

D. Should Women be Church Officers?

Most systematic theologies have not included a section on the question of whether women can be church officers, because it has been assumed through the history of the church, with very few exceptions, that only men could be pastors or function as elders within a church. But in recent years a major controversy has arisen within the evangelical world: may women as well as men be pastors? May they share in all the offices of the church? I have treated this question much more extensively elsewhere⁶⁰ but a brief summary of the question can be given at this point.

We must affirm at the outset that the creation narrative in *Genesis 1:27* views men and women as equally created in the image of God. Therefore, men and women have equal value to God, and should be seen by us as having absolutely equal value as persons, and equal value to the church. Moreover, Scripture assures men and women of equal access to all the blessings of salvation (see Acts 2:17–18; Gal. 3:28). This is remarkably affirmed in the high dignity and respect which Jesus accorded to women in his earthly ministry.⁶²

We must also admit that evangelical churches have often failed to recognize the full equality of men and women, and thereby have failed to count women equal in value to men. The result has been a tragic failure to recognize that God often gives women equal or greater spiritual gifts than men, a failure to encourage women to have full and free participation in the various ministries of the church, and a failure to take full account of the wisdom that God has given to women with respect to important decisions in the life of the church. If the present controversy over women's roles in the church can result in the eradication of some of these past abuses, then the church as a whole will benefit greatly.

Yet the question remains, should women be pastors or elders in churches? (Or should they fill roles equivalent to that of an elder in churches that have alternative forms of government?) My own conclusion on this issue is that the Bible does not permit women to function in the role of pastor or elder within a church. This has also been the conclusion of the vast majority of churches in various societies throughout history. The reasons that seem to me to be most persuasive in answering this question are the following:

1. 1 Timothy 2:11–14. The single passage in Scripture that addresses this question most directly is 1 Timothy 2:11–14:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. *I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men*; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Here Paul is speaking about the church when it is assembled (see vv. 8–9). In such a setting, Paul says, “I permit no woman to *teach* or to *have authority over men*” (v. 12). These are the functions that are carried out by the elders of the church, and especially by what we know as a pastor in contemporary church situations. It is specifically these functions unique to elders that Paul prohibits for women in the church.⁶⁴

Several objections have been brought against this position:

(a) It has been said that this passage applies only to a specific situation that Paul is addressing,

probably one where women were teaching heretical doctrine within the church at Ephesus. But this objection is not persuasive, since there is no clear statement in 1 Timothy that says that women were actually *teaching* false doctrines. (1 Tim. 5:13 talks about women who are gossiping, but does not mention false doctrine.) Moreover, Paul does not simply tell certain women who are teaching false doctrine to be silent, but he says, “I permit no *woman* to teach or to have authority over men.” And finally, the *reason* Paul gives for this prohibition is not the one proposed in this objection, but a far different one: the situation of Adam and Eve before the fall, and before there was any sin in the world (see v. 13), and the way in which a reversal in male and female roles occurred at the time of the fall (see v. 14). These reasons are not limited to one situation in the church at Ephesus, but have application to manhood and womanhood generally.

(b) Another objection is to say that Paul gave this prohibition because women were not well educated in the first century, and therefore were not qualified for teaching or governing roles in the church. But Paul does not give lack of education as a reason for saying that women cannot “teach or ... have authority over men,” but rather points back to creation (vv. 13–14). It is precarious to base an argument on a reason Paul did *not* give instead of the reason he *did* give.

In addition, this objection misunderstands the actual facts of the ancient church and the ancient world. Formal training in Scripture was not required for church leadership in the New Testament church, because several of the apostles did not have formal biblical training (see Acts 4:13). On the other hand, the skills of basic literacy and therefore the ability to read and study Scripture were available to men and women alike (note Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 2:11; Titus 2:3–4). There were many well-educated women in the ancient world, and particularly in a cultural center such as Ephesus.

Finally, those who make such an argument are sometimes inconsistent in that elsewhere they point to women who had leadership positions in the ancient church, such as Priscilla. This point is especially relevant to 1 Timothy 2, because Paul was writing to Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), which was the home church of Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18:18–19, 21). It was in this very church at Ephesus that Priscilla knew Scripture well enough to help instruct Apollos in A.D. 51 (Acts 18:26). Then she had probably learned from Paul himself for another three years while he stayed at Ephesus teaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27; cf. v. 31; also 1 Cor. 16:19). No doubt many other women in Ephesus had followed her example and also had learned from Paul. Although they later went to Rome, we find Aquila and Priscilla back in Ephesus at the end of Paul’s life (2 Tim. 4:19), about A.D. 67. Therefore, it is likely that they were in Ephesus in A.D. 65, about the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy (about *fourteen years after Priscilla had helped instruct Apollos*). Yet Paul does not allow even well-educated Priscilla or any other well-educated women at Ephesus to teach men in the public assembly of the church. The reason was not lack of education, but the order of creation which God established between men and women.

2. 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36. In a similar teaching, Paul says:

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? (1 Cor. 14:33b–36)

In this section Paul cannot be prohibiting all public speech by women in the church, for he clearly allows them to pray and prophesy in church in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Therefore, it is best to understand this passage as referring to speech that is in the category being discussed in the

immediate context, namely, the spoken evaluation and judging of prophecies in the congregation (see v. 29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and *let the others weigh what is said*”). While Paul allows women to speak and give prophecies in the church meeting, he does not allow them to speak up and give evaluations or critiques of the prophecies that have been given, for this would be a ruling or governing function with respect to the whole church. This understanding of the passage depends on our view of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament age, namely, that prophecy involves not authoritative Bible teaching, and not speaking words of God which are equal to Scripture, but rather reporting something which God spontaneously brings to mind.⁶⁸ In this way, Paul’s teachings are quite consistent in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2: in both cases he is concerned to preserve male leadership in the teaching and governing of the church.

3. 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. Both 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 assume that elders are going to be men. An elder (or bishop/overseer) must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; also Titus 1:6), and “must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way” (1 Tim. 3:4).

Some may object that these were directions given only for the cultural situation in the ancient world, where women were not well educated, but the same response that was given above concerning 1 Timothy 2 would apply in this case as well.

4. The Relationship Between the Family and the Church. The New Testament makes frequent connections between the life of the family and the life of the church. Paul says, “If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:5). He says to Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a *father*; treat younger men like *brothers* older women like *mothers* younger women like *sisters* in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1–2). Several other passages could be cited, but the close relationship between the family and the church should be clear.

Because of this connection, it is inevitable that leadership patterns in the family will reflect leadership patterns in the church, and vice versa. It is very appropriate that, as godly men fulfill their leadership responsibilities in the family, they should also fulfill leadership responsibilities in the church. Conversely, if patterns of female leadership are established in the church, it will inevitably bring pressures toward greater female leadership, and toward abdication of male leadership, within the family.

5. The Example of the Apostles. While the apostles are not the same as elders in local churches, it is still important to realize that Jesus established a pattern of male leadership in the church when he appointed twelve men as apostles. It is simply not true that women have equal access to all offices in the church, for Jesus, the head of the church, is a man. And the twelve apostles who will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matt. 19:28), and whose names are written forever on the foundations of the heavenly city (Rev. 21:14), are all men. Therefore, *there will be no eternal modeling of equal roles for men and women at all levels of authority in the church*. Rather, there is a pattern of male leadership in the highest governing roles of the church, a pattern that will be evident to all believers for all eternity.

One objection brought against this argument is the claim that the culture at that time would not have allowed Jesus to choose six men and six women as apostles, or six husband-wife teams as apostles, and this is the reason he did not do so. But such an objection impugns Jesus’ integrity and courage. Jesus was not afraid to break social customs when a moral principle was at stake: he criticized the Pharisees publicly, healed on the Sabbath, cleansed the temple, spoke with a Samaritan woman, ate with tax collectors and sinners, and ate with unwashed hands. If Jesus had

wanted to establish a principle of equal access to church leadership by both men and women, he certainly could have done so in the appointment of his apostles, and he would have done so, in spite of cultural opposition, if it had been the pattern he wanted to establish in his church. But he did not.⁷²

Another objection to this argument is to say that, if this is true, then only Jews can be leaders in our churches, since all twelve apostles were Jewish as well. But this objection is not persuasive because it fails to recognize that the church was entirely Jewish at its beginning. This was because it was God's plan to bring salvation through the Jews, and this led to twelve Jewish apostles. Yet within the pages of the New Testament, we see that the church soon expanded to include Gentiles (Matt. 28:19; Eph. 2:16) and Gentiles soon became elders and leaders in the New Testament church. A Gentile (Luke) wrote two books of the New Testament (Luke and Acts), and several Gentiles such as Titus and Epaphroditus were Paul's apostolic assistants and co-workers. In fact, God had progressively revealed from the time of Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 17:5) that it was his plan eventually to include countless Gentiles among his people.

So the Jewishness of the early apostles is not like their maleness. The church began as entirely Jewish, but soon became Jewish and Gentile as well. But the church did not begin all male, and only later include females as well. *Christ's followers were male and female from the beginning* and both men and women were present at the beginning of the church at Pentecost. So this objection is not persuasive either.

6. The History of Male Teaching and Leadership Through the Whole Bible. Sometimes opponents of the view presented here have said it is based only on one text, 1 Timothy 2. Several of the foregoing arguments have demonstrated that this is not the case, but there is one further argument that can be made: throughout the history of the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, there is a consistent pattern of male leadership among God's people. Though there are occasional examples of women having leadership in government positions such as queen (Athaliah did reign as sole monarch in 2 Kings 11:1–20, but she is hardly an example to imitate) or judge (note Deborah in Judg. 4–5), and though there were occasionally women such as Deborah and Huldah who were prophetesses (see Judg. 4–5; 2 Kings 22:14–20), we should note that these are rare exceptions in unusual circumstances. They occur in the midst of an overwhelming pattern of male leadership in teaching and governance, and, as such, they hardly serve as patterns for New Testament church office. Moreover, *there is not one example in the entire Bible of a woman doing the kind of congregational Bible teaching that is expected of pastors/elders in the New Testament church.* In the Old Testament it was the priests who had teaching responsibilities for the people, and the priesthood was exclusively male; moreover, even the women prophets Deborah and Huldah prophesied only privately, not publicly to a congregation of people.

7. The History of the Church. As was mentioned above, the overwhelming pattern through the entire history of the church has been that the office of pastor/elder (or its equivalent) has been reserved for men. Although this does not demonstrate conclusively that such a position is correct, it should give us reason to reflect very seriously on the question before we rush ahead and declare that almost the entire church throughout its history has been wrong on this issue.

8. Objections. Numerous objections have been brought against the position outlined here, only a few of which can be treated at this point. It is objected that *ministry should be determined by gifts, not by gender.* But in response, it must be said that spiritual gifts have to be used within the guidelines given in Scripture. The Holy Spirit who empowers spiritual gifts is also the Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible, and he does not want us to use his gifts in disobedience to his words.

Another objection is to say that *if God has genuinely called a woman to be a pastor, she should not be prevented from acting as one*. The response to this objection is similar to the one given above: an individual claim to have experienced a call from God must always be tested by subjecting it to the words of God in Scripture. If the Bible teaches that God wills for men alone to bear the primary teaching and governing responsibilities of the pastorate, then by implication the Bible also teaches that God does not call women to be pastors. However, we should add that often what a woman discerns as a divine call to the pastorate may be indeed a call to full-time Christian ministry, but not to be a pastor/elder in a church. In fact, many opportunities for full-time occupational ministry exist within the local church and elsewhere, apart from being a teaching pastor or an elder—for example, church staff positions in counseling, women’s ministries, Christian education, and children’s ministries, as well as ministries of music and worship, campus student ministries, evangelistic ministries, ministries to the poor, and administrative responsibilities that do not involve functioning in the elder’s role of government over the entire church. This list could be expanded, but the point is that we should not make restrictions where Scripture itself does not place restrictions, but should allow and encourage full and free participation by women as well as men in all of these other areas.

Some object that *the New Testament emphasis is on servant leadership* and therefore that we should not be so concerned about authority, since that is more a pagan than a Christian concern. But this objection makes a false distinction between servanthood and authority. Certainly Jesus himself is the model of a servant leader, but Jesus also has authority—great authority! He is the Lord of our lives and the Lord of the church. By analogy, elders ought to follow Jesus’ example of servant leadership (see 1 Peter 5:1–5) but that does not mean that they should neglect to govern with authority when the Bible itself gives them this responsibility (see 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5).

Sometimes people object that, *just as the church finally realized that slavery was wrong, so the church today should recognize that male leadership is wrong* and is an outdated cultural tradition that should be discarded. But this objection fails to realize the difference between the temporary cultural institution of slavery, which God certainly did not establish at creation, and the existence of a difference in male-female roles in marriage (and, by implication, in relationships within the church) which God established at creation. The seeds for the destruction of slavery were sown in the New Testament (see Philem. 16; Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1–2), but no seeds for the destruction of marriage, or the destruction of male-female differences as created, are sown in the Bible. Moreover, the objection can be turned around: it is likely that a closer parallel to the Christian defenders of slavery in the nineteenth century is found in evangelical feminists who today use arguments from the Bible to justify conformity to some extremely strong pressures in contemporary society (in favor of slavery then, and women being pastors now).

It is sometimes objected that *Priscilla and Aquila together spoke to Apollos* and “expounded to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). This is true, and it is helpful evidence showing that informal discussion of Scripture by men and women together, in which both men and women play a significant role in helping one another understand Scripture, is approved by the New Testament. Once again, an example such as this cautions us not to prohibit activities which are not prohibited by Scripture, yet it does not overturn the principle that the publicly recognized governing and teaching role within a church is restricted to men. Priscilla was not doing anything contrary to this restriction.

Sometimes it is objected that *it is inconsistent to allow women to vote in churches that have congregational government, but not to serve as elders*. But the authority of the church as a whole

is not the same as the authority given to specific individuals within the church. When we say that the congregation as a whole has authority, we do not mean that each man and each woman in the congregation has the authority to speak or act for the congregation. Therefore, gender, as a part of individual personhood, is not significantly in view in corporate congregational decisions.

Another way of putting this is to say that the only question we are asking in this section is whether women can be officers within the church, and specifically whether they can be elders within the church. In any congregational system where the elders are elected by the congregation, it is evident to everyone in the church that the elders have a kind of delegated authority which other members of the congregation do not have—even though the other members of the congregation have voted for these people in the first place. It is the same in all systems of government where officials are elected: once the President of the United States or the mayor of a city is elected, that person has a delegated authority over the people who elected him or her and it is an authority that is greater than the authority of any individual person who voted.

At this point it is also appropriate to recognize that God has given much insight and wisdom to women as well as to men, and that any church leaders who neglect to draw on the wisdom that women have are really acting foolishly. Therefore, any group of elders or other male leaders who make decisions affecting the entire church should frequently have procedures within the church whereby the wisdom and insight of other members of the church, especially the wisdom and insight of women as well as men, can be drawn upon as an aid in making decisions.

9. What About Other Offices Within the Church? The entire discussion above has focused on the question of whether women should function as pastors or elders within the church. But what about other offices?

The biblical teaching regarding the office of *deacon* is much less extensive than that regarding the office of elder, and what is involved in the office of deacon varies considerably from church to church. If deacons are actually functioning as elders and have the highest governing authority within a local church, then the arguments given above against women being elders would apply directly to this situation, and it would follow that Scripture does not permit women to be deacons in this sense. On the other hand, if deacons simply have delegated administrative responsibility for certain aspects of the ministry of the church, then there seems to be no good reason to prevent women from functioning as deacons. Regarding the question of women as deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13, it does not seem to the present author that this passage allows women to be deacons *in the way deacons are understood in that situation* but there is a significant difference of viewpoint among evangelicals over the understanding of this passage, and it is much less clear to us exactly what deacons did at that time than it is clear what elders did.⁸²

With regard to other offices, such as treasurer, for example, or other staff positions such as youth minister or counseling director or children's minister, and so forth, the only question to be asked is whether these offices include the ruling and teaching functions reserved for elders in the New Testament. If not, then *all of these offices would be open to women as well as to men* for we must be careful not to prohibit what the New Testament does not prohibit.¹

¹ Grudem, W. A. (2004). [*Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine*](#) (pp. 937–945). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.