

Women Teaching Men — How Far Is Too Far?

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- Topics: Women, Preaching & Teaching

Where is the line when it comes to women teaching men? May women preach on Sunday mornings? Teach a Sunday school class? Lead a small group? Instruct a seminary course? Speak at a conference? At a couples retreat? Or on the radio?

May women *ever* teach from Scripture when men are in the audience? Should men even be reading this article? How far is too far?

It's a question being asked by scores of women who want to be faithful to the Bible and want to exercise their spiritual gift of teaching in a way that honors God's pattern of male headship in the church.

The discussion surrounding the boundary reminds me of another how-far-is-too-far issue: How physically affectionate should a couple be prior to marriage? Should they hold hands? Kiss? Kiss for five seconds, but not fifteen? Lip kiss but not French kiss? How far is too far?

Well, the Bible doesn't exactly specify.

Trying to put together a list of rules about permitted behaviors would be both misleading and ridiculous. But we're not left without a rudder. The Bible does provide a clear boundary.

Sexual intercourse prior to marriage crosses the line.

God reveals for us the principle of purity, gives a clear this-goes-over-the-line boundary, and to help us figure out the rest, provides us with the gift of his indwelling Spirit in the community of the saints. And thankfully when we mess up, he stands ready to extend his lavish and costly forgiveness and grace.

Asking the Right Question

Pre-marital sexual intercourse crosses the line. But let me ask you this: *Can a couple physically honor the boundary and still violate the principle of purity?* Of course they can.

So a woman who only considers the boundary and asks, "How far is too far?" is really asking the wrong question. A better question would be, "Do I love what God loves?" "Do I treasure what he treasures?" "Does what I do with my body indicate that I treasure purity?" And, "How can I best honor Christ in how I physically interact with my boyfriend?"

By now you may be muttering, "I thought she was going to talk about women teaching men in the church."

I am. But I think the question of how I — as a woman with a spiritual gift of teaching — ought to honor male headship in the church has many similarities with the question of how a young woman ought to honor the principle of purity. In the former situation as well as the latter, God hasn't given us a detailed how-far-is-too-far list. He's given us a broad principle, a clear this-goes-over-the-line boundary, and the gift of his indwelling Holy Spirit to help us figure out the rest in the wisdom of community.

Loving What God Loves

God wants us to honor his divine design by honoring the principle of male headship in our homes and church families. The church is God's family and household (1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:6; Galatians 6:10).

The "family" part is key. The Bible teaches that in the nuclear family unit, as well as in our corporate church families, the father — or multiple fathers in the case of the church — have the responsibility to lovingly lead and humbly govern the family unit. This pattern is repeated on multiple levels: A husband is the head of his home, elders are heads of their local churches, Christ is head over the universal Church, and God the Father is the head of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 3:4–5; Hebrews 3:6).

God wants us to value and honor this pattern and cherish it as he does.

The biblical term for a church leader is elder or overseer. Churches today often call their leaders "pastor." Some churches call every person on paid staff a pastor — even if that person is a female and not an elder. To avoid confusion over all the conflicting terminology, and to be clear about what I mean, I will call the men who occupy the biblical office of elder/overseer, and who govern and lead the church family, the "church-fathers."

God gives us a clear boundary for how we ought to honor the principle of male headship in the church. We honor it by letting the church-fathers govern and teach the church-family. Scripture indicates that women are to remain quiet when the church-fathers are providing this type of authoritative family instruction. "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (1 Timothy 2:12). That's the boundary we must observe if we want to honor the principle of male headship.

But what does it mean? What about a woman preaching Sunday morning? Or Sunday night? Or Wednesday night? Or Tuesday morning? Or sharing her testimony? Or speaking at a co-ed Bible study? Or to a mixed audience at a religious conference? Or teaching a seminar when men are present? Or leading a prayer meeting? Or teaching at a co-ed seminary? Or privately mentoring men? Or preaching on TV? Or the radio? Or instructing men through articles and books?

If I am a woman who is gifted at teaching, at what point do I cross the line?

As in the case of purity, I believe that putting together a set of rules about permitted behaviors would be both misleading and ridiculous. Furthermore, I believe that asking “How far is too far?” is asking the wrong question.

For me, a better question is: “Do I love what God loves?” “Am I treasuring Jesus by treasuring God’s model of headship? Do I uphold it and support male headship as a good and beautiful aspect of God’s wise plan? Does how I exercise my teaching gift indicate that I value it?” And, “How can I best honor Christ in how (and in what context) I teach?”

Responsibility of Church-Fathers

I believe the question of how to honor Christ through the exercise of my teaching gift revolves around the issue of whether I’m acting like a *church-father*. Am I doing something that is, or will likely be construed as, setting the doctrinal and spiritual direction for my entire church family?

Most churches gather to hear the church-fathers teach and instruct the family at weekend church services, particularly Saturday evening and Sunday morning. That’s not to say that every weekend service is focused on doctrinal instruction and leading the family, or that the

weekend is the only time such instruction takes place. But as a rule, in most churches, the weekend service is the context in which the official teaching and leading of the church-family happens.

Because I want to honor 1 Timothy 2:12, for my good and the good of the church, and because I believe it presents a fairly clear boundary about women teaching authoritatively in the local church, I generally turn down invitations to speak on Sunday mornings. The passage indicates that the doctrinal teaching delivered in the context of the regular church meeting is the responsibility of the church “dads.” The way I honor and treasure God’s model of headship is to remain quiet and let the church-fathers instruct the family.

I say that I *generally* turn down invitations to speak on Sunday mornings. There have been exceptions. I once accepted an invitation to speak on Mother’s Day, when a church-father prefaced my talk with the qualification that he wanted to honor moms and have me give special instruction to the women on that day. I have also accepted speaking invitations when the church-fathers have asked me to give an overview of the history and philosophy of feminist thought, speak about cultural or women’s issues, share my testimony, or to report how God is working through my ministry.

I have been on panels and participated in question-answer format teaching at weekend church services in conjunction with men. There was a time when a church-father and I team-taught one Sunday morning because the topic had a specific his-and-her application, and he thought it would benefit the women in the audience to hear things from a woman’s perspective.

I have also taught men in multiple venues that didn’t qualify as a church service — like camps, conferences, seminars, seminary classes, and workshops. Later in this article, I’ll

present some guidelines I use to help me determine whether or not accepting an invitation to teach men in a religious, co-ed venue honors 1 Timothy 2:12 and the principle of male headship.

But before I get there, let me stress that although there are exceptions, I believe that as a rule, treasuring and honoring God's model of headship means that I refrain from teaching during the regular weekly gathering of the church (that is, preaching Sunday morning) — even if I am asked to do so. Just as I defer to my husband when he is providing spiritual leadership for our family, so I defer to God's desire that it is the church-fathers who deliver the doctrinal instruction and direction for my church family.

I do this joyfully. I am not a church-father. I am a woman and therefore a spiritual mom. I delight in the fact that God has created us male and female and wired us to be spiritual dads and moms. Arguably, because I am a gifted teacher, I could do a better job of interpreting the text and delivering the sermon than many church-fathers do. But that would miss the point. It's not about competence. God created the family and, in the family, men are supposed to be the dads and women are supposed to be the moms. It's not a question of who is better at it or more gifted. Male-female roles are neither identical nor interchangeable.

Can Women Teach Under Male Authority?

Some churches have women regularly preach at their corporate gatherings. They skirt 1 Timothy 2:12 by saying the women are teaching under the authority of the church-fathers. In my mind, this is highly inadvisable. In my marriage, I would refuse if my husband told me to do something that was clearly against Scripture. My responsibility to obey the Lord Jesus supersedes my husband's headship. If a church-father asked me to preach and doctrinally instruct the congregation, I would seriously need to consider if he was asking me to do

something that went against God's revealed will in his word. Church-fathers cannot legitimately give someone permission to disobey the Bible.

The text doesn't say, "Preserve some semblance of male authority in your churches." It does not say, "A woman may teach men in your church meeting if she is under the authority of an elder/church-father." It does not say, "A woman can teach if she is married to an elder/church-father." It does not say, "A female pastor can preach if she is a paid church staff, operating under the authority of the elders/church-fathers."

It says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." Even if we don't like it, don't agree with it, or don't understand it, the boundary is quite clear. Having the church-fathers authoritatively teach and instruct the congregation is God's standard for the regular public meeting of the local church.

Can an elder or pastor of a church rightfully give a woman permission to disobey this Scripture text? Let me ask you the same question using a different issue. What if an elder told you that you could sleep with your boyfriend and live together without getting married? Or told you that you could cheat on your tax return? Or lie on the witness stand? What would you think if a woman at your church told you, "I can read erotica and smut and surf porn sites because my pastor has given me permission, and I'm under his authority"? You would dismiss this "permission" as ridiculous. These examples, although extreme, highlight the fact that no church elder, bishop, pastor, church-father, or any other church officer has the authority to give people permission to disobey God.

Generally speaking, the weekend service of the church is the context in which the doctrinal instruction of the church family takes place. But as I said earlier, not every weekend service is focused on purely doctrinal instruction (there's not always a sermon *per se*), not all types of sharing or instruction constitute exegetical teaching, and not all types of presentations can

be categorized as being “authoritative,” so obviously there are exceptions to this rule. I believe that there are times when it is entirely appropriate for women to take part and that it is advisable for churches to be intentional about including a woman’s perspective at times and in ways that are appropriate.

So that’s what I believe about women teaching at weekend church services. But church people gather at many other times and in many other contexts. There’s Sunday school, small groups, prayer meeting, seminars, and conferences. What’s more, Christians often gather for religious edification and instruction with people who don’t go to their church. And they listen to podcasts, watch videos, and read books. The Bible doesn’t specifically address these contexts. As a woman, how do I decide if teaching in these other religious, co-ed contexts is appropriate?

Does It Officially Set the Bar for the Family?

The way I determine if teaching in a specific *religious venue* to a *co-ed-audience* honors male headship is by trying to determine how closely that particular situation mimics the nature, role, and function of a church-father in governing and providing public doctrinal instruction for the local-church family.

I try to pin down where the venue sits on each of the following eight continuums:

1. Context: congregational (church) → non-congregational. Is this local-church or is it not exactly church?
2. Nature: exegetical → testimonial/inspirational. Am I forcefully interpreting a text of Scripture or sharing from my life and experience with biblical support?
3. Authority: governmental (directive) → non-governmental (non-directive). Am I establishing the official standard for the community?

4. Relationship: close (personal/relational) → distant (impersonal/non-relational). Am I in a community relationship with these men? Am I seeking to mentor them?
5. Commitment: formal → informal. Have the listeners made a formal commitment to me or to this community?
6. Obligation: obligatory → voluntary. Are the listeners obliged to listen to the teaching that takes place in this context? Can they be disciplined and corrected for failing to obey?
7. Constancy: habitual (ongoing) → occasional. Does this happen often and repetitively or infrequently?
8. Maturity: sister → mother. Does my age and spiritual maturity create a situation where I am speaking as a mother would to her sons?

The more a teaching venue leans toward the left (the first part of each pairing), the less likely it is that the venue is an appropriate one for me to provide co-ed instruction. The more the speaking venue leans toward the right (the second part of each pairing), the more likely it is that I might be a helpful teacher in this context.

For example, in the instance of having me give a co-ed address at a national religious conference, I may regard the activity as appropriate based on the following analysis:

1. Context: Non-congregational. National religious conferences are outside of the context of the local church (although denominational meetings may more closely resemble a congregational context).
2. Nature: Testimonial or inspirational. Depending on the content, the message may be more testimonial-inspirational than exegetical.
3. Authority: Non-governmental. I have no authority or responsibility for establishing standards.

4. Relationship: Impersonal. Normally there is no personal, ongoing relationship. The relationship with the listeners is quite distant, like the relationship one might have reading someone's book. As a guest speaker, I rarely even know the registrants' names.
5. Commitment: Informal. There is no formal covenant or commitment between myself and the listener, nor between him and the community. This is quite different than teaching in a Sunday service, where and when community members congregate to hear the official teaching of the church of which they are members.
6. Obligation: Voluntary. There is no obligation on the part of the listener to attend the address. It is totally discretionary and voluntary on his part (unlike the obligation of a church member to attend weekly church services and obey that teaching).
7. Constancy: Occasional. A one-time address (flying into an area, teaching, and then leaving) is very different than the ongoing corporate instruction in the context of a local church body (as it would be, say, in a Sunday school class).
8. Maturity: Mother. I have found that as I get older I have more freedom to instruct younger men as a mother instructs her sons. A middle-aged woman instructing a group of 17-year-old men is a far different situation than a young woman instructing them. Given my analysis of the nature of the venue using the above continuums, giving a keynote at a religious conference may not be a problem for me, whereas mentoring men by leading a mixed home-group Bible study (without a male co-leader) would fall outside the realm of what I would consider appropriate.

In the final analysis, I can't give you a cut-and-dried list of what is and isn't permissible. It would be like trying to come up with a strict, one-size-fits-all, permissible-physical-affection list for dating couples. It's not advisable — or really even possible. All I can say is that your decision depends on the situation. God gives us the principle of male headship, a clear this-

goes-over-the-line boundary, and the gift of his indwelling Holy Spirit, in faithful community, to help us figure out the rest. And when we mess up, he extends grace upon grace.

An externally focused, rule-based approach to women teaching co-ed audiences in the church neither reflects nor honors the beauty of God's design. God wants us to have a grace-soaked, joyous spirit that delights in honoring headship as a beautiful aspect of his good and wise plan — one that respects and engages men and women as joint-heirs and co-workers who wholeheartedly exercise their gifts together in the service of each other and the advance of the gospel. God is far more concerned that we have the right heart and spirit than that we fall in line with man-made flashpoints.

And then there's grace. Because of grace, I need to recognize that my Christian brothers and sisters may be in a different stage in their understanding of the issue. I need to humbly acknowledge that I don't have a corner on the market of truth. I need to extend grace when they draw lines of application more tightly or loosely than I would.

Having said that, we cannot think for a moment that this instruction is irrelevant, that we can write it off as an ancient cultural quirk, that how we apply it is totally optional, that every interpretation and application is equally valid, or that churches should just do what they please. To be sure, we probably won't all get it right all the time. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't always do our best to get it right.

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