

WOMEN IN THE MINISTRY

FRONTLINE POSITION PAPER

INTRODUCTION

What does the Bible tell us about the role of women in ministry? Are women permitted and encouraged to pursue leadership roles in the life of the church? If so, are there any limits to what roles or offices a woman can hold in the church? In a culture that is becoming increasingly confused about the very nature and essence of gender, it perhaps has never been more timely for the church to offer beautiful and biblical answers to these questions. But before answers to these questions can be given, we must lay some biblical groundwork.

Frontline Church believes that the Bible clearly teaches the following:

- That both men and women are created equally in the image of God, and that neither is more or less in the image of God than the other (*Genesis 1:26-27*).
- That both men and women are equal in dignity, value, and worth, and that both men and women equally deserve respect and honor as image-bearers of God (*Genesis 1:26-31*).
- That any and all forms of abuse, misogyny, oppression, disrespect, or devaluing of women is sinful and an affront to the very image of God (*Romans 12:9-10; Galatians 5:19-24; Ephesians 5:25-33; 1 Peter 3:7*).

A GENDER-REDEEMING CHURCH

One of the core distinctives of Frontline is the theological conviction to be a gender-redeeming church. This means that we are passionately committed to seeing men and women fully embrace their God-given gender in a way that expresses the unique and beautiful essence of maleness and femaleness. In short, our desire is to see men embrace and embody all that it means to be a godly man, and for women to embrace and embody all that it means to be a godly woman. With roughly fifty-percent of the regular attenders of our church being female, we long to see women thriving and flourishing in every sphere of their life and calling.

We strongly believe that God created men and women equal in value, worth, and dignity, but he did not create men and women to be the same (*Genesis 2:15-25*). Unfortunately, our culture often thinks of equality as “sameness.” When this distortion happens, we miss out on the beautiful differences between men and women. Both men and women equally bear the image of God, but they uniquely

highlight different aspects of God's character in a way that each gender alone cannot fully embody or express.

When it comes to the question of women in the ministry, Frontline affirms, encourages, and releases women to step into every area of ministry, unless it is explicitly forbidden by God's word. From our reading of the Bible, women are free and encouraged to do the following:

- Teach the Bible in a variety of contexts and to a variety of people
- Hold the office of Deaconess
- Lead worship through singing
- Pray and prophesy in church
- Lead a community group
- Teach a class
- Baptize new Christians
- Run a business
- Hold leadership positions over men
- And much more...

TWO BIBLICAL RESTRICTIONS FOR WOMEN

Frontline believes and affirms that the Bible provides two specific restrictions for women, one in the realm of the home and one in the realm of the church. First, a married woman cannot be the head of her household (*Ephesians 5:22-24*). The headship role in marriage is reserved for husbands only. Biblical headship is not describing the power of a superior over an inferior, nor is it describing the husband's need to "rule over" or domineer his wife. Rather, true biblical headship is describing the responsibility of a husband to sacrificially serve and lead his family the way Jesus serves and leads the Church (*Ephesians 5:25-33*). In the words of John Stott:

"If headship means 'power' in any sense, then it is power to care, not to crush; power to serve, not to dominate; power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or destroy it. And in all this the standard of the husband's love is to

be the cross of Christ, on which he surrendered himself even to death in his selfless love for his bride.”¹

Second, a woman cannot serve as an elder in the church nor teach in the authoritative manner which is reserved for elders, who are charged with guarding and protecting the doctrine of the church. Instead, the office of elder is reserved for biblically-qualified men only. We see this restriction explicitly taught in 1 Timothy 2:12-14, which states:

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

This eldership restriction is rooted in the design of creation (“*Adam was formed first, then Eve*”) and is not a holdover from a patriarchal culture that no longer applies to more modern Christians in the 21st century.

Furthermore, the primary passages that address who is biblically-qualified to serve as an elder clearly imply that the office of elder is a male-only office (*1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9*). It is important to note that these two passages, outlining who can serve as an elder and who cannot, are written to two very different contexts and cultures (Ephesus and Crete). This shows us that male-only eldership was a universal practice in the early Church, not restricted to a specific time, place, or culture.

WHY DO THESE TWO RESTRICTIONS EXIST?

Since both the headship of the home and the office of elder are *guarding* and *protecting* roles, God’s restriction of women serving in these two capacities has nothing to do with a lack of ability, giftedness, intelligence, or inferiority on the part of women. Rather, women are to be the beneficiaries of this guarding and protecting.

An inherent aspect of what elders do in the church is guard and protect the Bride of Christ from spiritual and theological harm from wolves and false teachers, which is a role primarily assigned to men throughout the Scriptures. God’s intention is that the whole church, and in particular women, would experience the blessing of being guarded and protected by male elders that function like godly fathers in the family of God.

¹ Stott, John. Quoted in Sam Storms. “Men and Women in Ministry: The Meaning of Headship.” Accessed October 31, 2016. <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/men-and-women-in-ministry:-the-meaning-of-headship>

CAN WOMEN TEACH THE BIBLE?

1 Timothy 2:12-14 does not restrict women from general teaching in the life of the church. In these verses, there are two particular Greek words which help us understand what is being restricted: “to teach” (διδάσκω) and “exercise authority” (αὐθεντέω). However, the way in which these words are used means that they are not merely referring to two separate actions (teaching and exercising authority), but as a specific kind of teaching authority which is connected to the role of elder.

In her excellent book, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*, Kathy Keller states:

“So what is being forbidden to women in 1 Timothy 2 (and by extension in 1 Corinthians 14) is authoritative teaching— some kind of teaching that carried with it an authority not found in other, allowable forms of oral discourse. Because this has already been linked in 1 Corinthians 14 with the judging of the prophets and is followed immediately in 1 Timothy 3 by a discussion of the qualifications of elders, I find it not only plausible but unavoidable to come to the conclusion that women were being enjoined to silence (i.e., forbidden to participate) in a function reserved for elders alone— those men tasked with judging personal and corporate faithfulness to the apostolic ‘deposit’ of truth.”²

While the Bible restricts women from authoritatively teaching the church, it does not restrict every form of teaching. There is explicit and implicit evidence in Scripture that women have the freedom to teach, presumably underneath the authority and blessing of the elders:

- All Christians, including women, are commanded to teach and admonish one another (*Colossians 3:16*).
- Those with the gift of teaching are encouraged to use their gift, without any restriction on gender or role (*Romans 12:6-7; 1 Corinthians 14:26*).
- The Ephesians 4 gifts of “prophet,” “evangelist,” and “teacher” are not restricted to men only. We know for a fact that women were “prophets” and were encouraged to pray and prophesy in church (*Acts 2:16-18; Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5*).
- In the New Testament, we have examples of women teaching men (*Acts 18:26*).

² Keller, Kathy. *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*. Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry. Kindle Edition. Zondervan, 2012.

These are various cases of teaching in the New Testament that both women and men exercised. From this, it is clear that not every form of teaching falls under the category of “to teach and exercise authority” expressed in 1 Timothy 2:12-14. Instead, this must refer to a teaching authority given to the office of elder, which is reserved for them alone. Elders exercise their authority through teaching to establish the doctrine of the church, guard against false teachers, and judge corporate prophecies and teachings against Scripture. Therefore, this teaching authority is restricted from women, since it is reserved for the office of elder.

Since the only restrictions the Bible clearly gives to women are 1) being the head of their household and 2) holding the office of elder, women are free and invited to step into every other aspect of ministry in the life of the church. The only restrictions for women in the church are the things that elders *alone* are called and qualified to do. *Nothing else is off limits.*

WHAT ABOUT WOMEN TEACHING ON SUNDAYS?

From time to time, the elders at Frontline will ask a woman teach in the context of a Sunday gathering. Our goal in this decision is not to make a statement or to prove a point. Rather, we strongly believe it is biblically permissible and practically beneficial for the whole church.

The New Testament provides us with a framework for allowing non-elders (including women) to participate in significant and meaningful ways as the church gathers together on the Lord’s Day, including teaching or bringing a “lesson” (see *1 Corinthians 14:26*). The Lord’s Day is a special day, and everything that happens on that day happens underneath the authority of the elders. But this does not require that only elders have the freedom to teach when the church gathers together on Sundays.

There are godly and gifted teachers (men and women alike) that, despite not being elders, are nonetheless a great blessing to the church when they use their teaching gift. Teaching in the context of a Sunday gathering is not restricted in Scripture to elders only or men only. Therefore, the elders at Frontline encourage and allow gifted teachers, both men and women, to bring a teaching to the whole church, from time to time.

All teaching that occurs in the context of a Sunday gathering is done in submission to and underneath the authority of the elders. Each person teaching submits their teaching notes to the elders for review, feedback, and changes. In addition, the elders at Frontline are responsible for guarding the doctrine of the church and correcting anything that was said that deviated from the teachings of Scripture.

WHAT ABOUT PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE THAT SAY WOMEN SHOULD BE “SILENT” IN THE CHURCHES?

There is often much confusion and frustration surrounding 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, which states the following:

“As in all the churches of the saints, 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.”

Before we state what this passage means, it is helpful to state what this passage does not mean. It cannot mean that women may not, in any way, communicate orally in public gatherings. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, the Apostle Paul writes about women praying in the public Sunday gatherings. Further, women were among the prophets throughout the New Testament, including the Day of Pentecost when a large group of Christians were assembled. In short, women were active participants in the life of the church, including on Sundays, when the church gathered together for corporate worship.

What, then, does 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 mean? Kathy Keller is helpful on this point:

“Consider for a moment the situation of the congregation receiving this letter. The early church was taught to model its worship on the template of Jewish synagogue worship. Neither synagogues nor early church gatherings had permanent, trained clergy, but the occasional traveling rabbi or teacher who was invited to speak. This appears to be the case with Jesus in Matthew 13:54, Mark 6:2, and Luke 4:31-32. This incident or another like it is more fully recorded in Luke 4:14-29. Note that one of the things that amazed and ultimately enraged ‘the people in the synagogue’ (Luke 4:28) was the authority with which Jesus spoke. This amazement, and other mentions of the authority with which Jesus taught, may have derived from his practice of beginning his remarks with ‘Amen, Amen,’ translated variously as “Verily, verily” or ‘Truly, truly,’ or even ‘Truly I tell you.’

This becomes more understandable when we reflect on the structure of synagogue worship. The elders of the synagogue were tasked with reviewing the remarks of the guest preacher of the day and judging them as true and to be received, or false and to be rejected. They sat at the front of the congregation, and if a true word was spoken, they were the ones meant to pronounce ‘Amen, Amen’ at the end of it. Jesus’ offense, among others, was

that by beginning his remarks saying, ‘Amen, Amen’ (Luke 4:24), he was judging his own words to be true before they had even been spoken, taking that function away from the elders. Small wonder that the elders were insulted, since they were the ones to whom the role of judging truth from blasphemy rightly belonged. Their anger at being overridden was in a sense justified, or it would have been if Jesus had not been the Word of God incarnate, full of truth.

The early church adopted this same practice as the Jewish synagogue—and for the same reasons. Without a resident, trained clergy and an authoritative compilation of the ‘deposit of truth’ left by Jesus, traveling apostles, messengers of apostles, and apostle-wannabes could show up at any worship event and speak. Depending on the forcefulness of the speaker, they might win a hearing for their interpretation of Jesus’ teaching. False doctrine was the biggest enemy of the infant church, and the counter to it was to have a group of local elders, chosen for their maturity in the faith, whose job it was to judge truth from heresy, whether from the mouths of their own local congregation or from a traveling speaker. It appears likely that these elders may have been the first paid clergy in the young church—their function was so critical and their training so extensive that it was appropriate to remunerate them so they could be free to pursue it. (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

It is at this point, when the prophets are being judged (1 Corinthians 14:29-33a), that women are told to be silent...”³

SUMMARY

Frontline Church is committed to being a gender-redeeming church at every level. We believe that God has created men and women equal in value, worth, and dignity. This equality of value, however, does not mean sameness. Men and women are different by design, and therein lies the beauty of the male and female gender. Both men and women image God in unique and beautiful ways.

At Frontline, women are equipped, encouraged, and released into every aspect of ministry, unless it is explicitly forbidden by God’s word. The only restrictions God has given women in Scripture is from functioning as the head of their household (if married) and holding the office of an elder. In the church, this means that the only restrictions for women are from the things that elders *alone* are called and qualified to do, and this does not include teaching on a Sunday morning.

³ Keller, Kathy. *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*. Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry. Kindle Edition. Zondervan, 2012.