



Men, Women & Ministry at OEC

There are some big issues that are raised in any attempt to understand and practise appropriate relationships between men and women in the church.

How can we work together as men and women in a healthy way? As in any other discussion, our final authority must be the scriptures. It is to God's Word that we must *all* submit as Christians.

NEW TESTAMENT OVERVIEW

The Bible is very clear—the ministry of women is welcomed. Women are gifted and an active use of those gifts is expected. Women are not excluded by the more than 50 occasions where Christians are called upon to minister to “one another”. Women are recorded in the Bible as having played key roles in establishing the earliest church meetings:

- In Philippi; Acts 16:13–5 *“On the Sabbath we went outside the city gates where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord” she said, “come and stay in my house”. And she persuaded us.”*
- In Thessalonica; Acts 17:4 *“Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.”*
- In Berea; Acts 17:12 *“Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.”*
- Quite a few women are mentioned as opening up their homes for Christian gatherings; Acts 12:12 *“he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, where many people were gathered and were praying”* Acts 16:15 *“she invited us to her home”,* Colossians 4:15 *“give my greetings to... Nympha and the church in her house.”*

Women are significantly involved in the prayer life of the churches and in early evangelism. So we see Euodia and Syntyche specifically mentioned by Paul as *“fellow-workers”* *“...help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers”* (Phil 4:2).

Lydia takes the initiative to invite the Apostle to her house in Acts 16:15 and Priscilla in Acts 18:26 is mentioned as being involved along with her husband Aquila in explaining Christian truth: *“They invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”* For this kind of active ministry, Paul thanks them and commends them publicly. In his final words in Romans, Paul says this: *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them”* (Rom 16:3). In the same closing passage, Paul writes *“Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord”*. (Rom 16:12).



We have some other great examples of women having a significant ministry when we read of grandmother Lois and mother Eunice explaining the truth to Timothy (2 Tim 1:5, 3:14–15).

In the New Testament we have the expectation and encouragement for older women to *teach* and *train* younger women (Titus 2:3–5). We also read of the four daughters of Philip having the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). Gifts of hospitality and other good deeds are specifically mentioned as being valuably expressed by Christian women (Acts 9:36, 1 Tim 5:10).

Specific directives

It is a sure thing that women participated in the day-to-day activities of the early Christian gatherings. We have a number of descriptions of women taking part actively by praying and prophesying in some of the gatherings. For example, “*And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head...*” (1 Cor 11:5).

It is at this point, where the participation of women is described, that specific directions on how men and women can participate helpfully are given. 1 Corinthians is Paul’s letter to the Corinthian churches to explain the importance of unity and order in their lives and also their meetings.

At the same time as stressing unity, Paul stresses that all Christians have different gifts that can and should be used “*for the common good*” (12:7). The big point is that these gifts *can* be misused. Just having a gift doesn’t give a person licence to use it however and whenever they want. When it comes to describing the appropriate way for men and women to exercise the gift of prophecy or to pray, the Bible gives the following advice:

“Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for her hair to be cut or shaved off she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (1 Cor 11:3–8)

This passage is a bit inaccessible to the average person in our society. But it shows that there is real and appropriate participation of women in Christian gatherings. It also shows the equality that both men and women have in access to God in prayer. It shows that both men and women are able to prophesy, or speak forth God’s word. However, it also shows that there is an *order* to be observed on the basis of gender. It is essential to note that the whole logic of this passage is based on the creation order (11:3).

The issue of head covering in Corinth seems weird to us. However, it is an expression of the basic principle Paul is addressing—that of headship based on the pattern of authority and order in creation.

It is important to understand that the “*prophecy*” being discussed in 1 Corinthians is not an authoritative setting forth of doctrine to the gathering. All are allowed to take part but not in such a way as to imply a freedom from all order. It seems to be a time of sharing insights and ideas with the assembly for their consideration. We read that the prophet who was speaking was to be *silent* if another person was speaking (1 Cor 14:30). What was spoken, either by a man or woman, was to be weighed and assessed—presumably by the congregation or the elders present. It needed to be weighed because even if true, it may be open to different ways of responding or application (see Acts 21:9). The prophecy spoken about is a carefully qualified and controlled one. It is not a direct pastoral word, but more like what we would call sharing or speaking in such a way that it is clear that the speaker is subject to the recognised congregational leaders (14:29). Thus it is not forbidden to Christian women.

There is actually an appropriate way for Christian men and women to relate when they gather so they reflect the order and authority pattern of creation. Paul is concerned that the Corinthian Christians should be aware of the basic creation principle and reflect it in their gatherings.

“The man is the head of the woman” is exactly the same phrase that is used of husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:33, where wives are instructed to *“submit”* to their husbands, who are told to *“love”* their wives. So in some way the principle of creation order characterises both Christian gatherings and Christian marriages.

We see this creation order again in 1 Tim 2:9–15. In this passage, we have a retelling of the creation story and then a directive on what is an inappropriate way for women to contribute to the gathering: presuming to speak authoritatively to men in the church gathering.

Women are *“not to teach or have authority over a man”*. That is, women should not teach authoritatively to men in the church gathering. Why? *“For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner”* (1 Tim 2:13–14). This teaching is not just a cultural requirement, no longer relevant for us, but based on creation order and the reversal of that order which was the original sin.

This kind of thinking runs right against the grain of our culture. We are always in danger of making the imperatives of our culture the ones we follow as authoritative. That’s why this issue is so clear to most Australians. It is simply *assumed* that there are no areas where men and women have different roles or authority. “Equality” is understood to mean having the same right to claim authority in all situations. The differences between men and women in this regard are played down. The emphasis in our culture is on the equality men and women have in every respect rather than the unity achieved through their complementary differences.

People can, however, act with unity in a common cause or group while having very different roles, responsibilities and authority. For example, the different musicians and the conductor in a band, or as the Bible describes the church; as different parts of one body. The Bible *does* affirm equality between Christian men and women in status before God. They are equally saved from sin, just as Jewish and Greek Christians are equally saved: *“For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”* (Gal 3:27–29)

MEN, WOMEN AND MINISTRY AT OEC

At Orange Evangelical Church, we want to be careful in applying this principle in our gatherings and ministry. And we want to encourage as much ministry as possible by both men and women in our church life.

So we encourage men and women to use their gifts to minister in all areas, where appropriate. It is our considered view, however, that the prudent application of the teaching outlined above means that some ministry activities should be restricted to men. There are great opportunities open for women in ministering to other women and children, but also in the larger gatherings, contributing in important ways that do not undermine the creation order.

The Bible promotes and commends women in their ministry. It does this at the same time as recognising the ordered differences between men and women. OEC is attempting to do just that. We are aware of the danger of discouraging women from using their gifts, skills and abilities to serve, but at the same time, are seeking to maintain the order the Bible expresses.

We don’t want to become simplistic or legalistic, but allow every Christian to contribute *“for the common good”*.



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