

Prominent Biblical Scholars on Women in Ministry

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Some Christians think that only people who have a “loose approach to scripture” can believe that women should be leaders and teachers in the church. I strongly doubt that any evangelical Christian would regard these scholars and theologians as having a loose approach to scripture, and yet each of them believes that appropriately gifted women should be leaders and teachers in the church. Here is a sample of various statements made by these prominent scholars (some of whom are now deceased.)

F.F. BRUCE (1910-1990)

F.F. Bruce was the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, and belonged to the Open Brethren.

“An appeal to first principles in our application of the New Testament might demand the recognition that when the Spirit, in his sovereign good pleasure, bestows varying gifts on individual believers, these gifts are intended to be exercised for the well-being of the whole church. If he manifestly withheld the gifts of teaching or leadership from Christian women, then we should accept that as evidence of his will (1 Cor. 12:11). But experience shows that he bestows these and other gifts, with ‘undistinguishing regard’, on men and women alike—not on all women, of course, nor yet on all men. That being so, it is unsatisfactory to rest with a halfway house in this issue of women’s ministry, where they are allowed to pray and prophesy, but not to teach or lead.”

F.F. Bruce, “Women in the Church: A Biblical Survey,” *Christian Brethren Review* 33 (1982), 7-14, 11-12. (Source)

GORDON D. FEE (B. 1934)

Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Regent College, ordained in the Assemblies of God

“It seems a sad commentary on the church and on its understanding of the Holy Spirit that ‘official’ leadership and ministry is allowed to come from only one half of the community of faith. The New Testament evidence is that the Holy Spirit is gender inclusive, gifting both men and women, and thus potentially setting the whole body free for all the parts to minister and in various ways to give leadership to the others. Thus my issue in the end is not a feminist agenda—an advocacy of women in ministry. Rather, it is a Spirit agenda, a plea for the releasing of the Spirit from our strictures and structures so that the church might minister to itself and to the world more effectively.”

“The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry”, *Discovering Biblical Equality Complementarity without Hierarchy*. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Gordon D. Fee (eds) (Leicester: IVP Academic, 2005), 254.

CRAIG S. KEENER (B. 1960)

Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, ordained in an African-American Baptist church but serves in settings with a range of traditions.

“ . . . we Pentecostals and charismatics affirm that the minister’s authority is inherent in the minister’s calling and ministry of the Word, not the minister’s person. In this case, gender should be irrelevant as a consideration for ministry—for us as it was for Paul. . . . Today we should affirm those whom God calls, whether male or female, and encourage them in faithfully learning God’s Word. We need to affirm all

potential laborers, both men and women, for the abundant harvest fields.”

Was Paul For or Against Women in Ministry?, *Enrichment Journal*, Spring 2001. (Source)

I. HOWARD MARSHALL (1934-2015)

Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, belonged to the Evangelical Methodist Church

“Much anguish is felt by women whose God-given talents have been denied expression. This is due to the inability of complementarians to provide any coherent and persuasive reasons for denying women these [ministry] positions in church—women are asked to accept a scriptural command simply because it is God’s will even if they cannot understand why it is so. . . . [Anguish is also caused by] the arbitrariness of the way in which the ruling is put into effect, with all the going beyond what Scripture actually says and the casuistry that is employed regarding the limits of what women may and may not do.”

Comments made at a panel discussion at the Evangelical Theological Society 2010 meeting. (Source)

LEON MORRIS (1914-2006)

New Testament scholar, ordained Anglican minister

In his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, Morris stated that “Phoebe is certainly called a deacon” in Romans 16:1; and Junia along with Andronicus (mentioned in Romans 16:7) were “outstanding among the apostles which might mean that the apostles held them in high esteem or that they were apostles, and notable apostles at that.” Morris adds, “The former understanding seems less likely . . .” *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 529 & 534. Morris also wrote essays advocating for women in ministry, and he welcomed women at Ridley Theological College, Melbourne, where he was Principal from 1964 until his retirement in 1976.

JOHN STOTT (1921-2011)

Anglican minister, theologian, one of the principal authors of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974

“If God endows women with spiritual gifts (which he does), and thereby calls them to exercise their gifts for the common good (which he does), the Church must recognize God’s gifts and calling, must make appropriate spheres of service available to women, and should ‘ordain’ (that is commission and authorize) them to exercise their God-given ministry, at best in team situations. Our Christian doctrines of Creation and Redemption tell us that God wants his gifted people to be fulfilled, not frustrated, and his church to be enriched by their service.”

J.R.W Stott, *Issues facing Christianity Today* (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1984), 254.

BEN WITHERINGTON III (B. 1951)

Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary, ordained Methodist pastor

“We need to keep steadily in mind that what determines or should determine the leadership structures in the church is not gender but rather gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. The family of faith is not identical with the physical family, and gender is no determinant of roles in it. Gender of course does affect some roles in the Christian family, but that is irrelevant when it comes to the discussion of the leadership structure of the church. This is why we should not be surprised to find even in Paul’s letters examples of women teachers,

evangelist, prophetesses, deacons, and apostles. Paul is not one who is interested in baptizing the existing fallen patriarchal order and calling it good. One of the tell tale signs of Paul's views on such matters can be seen in what he says about baptism— it is not a gender specific sign that we have for the new covenant unlike the one for the old covenant, and Paul adds that in Christ there is no 'male and female' just as there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free. The implications of this are enormous. The change in the covenant sign signals the change in the nature of the covenant when it comes to men and women."

Why Arguments against Women in Ministry aren't Biblical, on Dr Witherington's website *The Bible and Culture* here.

N.T. WRIGHT (B. 1948)

New Testament scholar, Anglican Bishop of Durham (2003-2010)

"It is the women who come first to the tomb, who are the first to see the risen Jesus, and are the first to be entrusted with the news that he has been raised from the dead. This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles. We should not be surprised that Paul calls a woman named Junia an apostle in Romans 16.7. If an apostle is a witness to the resurrection, there were women who deserved that title before any of the men. . . . Nor is this promotion of women a totally new thing with the resurrection. As in so many other ways, what happened then picked up hints and pinpoints from earlier in Jesus' public career. I think in particular of the woman who anointed Jesus (without here going into the question of who it was and whether it happened more than once); as some have pointed out, this was a priestly action which Jesus accepted as such."

"Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis", a conference paper for the Symposium, *Men, Women and the Church*, St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004. (Source)

MANY MORE . . .

Numerous other evangelical scholars also believe that the Bible, correctly interpreted, does not restrict gifted women from any ministry function or position. There are too many to mention them all, but here are just a few: Kenneth Bailey, Gilbert Bilezikian, Michael Bird, Craig A. Evans, R.T. France, Kevin Giles, Joel B. Green, Stanley Grenz, Richard Hays, David Instone-Brewer, Walter Kaiser, Kenneth Kantzer, John R. Kohlenberger III, Richard N. Longenecker, Scot McKnight, Roger Nicole, Roger E. Olson, Philip Barton Payne, Stanley Porter, Howard Snyder, John Stackhouse, etc. (I have chosen to mention only male scholars to avoid an accusation of women being self-serving.)

Finally, a quotation from Dallas Willard (1935-2013),

"It is not the *rights* of women to occupy 'official' ministerial roles, nor their *equality* to men in those roles, that set the terms of their service to God and their neighbors. It is their *obligations* that do so – obligations that derive from their human abilities empowered by divine gifting."

How I Changed my Mind about Women in Leadership (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 10 (italics by the author).

Who else can be added to the list of well-known respected evangelical scholars who advocate for women in ministry?