



A BAPTIST REFLECTION ON

THE BIBLE & WOMEN

IN MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP

Updated Version
With Discussion Guide

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For many Baptist churches today, how women serve in ministry leadership roles continues to be a debated topic. Can women serve as deacons? Can women be ordained? Can women have leadership or teaching roles over men? Can women preach or be pastors? These are questions that have been the source of conflict for decades, and at the heart of the matter is how we interpret biblical passages related to women's roles and leadership.

Baptists have many different interpretations of scripture regarding how women should serve in ministry leadership. In the presence of varied viewpoints, understanding the Baptist distinctives of the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church is vital.

The Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers, or soul freedom, invites us to acknowledge that every believer has equal access to God through Christ, and thus has the right and responsibility to interpret the scriptures on their own behalf with guidance from the Spirit.

The Baptist distinctive of the autonomy of the local church affirms that each congregation has the right and responsibility to govern itself and to make its own decisions concerning its leadership.

Operating under these Baptist distinctives, many Baptist congregations and persons have studied the scriptures, have chosen to eliminate limitations on how women can serve in the local church, and are creating congregational cultures where women can thrive in ministry and leadership.

The perspective offered in this booklet demonstrates how these Baptists, among other followers of Jesus, interpret the Bible to affirm women's full participation in ministry leadership.

Scriptural interpretation is a complicated task. While some passages seem to have clear and direct application to the lives of individuals and congregations in the present day, others need more intentional study and consideration by the faith community to understand application and meaning.

For example, when interpreting many of the Old Testament laws or even particular practices New Testament congregations were exhorted to perform (i.e.: the holy kiss, Rom. 16:16; men lifting their hands in prayer, 1 Tim. 2:8), we seek to understand the cultural and literary contexts of those passages so that we might uncover the principles of faith underlying them. With these contexts in mind, we discern how the same principles might apply to the current context when considered in light of the life, example, ministry, and saving acts of Jesus, while prayerfully receiving the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In similar fashion, the many passages which describe and speak to women's roles and leadership are approached here with respect for the complicated nature of interpretation, attentiveness to the contexts of each passage, guidance from the Spirit, and are considered in light of Jesus.

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

The Bible includes many stories about women which are important to consider. While some women in the Bible exist in submissive roles to men, other women have authority and are prominent leaders.

In the Old Testament, Deborah is a military and judicial leader for the all Israelites—men and women (Judg. 4:4-15). Huldah is a prophet to whom King Josiah sends messengers so that she can instruct them regarding what is written in the Book of the Law that they have found (2 Kgs 22:11-20). Esther is a queen who successfully saves her people from annihilation (Esth. 5:1-9:19). Zelophehad's five daughters stand up to Moses for their right to own land, and in doing so they influence a new law which gives other women the right to own land as well (Num. 27:1-11).

In the gospels, women are significant participants in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' mother, Mary, nurtures his faith and sense of calling (Luke 1:46-55; 2:39-40), and nudges him toward his first miracle (John 2:1-11). A prophetess, Anna, recognizes the young Jesus at the Temple and affirms that he will bring about the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). Many women follow Jesus and join him on his journey, financially supporting his ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

Other women provide faithful examples of discipleship throughout the gospels (Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 26:6-13, among others). Matthew (27:55-56) and Mark (15:40-41) specifically record women witnessing Jesus' crucifixion even though the twelve disciples deserted him after his arrest. Mary Magdalene and other women are the ones who find Jesus' empty tomb on the third day and are told to go and tell people that Jesus is risen (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18). These women are the first evangelists, sharing the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

In Acts and the epistles, Lydia is a woman of wealth, who becomes a believer in Christ and starts the church at Philippi in her home (Acts 16:14-15, 40). Priscilla is a co-worker of Paul, who teaches others in the ways of God (Acts 18:26,

Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19). Phillip, one of the original seven deacons, is father of four prophesying daughters (Acts 21:8-9).

In addition to instructions regarding women's roles which are included in the New Testament, these are a few examples of women who also inform how we interpret the Bible regarding the roles and leadership of women.

WOMEN AND CREATION

The story of creation and the sin of Adam and Eve are often cited to explain why women must be submissive to men and thus should not be in authority or leaders over men. Three specific points are a part of this argument—the order of creation, the order in which Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree, and the consequences God spoke over Adam and Eve after the event.

When considering the order of creation, both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 must be considered. In Gen. 1:1-2:4a, the six days of God’s creative activity are presented in their entirety with God’s completion and rest on the seventh day. As a part of this complete account of creation, God creates humans in Gen. 1:26-27, and the passage specifically states that God creates women and men at the same time, and that both female and male are created in God’s image. No order is present, nor instructions given, which distinguish the roles of women and men.

In Gen. 2:4b-25, the reader finds another complete account of creation with a different order and structure. In this account, God created a man when all that existed were streams which watered the surface of the earth. A better translation of the Hebrew word, “man” is actually “a person” since the Hebrew word for person is the same word which is also sometimes translated/interpreted as “mankind” or “humanity” since the term includes all people, not just males.

Then, after creating the person, God creates a garden, trees, animals, and finally a second person, woman, who is made from the first person. If the order of creation is determinative of authority in this second account of creation, then it would appear the animals would even have authority over the woman, and no credible interpretation of Genesis 2 suggests that is the case.

In addition to the order, some scholars note that the woman is created to be a “helper” (Gen. 2:20) for the man, not to be his equal. Yet, the woman is created from the person’s rib, not his foot, so that they would stand side-by-side instead of him ruling over her. Further, the Hebrew word “helper” is most often found in the Old Testament in reference to God (e.g. Hos 13:9, Ps 70:5, Ps 40:17), and is a

designation which does not indicate God should be ruled over or is unworthy of authority or leadership.

In contemplating the order of their sin in Genesis 3, the woman eats the forbidden fruit first, but the man does not seem to have any reservations about eating the fruit himself (Gen. 3:6). Indeed, God spoke the command about not eating from this tree to the first person created and gave the command before the woman was even formed (Gen. 2:16-17). They both sin against God's command and suffer consequences.

1 Timothy 2:13-14 refers to the creation order and uses the fact that the woman was deceived first as a basis for women to not assume authority over men. However, a passage in Romans places the blame for first sin squarely on the man, explaining that sin came into the world through the trespass of one man—Adam (Rom. 5:12-19). If Eve's sin was the basis for universal subjugation to men, it would seem inappropriate and inconsistent for another biblical passage to place the blame of the first sin on Adam. Additionally, no other biblical passages seem to indicate that the order in which sins are performed by people necessitates greater punishment or a hierarchy between the sinners.

Finally, in God's encounter with Adam and Eve after their sins, God describes the consequences to each. For some, these consequences are prescriptive—rules prescribed for and imposed upon all people for all time. But others read God's response to each of the sinners in Genesis 3 as descriptive—a description of the consequences of sin, though not necessarily a prescription of God's desires for humanity.

Interpreted descriptively, when God says to the woman, "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3:16), God is describing the consequences of sin entering into the world. Because sin exists, power entered relationships that were meant for mutuality and thus men will rule over women. God does not prescribe that men are meant to rule over women but describes that this is the way things are.

God's desire is unity between the two humans, the oneness they had with each other before their sins (2:23-25). God expresses hope that the woman and man experience an unhindered relationship with each other and with God. If God had desired a hierarchical arrangement for their relationship, then God would have arranged it this way from the beginning, rather than imposing it as a consequence for their sin.

In Genesis 2-3, hierarchy between men and women is connected to sin, whereas mutuality and unity are connected to the initial creation of men and women.

AFFIRMATION OF EQUALITY AMONG WOMEN AND MEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

While Paul's epistles present challenging passages that will be discussed subsequently, Paul and other New Testament scriptures also offer affirming presentations of the equality of women and their inclusion in the leadership of the church. Some of those affirming passages include the following.

Gal. 3:28 states that in Christ there is no male and female, an affirmation that division and power between people should no longer exist for those in Christ.

1 Cor. 11:11-12 declares that while woman came from man, man is also born of woman, but ultimately everything comes from God.

Further, in the same chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul instructs that every woman who prays or prophesies must cover her head (1 Cor. 11:4). Paul does not instruct women not to pray or prophesy, which were both forms of public speaking that Paul acknowledges were occurring in the Corinthian congregations. Paul simply provides further instruction on how women should pray or prophesy respectfully in their cultural context.

In Romans 16, Paul sends greetings to those whom he regards as friends and co-workers. Of the twenty-eight people mentioned specifically in the chapter, nine are women, including Junia who Paul calls an apostle.

Additionally, the gospels never present Jesus limiting women's participation in his ministry or making public statements that promote hierarchical relationships between women and men. In contrast, Jesus includes women among his followers, sees and meets their needs, and entrusts them with the gospel message (see previous section on Women in the Bible). Women are integral and important to Jesus' work.

WOMEN AS WIVES IN SUBMISSION TO HUSBANDS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Four New Testament passages instruct wives to be submissive or subject to their husbands (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6), and some suggest submission in marriage directly impacts women's ability to lead in the church.

In considering these passages, it is important to first note that the instructions for wives to submit to husbands appear in New Testament books which are in the epistolary genre. Epistles, or letters, are two-way communication written specifically from one person to another person or group of people.

Evidence of the epistolary genre is on display at the end of many New Testament letters when Paul sends greetings to individual people who only existed at the time of the letter's writing, gives instructions involving his cloak (2 Tim. 4:13), or writes that Tychicus will explain everything (Eph. 6:21). These instructions make no sense to modern-day readers since they pertained to matters only known to the two parties of the letter.

When reading New Testament letters 2,000 years after they were written, readers only hear one side of the story and are not given the full context of all the issues mentioned in the letter. So, as in most two-way communication, if a third party listens in, they do not understand the full matter under discussion. The same is true in the epistles where wifely submission is addressed.

In the two-way communication of these letters, the instructions concerning the submission of wives were written for the particular wives in those specific congregations, which existed in a particular culture and/or under particular circumstances which are unknown and unmentioned. Three primary reasons to interpret passages regarding wifely submission in this manner are included here.

First, those who penned the letters in the New Testament often addressed particular issues in individual congregations (lawsuits among believers, 1 Cor. 6:1-8; wearing gold jewelry, 1 Pet. 3:3; drinking a little wine instead of only water,

1 Tim. 5:23), rather than only writing instructions intended for all people in all times. Because of this practice, it would be consistent for the passages to be interpreted as addressing particular issues among the letters' recipients.

Second, while the passages instruct wives to submit, other New Testament passages specify mutuality among husbands and wives (1 Cor. 7:3-4; Eph. 5:21). All scripture must be considered in light of other scripture, especially when disparate ideas seem to be present. Whether one chooses to interpret wives' submission as universally applicable or only contextually-binding, the presence of disparate ideas cannot be denied. A decision must be made as to how to interpret the passages in light of each other. Further, when considering these passages in light of Jesus, who presented a vision of power turned upside down (e.g. Luke 6:17-36), marriages of mutuality seem more consistent with Jesus' teachings and ministry.

Third, some of the same passages which commend wives to submit to their husbands also instruct slaves to submit to their masters (Col. 3:22-25; Eph. 6:5-9) and seem to condone the hierarchy of power present in the institution of slavery. However, rightfully, the majority of believers now condemn slavery and its harmful arrangement of one person's ownership and power over another. The oppressive institution of slavery is sinful and must continue to be abolished even though scripture includes many instructions for how to live within slavery.

In a similar fashion, though instructions appear for women living within the hierarchy of power present in the marriage institution of the 1st century BCE, such arrangements of one person wielding power over another are sinful and should not exist. The close literary proximity of the passages regarding submission in marriage and slavery is a key aspect of this interpretation.

SPECIFIC LIMITATIONS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND SPEAKING IN THE CHURCHES

Two specific passages have been considered most important in terms of limitations placed on women's authority and leadership in the church—1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15.

1 Cor. 14:34-35 states, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

In the larger literary context of this passage, Paul is addressing the need for orderliness in the worship found among Corinthian congregations, specifically in terms of how the congregants speak in tongues (14:26-40). Most Baptists do not regard Paul's instructions in terms of the order of how people speak in/interpret tongues as relevant to our current worship practice but view them as related to contextual concerns of the Corinthian believers. Thus, because the verses regarding women's silence exist within a larger literary unit which is interpreted as contextual, it is inconsistent to pick out two verses regarding women's roles in worship from the section to elevate them alone as universally applicable.

Further, one way that some interpret verses 34-35 is in connection to the verse that follows. Verse 36 begins with a Greek particle that normally appears before a question for which the expected answer is no, or it occurs in a similar position to negate the statement that precedes it.

Thus, some interpreters see Paul's statement regarding women's silence in verses 34-35 as a practice of the Corinthians, which the Corinthians had written Paul about, or about which he heard. Then, by starting the next verse, v. 36, with the Greek particle, Paul is refuting the content of verses 34-35 and the Corinthians' practice of women's silence in the churches by saying, "No! Did the word of God originate with only you (male Corinthians)?" (1 Cor. 14:36).

Paul also uses this literary technique in 1 Cor. 7:1 when he refutes the Corinthians' idea that it is good for a man to abstain from sex, and then continues by providing further instruction on the matter of sexual relationships in the rest of the chapter.

For Paul to negate the idea that women need to remain silent would be consistent with the presence of Paul's instructions for how women should speak publicly in the assembly given just three chapters prior (1 Cor. 11:4).

1 Tim. 2:11-15 states, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man, she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety."

Several aspects of this passage are important to consider when discerning how to interpret the verses' application for church practice today.

First, the Greek word for "to assume authority" is used only in this verse and nowhere else in the New Testament. Because there are no similar uses with which to compare, we cannot infer that Paul refers to the same kind of authority about which he writes in other passages regarding church leaders. Instead, his use here of the word "authority" seems to indicate an assumption of inappropriate power over others given that God alone is the ultimate authority. Therefore, interpreters presuppose there may have been women in that particular congregation who were trying to exercise authority over others in ways that were domineering, inconsistent with following Jesus, or similar to how women exercised authority in some of the cults of the Greco-Roman world.

Second, the literary context of the passage must also be considered. These verses appear as a part of a larger passage in which Paul is exhorting men to pray lifting up holy hands without anger (1 Tim. 2:8) and women to dress modestly without pearls, gold, or expensive clothing (1 Tim. 2:9). Rather than

being considered necessary to modern practice in worship, both instructions are interpreted as related to the contextual setting of the letter's recipients. They are interpreted as representing principles of praying respectfully and reverently, and demonstrating modesty in a way that is appropriate in one's culture.

Further, the literary context of the passage also addresses salvation in a way that most would not find to be consistent with an understanding of being saved by grace through faith. 1 Tim. 2:15 states that women are saved through childbearing, although only if they continue in faith, love, and holy living. Many women (as well as men) have navigated the difficult road of infertility, and it seems unimaginable that the church would render them ineligible for salvation or for belonging in the community of God because they are unable to reproduce.

Thus, in the same way that 1 Cor. 14:34-35 exists within a larger literary unit which is interpreted as related to the contextual setting of the letter, it is also inconsistent to pick out a few verses regarding women's roles in worship from the unit in 1 Tim. 2:8-15 and elevate them alone as universally applicable, especially since the unit also includes a statement about salvation which is inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament.

THEOLOGICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to considering how scripture is interpreted to affirm women's full participation in church leadership, theological, practical, and historical considerations can also inform the church's conversation on the role of women in the church. Three key points are included here.

First, increased women's presence in leadership roles expands our imagination of God's nature. Even though Baptists hold the distinctive of the priesthood of all believers, the practical reality of our churches is that leaders "speak for God." Leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of revealing God and God's purposes to congregations, and thus it is inevitable that the leaders' characteristics end up being associated with God as well. Since both women and men are created in the image of God, all people exist as a reflection of God in the world.

God's infinite nature cannot be captured by one gender. When women serve in leadership roles, including as preachers and pastors, people are able to imagine a more complete picture of God's infinite nature captured in the perspectives and voices of women.

Second, when women serve in more ministry and leadership roles in the church, the needs of more than half of our church populations can be better understood and served. More than half of the participants in churches are women. Women are more likely to be regular attenders and volunteers in church ministries. When more than half of our church population is not represented among the church's leadership, the church's vision and work may not accurately represent its full membership.

Further, there are many issues, such as domestic and sexual abuse, for which women will not seek the help and counsel of male leaders. As the #metoo and #churchtoo movements have revealed, abuse is far more common in our society than we would ever hope, and survivors cannot have too many advocates, especially in the church.

Third, women have been leading and preaching since the beginning of the church. Women were the first evangelists (as mentioned above), were prophesying and preaching in the church at Corinth, if not other churches as well, and were taking on the leadership of new church starts just as Lydia did in Phillipi.

But women's involvement in the preaching of God's word and leadership of God's church did not end with the New Testament era. Early Christian documents reveal that women such as Thecla, Perpetua, Proba, Macrina, and Paula were leaders of the new faith movement. In the newly formed Baptist tradition, women began preaching in the 1630s. Anne Hempstall, Mary Bilbrow, Joane Bauford, Susan May, Elizabeth Bancroft, and Arabella Thomas preached throughout England during those years, and in the mid-1640s, Mrs. Attaway, a lace-maker and member of a General Baptist church in London, was derisively labeled as the "mistress of all the she-preachers on Coleman Street" by a vocal Baptist opponent. Women leaders and preachers are not a new phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

As Baptists, we affirm the right and responsibility of each person and each congregation to prayerfully discern the appropriate roles of women in the church and to do so based on serious study of scripture.

The intent of this prayerful study, under the Lordship of Christ and guided by the Spirit, is to demonstrate how many Baptists interpret the Bible in a way that affirms women's full participation in the leadership of the church.

God created women in the divine image and with the intent of mutuality and shared responsibilities. Even though the sinfulness of some people exerting power over others became a part of the world's existence, the equality in which God created women and men remains God's desire.

In Joel 2:18-32, the prophet presents a vision of the coming reign of God in which fear, scarcity, and power over others no longer exists. In his vision, Joel includes this divine prophecy:

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people in those days. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29).

On Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on all those who followed Jesus, which included women, Peter spoke these same words of Joel (Acts 2:14-18) to describe what was happening that day and to convey that the prophecy was being fulfilled in their presence. The first Pentecost and the Spirit's presence brought a taste of the reign of God that Jesus is bringing to earth.

Therefore, by affirming women in ministry, eliminating the power exerted by people over one another, and submitting ourselves to God's power alone we also live into God's reign.

More and more Baptist women ministers are faithfully sharing the love and grace of Christ to a world in need of redemption. With the perspective on the interpretation of scripture offered in this booklet, it is our hope that even more women will be able to fully embrace and embody their callings so that the work of God might increase through a rising number of workers for the plentiful harvest (Luke 10:2).

If you and/or your congregation are exploring the issues raised in this booklet and need further resources or desire more conversation, visit the Baptist Women in Ministry website or contact the BWIM staff.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For those who are reading this booklet in community with others, the following prompts and discussion questions are provided to create opportunities for group discernment. The first 5 prompts are for a shorter general discussion, while the rest follow each of the booklet's sections to provide more opportunity for specific conversation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How are the interpretations of various scriptures offered in this booklet different from or similar to interpretations that you have previously held?

Which of the arguments for various passages are most convincing to you? Which ones are least convincing to you?

What would be lost if you and/or your congregation chose to interpret the Bible as affirming of women in ministry? What would be gained?

Are Baptists truly free to interpret scripture any way they feel is faithful as long as they seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit? If not, what are the limits that would be placed on interpretive freedom and why?

What would it look like for your congregation to put this type of interpretation affirming women in ministry into practice?

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

- Read the story of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27:1-11. Describe how God is involved in the story and what God's involvement might mean not only to the story but also to women's equality.
- Read the resurrection narrative in Matthew 28:1-10 and John 20:11-18. Jesus directly tells Mary Magdalene and the women to go and tell the other disciples about his resurrection. Because Jesus entrusts the gospel message to women, do you consider this evidence that Jesus entrusts all women to go and tell the gospel message without barriers or limitations? Why or why not?
- Does the presence of positive examples of women's equality scattered throughout scripture, admittedly among many examples of hierarchical relationships for women, support the case that women can and should be leaders in the church today? Why or why not?

WOMEN AND CREATION

- Share with one another how the creation story has been taught to you regarding women's and men's roles. How is the interpretation presented in the booklet different from or similar to what you have been taught?
- When you read the creation narratives in Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25, what would you determine to be the ultimate truth about humanity in these stories? How does that ultimate truth relate to or not relate to understanding women's and men's roles today?
- Read the full story of the first sin and its aftermath in Gen. 3:1-24. Are the "punishments" given to all the involved parties still enforced today? Can you glean what God feels was lost in the process? How does that relate to or not relate to understanding women's and men's roles today?

AFFIRMATION OF EQUALITY AMONG WOMEN AND MEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- Like reading the stories of women in the Bible, does the presence of these passages along with examples of women's equality and clear involvement in church leadership support the case that women can and should be leaders in the church today? Why or why not?
- While Jesus calls women as his disciples, points to them as examples of discipleship, and calls them to proclaim the resurrection, Jesus never clearly states that women should be considered equal to men and have freedom to lead the church in all ways. Did Jesus need to speak specific words on this matter for women to be equal in all ways or is his example enough?

WOMEN AS WIVES IN SUBMISSION TO HUSBANDS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A key point in this section is interpreting which biblical passages are contextual or culturally conditioned and which are universally applicable. How do you think these decisions are made?
- Can you think of other passages where it might be difficult to determine whether the passage is contextual or universally applicable? How can considering the interpretation of these other verses contribute to interpretive decisions for verses involving wives' submission in marriage and limitations placed on women's leadership in the church?

SPECIFIC LIMITATIONS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND SPEAKING IN THE CHURCHES

- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 calls for complete silence of women in the church, meaning women should not speak at all. If this passage is interpreted as universally applicable, how would one discern what types of speech from women are permitted in the church today (e.g. speaking to children, to other women, singing)?

- How do you understand the meaning of 1 Timothy 2:15? Is the author actually saying women who are infertile cannot be saved? What interpretive tools would you use to determine if the author actually means it, whether for today or even for the women in its original audience? To you, how does this passage affect your interpretation of the previous verses which seem to limit women's authority?

THEOLOGICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS & CONCLUSION

- From your perspective, what effects does not having female leadership in the church have on women today?
- From your perspective, are there negative effects on men when they do not have the full partnership of women in the church?
- Is the reign of God envisioned in the "last days" something that God only wants to happen in the future, or does God want to see the characteristics of the world-to-come breaking into the church now?



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BAPTIST WOMEN
IN MINISTRY

