

Can a Woman Teach a Mixed Adult Sunday School Class?

The Lord equips both men and women in the body of Christ with a rich array of gifts. Over the years, New Hope has had women gifted with not only teaching abilities, but also skilled in specific topics in which *session* wanted our church to grow. When we asked these women to teach, some were willing, others less so. We received some questions of concern regarding how we could justify this biblically. In this article we want to answer those concerns. The specific question we have in mind is whether or not the Bible allows for a woman to teach a mixed adult Sunday School class. A parallel question is whether or not a woman can lead, or co-lead the Bible study portion of a growth/small group.

The matter of a woman's role in the life of the church has been a hotly debated issue for a long time in the church, particularly the last 50 years. The debate has forced the church to study the Scriptures carefully concerning the issue and there is a wealth of articles, books and commentaries on this topic. It has also become clear that good men, able exegetes all, have arrived at different opinions on what exactly a woman is allowed to do in the context of the church. That is not to say that the Bible allows both positions, it simply suggests that we should be careful as we study the matter and that this may be an issue where brothers and sisters in faith will need to agree to disagree.¹

All of us agree that a line needs to be drawn somewhere when it comes to the roles of men and women in the church and in the home. But the placement of the line often proves to be the point of contention within the church. Concerning teaching in the church, Paul clearly intends that there be a difference in roles citing the fact of creation ("man was created first," 1 Tim 2:13) and the fall ("the woman was deceived," 1 Tim 2:14). Many believe that a woman should not be allowed to teach a man since it seems to violate Paul's command in 1 Timothy 2:12, namely "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet."

While the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is fully agreed that the office of elder belongs only to men, *there is not* a unanimous position on the matter of women teaching men. *In 1988, the General Assembly did receive a report from The Committee on Women in Church Office, as well as another relevant report in 1991 from The Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church* (https://www.opc.org/ga_reports.html). Both of these reports offer significant input pertinent to this topic from various OPC pastors. Note that the General Assembly reports do not become the "official stance" of the OPC, and local sessions are not bound by them. They are intended to be received in the spirit of "pious advice," thus you will find that in the OPC different churches have adopted differing guidelines.

¹ This paper is built largely on an article written around 2009 by Dale VanDyke, pastor of Harvest OPC in Grand Rapids, MI, and Francis VanDelden.

Session believes that 1 Timothy 2:11-13 is written in the context of a discussion of church officers who, by virtue of their office, would be responsible for teaching in an authoritative capacity and therefore Paul prohibits women from office but not from speaking. We agree with Dr. Edmund Clowney, a highly respected minister in the OPC and professor at Westminster Seminary for many years who says,

“In a variety of informal circumstances, women may teach children, other women, and men as well, provided that the teaching not be of the authoritative sort that would disrupt apostolic order.... In lay activities, such as Sunday School, opportunities abound for the use of women’s gifts in teaching” (Clowney and Bray 229-230).

We would also highly recommend two sermons from John Piper for a careful interpretation of the 1 Timothy 2:12 text which you can find in the “works cited” below.

1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 13 provide a clear example of women speaking to a mixed audience in a non-ordained teaching capacity, although there it is even in the corporate worship service. It says, “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.... Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?” The GA committee’s majority report helpfully summarizes,

“Our conclusion, then, is that 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 13 plainly imply that in some form public prayer and prophecy, by both men and women, were accepted practices in the churches known to Paul (see verse 16; cf. the four daughters of Philip the evangelist who were known by the fact that they prophesied, Acts 21:9).

“Consequently, 1 Corinthians 11:3f limit in some way the apparently absolute sweep of the command in 14:34 for women to be silent. How? Several explanations have been offered.... None is entirely convincing, but if we recognize that yielding to authority is the key issue (women “must be in submission”), most satisfying is the view, in the light of the immediately surrounding context, that 14:33f prohibit women especially from participating in the (authoritative) judging or evaluation of prophetic utterances.”

“*How* exactly the prohibition is limited may not be so easy to answer; *that* it is not absolute, however, seems clear in the light of 11:5, 13. (For a fuller treatment of both the 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 passages, see the “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes*, 55th [1988] GA, pp. 327-29.)” (Jerrell and Peterson, C.2.d. (6), (7).)

The Bible also calls the whole church to exercise its Spirit-given gifts. This can be seen in 1 Peter 4:10-11 which says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good

stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” Again, to borrow from the same GA report,

“These verses almost certainly have in view the exercise of gifts variously distributed through the congregation *at large*. There is no contrary indication of any restriction. Further, in the immediate context, on either side (verses 7-9, 12-19), Peter is addressing the *whole* church, all believers without exception. It is highly unlikely, then, that in verses 10-11 only some within the congregation, a delimited group such as those holding special office, are in view (the elders, specifically, are addressed subsequently beginning at 5:1).

“What verse 11 provides is a basic, dual profile on the full diversity of gifts given to the church (if anyone *speaks*...if anyone *serves*...); each gift is a ministration of God's grace, either in word or deed. This twofold structure likely reflects and is reflected in the twofold pattern of special office permanently established in the church; the elders correspond to the word-ministry of the general office, the deacons to its deed-ministry (cf. Ephesians 4:12). But in view here is not that special office arrangement itself but the functioning of the general office of all believers (which the special offices exist to facilitate).

“It would obviously be wrong to limit the scope of verses 10-11 to what takes place in corporate worship. But there is no good reason to *exclude* such worship from their purview. Consequently, when Peter says, "If anyone speaks....," we ought to hear in that a challenge to consider how, in the light of what we have seen in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, we are to implement such general office speaking in our worship today.” (Jerrell and Peterson, C.2.f.(1), (2))

In short, we believe that God has gifted all members of the church as members of the office of believer. Any exercise of those gifts **appropriate** to the general office of believer is permissible for a woman. While a woman may not rule or teach in the capacity of an elder, we do believe that she may teach under the authority of elders. If one makes the appropriateness of a woman's speaking hinge on the public nature of it, ((Richardson et al., III.B.1.e), or the content of her teaching (Piper and Grudem 185-186), you get entangled in a quagmire of hair-splitting distinctions.

For instance, if Priscilla was allowed to be engaged in teaching Apollos because it was private (in her home and just to one man), how many other men would be allowed before it was no longer permissible? If a woman is allowed to teach men “anything besides Bible or doctrine” even in colleges (as Douglass Moo maintains), could a female math teacher make mention of

Scripture which speaks of God's order in creation? Could a female history professor speak at any length of God's providence if there were men in the room? How old would the male students need to be before they were considered men? Would a 17 year old be permitted but asked to leave on his 18th birthday? Could an elder, teaching in the church, make use of an article written by a woman if it addresses the Bible? Could any christian man make use of such an article in any setting at all? Could a pastor use a commentary on a Bible book if it was written by a female Hebrew scholar? You can see how utterly confusing such a position becomes.

But if Paul is actually speaking of the office of elder in 1 Timothy 2 (which seems much more likely), the quagmire is removed. Paul is saying that women are not permitted to the office and he explains why this is so (Piper, Manhood). Paul refers to creation precisely because the issue is one of ordained office, or authority, not one of function. Eve's sin was not that she spoke, but that she usurped the authority of Adam by unilaterally making the decision she made. A female Sunday School teacher is in no way usurping authority. Rather, she is exercising her gifts in the office of general believer in full submission to the authority of the session. Consequently, we do not believe that allowing a woman to teach a mixed adult Sunday School class is putting her in a position that God forbids in his Word. We believe that allowing a woman to teach under the authority of the session in the "household of God" is a direct corollary to Priscilla's ministry under the authority of her husband.

Now some may argue that this allows men to shirk their responsibility. However, that doesn't hold true if God has commanded all believers to use their gifts in the office of general believer (1 Peter 4:10). Men and women are both equally commanded to exercise their gifts and the session must encourage them to do so. It is true that feminism, which is so rampant in the modern church, does seek to usurp authority and thereby encourages passive male leadership. But obedience to biblical lay ministry cannot be charged with this. If a session were asking a woman to be an official leader, or if she assumed that calling, then we would be guilty of allowing a woman to usurp authority, and promoting passive male leadership. But having a woman who is gifted in teaching exercise these gifts as a general office believer does not do so.

Some might suggest that since a woman is teaching publicly she has the aura of authority and is therefore in violation of the Biblical command. Once again, teaching publicly does not make a person an authority figure in the sense that the Bible uses that term. Authority is conferred by office (ordination) not by the number of people present. While the official ministry of the Word in worship and the official oversight of the church is clearly reserved for men, there is a great deal of ministry, even teaching ministry, commanded to all believers in the church (e.g. Col 3:16 "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.")

The principle of general office ministry also applies in the home. A highly gifted woman is not allowed to usurp authority in the home. However, a man would be foolish to prohibit his gifted wife from properly exercising her gift in the home under his oversight! Consider Abigail and David: while she in no way usurped his authority, she clearly instructed him in the will of God and David blessed her for it. Submission to headship in no way negates a wife's right and responsibility to be an encourager and helper to her husband in the things of God.

In sum, borrowing from the OPC website's Q & A on this question, the responder writes,

"Those who represent the Lord Jesus Christ in teaching and ruling his church must be men of good character and understanding. Women may teach other women or children but they may not teach men in any official capacity in the church.... This has to do with obedience and headship.

"If anyone, man **or woman**, teaches as part of the program of a church, the elders of that church have oversight to be sure that their teaching is according to the doctrinal standards of their church" ("Question & Answer")."

Those who "represent the Lord Jesus Christ in teaching or ruling his church" would be elders. The author agrees that the issue is one of office and official authority when he says this is a matter of "obedience and headship." We believe that having a woman teach a mixed adult Sunday School class is not a violation of Scripture since her teaching is not an exercise of authority, but is taking place under the oversight and authority of the session.

In light of women praying and prophesying in the worship service 1 Corinthians 11, and the Bible's call to all in the general office of believer to exercise their teaching gifts, we believe it is scripturally warranted for women to teach mixed adult Sunday School classes, and the like.

This brings us to a couple of pastoral matters. The first is that all Sunday School, growth group, and other general office ministries must be under the authority of the session in some tangible way. Whether a class is taught by a non-ordained man or woman, the material should be reviewed by an elder(s) or pastor(s).

Furthermore, we recognize that not all believers in our congregations will necessarily hold to this position. Therefore, to avoid making them choose either to sit in a class against their conscience, or not attend Sunday School, we believe it pastorally wise to always have a second class which a man is leading.

Finally, although the Bible allows for women to teach mixed adult Sunday School classes, this ought not to become some kind of agenda such that we must have a woman teaching at all times. Rather, as gifting and opportunity arise, men or women will use their gifts to honor Christ in the church. Any member, ordained or not, should be aware of the heart's capacity to either assume an air of authority on the one hand or shirk responsibility on the other. The delight in serving the body of Christ is primary. Our goal as a session in forming an opinion on this topic is to encourage women who are gifted in teaching to freely, under the authority or oversight of the elders, exercise their gifts in the body of Christ and for this local church body to be further built up as a result.

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