Question: "Women pastors / preachers? What does the Bible say about women in ministry?"

Answer: There is perhaps no more hotly debated issue in the church today than the issue of women serving as pastors/preachers. As a result, it is very important to not see this issue as men versus women. There are women who believe women should not serve as pastors and that the Bible places restrictions on the ministry of women, and there are men who believe women can serve as preachers and that there are no restrictions on women in ministry. This is not an issue of chauvinism or discrimination. It is an issue of biblical interpretation.

The Word of God proclaims, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). In the church, God assigns different roles to men and women. This is a result of the way mankind was created and the way in which sin entered the world (1 Timothy 2:13-14). God, through the apostle Paul, restricts women from serving in roles of teaching and/or having spiritual authority over men. This precludes women from serving as pastors over men, which definitely includes preaching to, teaching, and having spiritual authority.

There are many “objections” to this view of women in ministry. A common one is that Paul restricts women from teaching because in the first century, women were typically uneducated. However, 1 Timothy 2:11-14 nowhere mentions educational status. If education were a qualification for ministry, the majority of Jesus' disciples would not have been qualified. A second common objection is that Paul only restricted the women of Ephesus from teaching (1 Timothy was written to Timothy, who was the pastor of the church in Ephesus). The city of Ephesus was known for its temple to Artemis, a false Greek/Roman goddess. Women were the authority in the worship of Artemis. However, the book of 1 Timothy nowhere mentions Artemis, nor does Paul mention Artemis worship as a reason for the restrictions in 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

A third common objection is that Paul is only referring to husbands and wives, not men and women in general. The Greek words in the passage could refer to husbands and wives; however, the basic meaning of the words refers to men and women. Further, the same Greek words are used in verses 8-10. Are only husbands to lift up holy hands in prayer without anger and disputing (verse 8)? Are only wives to dress modestly, have good deeds, and worship God (verses 9-10)? Of course not. Verses 8-10 clearly refer to all men and women, not only husbands and wives. There is nothing in the context that would indicate a switch to husbands and wives in verses 11-14.

Yet another frequent objection to this interpretation of women in ministry is in relation to women who held positions of leadership in the Bible, specifically Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah in the Old Testament. This objection fails to note some significant factors. First, Deborah was the only female judge among 13 male judges. Huldah was the only female prophet among dozens of male prophets mentioned in the Bible. Miriam's only connection to leadership was being the sister of Moses and Aaron. The two most prominent women in the times of the Kings were Athaliah and Jezebel—hardly examples of godly female leadership. Most significantly, though, the authority of women in the Old Testament is not relevant to the issue. The book of 1 Timothy and the other Pastoral Epistles present a new paradigm for the church—the body of Christ—and that paradigm involves the authority structure for the church, not for the nation of Israel or any other Old Testament entity.

Similar arguments are made using Priscilla and Phoebe in the New Testament. In Acts 18, Priscilla and Aquila are presented as faithful ministers for Christ. Priscilla's name is mentioned
first, perhaps indicating that she was more “prominent” in ministry than her husband. However, Priscilla is nowhere described as participating in a ministry activity that is in contradiction to 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Priscilla and Aquila brought Apollos into their home and they both discipled him, explaining the Word of God to him more accurately (Acts 18:26).

In Romans 16:1, even if Phoebe is considered a “deaconess” instead of a “servant,” that does not indicate that Phoebe was a teacher in the church. “Able to teach” is given as a qualification for elders, but not deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9). Elders/bishops/deacons are described as the “husband of one wife,” “a man whose children believe,” and “men worthy of respect.” Clearly the indication is that these qualifications refer to men. In addition, in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9, masculine pronouns are used exclusively to refer to elders/bishops/deacons.

The structure of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 makes the “reason” perfectly clear. Verse 13 begins with “for” and gives the “cause” of Paul’s statement in verses 11-12. Why should women not teach or have authority over men? Because “Adam was created first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived.” God created Adam first and then created Eve to be a “helper” for Adam. This order of creation has universal application in the family (Ephesians 5:22-33) and the church. The fact that Eve was deceived is also given as a reason for women not serving as pastors or having spiritual authority over men. This leads some to believe that women should not teach because they are more easily deceived. That concept is debatable, but if women are more easily deceived, why should they be allowed to teach children (who are easily deceived) and other women (who are supposedly more easily deceived)? That is not what the text says. Women are not to teach men or have spiritual authority over men because Eve was deceived. As a result, God has given men the primary teaching authority in the church.

Many women excel in gifts of hospitality, mercy, teaching, evangelism, and helps. Much of the ministry of the local church depends on women. Women in the church are not restricted from public praying or prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:5), only from having spiritual teaching authority over men. The Bible nowhere restricts women from exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). Women, just as much as men, are called to minister to others, to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and to proclaim the gospel to the lost (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 3:15).

God has ordained that only men are to serve in positions of spiritual teaching authority in the church. This is not because men are necessarily better teachers, or because women are inferior or less intelligent (which is not the case). It is simply the way God designed the church to function. Men are to set the example in spiritual leadership—in their lives and through their words. Women are to take a less authoritative role. Women are encouraged to teach other women (Titus 2:3-5). The Bible also does not restrict women from teaching children. The only activity women are restricted from is teaching or having spiritual authority over men. This logically would preclude women from serving as pastors to men. This does not make women less important, by any means, but rather gives them a ministry focus more in agreement with God’s plan and His gifting of them.

Question: "Can women serve as elders in the church?"

Answer: There are two primary viewpoints on the question of whether women can serve as elders in the church. The egalitarian view holds that women can serve as elders as long as they fulfill the requirements as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The complementarian view affirms the opposite and states that women are not allowed to serve in the capacity of elder within the church of Jesus Christ.
Let’s look at 1 Timothy 3:1-7: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." (ESV)

The first thing to notice in this passage is the number of masculine pronouns (“he” and “his”). The pronouns "he," "his," and "him" occur 10 times in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. As a result, just a cursory reading of this passage would lead the average person to conclude that the role of an elder/overseer must be filled by a man. The phrase “husband of one wife” also indicates that the office of elder is assumed/intended to be fulfilled by men. The same points are also made in the parallel passage of Titus 1:5-9.

The passages that describe the qualifications and duties of elders/overseers do not open the door for women to serve as elders. In fact, the consistent use of male pronouns and terminology argue strongly for the office of elder/overseer being restricted to men only. As with other issues in this debate, the question of women serving as elders is not a matter of chauvinism. In no sense is this a matter of men being superior to women. Rather, God restricts the office of elder to men only because that is how He has structured the church to function. Godly men are to serve as leadership, with women serving in the crucially important supporting roles.

Question: "Can women serve as deacons in the church?"

Answer: Scripture is not completely clear whether or not a woman can serve as a deacon. The statement that deacons are to be “men worthy of respect” (1 Timothy 3:8 NIV) and the qualification “the husband of but one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12) would seem to disqualify women from serving as deacons.

However, some interpret 1 Timothy 3:11 as referring to women deacons because the Greek word translated “wives” can also be translated “women.” According to this interpretation, Paul is referring not to deacons’ wives, but to women who serve as deacons. The use of the word likewise in verse 8 could suggest a third group of leaders in addition to elders and deacons. Also supporting this interpretation is the fact that Paul gives no requirements for elders’ wives when outlining the qualifications for eldership. Why would he list qualifications for deacons’ wives but not for elders' wives? Elders hold a more prominent position in the church, yet Paul places no demands on their wives.

Arguing against interpreting "deacon's wives" as "female deacons" is the fact that it would be unusual for Paul to give qualifications for deacons in verses 8-10 and 12-13, with qualifications for deaconesses in between.

Romans 16:1 refers to Phoebe with the same word Paul uses in 1 Timothy 3:12. It is unclear, though, whether Paul is saying Phoebe is a deacon or whether he is just saying she is a servant. In the early church, women servants cared for sick believers, the poor, strangers, and those in prison. They instructed women and children (Titus 2:3-5). Phoebe may not have had the official designation of “deacon” but Paul thought enough of her to entrust her with the tremendous
responsibility of delivering the epistle to the Romans to the church in Rome (Romans 16:1-2). Clearly, he saw her not as inferior or less capable, but as a trusted and valued member of the body of Christ.

Scripture does not give much support to the idea of women serving as deacons, but it does not necessarily disqualify them, either. Some churches have instituted the office of deaconess, but most differentiate it from the office of deacon. If a church does institute the position of deaconess, the church leadership should ensure that the deaconess is in submission to the restrictions Paul places on the ministry of women in other passages (such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12), just as all leadership is to be in submission to the church authority structure and ultimately to our supreme authority, Christ Jesus.