

A Wesleyan View of Women in Ministry

The Wesleyan Church affirms its long-standing commitment to full opportunity for women to be ordained to the ministry and to serve in any and all ministerial and leadership capacities. Although this vision has yet to be fully realized within The Wesleyan Church, the Church and its precedent bodies have experienced the benefits of such a commitment for over 150 years.

How We Read Scripture

We recognize that such a position on women in ministry is sometimes challenged on the basis of certain Scripture passages. However, we believe that all pertinent Scriptures need to be interpreted in the light of their immediate contexts, as well as in the context of Scripture as a whole. We also believe that no passages of Scripture clearly prohibit women from holding positions of authority. The passages that on the surface appear to do so are often twisted by interpretations stemming from biased readings of the text. In some cases there are faulty or biased translations. And in others there is evidence of localized situations that required special treatment that was not intended for general application.

We believe that God has progressively revealed in the Scriptures His purpose to call, equip and empower women for full opportunity of ministry in the church. Galatians 3:28 states that in the Christian era “There is neither . . . male, nor female.” This is a general principle of Scripture. Any Scriptures that at first appear to contradict this general statement must be understood in light of the general principle of Galatians 3:28. Clearly the spiritual and heavenly identity proclaimed in Galatians 3:28 has precedence over the earthly, administrative identity. It was just such an understanding of Scripture that prompted our Wesleyan predecessors to re-examine the position held by many of their contemporaries that the Scriptures were pro- slavery, and to take the lead in both the abolition of slavery and in the abolition of discrimination against female ministers.

What We Know from Scripture

Scripture sets forth God’s original plan and its redemptive renewal that provides equal standing to both men and women.

1. In the Beginning. The creation story reveals full equality of man and woman in God’s original plan, as both were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and the so-called “cultural mandate,” giving them full authority over the earth and all earthly life-forms, was spoken to man and woman (Gen. 1:28-30). This plan of equality was interrupted by the Fall as human sin brought the wife’s submission to her husband (Gen. 3:16). But even at that point God spoke of His redemptive plan as He foretold that Eve’s descendant would crush Satan beneath His heel (Gen. 3:15). The redemptive purpose and mission of Jesus is to redeem all humanity from the results of the fall, including the subjection of women. Jesus has provided equal forgiveness and redemption to both men and women.

2. In the Old Testament. God Himself initiated opportunities in the Old Testament period by His call to and use and blessing of women in ministry. God used Miriam as both a prophetess (Ex. 15:20) and a leader (Micah 6:4). He used Deborah as a prophetess and as a judge who led Israel; she directed Barak as to how military victory was to be won and even accompanied him into battle (Judg. 4:4ff.). God used the prophetess Huldah (even though Jeremiah and Zephaniah were prophets at the time) to spark a great religious revival during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:14ff.; 2 Chron. 34:22ff.). And God predicted through an Old Testament prophet the coming of the long-expected Day of the Lord when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on both men and women and they and their sons and daughters would prophesy (Joel 2:28-29).

3. In the Ministry of Jesus. The New Testament shows that Jesus differed from the prevailing culture in a very positive openness to women as co-laborers. He ministered to men and women alike without distinction. He violated several cultural taboos to share the good news with the Samaritan woman who then evangelized her village (John 4:7ff.). He was accompanied by women who ministered to Him and His disciples (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3). And Jesus chose women to be the first to see Him after His resurrection and to be the first to carry the message of the resurrection to the male disciples.

4. At Pentecost. Both men and women were awaiting the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they would receive power for witnessing to the whole world when the Holy Spirit would come upon them (Acts 1:13-15). It was this group of men and women that was filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and began to speak in many languages to the Jews assembled in Jerusalem for the festival (2:1-12). Peter took the occasion to declare that "this is that" which Joel had predicted: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . . and on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (2:17-18). So the birth of Christ's church was accompanied by the demonstration and announcement that men and women would both serve as God's voices to carry the message of Christ to the world.

5. In the Ministry of Paul. Paul reflected Jesus' openness to women as co-laborers. In what was probably the first epistle that he wrote, he declared that in Christ Jesus, "There is neither . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). In writing to the Corinthians, he recognized that women prophesied and prayed in public worship under the new order (1 Cor. 11:5). When closing his letter to the Romans, Paul mentions ten women in chapter 16, seven of whom he speaks of with detailed, high commendation, referring to one as a "deacon" (not deaconess) who had been a great help to many including Paul himself, referring to one as "outstanding among the apostles," referring to one as a "fellow worker," and referring to those who had worked hard "in the Lord" or for the Roman believers. In Philippians 4:2-3 he mentions two women who had "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel."

6. Misused Passages. Among Scripture passages frequently cited against women serving in the ministry, probably the most significant are 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 ("women should remain silent in the churches"), 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (women are not to teach or have authority over men), and passages in 1 Timothy and Titus calling for a minister to be "the husband of one wife." The 1 Corinthians passage is definitely dealing with a specialized, probably localized cultural issue, since in 11:5 Paul recognizes women speaking in church as a normal thing. The 1 Timothy passage as translated and interpreted is also inconsistent with Paul's position in 1 Corinthians

11:5. It probably deals with the false teaching at Ephesus that is repeatedly discussed by Paul in 1 Timothy. The 1 Timothy passage concludes with a reference to women being “saved through childbearing,” which has defied any consensus of interpretation. Paul sets forth qualifications for “a bishop” (KJV) or “overseer” (NIV) in 1 Timothy 3:1ff., and elder/bishop/overseer in Titus 1:5-7, and “a deacon” in 1 Timothy 3:12, and in all cases says that such is to be the “husband of but one wife.” Since Paul implies that he and Barnabas were not married (1 Cor. 9:5-6) and he specifically calls Phoebe a deacon (Rom. 16:1), it is clear that the references in 1 Timothy and Titus were not intended to exclude women and single men from ministry, but to exclude polygamous men.

7. Summary. One rule of scriptural interpretation is that passages that are unclear are to be interpreted in the light of clear ones. We are left with the clear examples of Jesus and Paul, the clear statements of Joel, Peter and Paul as our scriptural mandate. Just as the Lord provided opportunities for Old Testament women to lead, and just as the examples of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament provided increasing opportunities for women to lead, so we are called to enact this redemptive action. To live within the teachings of Scripture, we must work counter-culturally to provide women with increasing opportunities to answer the call of God.

What We Know about the Character of God

Throughout the Scriptures we see that it is like God to work in ways contrary to traditional human systems of authority. God has never limited revelation to kings, rulers, or government officials. To the contrary, we see God divinely empowering the poor, the prostitute, the virgin, and the widow. Even Jesus came to earth as a poor carpenter. God has always worked counter-culturally to bring about the revolutionary Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 1:26-31). It is in keeping with the character of God that women are called to ministry.

We also recognize that it is essential that anyone serving in the ministry must be chosen by God—man or woman. Men and women both must testify to such a call and confirm it through their holy outworking of this mission.

Furthermore, we recognize that women are also called to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing . . . and teaching them” (Matt. 28:19-20). If a woman’s call to fulfill the Great Commission is in the form of ministerial leadership, then it is not only her privilege, but her obligation to obey the Holy Spirit.

Our Wesleyan Heritage

The Wesleyan Church has a rich heritage in the anti-slavery movement in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the precedent bodies of the present denomination was born and flourished under just such a banner. While the current culture is more subtle in its expressions of prejudice than were those of an earlier era, The Wesleyan Church today is and must continue to be as clear cut in denouncing prejudice as were our founding fathers.

“We believe each individual possesses the fundamental right to live and be respected as a human being. These rights are derived from being created in the image of God, and from the vicarious death of Jesus Christ for all persons.” (*Church and Culture*, p. 10).

“No person for whom Christ died is worthless. Each individual should be respected as a person of intrinsic worth and dignity, and not subjected to discrimination. Discrimination between people on the basis of ethnicity, color, national origin, gender, age, wealth, or physical challenge should be overcome by the unity of Christian love and common personal submission to Christ.” (*Church and Culture*, p. 10)

“The Wesleyan Church upholds the right of all individuals to equal opportunity politically, economically and religiously, and pledges itself to an active effort to bring about the possession of dignity and happiness by all people everywhere.” (2016 *Discipline* 410:1)

“In spite of some forces which seek to undo our long-standing position on the ordination of women, we refuse to budge on this issue—we will not tolerate the blocking of a person’s ordination due to his or her gender, for we believe that both men and women are called to the ministry and thus should be ordained. Furthermore, we condemn any practice of exclusive male-only leadership on boards or committees in the church, excluding women from these positions by either public policy or unofficial behind-the-scenes agreed-upon policy, for we believe that when it comes to God’s gifts, graces and callings, there is neither male nor female.” (“Statement on Social Issues,” adopted by the 1996 General Conference)

We believe that our experience over the past 150 years affirms the fact that the Holy Spirit anoints and blesses the ministry of women. We can provide examples of pastors, evangelists, preachers, teachers, missionaries, church planters and church leaders who have rendered Spirit-anointed and Spirit-empowered service. They have won thousands of converts, recruited scores of ministers and leaders (both male and female), established scores of churches, developed mission fields, and taught entire generations of ministers in some overseas fields— often serving where no one else would go.

On the basis of the total teaching of Scripture, the sovereign call of God to women, and the demonstration of divine sanction and empowerment of women in ministry in our own denominational history, as well as that of the larger holiness movement, The Wesleyan Church affirms that woman is fully equal to man in terms of her responsibility, as directed by the Holy Spirit and authorized by the Church, to preach, teach, lead, govern or serve in any office or ministry of the Church.

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