



THE LOCAL CHURCH

POSITION PAPER: WOMEN'S ROLE IN MINISTRY THE LOCAL CHURCH GRAND RAPIDS

We believe that the Holy Spirit empowers and gifts all believers, both men and women, for the work of Christ's Kingdom. Here at The Local Church GR, both men and women serve as elders and participate in pastoral ministry, including the preaching and teaching ministry of the church as a whole.

Across Christian tradition, there is a wide variety of views on this topic. This says something important about the Bible—mainly that it's a unified story that leads us to Jesus (thanks, BibleProject) and not an essay or a set of by-laws to sort out the question of men and women and the leadership structure of the local church. Is it helpful in sorting those questions out? Of course. However, the task of combing through the entire biblical story and arriving at a position on such a question requires study, integrity, and humility. We recognize that other sincere followers of Jesus who seek to do God's will might arrive at a different conclusion on this question. For the health and unity of our church, this is our attempt to kindly and clearly explain our position on this important topic.

Throughout history the church has commonly held two views on gender: some (often referred to as complementarians) believe that women's roles should be limited in some way while others (often referred to as egalitarians) believe that women's roles should not be limited in any way. Both views believe in the equal worth and value of men and women. The heart of the disagreement is the function or role of males and females in the ministry of the church: Does scripture invite women to be deacons, elders, or pastors? The Local Church GR affirms that women may serve in any role where God has gifted and called them. Are we allowing our culture to shape the interpretation of the Bible or is this faithful exegesis and hermeneutics?

Our position on this important topic is anchored to the scriptures by a consideration of the trajectory of the biblical narrative, a look at the role of women in biblical leadership, and an interpretation of some key biblical passages.

1. TRAJECTORY OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

THE NEW COVENANT

The New Testament is a dramatic announcement that describes the arrival of Christ's Kingdom. Members of this Kingdom are called, set apart, and invited to step into a new, unexpected reality – a new covenant – where forgiveness, grace and transformation are common. Features of this membership pop up throughout the New Testament:

- (A) Every believer, regardless of gender, is united by faith to Christ. There are no hierarchies. Race, social status, and gender no longer shape our worth, identity, or access to God. Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). He repeats this in his letter the Colossians, concluding "Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11). Thus, everyone (including women) have full access to Christ without any limitations.

- (B)** Every believer, regardless of gender, is empowered with the life-transforming gift of the Spirit. Every believer receives this gift without any consideration of gender according to the New Testament. At Pentecost Peter explains this by quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel, “In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people; and your sons and daughters will prophesy...” (Acts 2:17). Those who awaited this New Covenant anointing were the apostles along with 120 others, including “women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers...” (Acts 1:14). Thus, women have full access to the Spirit without any limitations.

LIFE IN THE KINGDOM

Life within this New Covenant Kingdom is uncommon. Cultural values cherished by Romans and Jews alike were being upended when believers discovered the new freedom they had experienced in Christ.

- (A)** The rich celebration of women in gathered fellowship is one hallmark of life in the New Covenant. Throughout the gospels, we find women invited into Jesus’ inner circle. In a typical case, they are invited to sit at his feet as a disciple learning as any man might (Luke 10:38-42). Luke even tells us that women helped finance Jesus’ ministry (he lists Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, Luke 8:1-3). A woman anoints Jesus before his arrest (Mark 14:3). Women are even the first eyewitness to his resurrection (Mark 15:40-41), perhaps the most significant role in gospel. The mark of membership in this community is now baptism (not circumcision, Colossians 2:11-12) which welcomes both men and women. Throughout the early church, life in this Kingdom meant life with men and women sharing responsibilities of serving, teaching and preaching.
- (B)** The model for leadership in the New Testament departs from the priestly roles we find in the Old Testament. Christ fulfills the role of priest who not only serves us in worship but sacrifices himself, leaving no need for any to continue his work (Hebrews 8:1-7). This leaves his followers with new roles: we are to be disciples who bear gifts given by Christ to teach, prophesy, heal and serve in countless ways (1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Ephesians 4:11-12). In these lists of gifts, women are never excluded. Gifting always comes before gender in every leadership role.

2. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP

The church is meant to open a window toward the future that God has promised to the world. In light of the new covenant in God’s kingdom, we observe many patterns regarding women in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament.

- (A)** Women serve in leadership roles. The scriptures again and again describe women who were anointed by God to lead God’s people in a variety of capacities. Deborah, for example, served as both a prophet and a judge in Israel (Judges 4:4-5), Miriam led the assembly in worship (Exodus 15:20-21), and Huldah provided authoritative prophecy for Hilkiah when sent by King Josiah (2 Kings 22).

- (B)** The New Testament provides numerous examples considered below.

- Throughout the Book of Acts, women are included. They are present at Pentecost and listed whenever the growth of the church is described (Acts 5:14; 8:12). Women are prominent in the early churches: Philippi (Acts 16:13-15); Thessalonica (17:4), Berea (17:12), Athens

(17:34), and Corinth (18:12). Women host Paul in his travels (Acts 16:5; Romans 16:2) and serve as hosts to churches in their homes. There was a church in the home of Mary (Acts 12:12); Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:4-5), Nympha of Laodicia (Colossians 4:15), and Apphia of Colossae (Philemon 2). When Paul writes letters and concludes with special greetings, he names women regularly – names we generally do not recognize (like Tryphaena and Persis). In Romans 16 Paul recognizes 26 people of note and eight of these are women (30%).

- We also see that women are included in specific ministries. Prisca (also known as Priscilla) was married to Aquila but she is often honored and listed first which broke with Roman custom (Romans 16:3). Above all she is called a “fellow worker,” a title Paul reserves for his colleagues in ministry (Romans 16:9) including Timothy and Titus. She even aids in the conversion of the important leader Apollos (Acts 18:26).
 - Other women are likewise named. Euodia and Syntyche are “fellow workers” with Paul (Philippians 4:3). Women serve as prophets (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5). There was even a ministry for widows who served the church (but we know little about this, 1 Timothy 5:3-16). A woman named Phoebe was a deacon (never called a “deaconess”) from Cenchreae near Corinth. Phoebe’s role shows that Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 3:11 (“deacons must be the husband of one wife”) is an exhortation for men, not a verse that excludes women. Romans 16:7 is most remarkable. A woman named Junia (not Junias, a man) has renown “among the apostles.” Was she well-known? Was she celebrated as an apostolos (a teacher-leader sent out)?
- (C)** All of this evidence is consistent with Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28. The church celebrated a lived reality that elevated women and invited them into leadership in ways we need to recognize. In Christ there was to be no “male or female.” This does not mean that gender distinctions are eliminated. It simply means that in the Christian life gender gives neither advantage or disadvantage.

3. INTERPRETATION OF SOME KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES

There are a few texts in our bibles that continue to cause controversy about men, women and leadership. Three deserve attention.

- (A)** 1 Corinthians 14:33-34. Here Paul writes, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

In the church of Corinth, Paul has already endorsed women who pray and prophesy in worship (11:2-16). In chapter 14 Paul is giving directions for orderly worship. He is chiefly concerned about spoken prophesy during worship that will disrupt (14:28-30). And in 14:33-34 he is asking wives not to speak disruptively but to ask their husbands at home. The verb Paul uses is not the word for public speech (a lecture, a sermon, a teaching). He refers to talking as if one were talking to a neighbor.

This limitation has been explained frequently by scholars who have worked in the developing world where women had limited education and rare literacy. This was the same in the Roman world. Women were talking to their husbands aloud, asking what the Apostle Paul meant. Their questions were disrupting the flow of public worship which was precisely Paul's concern.

- (B)** 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Here Paul writes, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

This one text has caused tremendous controversy in the church. However, much confusion stems from the failure to understand its original context. Clearly women were in prominent roles in the early church and so what is Paul's concern here at Ephesus? It appears Paul is addressing a problem with women who have usurped Timothy's leadership in the church. When he refers to “having authority” Paul uses a word that is surprising. It's the Greek word *authenteō*. This word appears only here in the New Testament despite Paul speaking about authority many times. This version of the word translated authority often carries with it a negative connotation with suggested definitions including: to hijack authority, to take it by force, to usurp it. There appears to be a movement of women in the church that is failing to show Christian modesty (2:9) and a demeanor that is respectful. Paul refers to Eve (2:13-14) as a simple reminder that women too can be deceived. He is not making a universal pronouncement about women from Genesis for all women in all contexts. And this passage to Timothy is likewise “particular,” aimed at a problem in Ephesus, not designed for all women in all times and places.

- (C)** 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6. In these two verses Paul refers to church leaders and says they must be “the husband of one wife.” The language in both texts is identical. In each case, Paul wants leaders to be “blameless” so that no one can make accusations against them and thus discredit the church. He also says that such leaders should not be new converts (1 Timothy 3:6) and should be respected “among outsiders” (3:7). The idea here is protecting the church by having Christ-like people in leadership. Some have taken these two verses to mean that leaders must be men because only men can have a wife. However, a parallel requirement for women is in 1 Timothy 5:9 which implies that Paul has something universal in mind for both men and women.

Many interpretations of these verses have been suggested – and most have been disqualified except one. Paul is referring to a person who is faithful to their marriage. Paul wants leaders who understand marital fidelity and will be models in a world where polygamy, serial divorces, and sexual immorality were common. Paul is seeking husbands and wives who can demonstrate the righteous qualities of Christ in their marriage. In Ephesians 5:32 Paul refers to the sacred mystery of marriage and how it should be similar even to Christ's faithfulness to the church. To imply that leaders must be men because they have wives is to miss Paul's intention. If leaders are men, they should know how to be married in holiness. The same rule is true of women (1 Timothy 5:9).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH GR

Together these scriptural texts point in the same direction: the New Testament consistently affirms the leadership of women and promotes a leadership among men and women that is like that of Christ, whose life and work were defined by the cross.

- (A)** The Elder Board is open to women who meet the qualifications that are listed in the Scriptures.
- (B)** Pastoral roles (including pastoral roles that require leading and teaching) are also open to qualified and called women.