

WOMEN IN MINISTRY

A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER

During the past several decades the subject of women in ministry has been much debated in Christian circles. There has been some very important scholarship on this particular subject during that time and in the wake of it, significant movement in terms of the ministry roles occupied by women. What follows expresses the position of the Elders of Red Mountain Community Church on the matter as a result of our prayers and study on the subject. To begin with, we will state our position in a short paragraph, and then in ensuing paragraphs we will deal with some of the specific scriptural issues we have worked through on this matter over the years.

We believe that women have been equipped by the Holy Spirit not only for meaningful ministry but for roles of leadership in the particular ministries of our Church under the umbrella of the teaching authority of the Elders. We believe that this expresses the intent of the commands of Scripture as they are brought to bear on our specific culture. Therefore, while we adhere to what we feel is the Biblical teaching that a Church should be led by male Elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7), under the direction of the Holy Spirit we freely empower women to serve as Pastors who work under the umbrella of the Elder's authority where that seems to be in accordance with the leading of our Lord.

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

The position stated above emerges clearly from scripture when we understand the distinction between office and ministry. A biblical office is a position of responsibility and authority, a trust or duty assigned by the church to a person to be performed for the common good. The scriptures delineate two offices within the church, that of elder and that of deacon. The office of elder is the highest office. Elders have the responsibility of overseeing all aspects of the church's ministry. The function of the office of deacon is to assist the elders in carrying out the ministry to the congregation and to assist the congregation in carrying out their ministry to each other and the community. The scriptures enumerate specific qualifications for those who wish to occupy these two offices in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-4 and Acts 6. The passage in 1 Timothy clearly limits the office of elder to men while leaving the office of deacon open to both men and women. (The term "wives" in 1 Timothy 3:8 in the NIV may also be translated "deaconess.")

By contrast, a ministry is any function carried out by any believer that builds up the church. Examples of ministry are teaching Sunday school, serving in the nursery, visiting a shut-in, cooking a meal, etc. Ministry flows naturally out of giftedness and since all believers are gifted by the Holy Spirit all are expected to minister in some capacity (1 Corinthians 12:3-7). If you are gifted to teach you are expected to teach and if you are gifted to serve you are expected to serve, each according to his or her own measure of faith (Romans 12:3-8). Throughout the New Testament gifts and ministries are listed without regard to gender (see Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:3-11 and 28-30, Ephesians 4:7-13, and 1 Peter 4:7-11). Thus gifts and ministries are not gender specific. All types of ministries are open to both men and women according to their particular gift or gifts. All believers are ministers of the church but only a relative few hold office in the church.

The duties of elders in overseeing the church revolve around two main areas: the spiritual health of the church and the soundness of its doctrine. The elders are involved then in pastoral care, keeping watch over the souls entrusted to them (Hebrews 13:17), tending, shepherding and feeding the flock (Acts 20:28), and leading by example (1 Peter 5:1-3). Elders are also engaged in teaching by guiding and guarding all the teaching that takes place in the church. The elders are responsible to make sure the church's doctrine remains pure and that its members are able to discern and refute error (Titus 1:9).

While elders are mainly involved in pastoring and teaching, they are not the only ones who do so. All those who are so gifted will participate in teaching and shepherding, regardless of office or position, lay or paid staff. The office of elder is unique in that they are given authority and responsibility to oversee all such ministry. All who minister within the church do so under the authority and guidance of the elders, regardless of gender. Both men and women may be gifted to do either pastoring and/or teaching and there are examples of each in scripture. In Romans 18:26, Pricilla (named first) and Aquila teach Apollos, who is himself a teacher, the way of Christ more accurately. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, women are allowed to prophesy. There are many examples of women fulfilling significant ministry roles in the Gospels, e.g., Luke 8:1-3, John 4:39-42 and Matthew 28:1-10.

On the face of it then, it appears that the Bible leaves open the possibility of women being pastors and teachers, these being ministries not offices. In our culture today, however, this confronts us with a difficulty due mainly to language. That difficulty is that we have come to equate the terms "pastor" and "elder." If this is true and we hold that elders must be men, then the title of "Pastor" could only apply to men. We have tried to show here, however, that biblically these terms are not equivalent. Pastor refers to a particular type of ministry whereas elder refers to an authoritative office charged with oversight of the Church. A pastor may indeed be an elder but not necessarily so. Based in part on this biblical data, Red Mountain has Elders who have been given authority and entrusted with the responsibility of all matters of the Church. The Elders have hired pastors, both male and female, who function as deacons carrying out the directives and vision of the Elders, ministering under the umbrella of their authority. It is our belief that it is wise and appropriate that the position of lead pastor (i.e. that pastor charged with the responsibility of preaching on a regular basis) be an Elder, as this position contributes significantly to the overall guidance and pastoral care of the entire church. This means that the particular position of lead pastor is not open to females. This does not rule out, however, the occasional preaching by a non elder, male or female, all being done under the direction and authority of the elders.

SPECIFIC SCRIPTURAL DATA

Having stated this position, how do we view Scriptures that seem to clearly prohibit women from a leadership role or speaking role in the Church? The following will attempt to give an overview of our understanding of these Scriptures.

The primary scriptures cited on this subject are 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

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. — 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Examined alone, with no consideration for what has been said earlier in Paul's letter, these words are a prohibition against women uttering even a sound. If we look at these words in this way, isolating them from the rest of the book, their meaning is plain. Women should not be allowed to say a word. However, we must remember that no Scripture stands alone. This meaning, that women are not to speak at all in the church, has been embraced by many over the centuries even though it plainly contradicts what Paul has allowed in his earlier instructions in chapter 11 (1 Corinthians 11:6). Clearly in that passage he allowed women to prophesy, but commanded that their heads be veiled when they did so. So they were allowed to speak words of prophesy in the church, but were to do so with veils in place over their heads. Now if Paul was going to prohibit women from speaking later in his letter, why would he go to the trouble of giving them these instructions on what to wear when prophesying? It seems that it would be a moot point. It appears that to take these words in chapter 14 as meaning that women should never be allowed in any situation to speak in the church is to misinterpret them.

Now since these words cannot be taken in this sense without making the book contradictory, how are we to take them. What precisely was Paul prohibiting in giving these instructions? The answer to this question can be found in the customs that were observed in the Jewish Synagogue. We know that the synagogue was perhaps the most important force, next to the Holy Spirit Himself, in shaping early church polity. We know that in the Synagogue, there was a time in the meeting when men were allowed to ask questions regarding what had been taught on that particular occasion. The questions could even be antagonistic and aggressive in nature, contesting the statements of the speaker. The discussions were often quite spirited. But women were not allowed to take part in these particular exchanges; it was considered a usurpation of male headship. We believe that Paul, in a desire to affirm and reinforce male headship, was following the custom of the Synagogue, restricting women from publicly calling into question the ideas and thoughts of the speaker during the church service. He was not closing off to them the opportunity to participate in the normal exercise of the various spiritual gifts. It seems to us that this fits best with the instructions of the entire book. It also seems likely in view of the statement that follows, "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home." We believe that to interpret this passage as a prohibition against woman speaking in a public assembly in all circumstances is a direct contradiction to what Paul has earlier allowed (see his instructions in chapter 11).

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

The first thing we should note is that in the culture of our day these look like very confining words that box women into a very narrow role. In our culture we would tend to notice the words quietness and submission in that sentence. In the culture of the hearers, that a woman should learn was a progressive idea. Among the writings of the rabbis of the time we find these words, "A woman should know nothing but the use of her distaff." In other words, they should stick to sewing! These words are also found, "Let the words of the law be burned, rather than that they should be delivered to women." Against this trend of the devaluation of women, Paul is affirming the value of educating them in spiritual things, as fellow members of the body of Christ, while having them do so in a manner that would not totally offend the cultural sensitivities of the day.

As we look closer at 1 Timothy 2:11-12, we see that as in 1 Corinthians 14, “quietness” is the behavior called for. The word occurs in verses 2, 11 and 12. It is important to observe that the word rendered “quiet” in verses 4 and 11 and “silent” in verse 12 by the NIV in this passage is the same word, and is a different one than Paul uses in the 1 Corinthians 14 passage addressed above. The word used in 1 Timothy occurs only five times in the New Testament, only twice outside of these verses. We will look at the two usages outside this passage because they demonstrate two different shades of meaning that are possible in the word. Luke uses this word in Acts 22:2, where he describes the “silence” that comes over a noisy crowd. “When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.” Clearly in this context the word means no sound, a “hush,” with an accompanying ability to listen and give attention to spoken words. A different shade of meaning is in Paul’s mind when he uses the word in 2 Thessalonians.

“We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busy-bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.” — 2 Thessalonians 3:12

Here the NIV renders the word “quiet” with the English words “settle down.” This captures Paul’s meaning well. He means quiet in the sense of being settled, submitting oneself to a life routine as opposed to leading an undisciplined life. So outside of 1 Timothy, the word is used in the sense of silence by Luke, and in the sense of submission to a routine by Paul.

Which shade of meaning does Paul intend in his three usages of the word in 1 Timothy 2:2,11,12? Verse 2 is very straightforward, where the word is used to speak of a “quiet life,” meaning a peaceable life. But what of Verses 11 and 12? Verse 12 provides the answer. There he says “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority, over a man; she must be silent.” Paul uses silent here to describe behavior that is the opposite of exercising authority over someone. Is absence of sound the best rendering, as in the NIV, or would a rendering that suggested “settling down” under the headship of those in authority be best? It seems to us that “to settle down” under the headship of those in authority in the church is what Paul was driving at rather than absolute silence. So as in the passage in 1 Corinthians 14, we believe that the goal of Paul’s instruction is not the absolute and utter silence of women, but their abstaining from those activities that would be interpreted in that time as casting aside the spiritual headship of the men. Very specifically in terms of “how church was done” at that time, they were to abstain from injecting themselves into the public discussion surrounding the shaping of belief and doctrine. They were not by these instructions prohibited from proclaiming and applying that doctrine.

We recognize that the English translation in the NIV makes these words of Paul in 1 Timothy sound like absolute commands, particularly the phrase, “she must be silent.” In reality, the Greek grammar used in verse 12 does not demand that we take any of this as a charge or command. Paul’s words are in the indicative mood, not the imperative mood. This means that while they could be taken as a universal rule, it is more likely that they are to be taken as a simple statement of his present practice. So it is probable that the “commands” here are not commands at all but simple statements of what Paul has found a fitting practice in the culture of the day and that he is passing along his practice to Timothy. It would be legitimate to transliterate verse 12 as follows, “I am not permitting a woman to teach or govern men, but to be settled in under their headship.” We should note that in the next verse Paul makes a statement that re-affirms the ordination of male headship in the creation of Adam and Eve. Headship we believe is the principle of concern to him.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that both passages are primarily concerned with establishing practices in local churches that do not undermine God's institution of the spiritual headship of man. This was to be accomplished by women not being involved in the public (and that's an important word!) exchanges that went into the formulation or refutation of ideas, doctrines, and systems of belief.

What then is the message of scripture to us in the 21st century at Red Mountain? There is no doubt as we see it, that God has ordained for His own reasons and purposes the spiritual headship of the man. He did so in the home. He did so in the government of Israel in the Old Testament. He did so in the governing of the church in the New Testament. We affirm this important principle that seems to us to exist throughout the various eras of God's program on earth.

We believe that the Word of God dictates that principle. We believe however that culture dictates how this principle of male headship is expressed and affirmed, and that means there is variation from culture to culture across the centuries of time in the particulars of what is permissible for women in the church. In the times of Paul there were a number of ways in which the man's headship in the home was expressed. An example was the covering, or veils that women wore over their heads. Paul believed that particular expression to be appropriate and so taught that it should be observed in the church as well (1 Corinthians 11:3-16). Christianity for the most part has set that custom aside, and we think rightly so, even though it is commanded in Scripture. The culture of that day drew much tighter and more visible lines than we are accustomed to in western culture today. It seems that Paul did not want Christians to ignore their culture, while at the same time he wanted to call them to observe within that culture the higher laws of mutual love, respect and submission that Christ restored. In the culture of his day, Paul could only allow the latitude outlined in the passages considered above from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, without undermining completely the idea of male headship. We believe that today in western culture, we can open the door considerably wider and still maintain the divine order of male headship in the governing of the Church.

As is the case with all truth, in "fleshing it out" we are forced to walk a narrow path. We must hang onto a principle our culture can't wait to abandon, male headship. But our challenge is to embrace and express that truth in a way that conveys its essence (not its trappings) accurately to our culture. That is what our position seeks to do. We believe that males should occupy the office that is charged with the single role of teaching/governing the church and that this office is not opened to women. At Red Mountain that is the office of the Elders. Here, the pastors function as Deacons, under the umbrella of the Elders and are accountable to them. For this reason, we see it as permissible in terms of the Scripture to convey the title of pastors on women where that seems to be in accord with the Holy Spirit's leading. These women then function as all pastors do, under the spiritual headship of the Elders.