

## ROLES OF WOMEN IN RELIGION

### The Old Testament

The culture of ancient Israel was patriarchal, but women still played **important, diverse, and sometimes surprising roles** within the religious, prophetic, and communal life of the people.

Here's a breakdown of key roles women held in the **churches (or rather, religious life and gatherings) of the Old Testament**:

#### 1. Prophetesses (Women Prophets)

Some women were explicitly called and recognized as **prophets**, speaking on behalf of God and offering spiritual leadership.

- **Miriam** – Sister of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20). She is called a prophetess and led worship after the Red Sea crossing.
- **Deborah** – A judge and prophetess (Judges 4–5). She held court under the palm tree and delivered God's messages, even commanding military action. Deborah ruled as a civil and spiritual judge over Israel – unique among all men and women of her day.
- **Huldah** – A prophetess during King Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22:14–20). When the Book of the Law was found, she was the one consulted to authenticate it.

These women had recognized spiritual authority and often influenced major decisions.

#### 2. Worship Leaders and Musicians

Women played roles in temple worship, particularly in **music and praise**.

- **Women singers and musicians** were part of temple ceremonies (e.g., 1 Chronicles 25:5–6; Ezra 2:65).
- Miriam led women in song and dance with tambourines (Exodus 15:20–21), which was a form of celebratory and spiritual expression.

### 3. Wise Women and Advisors

Some women were recognized for their **wisdom and diplomacy** and played a role in peacemaking or advising.

- The **Wise Woman of Tekoa** was sent by Joab to influence King David with a parable-like story (2 Samuel 14).
- The **Wise Woman of Abel** negotiated with Joab to save her city (2 Samuel 20:14–22).

They served almost like community elders or intercessors.

### 4. Mothers of the Faith / Matriarchs

Women like **Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah** were key figures in Israel's covenant history. Their faith, struggles, and choices often influenced the direction of the people of God.

- Though not temple leaders, their **spiritual and familial influence** shaped the generations.
- **Hannah** (mother of Samuel) prayed fervently at the temple (1 Samuel 1), demonstrating deep personal piety and trust in God. Her story shows the power of individual women's prayers and vows.

### 5. Servants at the Tabernacle

Some women **served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting** (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22). The Hebrew term used is somewhat vague, but they had recognized roles in the religious life of the tabernacle—likely involved in duties related to ritual purity or helping maintain the sacred space.

### 6. Queen Mothers and Royal Intercessors

In the monarchies of Israel and Judah, the **Queen Mother (Hebrew: Gebirah)** held a position of honor and sometimes influence.

- **Bathsheba**, mother of Solomon, approached the king on behalf of others (1 Kings 2:13–25).
- Queen Mothers were sometimes advisors or power brokers behind the scenes.

## 7. Faithful Women in Exile and Renewal

During times of national crisis or restoration, women like **Esther**, **Ruth**, and **Naomi** showed personal devotion and acted boldly.

- **Esther** interceded for her people.
- **Ruth**, a Moabite convert, embodies loyalty and became part of the messianic lineage.

These women, while not official church leaders, acted with spiritual courage and modeled covenant faithfulness.

Women were **not priests** in the Levitical system (that role was restricted to men from the tribe of Levi), they still:

- Held prophetic office
- Led worship in song and dance
- Served in the sanctuary
- Gave wise counsel
- Acted as intercessors
- Modeled faith and obedience
- Participated in Israel's covenant story in deeply meaningful ways

## Why Weren't Women Priests in the Old Covenant?

### 1. Priesthood Was Based on Tribe and Lineage — Not Gender Alone

- The **Levitical priesthood** was **exclusively given to male descendants of Aaron** (Exodus 28:1, Numbers 3:10).
- This was a **covenantal and sacrificial role**, not a leadership reward or talent-based appointment.
- So **most men weren't eligible either** — even many Levites were excluded from priestly duties.

The priesthood was **narrowly defined** by bloodline, ritual purity, and temple function — **not general authority** over Israel.

## 2. Ritual Purity Laws and Symbolic Roles

- Priests had to maintain **constant ceremonial purity** (Leviticus 21), and **women's monthly cycles, childbirth, and other natural events** made this harder under Mosaic law.
- In the typology of Old Testament worship, **priests symbolized the coming Christ** — a role fulfilled in **Jesus, the High Priest** (Hebrews 7–10).

This restriction was more about **symbolism and function** than value or ability. Women were not “less holy” — but were **set apart differently** under the law.

Though women were not priests, they **clearly heard from God**, led people, rebuked kings, and shaped Israel's destiny.

## Roles of Women in the Churches of the New Testament

What are the main roles women played within the early Church?

### 1. Disciples of Jesus

Women were not just followers in the background — they were **active disciples**.

- **Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna**, and others traveled with Jesus, supported Him financially, and were present at key events (Luke 8:1–3).
- Mary of Bethany sat at Jesus' feet to learn — a position of formal discipleship (Luke 10:39), which rabbis typically reserved for men.

Jesus shattered social norms by allowing women to learn from and follow Him like male disciples.

## 2. Witnesses to the Resurrection

Women were the **first to see and proclaim the risen Christ**, despite their testimony not being considered legally reliable in that time.

- Mary Magdalene was the **first messenger of the resurrection** (John 20:11–18), making her the "apostle to the apostles."

This was a **theological and prophetic statement**: the Gospel is entrusted to the faithful, not just the powerful.

## 3. Prophetesses

Women received and proclaimed messages from God.

- **Philip's four daughters** prophesied (Acts 21:9).
- **Women prophesied** in public worship settings (1 Corinthians 11:5), which Paul acknowledged and gave instructions for.

Prophecy was a **spiritually authoritative** role, used for building up the church (1 Cor. 14:3).

#### 4. Deacons and Servants of the Church

Some women held **formal ministry offices**.

- **Phoebe** is described as a “**deacon**” (**diakonos**) of the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1–2). She also acted as Paul’s emissary, likely carrying and interpreting the letter to the Romans.
- The Greek word *diakonos* is the same used for male deacons like Timothy.

She is also called a “**prostatis**” (benefactor, patron), suggesting leadership and protection over many, including Paul.

#### 5. Teachers and Theological Instructors

Some women taught, corrected, or trained others — including men.

- **Priscilla**, with her husband Aquila, taught **Apollos**, a gifted preacher, correcting his theology (Acts 18:26). Notably, **her name often appears before his**, likely indicating her leadership prominence.
- **Phoebe** is called a **deacon (diakonos)** and a **benefactor** in Romans 16:1–2. Paul entrusts her with delivering and possibly explaining the Roman epistle — a massive responsibility.

Women were **capable of deep theological understanding** and carried responsibility for shaping doctrine.

#### 6. Church Leaders and Hosts

Women often **hosted and led house churches**, the primary form of church in the first century.

- **Lydia** in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15, 40)

- **Nympha** in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15)
- **Chloe** in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11)
- Possibly **Mary**, mother of John Mark, whose house was used for Christian gatherings (Acts 12:12)

House hosts were often de facto **church leaders**, since gatherings, hospitality, and oversight happened under their authority.

## 7. Apostolic Partners and Coworkers

Women are listed among Paul's **coworkers and laborers** in the Gospel.

- **Junia**, a woman, is called “**outstanding among the apostles**” in Romans 16:7 — a statement of high authority. Some translations historically masculinized her name (as Junias), but the Greek text supports "Junia" as a woman.
- Others: **Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Euodia, and Syntyche** are mentioned as laboring in the Lord (Romans 16:12; Philippians 4:2–3).

These are not passive helpers — they are **recognized, named ministers** who contended for the Gospel.

## 8. Spiritual Mothers and Mentors

Women nurtured spiritual growth and legacy within families and communities.

- **Lois and Eunice**, Timothy's grandmother and mother, passed on a deep faith that formed the foundation of his leadership (2 Timothy 1:5).
- Paul affectionately honors “**the mother of Rufus,**” calling her his own mother (Romans 16:13).

- Mary, the mother of Jesus, plays a **central theological and symbolic role** — from the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) to being present at Pentecost

Women were seen as **shapers of faith**, not just biologically but spiritually.

### **New Testament:**

- Women were present in the **Upper Room at Pentecost** (Acts 1:14; 2:1–4), receiving the Holy Spirit alongside men.
- They joined in **prayer, worship, and teaching**, without the temple-based divisions.
- **No temple veil:** With Jesus' death, the veil was torn, and **access to God was made equal for all** (Hebrews 10:19–22).

Women now **worshipped alongside men**, not just as bystanders or background supporters, but as co-heirs of grace (Galatians 3:28).

### **The Example of Jesus**

Jesus **revolutionized the treatment of women** in a patriarchal society:

- He **spoke publicly** to the Samaritan woman (John 4), revealing Himself as Messiah.
- He **healed and taught** women (Mark 5, Luke 13).
- He had **women among His closest followers** (Luke 8:1–3).
- Women were **the first witnesses** to His resurrection (Luke 24; John 20), defying the norms of testimony in that culture.

He treated women with **dignity, equality, and spiritual authority**.

## Addressing the Tension: Silence and Submission Texts

Two passages often cited as restricting women's roles:

### A. 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

*"Women should remain silent in the churches... if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home."*

*The Greek word for "speak" (lalein) is general — not necessarily teaching — and in this context likely refers to **chattering, questioning, or interrupting**. Cultural norms in Corinth discouraged women from publicly questioning male teachers, especially their husbands, in mixed assemblies.*

### Context: Disorder in Worship

The letter to the **Corinthian church** responds to a chaotic, immature, and divided community. The broader section (chapters 11–14) is about **orderly worship, spiritual gifts**, and avoiding **confusion** in the public gatherings.

The historical case for **women misleading the Corinthian church** is less direct than Timothy, but **still compelling** when we look at the **overall chaos and cultural influence**.

### Historical & Cultural Context:

- Corinth was a **wealthy, cosmopolitan port city**, filled with pagan temples and Roman libertine values.
- The **Temple of Aphrodite**, reportedly staffed by hundreds of female priestesses (often associated with ritual prostitution), had **influenced public morality and sexual dynamics**.
- In Greek and Roman culture, women were often **excluded from public intellectual life**, so Christian women suddenly **speaking, prophesying, or questioning teachings** in mixed company would have shocked both Jews and Gentiles.

## Biblical Clues:

- **1 Corinthians 11–14** addresses a church in **complete disorder** — people interrupting each other, abusing spiritual gifts, getting drunk at communion, and apparently **blurting out questions or unhelpful speech during gatherings**.
- Paul gives **specific instructions** for women to **cover their heads when prophesying**, which implies they **were** speaking in worship (1 Cor. 11:5).
- The “silence” command in 14:34–35 likely addresses **a subset of women** (possibly wives) who were **asking disruptive questions** — not necessarily teaching error, but contributing to confusion.

The **tone and corrective nature** of Paul’s letters suggest a community in need of structure, where **both men and women were behaving inappropriately**.

Many women were experiencing **freedom in Christ for the first time**, and perhaps misapplying it (e.g., removing veils in ch. 11 or speaking over others). Resulting in **public disorder**, not heretical teaching

Let us keep in mind, Paul Had Already Permitted Women to Speak

- In **1 Corinthians 11:5**, Paul gives instructions **for how women should pray and prophesy** — not whether they should.
- This means **he’s not calling for absolute silence**, but specific silence in a specific setting — probably to avoid disrupting the flow of communal discernment.

This passage is **not a universal ban** on women speaking, but a **call to order** in a messy church. Paul wants **edifying, respectful worship**, not chaos. The silence called for here is **temporary and situational**, not eternal.

## B. 1 Timothy 2:11–12

*"I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."*

"Assume Authority" = Domineer or Usurp

- The Greek word **authentein** (used only once in the NT) means **to domineer, control, or usurp** — not healthy leadership. Paul is addressing a specific **power-grab**, not all teaching.

### Context: False Teaching in Ephesus

This letter is written to **Timothy**, overseeing the **Ephesian church**, which was **rife with false teachers, myths, and confusion**.

See 1 Timothy 1:3–4:

*"Stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies."*

### Ephesus (1 Timothy 2)

The case for false teaching involving women in **Ephesus** is **stronger and better documented** than in Corinth.

### Historical & Cultural Context:

- **Ephesus was the center of the Artemis cult**, one of the most dominant **female-led religious movements** in the Roman Empire. Artemis was a fertility goddess, and her temple was led by **female priestesses** who claimed secret knowledge, ritual power, and spiritual authority over men.
- The city's culture already revered **powerful women in religious leadership** — and that likely influenced **new female converts**.

## **Biblical Clues (All in the Pastoral Epistles):**

- **1 Timothy 1:3–7:** Paul urges Timothy to **stop false teachers**, some of whom are caught up in **myths and genealogies** — common in early Gnostic teachings. Some of the women were bringing in Gnostic, mystical, or authoritarian ideas, trying to teach in ways not grounded in sound doctrine (1 Tim. 5:13, 2 Tim. 3:6–7).
- **1 Timothy 5:11–15:** Paul refers to **younger widows who become idlers, gossips, and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.** These women were new to the faith, uneducated in Scripture, and potentially spreading spiritual error.
- **2 Timothy 3:6–7:** False teachers are *“worming their way into households and gaining control over gullible women who are loaded down with sins and swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*
- This implies that **some women were not just deceived, but possibly propagating false teachings.**

So while Paul doesn't name individuals in 1 Timothy 2, the **letter as a whole paints a picture of disorder involving women** — particularly **spiritually immature or culturally conditioned** ones.

Rather than discipline or banish these women, Paul calls for **quietness and learning**, as a means of growth and restoration. It's a temporary restriction, with the goal of maturity and sound teaching.

So, this passage is **not a timeless prohibition**, but a **corrective response** to false teaching, cultic influence, and spiritual immaturity among certain women (and likely men, too). Paul wants women **to learn**, not to be silenced forever.

**SO**, both these verses:

- Appear in letters to specific churches (Corinth, Ephesus) with **specific issues** of disorder or false teaching.
- Must be **interpreted in light of the many women** in active, public roles (as listed above).
- Paul **allows and instructs how women should prophesy in worship** (1 Corinthians 11:5), clearly not absolute silence.

The weight of Scripture shows **women ministering in powerful and public ways**, with occasional corrective instructions for local contexts.

### **Big Picture: Paul's Actual Pattern with Women**

Despite these isolated texts:

- Paul worked with, commended, and honored **female teachers, prophets, deacons, and apostles**.
- His vision for the Church, as seen in **Galatians 3:28**, is that in Christ, *“there is neither male nor female.”*
- His corrective instructions were always about **preserving the Gospel and healthy worship**, never about demeaning women.

**biblical context, early Christian tradition, cultural history, and word usage** all provide **strong circumstantial and historical support** that this was the situation Paul was addressing.

### CONSIDERATIONS

Across the **entire Bible**, there are **very few examples** of women being **exiled, removed, or punished specifically for something they did within the religious assembly or “church” context**.

However, there are some **notable exceptions**, including **moral failures**,

**prophetic deception, and ritual violations** — but **far more often**, it is **men** who are the subject of spiritual judgment in the tabernacle, temple, or ecclesial setting.

## **Fulfillment and Expansion for women in the New Covenant**

With the coming of Christ, **the entire priesthood model was redefined:**

### **1. Jesus Became the Final High Priest**

- Hebrews 4–10 declares that Jesus is the **eternal High Priest**, eliminating the need for a hereditary, male-only priesthood.
- Sacrifices, temple rituals, and ceremonial roles were all **fulfilled in Him**.

No more bloodline restrictions. Access to God is now **through grace and faith**, not gender or tribal lineage.

### **2. The Church Becomes a Royal Priesthood**

- 1 Peter 2:9 — *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...”*
- Revelation 1:6 — Jesus *“made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.”*
- Galatians 3:28 — *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

In the New Covenant, **every believer** — man or woman — is given **access, authority, and gifting** to minister in the Spirit.

### **3. Early Church Reflected This Shift**

- Women hosted house churches: Lydia (Acts 16), Priscilla (Acts 18), Nympha (Colossians 4:15).
- Women prophesied: Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9).
- Women led and disciplined: Priscilla helped correct Apollos' doctrine.
- Women were apostles and deacons: Junia (Romans 16:7), Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

While some leadership tensions still existed (as we explored earlier), the early church clearly **included women in significant spiritual ministry**.

## **The Sanctuary's Principle**

**At The Sanctuary, we recognize and affirm the fullness of God's image in both women and men. Guided by the Spirit and rooted in the teachings of Jesus, we welcome both men and women into every role of leadership, teaching, service, and spiritual gifting within our fellowship.**

### **◆ Why?**

- 1. Because the Holy Spirit is not limited by gender.**  
*"In the last days, I will pour out My Spirit on all people... your sons and daughters will prophesy." (Joel 2:28 / Acts 2:17)*
- 2. Because Jesus himself honored and empowered women.**  
He taught them (Mary of Bethany), revealed Himself to them (the Samaritan woman), and sent them (Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the resurrection).
- 3. Because wisdom, prophecy, and leadership have long come through women.**  
Deborah, Huldah, the Wise Women of Tekoa and Abel, Priscilla,

Phoebe, Junia—all served God's people with divine authority, without apology.

**4. Because The Sanctuary is built on love, not control.**

We do not quench the Spirit where it flows, nor silence the voice of God when it speaks through a daughter just as through a son.

**5. Because in Christ, there is no male or female in calling and inheritance.**

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)*

**Final Statement:**

**We welcome women as teachers, preachers, shepherds, prophets, and leaders, not as exceptions—but as equals in Christ. At The Sanctuary, we do not assign worth by tradition or role, but by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who gifts as He wills. Where wisdom speaks, we listen. Where love leads, we follow.**