

Women in Leadership

By Mark Conner

This paper addresses the issues of women in leadership or governmental roles within the church.

Women in Leadership

There has been much discussion and debate over the years within the body of Christ as to whether or not women can have leadership roles in the church.¹ Theological debates like this have occurred all throughout church history and have often resulted in differing outcomes, each building a strong biblical case for their side of the issue. With the issue of women in leadership there is no clear consensus and two or three positions exist, each vigorously defended by their proponents. Thankfully, this issue does not involve the fundamental core beliefs of Christianity (upon which our salvation depends) and therefore, it is important for both sides to disagree in love and to move ahead with the work of the church despite their disagreements.

A few things should be noted: this is a very complex issue, debate is healthy and necessary, and it is possible that we will never reach a consensus on this matter. As we read the Bible, we do not do so in a vacuum. We all come to the Scriptures with inherited church traditions and personal experiences, which can easily colour our interpretation. As a result, there is not one “orthodox” position and another “heretical” position. There are a large spectrum of views and numerous styles of implementation within two main camps. The two views that have emerged as the major, viable, biblically based options are:

1. The Hierarchalist View – this view generally permits women to be involved in ministry but sees the Bible giving timeless restrictions on women as the authoritative teacher in the church, often associated with the office of elder (presbyter) or overseer.
2. The Egalitarian View – this view agrees that the biblical writers did in their day forbid women from holding certain leadership positions in specific situations, but that the rationales for these restrictions do not necessarily transcend time and culture.

As a result of extensive study and reflection, I recommend the latter approach as the preferred option for contemporary local churches seeking to be relevant in our generation. I believe that there is more than adequate biblical support for this stance. Ministry and leadership within the church should be based on *godliness* and *giftedness* not *gender*.² Hence, if a person has godly character and a gift of leadership, then they should be released to use that gift for the church’s benefit in whatever role or function is appropriate – the gender of the person in this context is largely irrelevant.

Following is an outline of some observations from the biblical data about this subject that were part of our process in coming to this conclusion:

1. **God’s Design for Women at the Beginning.** Man and woman were both created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26-28). God reveals himself as one God existing in three persons dwelling together in perfect unity and partnership. Adam and Eve were created to reflect this image through their partnership in populating the earth and taking dominion over creation. They had a shared leadership responsibility using their complementary giftings to carry out their God-given tasks.
2. **Women after the Fall.** Both Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and this sin damaged God’s creation and dramatically affected our world and especially human relationships. “Gender Wars” and the “battle of the sexes” entered humanity. Mind-sets such as male chauvinism and then more recently the rise of secular feminism, demonstrate this tension. The

¹ An excellent summary of the two sides of this debate is contained in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Revised Edition edited by James Back and Craig Blomberg (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005). Much of the introductory comments in this paper have been gleaned from this excellent book.

² This statement is adapted from an article entitled, *The Ordination of Women*, by Graham Cole, Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Victoria.

Fall brought division and dominance, which resulted in a broken, fractured relationship that left partnership behind and established hierarchy in its place. Before sin, they ruled together. After the fall, man would “rule” over the woman (Genesis 3:16-19). Male dominated societies are not part of God’s original society; they are a result of the curse. The image of God is “male and female” (Genesis 1:27), not male over female or vice versa.

3. Women in Old Testament Israel and Judaism.

The primary role of women in the Old Testament period was to serve as a wife and a mother. This was a role of considerable status in Jewish society as the family was considered to be the basic building block of spiritual community and the foundation of society in general. The woman, therefore, exercised great influence in her primary role in the home. But at the same time, it is important to recognise that these weren’t the only roles in which women were involved. In Old Testament, Israelite women functioned as prophetesses, judges and leaders. With the anointing of the Holy Spirit and demonstrated skills, these women could function in leadership positions within the community. Examples include Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Hulda (2 Kings 22:14-20) and Esther (Esther).

Leading up to the time of Jesus, women also played important roles in synagogue leadership according to existing records. They functioned as the “head” (or leader) of the synagogue, as elders, as priestesses and they held the esteemed position of Mother of the Synagogue.³

4. Jesus and Women.

In a male-dominated culture, Jesus elevated the value and status of women to that which would reflect how His Father meant things to be. He was neither a male chauvinist nor a secular feminist. He treated men and women as equals. He modelled a new day of grace towards women by demonstrating “good news” to women through his actions. Christ’s ministry released women from the bondage of domination and suppression, into a place of partnership with men that would empower both male and female to reach their potential in Christ. He released men and women into God’s original purpose.

Jesus talked freely with women, healed them, featured women in his parables, they were included as his disciples (Luke 8:1-3), he taught at the home of women (Mary and Martha), women were highlighted as witnesses of the resurrection while the men were somewhat absent (Matthew 27:55-56), women discovered the empty tomb and Jesus appeared first to women and commanded them to go and tell the men that he was alive (Matthew 28:1,8 -11).

5. Women in the Early Church.

God’s new community returns to the principles established in creation – partnership in ministry.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on men and women, old and young (Acts 2:1-4, 14, 17-18). The 120 disciples who gathered together for prayer in the upper room were both men and women (Acts 1:14). The Spirit was poured out on all of them. All can receive and minister in the power of the Spirit regardless of gender. The male priesthood is gone. No longer one man, one gender, one nation, one tribe, one family, one age (30-50), or one day of the year like in the Old Covenant. We are a new creation, a new community of the redeemed in which all distinctions based on gender and age are laid aside.

Peter tells us in his sermon in Acts 2 that God’s intention was that, in the last phase of history, he would pour out his Spirit on all believers – so that they would prophesy (the highest old

³ Information taken from a message by Dwight A. Pryor in a tape series entitled, *The Ministry Of Women in the Early Church and Synagogue*. Dwight A. Pryor is the Director of the “Center for Judaic-Christian Studies” (P.O. Box 293040, Dayton, OH USA 45429).

covenant activity). Only select, privileged individuals had access to the work of the Spirit under the Old Covenant. Now everyone, including sons and daughters, has access to this ministry because the Holy Spirit is available to all believers – both men and women. Ministry was opened up to *everyone*, even to those who occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder. No one in the community was exempt from doing ministry and no one was excused from it.

In Galatians 3:26-28, Paul boldly says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (NIV). Paul tells us that we are one in Christ and that gender distinctions cease to matter. This demands an end of prejudice based on difference. This is not the end or removal of differences or distinctions; however, these can no longer be the basis for restricting our relationships and roles in the Kingdom. God's new community lays aside all distinctions based on ethnicity, social class, gender and age. Racial, social (economic) and gender prejudice are exposed and nullified by the cross and grace of Christ.

Spiritual gifts and ministries are given to each believer (1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7, 27-28, 31; 14:26. Romans 12:6-8. 1 Peter 4:10-11. Ephesians 4:5-8, 11-13). Gifts are given to each one as the Lord determines. There is no mention of gender qualifications or of age or marriage requirements in any of the New Testament teaching on spiritual gifts. *No one* is excluded or excused from spiritual gifts or ministry. Every person, regardless of gender, is individually accountable for the use of their resources – time, energy and spiritual gifts.

Women are included in many church ministries listed within the New Testament. Paul's ministry team included women. Paul discarded his inherited cultural prejudices as uninformed and outmoded for kingdom living. He honoured the women who laboured with him in the gospel, recognising that God had created them for partnership. He released women to serve in God's kingdom. Paul was surrounded by women in his ministry and they fulfilled various roles including leadership positions in the church (see 1 Corinthians 1:11. Philippians 4:1-3. Romans 16:1-16. Titus 2:3-5).

Women throughout Church History⁴

These biblical roles for women continued for two or three centuries after Jesus. Tertullian lists different groups of women – deacons, single women, widows and elders. Some he treats as clergy. Paintings have been discovered of women serving communion and conferring blessings on men and women as would be expected of a bishop. Unfortunately, Tertullian also came to conclusion that women were weak, degraded and depraved and an obstacle to man's true spirituality. As the church got out of the Jewish context and became dominated by Gentiles who were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, the view of women began to change. Men began to put the women down.

Two other cultural forces caused the gradual repression of women in the church. First, there was a tendency to see leadership as a special priestly office, not as a congregational function. It became the “office” of priest in an elevated position. A growing degree of male dominance emerged and men began to simply appoint more men to leadership roles. Second, was a growing distorted view of “sexuality”. The church fathers saw the low moral standards of the pagan world around them and this led to a tendency to asceticism. Withdrawing from sexual relations ensured that they were not drawn into this moral degradation. In Athens, women were seen as good for nothing except to be prostitutes. Augustine spoke of sexual sin as the sin in the Garden of Eden. One Pope said that the Holy Spirit literally exits the room when a husband and wife have sexual relations. This view is totally the opposite of Judaism and the biblical record. Celibacy became an ideal and women came to be seen as obstacles to true spirituality. Church leaders took texts from Paul and interpreted them to mean that the highest spiritual calling for a man is that he not marry but be celibate unto God. This led to a view

⁴ Dwight A. Pryor, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church and Synagogue*.

that tended to subordinate women and elevate man as superior. Women were seen as equal in salvation but their status was inferior in the home and the church. These views are dysfunctional (they hinder the growth of the church) and a disgrace (they suppress women and are at odds with God's view of women).

Over time, these distortions began to be corrected. Women were very active in the Reformation, the Great Awakening and were in the forefront of evangelism, missions and the growth of the Pentecostal movement.

Common Objections to Women in Leadership Roles within the Church

A few biblical passages (such as 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15) have often been used to silence women in the church and to restrict them from positions of leadership. Some interpreters see these as timeless restrictions for all time and situations. I, along with many other interpreters, would see them as having local application rather than representing restrictions for all times and cultures (similar to the fact that we no longer wash one another's feet, greet one another with a holy kiss or require women to wear hats in church).

Scriptures such as these must be interpreted in light of their local historical and cultural context, as well as in the light of all Scripture. Upon further investigation, it seems that these Scriptures have direct local application to situations where women were causing unrest within the local congregation. We must not build our practices for the contemporary church on instructions given to churches experiencing extreme dysfunction. It is conceivable that, if it had been a group of men creating the same unrest that the scripture may have read differently. To take a literal approach to the interpretation of these scriptures would be to contradict other passages that speak about women leading, prophesying or ministering in various church gatherings (Romans 16. 1 Corinthians 11:4-5). In these other passages, Paul clearly demonstrates his approval of women in ministry and leadership. Therefore, the above texts cannot be used to prohibit women's ministry in all situations. His teaching is limited to Ephesus and to other churches facing similar crises in this period of the church's history.

The Trinity

The Christian God has revealed himself as one God existing as three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is referred to as the Trinity and it is the ultimate model for all human relationships. There is no hierarchy, domination, or forced subordination. The Godhead models love, serving, mutual respect, mutual submission, equality, and partnership in life and ministry (in the work of creation and redemption). I believe that this is a good foundational model for all human relationships – in the home, the marketplace, and the church.⁵

Women in Leadership

There are great benefits in local church congregations committing themselves to seeing individuals released into ministry according to their spiritual gifts, regardless of gender. If a woman has a teaching gift, then let her teach; if a woman has an administrative gift, then let her serve in that capacity and if a woman has a leadership gift, then let her use it for the benefit of the church in conjunction with others.

Ideally, congregations should be governed by a plurality of Elders or Board members who work with the Senior Pastor or Minister in giving leadership to the church. For many years in the church, these governing roles have been limited to men only. However, over the years there has been a gradual shift of emphasis within the wider church world to encourage women to be involved in ministry and/or leadership roles, without neglecting their other important roles. I believe that these changes are both biblical and are now relevant to our current church culture. Because governance groups make decisions that affect the entire church and seeing that over half of most congregations are comprised of women it should be obvious that the direct contribution of women to these decisions is both wise

⁵ See Kevin Giles' book *The Trinity and Subordination* for a further amplification of this principle.

and beneficial. Women, as created by God, contribute a unique and fresh perspective that, in partnership with men, can result in a much more effective leadership team.

I am aware that not all churches or believers have adopted this particular stance on women in leadership or woman being elders and, though we see differently, I respect them for their stance. However, I encourage all church congregations to seriously consider committing themselves to creating a church community where men and women partner together for the cause of Christ each using their unique gifts and talents for the expansion of the kingdom of God here on earth. Churches that have done so have benefited greatly from this approach.

Recommended Reading

Two Views on Women in Ministry, Revised Edition edited by James Back and Craig Blomberg (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005).

Beyond Sex Roles by Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985).

Let Her Lead: Creating a Better Future for Women in the Church by Brady Boyd (Colorado Springs, CO: Bondfire Books, 2013).

The Ministry of Women by Kevin Conner (KJC Publications, Melbourne, Australia, 1984).

Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership by Loren Cunningham, David Joel Hamilton and Janice Rogers (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2000).

Created for Partnership by John Finkelde, Senior Pastor of NorthCity Christian Centre, 31 Chadlington Drive Padbury, WA. 6025 (Finkeldie Ministries, 1996).

The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate by Kevin Giles (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Created Woman by Kevin Giles (Canberra, Australia: Acorn Press, 1985).

How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership: Compelling Stories from Prominent Evangelicals by Alan F. Johnson [Editor] (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

Junia Is Not Alone by Scot McKnight (Englewood, CO: Patheos Press, 2011).

The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women: Are They Related in Any Way? by Kevin Giles (Portland, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

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