

It's Biblical: Women in Ministry



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While the issue of women in ordained ministry has been settled in the United Methodist Church for years, it is still an issue for many in the larger Body of Christ. United Methodist Christians are frequently confronted by others who question this inclusiveness. Thus, it is important to have biblical and theological resources to affirm our view.

Passage after passage of scripture gives support for the leadership role of women in the church. In a time when women were devalued as persons, Jesus and the early church showed little sympathy for the prevailing attitude. He considered all people as equal children of God, worthy of God's love, and gifted for ministry. In the Gospels, women are mentioned on numerous occasions. For example, in one passage Jesus spent time with a Samaritan woman, to the shock of the disciples. This woman went on to serve as the first female preacher, for "many Samaritans from this city believed in him because of this woman's testimony" (John 4:39). Another story shows that Jesus encouraged women to sit and learn from him in a time when it was highly unusual, even contemptible, for a woman to be discussing religious matters with men (Luke 10:38f). In the gospels we learn that women were among the disciples and stayed close to him even at the time of his death, while the men fled with fear (Luke 8:2; 23:55). It was a woman who was the first to proclaim the resurrection (John 20:1f). In the gospels Jesus healed women, taught women, and called women to participate in His ministry. Given the times, this was remarkable indeed.

In other New Testament writings we have a remarkable witness to the leadership role of women. While there are a couple of passages that are frequently taken out of context and used to support opposition, the weight of the New Testament is supportive of women in leadership. In the Book of Acts, for example, we have the witness of women like Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla, and the daughters of Phillip (Acts 1:14, 2:14-17, 8:12, 9:36, 16:14-15, 21:9). In the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul mentions several women who were leaders in the church. He writes, "I commend to you our sister Pheobe, that you may receive her in the Lord and help her in whatever she may require of you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well" (Romans 16:1). Pheobe was a leader in the church at Rome. In the same chapter Paul calls Priscilla "a fellow worker in Christ, who risked her neck for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches give thanks" (Romans 16:3). He says that Euodia and Syntyche are persons who have "labored side by side with me in the gospel" (Philippians 4:2). From these passages, we learn that women were considered equals, co-workers in ministry. The people were told to listen to them. Women were encouraged to use their gifts and appreciated for it.

Reservations concerning women in ministry stem from basically two very brief passages: I Timothy, 2:11 and I Corinthians 14:34, both stating that women should remain silent in worship and should not have authority over men. There are multiple ways to faithfully interpret these passages. One way is to acknowledge that the principles of scriptures are often interpreted in culturally specific ways and thus reflect the customs and norms of the time. For example, very few Christians believe that women should be wearing veils in worship, even though it is stated in scripture. In this same way, and in light of the

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overwhelming evidence for women in ministry found elsewhere, we can conclude that these calls for silence are culturally specific and do not apply to our time and culture. We can still, however, learn from the principles of authority and orderly worship behind these statements. Concerning the Corinthian passage it can be said that Paul was speaking about a specific group of women who were disrupting the church. He is not making a general proclamation. This seems reasonable since he speaks favorably about women praying in church earlier in the same letter (I Cor 11:4-5). It might also be possible to say that Paul himself was a growing Christian and as such sometimes reverted to old ways of thinking. Then he would catch himself and preach the true gospel, saying things like "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

The United Methodist Church is an inclusive church because the scriptures mandate it. We seek to grow from the gifts and graces of all. We believe that we are living in the time that Peter talked about when he quoted from the prophet Joel, "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). Peter proclaimed that this prophecy had come true that day. It was the day of Pentecost and God was indeed pouring out the Holy Spirit. Today, we strive to make ourselves open to the "outpouring of God's Spirit upon all flesh." We do not want to limit God's work in our lives, nor do we want to miss out on the blessings that come to us as others allow God to pour out his Spirit upon them.

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