



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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## The Heart of the Matter:

### Biblical Support for Women's Leadership in the Churches

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Most people who believe that women should not be given certain leadership roles in churches cite Biblical passages. They will often quote one or more of the following three texts:

1 Corinthians 14: 33b-35: "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (NRSV);

1 Timothy 2: 11-14: 1 "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor" (NRSV);

Ephesians 5: 22-23: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior" (NRSV).

People who believe that women should serve any role in the churches for which they may be gifted will often be unable to point to any specific supporting biblical passages. They may or may not be able to cite instances in the Bible of women who are leaders, and are often unable to address the passages quoted above. They tend to follow their hearts, feeling that discrimination against women is simply unjust and therefore not in God's plan.

Those who are against women's leadership claim they have no choice but to follow what the Bible teaches. They believe they are more faithful to God's word than people who support women in leadership, whom they see as playing fast and loose with what the Bible says in order to support whatever they want. They fall back on long-standing traditions that tend to support their arguments.

Isn't this really the heart of the matter? What does the Bible really say about women's roles in the churches? I argue that those who oppose women's leadership are not reading the Bible closely enough and are misusing the above-quoted texts based on long-standing, misguided traditions. I also argue that those who follow their hearts in this matter have found the right answer about what the Bible teaches. In either case, all would gain from becoming more biblically literate on this issue.

#### Which Biblical Texts Should Control?

Why does tradition hold on to the texts mentioned above to govern the issue of women's leadership? There are more scriptural texts supporting women's leadership than there are against it. Deborah is a clear example (Judges 4 and 5). Deborah was a prophetess, a judge and a spiritual leader for all of the people. She was so good at what she did that the leader of the troops wouldn't go into battle without her! We know from Deborah's account that she didn't keep silent and that she taught and led men as well as anyone.

Why should the above texts be used against ordaining women when Deborah was only one prophetess among many mentioned in the Bible, including Huldah (2 Kings 22: 14-20), Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8: 3), Anna (Luke 2: 36, 38), the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21: 8 & 9) and all those daughters on whom the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost (Acts 1: 14, 2: 4, 17)? I suspect that all of the unnamed and seemingly peripheral women spoke out, taught, prophesied and did whatever their callings led them to do. They are mentioned without any particular fanfare because their presence was not considered unusual.

Why should the traditional texts teach today's churches that women are not to be deacons, when Phoebe was clearly identified as a leading deacon by Paul?<sup>1</sup> We also see that Paul gave specific instructions for women deacons right along with the instructions he gave for the male deacons.<sup>2</sup> The word "deaconess" is not found in the Bible!

Why should the traditional texts limit who women shall teach when Priscilla was a leading teacher who clearly taught men?<sup>3</sup> Why should tradition somehow translate the chosen texts to conclude that women should not pastor churches when Nympha and Lydia were both the heads of the households that were among the earliest churches?<sup>4</sup> Why choose these texts to deny women the right to be pastors, bishops, or any other positions of authority when Junia is identified by Paul as an outstanding female apostle?<sup>5</sup> In those days, apostles were equivalent to today's bishops.

Why doesn't tradition pay attention to how Jesus dealt with the women around him when he was here in the flesh? Jesus differed radically from the societal standards of his time in dealing with women. Examples include Jesus' lengthy discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well, whom he sent to tell the others that she had found the Messiah (John 4: 1-42); his relationship with Mary, Martha's sister, who he said had chosen "the better part" when she sat at his feet to be taught with the men rather than attending to the customary role of serving with her sister (Luke 10:38-42); and the fact that every gospel shows that he appointed women to be the first to share the most important announcement the world would ever receive on Easter morning, most prominently among them Mary Magdalene (see Matthew 28:8-10, Mark 16:9-10, Luke 24:9-10 and John 20:1-18).

### Surface Reading Versus Deeper Understanding

One argument to justify using the traditionally designated texts to deny women's leadership is that these texts are clear, straightforward and easily understood, while the texts supportive of women's leadership require some deeper knowledge of the historical, cultural and textual contexts, as well as some knowledge of the language in which the

texts were written. This traditional argument is only meaningful if you completely ignore or marginalize Deborah and women like her.

More importantly, who says we should read the Bible without trying to better understand its meaning? We cannot assume that something that was spoken or written to someone 2,000 years ago in a different cultural and social context was intended to apply to us completely and uncritically today. Yes, the Bible speaks to all people at all times, but how well we understand what the Bible means depends on how willing we are to study what the writers were writing about, to whom they were writing, what was going on around them when they wrote it, and what they may or may not have intended to convey to us when they wrote. The idea that we shouldn't seek to better understand what the Bible means is to me ridiculous.

The traditional texts clearly limit women's roles only if one doesn't study them in depth. Space limitations do not allow me to expound on all that a deeper study of the traditional texts will show; it is sufficient for this article to say that studying the historical, social, cultural and literal contexts uncovers problems in the texts themselves, including interpolations and "ghost writing," as well as cultural and historical issues that clearly limit the intent of the texts. When we understand these texts more deeply, we are inescapably led to the conclusion that they were not intended to apply to all times and to all people, in spite of how we have traditionally used them.

Similarly, many of the texts that support women's leadership are only discovered if one takes the time to study the Bible deeply. Do you think this all may have been a part of God's plan from the beginning, in order to spur us to search for the deeper meanings that speak truth to our hearts about who God is? I do.

### No Female Disciples?

A second argument supporting the traditional use of these texts is that Jesus did not choose any women among his 12 disciples. Couldn't Jesus have chosen at least one woman who would be the example for the rest to follow? That would have made this discussion much easier! The short answer is that many believe he did choose one, Mary Magdalene, but her apostleship was denied by early church leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Let's assume, however, that all of those women who followed Jesus were not really disciples and none of them were actually called to be apostles (leaving Junia out, too). Jesus, through his radically different behavior with the women of his time, left all kinds of clues about how he intended for women to be treated. I mentioned some of this radical behavior earlier, which I believe is an indication of what Jesus expects of us.

Jesus knew that most of the women were not prepared to take leadership roles because of the society in which they were situated. I believe Jesus knew that no matter how well the church started out, women would eventually be oppressed by the system that did not consider them worthy to be educated and trained to lead others. Jesus knew that no matter how radically differently he treated women, tradition would kick back and women would be pushed back. So he left us plenty of clues to help us discover what he wanted us to see and understand when we became ready.

The example guiding this conclusion is seen in how Jesus dealt with the Samaritans. He refused to rain down fire and destroy the hated Samaritans as his disciples asked him to do in Luke 9:51-56. Instead, Jesus told the story of the “good” Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), pointed out that only the Samaritan leper said “thank you” when he healed the group of them (Luke 17:11-19), and conversed deeply with the Samaritan woman at the well. These examples were seeds Jesus planted to help the disciples understand the relationship Jesus expected them to have with Samaritans later, when they were ready. The disciples harvested the crop when Jesus sent them to Samaria to share the good news about the risen Savior (Acts 1:8, 8:1-25).

Just as Jesus planted seeds during his ministry about what would be the right behavior towards Samaritans for a group of people who were not yet ready to hear it, he continually planted seeds about right relationships with women as he encountered them. He knew that one day we would get it; he knew that when the time was right, traditions based on social customs and not on biblical truths would be seen for what they are and women would be freed from the bonds of oppression. It takes deep study and understanding to find this jewel, but once uncovered, it is clear for all to see.

### Tradition vs. the Love Commandments

In response to the often repeated fear that we must hold onto tradition because it would be too easy to re-interpret the Bible to adjust to anything we desire, I argue that Jesus has given us very specific guidelines for biblical interpretation. Jesus gave two top commandments, to love God and to love each other, and he taught us to treat others the way we would want to be treated. The hermeneutical guideline he provided for us is to interpret all the “laws and the prophets”- the whole Bible - through the lens of these love commandments (Matthew 22: 37-40).

God wants us to search the Bible more deeply for the jewels that reflect God’s love. Jewels don’t just lay around on the surface waiting to be picked up. You have to search for them. So when we find the Bible being interpreted in a way that oppresses others, we are required to study more deeply in order to understand how the text is to be interpreted to comply with the love commandments. Once

we’ve learned to delve deeply like that, we’ve learned to use the Bible the way it is intended: to point in the direction of who God is, how God works with people in this world, and what God would have us do. This applies beyond the topic of women’s leadership to other difficult controversies as well.

The Bible needs to be freed from oppressive traditions that feed on limited understandings. That’s the most important part of this struggle - to help people learn to read the Bible for greater understanding and to think more deeply about its meaning. Isn’t that just what Jesus did when he taught his Sermon on the Mount? Didn’t he re-interpret traditional lessons on the commandments to show how radical and deep is the love that should govern our lives as children of God?

As ministers and clergy leaders in our denomination, we have an obligation to stand against any who use the Bible to oppress others. We are also obliged to deepen our own understandings of the Bible, and to teach and encourage others to read the Bible more carefully, always searching for the love that is behind all that God says and does. We do this because our Savior commands it. It is not optional!

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Romans 16: 1-2. The term *diakonon* is masculine in form, and is the same word used to describe Paul, Apollos, Tychicus and Timothy as ministers of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 3:5, Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7 and 1 Tim. 4:6). Phoebe is described as *prostatis pallon*, one who succors or supports many others. Peter Gomes points out that this title makes her equivalent to Paul and his male colleagues. See The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> “Women [deacons] likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” 1 Tim 3:11. (NRSV) The phrase translated in the NIV as “their wives” is literally “the women.”

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 18:24-26, where Priscilla and her husband both teach Apollos. See also Romans 16: 1-3, where Priscilla is mentioned before her husband, a rarity in those times (see Acts 18:18). It is believed that she is mentioned first several times because she was the more renowned Christian of the two. See Gomes (above), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> See Col. 4:15 (Nympha) and Acts 16: 11-15, 40 (Lydia). The earliest churches were in the homes of the believers, and the heads of those households were often heads of the churches. In her book Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), Linda Belleville points out the importance of this

group of early leaders: “Making one’s home available as a meeting place involved more than cleaning the house and offering cake and coffee. The patron in those days was in charge of the group, including some legal responsibility” (p. 50).

<sup>5</sup> Romans 16:7. *Junia* is a feminine name. In some of the ancient texts the name is the masculine Junias, in others it is another female name, Julia. “None of the early versions of the Greek New Testament considered Iouonian as anything else but feminine.” Ibid, p. 55. The earliest authorities also identified Junia as female. The early church father Chrysostom said of her, “Oh! how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!” Sometime in the early 13th Century she was referred to as male. Luther then identified her as male, and following that the scholars routinely referred to her as Junias. See Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Van Nuys, CA: BIM Publishing Co, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> See generally Anne Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press for Harvard Theological Studies, 2003), who points out that “Mary Magdalene was so esteemed among some early Christians that they bestowed on her the honorific title, ‘apostle to the apostles,’ and yet for others she holds no apostolic status at all and is instead known as a reformed prostitute, a concept for which there is no biblical basis.” (p. 1)

## The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ’s church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor

## The Ministers Council is that Unique Place within the National Structure of the ABCUSA which:

- Offers leaders opportunities to articulate a distinct ministerial viewpoint, among the many denominational perspectives that need to be voiced and heard, as we work together for the growth of Christ’s kingdom;
- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

[www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)

# THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

## for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

**H**aving accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with, the help of the holy spirit, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself.

In affirmation of this commitment, I will abide by the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches and I will faithfully support its purposes and ideals. As further affirmation of my commitment, I covenant with my colleagues in ministry that we will hold one another accountable for fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.

I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of our American Baptist Churches; I will not accept a position in the American Baptist family unless I am in accord with those traditions and practices; nor will I use my influence to alienate my congregation/constituents or any part thereof from its relationship and support of the denomination. If my convictions change, I will resign my position.

I will respect and recognize the variety of calls to ministry among my American Baptist colleagues, and other Christians.

I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues in neighboring churches.

I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues to understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or require fees for pastoral services from constituents they serve, when these constituents are helping pay their salaries.

I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my ministerial status.

I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.

I will recognize my primary obligation to the church or employing group to which I have been called, and will accept added responsibilities only if they do not interfere with the overall effectiveness of my ministry.

I will personally and publicly support my colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability.

I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.

I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.

I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information in private or public except when, in my practice of ministry, I am convinced that the sanctity of confidentiality is outweighed by my well-founded belief that life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.

I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone, especially children.

I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.

I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.



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## mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

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