

Women in the Church: Spirit-Led Influence and Shared Leadership

Yves Perriard – June 2025

For centuries, women were expected to have no responsibilities and no leadership in the church. However, with the Pentecostal movement, women began expressing themselves and gaining influence in the church. Many now claim that women should be pastors or apostles and lead churches. Is this correct?

The early Church had prophetesses¹, deaconesses² and women evangelizing with men³. They could sing, pray and prophesy together with men in a public context⁴ so that all women could influence the Church through their songs, prayers and prophetic words.

So how do we harmonize this “speaking” of women with the apparent “silence” that is required of them in 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 ?

If Christians understood the socio-cultural context of both the overall Greco-Roman culture, and particularly the one of the synagogues, they would have absolutely no confusion on how to interpret those passages.

It's important to recognize that the first-century Christian women, who had significantly less access to education compared to men, were granted an extraordinary privilege: the freedom to speak openly and engage in discussions with the same level of freedom as men did in the synagogue setting. This practice was prevalent in synagogue culture, as evidenced by the accounts in Acts and the Gospels.⁵

To clarify, any man had the right to interrupt any self-appointed teacher during the reading and commenting of the Scriptures during the “synagogue worship.” Naturally, Christians copied this

The restrictive measures on women actually reveal the incredible freedom they had received
--

¹ Acts 21:9

² Rom.16:1-2

³ Acts 18:26 Priscilla was co-evangelizing/teaching Apollos with her husband Aquila

⁴ 1 Cor. 11:4 is obviously a public context when the whole church got together.

⁵ We see either Paul or Jesus being given the freedom during the Jewish “worship service” to speak whatever they wanted. In Acts 13:16 Paul uses this freedom to preach the Gospel. In Luke 4:21 Jesus did the same while seating in their synagogue's ranks. See as well Mark 6:2-3 and 9:34, John 6:25-59, Acts 18:6 all show that the synagogue was a place where people openly discussed and even disputed any given message. For more information see books like in p.124 from *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research* by Stephen K. Catto (New York: T&T Clark, 2007) and particularly this argument of women being able to speak freely from *The most excellent way: Overcoming chronic issues that divide the Church* by Eldred Echols, Hurst TX: Sweet Publishing, , 1994

religious model from which they came. In that context, women were given the same amazing freedom to interrupt and ask questions as men had. In this new environment, women decided to ask and learn as much and as quickly as men. Eventually, their zeal to keep up led to a major disorder. (a "shame" v.35).

This is why Paul instructed them in 1 Corinthians 14:34 to remain “silent” and refrain from interrupting constantly. In verse 35, he advised them to seek more knowledge at home from their husbands rather than engaging in public discussions. If you’ve ever attended a meeting where anyone can ask questions and freely express their thoughts, especially in cultural contexts where women were historically suppressed from doing so, you can comprehend the chaos that could have ensued during that era!

In other words, the very freedom that was granted to women is the reason behind Paul’s “corrective” measures. The fact that he had to establish a balance demonstrates that a new level of freedom had been established for them. (The mention of the Torah in verse 34 was referring to submission, not speaking, as some women did speak in the Torah, such as Deborah and Miriam.)

The issue, therefore, was not teaching or authority, as many misunderstand from 1 Timothy, because as we have already seen, they were prophetesses, deaconesses, and women evangelizing men in the early Church. This clearly implied that women possessed sufficient authority to influence and “teach” men through their prayers and prophecies, as 1 Corinthians 11 demonstrates. If you have ever witnessed a woman prophesying or even passionately praying in the presence of men, I fail to see how you can ignore the fact that she lacked “teaching” or some measure of authority over them, as any prophetic utterance or prayer always does.

The real issue here is not whether women can speak and teach, but HOW they do it. In other words, women must be cautious not to come across as manipulative, dominating, or dismissive of men when speaking. This is what Paul emphasizes in 1 Timothy 2:12, where silence is actually “quietness” (hesuchia) rather than absolute silence. Essentially, they must “teach” with “quietness” rather than dominatingly. Silence (or holding peace, which is the same verb as in verse 30 for prophets) is actually another verb in Greek, the one used in 1 Corinthians 14:34 (“sigao”) to describe how women should learn, not how they should speak.

Combining this verse in 1 Corinthians 14:34 with the very same parallel in 1 Timothy 2:11 reveals that Paul intended women to learn silently in the Church, not just speak. Even 1 Corinthians 11 demonstrates the same principle: women could pray with men, but they had to wear a sign of their submission to them, which clearly indicated HOW they prayed.

Women can speak openly
in churches, as long as
they do not take authority
over men

To summarize, Paul essentially argued that if some ignorant women were disrupting the incredible freedom where both men and women could freely speak, it was better for them to remain silent in their learning or seek guidance from their husbands at home. Furthermore, based on the notion

that women lacked authority over men, women had to be cautious in the manner they spoke. In my opinion, these are the two key issues that Paul addressed in those two passages. If this is not the case, it becomes virtually impossible to reconcile the supposed “silence” of women with the fact that the early church had prophetesses and women praying alongside men in a public setting.

If women were not permitted to hold authority over men, it not only dictated the way they spoke but also determined the ministries they held within the Church. Since they were not allowed to have a dominant position, women were unable to lead entire groups independently. This seems to be the reason why we do not find them mentioned in significant decision-making roles, such as those held by apostles⁶, evangelists or elders.

But you find them among prophetesses (four daughters of Philip) or deacons (Phoebe), since those roles are not leadership positions. Some have argued that Priscilla might have been an evangelist, while others have speculated that the Junia of Romans 16:7 might have been an apostle, which is extremely unlikely from both the context and the language. There is virtually nothing that can be said about their roles, but even if someone wanted to invent anything, they would be forced to admit one very interesting fact: Priscilla is always mentioned with her husband, and Junia is mentioned with a man.

In other words, however powerful these women might have been, they are powerful because they are in unity with a male partnership. This is the model of the New Testament: strong women work with strong men, a fact which is illustrated by all the mentions of strong women in Paul’s letters. So, if a woman has any of the qualities of an evangelist, she works in harmony with her husband, so that she can express her gifts under his leadership.

This model of collaborative working is exemplified in a healthy marriage. When a wife offers her husband her advice or even warnings with an attitude of respect and submission, without asserting authority over him, he will be more inclined to listen to her. In fact, he will actively seek her guidance, as illustrated in the example of Proverbs 31. This suggests that wise and spiritually mature women should not only collaborate with strong men but should also be invited to participate in decision-making processes alongside them.⁷

To clarify, this is why women can always talk, teach, prophesy, and co-lead with men, but they must do so with the same attitude of respect that a wife has towards her husband. The behavior within the family should be modeled in the church and vice versa. Men need to feel respect, and women need to learn this challenging language, especially in today’s world where many men are treated like children and crave recognition.

⁶ Some have tried to argue that the possible apostle of the name Junia was a woman, but there is not enough evidence that it was a common name among women (see notes # 7 on Junia in Church Government in Grudem’s Systematic theology. P.909 or the excellent and extensive study from <https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/a-female-apostle>)

⁷ If Phoebe was working with Paul, as many other women along his ministry (like Jesus by the way) and if some could be deaconesses, the possibility of common work is very much alive.

On the other hand, husbands are expected to feel entirely responsible for their families and never relinquish their leadership. When husbands fail to take charge, something is seriously amiss, and in cultures where this occurs, women ultimately suffer. For instance, I spent over 15 years in Russia and Ukraine and discovered that most women there have very little respect for men, so that in turn most men act in a very insecure and irresponsible way towards them. This is a tragic vicious circle!

In other words, women left to themselves as primary leaders can be just as frustrated as women who are unheard and disrespected as equal partners—a reality we see in many countries around the world.⁸ For a long time, women were not heard in the church, which was wrong. However, we shouldn't fall into the other extreme of men abdicating their ultimate responsibility, as that would lead to women losing again. The key is to learn from the healthy interdependence and mutuality that a mature marriage offers.

Sometimes, a group of Christians can have one woman leading, especially when a church is newly established and lacks a strong male leader. This arrangement, similar to a single-parent family, is not inherently wrong as long as it's temporary. However, it becomes dysfunctional when the woman refuses to step down after many years, preventing a man from assuming the leadership role.

In other words, just as women desire to be genuinely heard and have husbands who take the final responsibility and protection of their families, so should it be in churches. The wise insights and even prophetic voice of women should be clearly heard in churches, and this is why we should fully restore the roles of prophetesses and deaconesses, or any responsibilities where they work alongside men who are pastors or evangelists.

Marriage defines the attitude and roles of men and women in the Church
--

Similarly, many men need to rediscover what it means to be “wild at heart” and lead with boldness, and this is why we need to restore the biblical role of evangelists and apostles within local churches.

In conclusion, the guidelines of the New Testament regarding women are as follows:

- **Women can speak, prophesy, and teach IF they do it with a respectful attitude that does not try to lead and take control over men.**
- **They can have fully independent ministries like prophetesses and deacons or use their specific gifts alongside pastors and evangelists. (Especially as women to other women, which is ideal!)**
- **If they have leadership abilities, they should do it in full partnership with their husbands or other leaders.**

⁸ Consider China where it is not good to have women babies, or the way most women are being treated in India or most Muslim countries.