

# WHAT WE TEACH ABOUT WOMEN'S MINISTRY ROLES IN THE CHURCH

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to help clarify the biblical understanding of women's ministry roles in the church and to guide the related ministry decisions for the local church of Alderwood Community. The desire is that this understanding would help us to grow in that greater truth, unity, and love that Jesus prayed for His church (John 17) and to be a more effective witness and discipler for Christ (*Matthew 28:19*).

It is realized that the topic of women's ministry roles has been one of some controversy and that different local churches and denominations have made different decisions regarding these roles, each believing to be following the Spirit-led teaching of Scripture. Knowing that, the position reached by this paper comes with certain humility and the understanding that we indeed "see in a mirror dimly."

## Key Texts of Scripture and Their Meaning

Following is a review of certain texts of Scripture that are primary to consider, as they are descriptions of the church or imperatives and instructions given to the church through the epistles. Other texts from the Gospels or *Acts* or the Old Testament are cited as they become helpful. This section looks at those texts toward the goal of determining their meaning in the context of their particular time and place with a view to applying them to our particular time and place. Much more could be said about each text; only that which will benefit in building a picture of women's ministry roles will be stated, and that in a brief summation.

The chosen texts are also presented "bottom-up"; each builds on the foundation and understanding of *Ephesians 2:19-22*.

*"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."*

In this passage Paul uses the metaphor of a building, actually the temple, to describe the church. As people are called out by God, through Christ, and by the Spirit, they become part of a human temple built upon the apostles (New Testament) and the prophets (Old Testament) with Christ as the cornerstone, that part of the building that defines and gives shape and meaning and purpose to the entire structure.

In this and other descriptions of the church by Paul (such as the church as a body in *Romans 12*) there are no gender distinctions. All are "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household." In *Galatians 3:26-29* Paul becomes more emphatic saying,

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

In one of Peter’s letters, he describes the church as a “priesthood,” again giving a picture of the church without distinction to gender (*1 Peter 2:5, 9*). As believers and as part of the church, whether male or female, we are all on an equal footing before God, and are to be “*subject to one another*” in Christ (*Ephesians 5:21*).

### **1 Corinthians 12:4-7**

*“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” (NKJV)*

As there is no gender distinction in the calling of people into the church, Paul makes no gender distinction regarding giftedness. Peter, in *Acts 2:17-21*, describes the birth of the church by quoting Joel’s prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Spirit:

*“...I will pour forth My Spirit upon all mankind.”*

Again, God does not say that some gifts will only be given to men or some only to women.

Examples of women being gifted for service and called to certain positions or offices include: Miriam (leader—*Micah 6:4*), Deborah (prophetess and judge—*Judges 4:4*), Huldah (prophetess—*2 Kings 22:14-20*) in the Old Testament, and Priscilla (teacher—*Acts 18:24-26*), Philip’s daughters (prophetesses—*Acts 21:8-9*), and Phoebe (service—*Romans 16: 1-2*) in the New Testament.

### **1 Timothy 2:11-14**

*“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. 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.”*

As far as the roles in the church are concerned, there is a distinction between men and women. Based on God’s design for man and woman since creation and given a certain emphasis since the fall, men have the primary responsibility of leadership. This is also seen in such texts as *1 Timothy 3* where the qualifications for “overseer” and “deacon” are detailed, each given in distinctly male terms. Even though there may be different ministry roles, each is important and necessary (*1 Corinthians 12:12-31*). This primary leadership responsibility of men is also applicable in the home in the husband/wife relationship. (*Ephesians 5:22-33*).

As Paul tells us, teaching in the church (no doubt teaching that pertains to church doctrine and faith) has a strong connection with church authority or leadership.

Because of that, men are to take the primary teaching roles, particularly when it is in the context of the assembled church (Kelly, pp. 59 & 60; Grudem). Paul in *1 Corinthians 11:3-16* gives instruction for women when they pray or prophesy, this also apparently in the context of the assembled church. This would tell us that while teaching in the assembled church is a primary responsibility of men, women are not necessarily kept from verbal participation.

It is important to note that these roles as outlined in Scripture primarily have nothing to do with intelligence, or knowledge, or giftedness, or even how skilled a teacher someone is; it has to do with the fundamental roles given by God to men and women since creation.

### **1 Corinthians 13:33b-35**

*“As in all the congregations of the saints, 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.”*

Paul’s concern and instruction in much of the Corinthian letter deal with Christian order, particularly when the church assembled (*14:33*). The disorder that was experienced in the church at Corinth included: 1) women who did not have their heads covered while praying and prophesying, head coverings being a visible expression for headship/submission at that time and place (*22:3-26*), 2) men and women eating the Lord’s Supper in a shameful fashion (*11:17-34*), 3) speaking in tongues in a disorderly way (*13:1-14:19*), and 4) women apparently speaking out and asking questions that were irrelevant and/or in such a way as to be disrupting to the church assembly.

Paul’s instruction, “...*women remain silent...*” cannot be taken as a universal principle in itself because Paul elsewhere gives instruction for women on how they are to speak in the church assembly (*11:3-16*).

“I conclude that a creation order or family order problem was not at issue in this passage but rather a church order problem caused by some women in the congregation. Paul corrects the abuse not by banning women from ever speaking in worship, but by silencing their particular abuse of speech and redirecting their questions to another time and place.” (Grenz, p. 124).

### **Summary**

In view of these key texts, a biblical picture of women’s ministry roles in the church would include: 1) no distinction from men as far as a relationship with God, through Christ, is concerned, 2) an active use of all the gifts given (including gifts of shepherding, leading, administration, and teaching), and 3) freedom to serve in any church role that does not usurp men’s responsibilities in the home or in church leadership and teaching, particularly in the context of the assembled congregation.

## **Meaning for Alderwood Community Church**

It is not the purpose of this paper, nor is it possible, to specify every possible ministry role or opportunity in the church and determine if it is one in which women can serve. These decisions, although to be made according to the following guidelines, must also be made with a God-honoring and Spirit-led discernment and judgment. As Wayne Grudem observes, "We must simply recognize the fact that God in His wisdom has given us a Bible which specifies many principles for conduct, and does give some specific examples of application. But by its very nature the Bible cannot speak in specific detail to the thousands, and even millions of real life situations that people will encounter throughout the centuries. What then do we do?...we attempt to make a mature judgment based on the wisdom that God gives and our knowledge of the situation." (Grudem, p.4)

In light of the instruction and principles given in the key and supporting texts of Scripture, and in consideration of Alderwood Church's previous policies for women's ministry roles in the church, we believe that women can serve in any ministry role or context except those specific to the office of pastor or elder or teaching the congregation in the main worship service given that the following criteria are met:

1. She feels so led by the Holy Spirit.
2. She is obviously submissive to Christ, her husband (if applicable), and the church leadership.
3. She has the affirmation, support, and approval of her husband (if applicable), and the church leadership.
4. She has the affirmation, support, and approval of those to whom she is ministering.
5. There is obvious male leadership/headship within the given ministry and context.

## **Some Questions and Answers**

While it is not the purpose of this paper to specify every possible ministry role or opportunity in the church and determine if it is one in which women can serve, a review and anticipation of some specific ministry situations may be helpful.

Q: What about women sharing a testimony in the morning worship service or singing a solo? Is it permitted? And what if they share or sing from passages of Scripture?

A: Women sharing a testimony, a missions report, reading from Scripture, singing a solo in the worship service...all this is permitted, again assuming church leadership approval.

Q: What about a woman choir director, worship leader, or orchestra director?

A: Yes, as she is not teaching the congregation in matters of doctrine or faith, a woman taking any of these roles is fine.

Q: Can a woman who has met the criteria above be a teacher in an Adult Fellowship?

A: Yes, as long as there is obvious male leadership present in the given Adult Fellowship, and she is not the sole assigned teacher.

Q: Can a woman who has met the criteria above be a leader and/or teacher in a small group that has both men and women?

A: Yes. She can be a leader and/or teacher as long as she is part of a team that includes a man or men who also teach and take on an obvious leadership role. It would not meet the criteria to have a woman as sole leader or teacher in this situation.

Q: What about preschool and grade school teachers and leaders? Are those roles open to women even though there are boys in the classes?

A: Yes. Children are different than adults, young boys different than men. We believe these roles as well as all others are open to women. However, it is also realized that there is a certain modeling that young boys get from men leaders and teachers that they would not get from women. Looking toward these boys' future and the examples they need, it is encouraged that men also take on these roles of teachers and leaders.

Q: What about middle school and high school teachers and leaders? Are these roles open to women?

A: Yes. Middle school and high school boys are not in our culture considered adults or men. However, just as in preschool and grade school, it is also realized that there is a certain modeling that boys get from men leaders and teachers that they would not get from women. Looking toward these boys' future and the examples they need, it is encouraged that men would take the majority of these roles of teachers and leaders.

## **Resources**

The following resources were consulted in the study and discussions by the pastoral staff in the preparation of this paper. Although many of these resources fundamentally agree with one another; on the whole they represent different views regarding women's ministry roles in the church, and, therefore, not all would be in agreement with the view taken by this paper.

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All Scripture quotations taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

This paper written based on study and discussions by pastoral staff and with input from various other church leaders.

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