and the two verses that follow. It’s not “all women” or even “women”, but “a woman”. The plural form is complete absent from **verse 11 to the middle of verse 15**: ‘A woman,’ ‘She must be silent,’ and ‘She will be saved through the childbearing.’ Then, in the second half of **verse 15**, Paul shifts back to the plural form. Is it possible Paul is addressing an issue with a particular woman under Timothy’s leadership? It’s possible, but I think there’s not enough evidence in the text, or in other passages relating to the congregation at Ephesus to answer that question definitively. But I also think it’s not Paul’s style to be grammatically inconsistent without a good reason.

If there was a particular woman, specifically one who was teaching or in any way promoting false doctrine, I can easily see Paul meaning this to reference that particular woman. Remember, the book of 1 Timothy largely is founded on Paul’s desire to correct the errant doctrines and attendant problems he wrote about in **Chapter 1**. At that time Gnosticism was prevalent and popular, and might help us understand why Paul revisits the order of creation in **verse 13**. Gnostic teaching was that man originated from woman. This passage may have nothing at all to do with superiority of men (or inferiority of women), *or even concerns that a woman was teaching per se*, but instead offers a refutation of Gnostic heresy, perhaps heresy being spread by a specific Ephesian woman in this case. Please understand that this is all a matter of pious speculation on my part, but it fits.



## **But We Don't Ordain Women, even if they "Prophecy".**

Correct. Aside from these passages, elsewhere in his pastoral epistles of Timothy and Titus, Paul offers other instructions that clearly teach us that men are put in the role of spiritual leader not just in the home, but as communal leaders in the church congregation.

### **1 Timothy 3:1-2**

"...If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Now an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife..."

### **Titus 1:5-6**

"This is why I left you in Crete ...that you might appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blame-less, the husband of one wife..."

In these passages "overseer" and "elders" are equivalent to what we in the LC-MS call, "ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry." Therefore, it is fitting that we ordain and call only men to be pastors for our congregations.

It is also fitting that we honor the words and the examples in scripture when it comes to the role of women in the home, and in the communal spiritual life of our congregation. We should in such matters, as in all matters of doctrine, remember sola scriptura, and honor all that the Bible has to say on the subject.

Why did God choose this "equal but differentiated" design for the sexes? I don't know the ultimate answer to that, and chalk it up to a "mystery" as St. Paul does in Ephesians 5. Such things are usually instructive about God, His relationship with us, or something similar, and that's no doubt the case here, but I personally am still learning the depths of that lesson!

## **What about the administration of the Sacraments? We Allow Women to Serve the Lord's Supper at Gloria Dei; isn't that the Pastor's role?**

This is a frequently-asked -- and debated -- question. In fact, this is an aspect of ministry at Gloria Dei that draws attention, much it negative, from other members of the LC-MS, especially from congregations and leaders that do not allow women to have a visible role related to the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.

From the LC-MS web site (<https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/doctrine#women>):

**QUESTION: What is the LCMS' position on women serving Communion in worship service to assist the pastor?**

**ANSWER:** *The official position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod regarding the practice of women serving Holy Communion has been set forth in 1989 Resolution 3-10 "To Address Practice of Women Serving Holy Communion," in which the Synod its members "to conform their practice" to the counsel of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations:*

*"The commission strongly recommends that to avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church, such assistance be limited to men" [1985 report on Women in the Church, 47].*

*While stopping short of saying on the basis of clear scriptural directions in this area "Thus saith the Lord," the Commission argues that the principal concern must be to preserve the uniqueness of the pastoral office as it relates to the role of women in the church.*

From "Women in the Church, Scriptural Principles and Ecclesiastical Practice"

(<https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/jpGGnUAESqiddqiLAdqa8IBJ8B87YcKU>):

*...The church in all ages stands under the mandate of Christ to preach the gospel to all peoples. This commission is addressed to each member of the Body of Christ. All men and women in the church have a share in the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. However, God has decreed that the church carry out this mandate not only in the context of private, individual actions but by formally selecting individual members for the office of the public ministry. The nomenclature used in the New Testament to refer to this office varies ("bishops," 1 Tim. 3:1; "elder," 1 Tim. 5:17; "leaders," Heb. 13:17), but that the holders of this office are to be engaged specifically in preaching and teaching is consistently enunciated. The oversight and supervision exercised in the office of the public ministry is that of teaching the Word and administering the sacraments. Paul's directives relating to women in the church in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 provide instructions concerning this position of leadership.*

Klemet Preus wrote an excellent, provocative, and non-authoritative article on the "Steadfast Lutherans" web site in 2010 that is well worth reading, and too long to

include here. Consider this homework, or extra-curricular reading, and be prepared to be offended – in the best possible way!

<https://steadfastlutherans.org/blog/2010/05/women-distributing-the-lord%E2%80%99s-supper/>

### **Biblically, can a woman assist the pastor in distributing communion, and by whose authority does she do so?**

There is a pernicious defect in the premise of this question. It should not be "...can a woman assist the pastor...". Instead, it should be "...can anyone assist the pastor..." In other words, by what authority do **men** assist the pastor, let alone women?

As we've seen, scripture makes a distinction between the role of "overseer" et al and the role of "deacon", helper, and partner. Only the overseer/pastor must be male, per God's design in the order of creation, and how He defines that role in His Word.

At Gloria Dei **we believe that the role of Pastor is designed to be fulfilled by men** in all but exceptional circumstances, and that authoritative teaching and preaching, as well as administration of the sacraments, "belongs" to the pastoral office, not by human design, but because God has ordained it.

We find no scriptural mandate to segregate any other ministry role by sex. Some congregations believe that any role *supporting* the pastoral office should be conducted only by individuals who could *potentially* be qualified for it (thereby excluding women), but we are not Biblically compelled to hold or conform to that view. Nor do we condemn that view, because those Christians have God-given freedom to embrace it.

At Gloria Dei **we believe and teach that both men and women can serve in all but the pastoral role in the church.** We also believe that all preaching, teaching, and administration of the sacraments is conducted exclusively under the authority – and in support of – the pastoral office. Therefore, it is the Pastor's decision who will serve in those roles in a given congregation.

Are congregations that **do** allow women serve communion wrong? No!

Are congregations that **do not** allow women serve communion wrong? No!

Are such vital ministry services the responsibility of the Pastor in all cases? YES!

## Conclusion

I'll leave you with words from former LC-MS President Dr. Alvin Barry, who wrote an excellent series titled "Unchanging Truth in Changing Times", wherein he addresses a number of topics, including the roles of women and men:

### **What are the roles of men and women in the church?**

Together, men and women serve their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Men have the divine obligation to be the leaders of the church. Women are called to be of assistance to men in this capacity. An attitude of service guides what we do in the church, not a demand for "rights" or an attitude of "lording it over" one another. We have one Lord and one Master, Jesus Christ. We serve Him in the ways He desires.

God has given the responsibility to serve as pastors only to certain qualified men. The church calls these men to serve as representatives of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in the pastoral office. Women are not called to serve in this way because God has not given this responsibility to women. Why didn't Jesus call a woman to serve as an apostle? Why, through the Apostle Paul, does He prohibit women from serving as pastors in the church? We must leave the answers to these questions to God. We honor and respect God's will in these matters and praise Him for the many gifts He has given us all, including the marvelous opportunities He provides to both men and women to serve Him.

-- Dr. A. L. Barry  
President  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
2001