



*The Role of  
Women/Men  
in the Church*

*A Pastoral Guidance Paper*



community  
FELLOWSHIP

## **Introduction**

The Bible has been used to justify many forms of injustice and oppression down through history; from war to racism, from classism to sexism. This has caused great pain to humankind and, we believe, to the heart of a loving God Who is perfectly just and has revealed Himself as a servant-leader in Jesus Christ.

We believe that the Bible calls us to freedom, equality, and loving service to one another. We also believe that the Bible does not stress these virtues in unbridled form but within the framework of an authority structure given to us by God Who is the ultimate authority. Into such a setting are placed all relationships within the Family and Church, like a diamond in a royal ring.

The following principles concerning women/men roles and relationships within the church are offered by the Elders for the purpose of Pastoral guidance. Our sincere desire is to give clarity to an issue upon which many fine Christian people disagree. We wish to encourage everyone to submit themselves to the Lord of the Church and to experience the freedom available to all members of Christ's Body as they function according to His design.

## **Principles to Consider**

1. Man, as male and female, was created in the Image of God (Gen. 1:27). They were made to be co-rulers over His creation (Gen. 1:28-30; 1 Cor. 11:10).
2. In the midst of this Pre-Fall (before humankind sinned) state of equality before God, there was an authority relationship between man and woman.
  - a. Adam was first created (Gen. 2:20-22; 1 Tim. 2:13); thus by the Old Testament law of primogeniture (law of the first-born), he was invested with authority (cf. Deut. 21:15-17; Col. 1:15-18).

b. Eve was taken out of Adam (Gen. 2:21-22; I Cor. 11:8); thus the Old Testament always stresses the relationship of “source” to authority (Col. 1:15-18). It should also be noted that if the very act of Adam’s naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19, 20) signified his authority over them, Adam’s naming Eve (Gen. 2:23) was also an act of authority, though in this case the narrative also stresses their unity and equality.

c. Eve was made as a gift of God for Adam (Gen. 2:20; 1 Cor. 11:9); the Scripture teaches that the woman was made to help the man in the service of God and in the dominion of the earth and not vice versa. Eve was made to be Adam’s helper, and when men conceive of their wives as less than the God-given gift of help which they need, they are unfaithful to the teaching of Genesis (1 Cor. 11:11,12). It should be noted here that the word “helper” is used 15 times in the Old Testament to refer to God helping His needy people.

d. It should also be noted that the Scripture does not regard the relationship of authority/subordination as mutually exclusive of equality or freedom. This theme is as eternal as God who, as the three Members of the Trinity, voluntarily agreed to subordinate themselves to one another in the interest of Redemption. Thus it should not surprise us that this part of the Creation design for human relationships is according to the divine model (Gen. 1:26).

3. There was also in this Pre-Fall relationship the implication that Adam was the leader in the home and in worship as he was uniquely prepared by God to discern the serpent’s lies (Gen. 2:15-17). This point is important to understand as it leads Paul to assert that Adam was not deceived like the woman (1 Tim. 2:14), but instead sinned out of deliberate rebellion against God (Rom. 5:12, 15-19) who had given the command to the man directly.

4. After the Fall, this subordinate relationship of the woman to the man continued but was contorted and distorted because of sin (Gen. 3:16b). The phrase “your desire shall be for your husband” this does not make much sense as a curse. Why should a woman's desire for

her husband cause him to dominate her? The word "desire" (translated from the Hebrew *tesuqah*) occurs only three times in the Old Testament: here, Genesis 4:7, and Song of Solomon 7:10. It can carry the sense of sexual longing (as in the Song of Songs), but its usage in Genesis 4:7 shows another side, that of a "desire" to overcome or defeat another: "[Sin's] desire is for you [to overcome you, to control you], but you should rule over it." This latter meaning fits Genesis 3:16 better than the former. Thus, we could understand this as a curse; because of the Fall, a woman's desire will be to supplant her husband's authority and control him, and her husband in turn will try and dominate her. This continual struggle has surely been a curse even in the best of marriages!

5. The rest of the Old Testament clearly demonstrates a patriarchal perspective, although women were regarded as individuals and had rights which were closely guarded by the Law. In religious life, women participated in worship, including the taking of vows and offering of sacrifices. Under the Mosaic Law, religious leadership was closely restricted to males from the tribe of Levi, although there are numerous examples of women who served as prophets. There are also examples of women who freely participated in the social, commercial, and civil life of Israel. These were never condemned for their roles.

6. Judaism, at the time of Christ, had taken the subordinate role of women set forth in the Old Testament and turned it into a role of inferiority. Women in public life were almost non-existent and their place in the worship-life of Judaism was always peripheral. Women were kept in isolation and the separation of the sexes was strictly enforced. A woman's ability to learn spiritual truth was always held in question.

7. The place of women in the ministry of Jesus stands in remarkable contrast to contemporary Judaism. The most obvious thing we can see about Jesus' attitude toward women was that they were present among His followers (Mt. 27:55, 56; Mark 15:41); they supported His ministry (Luke 8:1-3); and they were allowed to sit at His feet, the position of a disciple, and to learn from Him (Luke 10:38-42; John 4:5-30). What mattered to Jesus was not so much a person's sex, but his or

her obedience to God's will (Luke 11:27-28; Mt. 12:46-50). Women stood alongside men as recipients of His invitation to enter the Kingdom and they played a prominent role as witnesses to His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Jesus did not comment on the subject of male headship/authority in the home or worshipping community. Such silence, along with his appointment of an all-male apostleship, most likely indicated that He considered the Old Testament pattern of subordination to be still in existence without the specter of inferiority added by contemporary Judaism.

8. Women were integral in the life of the Apostolic community and in the ministry of Paul. They were present in the company of the disciples as they waited for Pentecost (Acts 1:13-14). The church grew as both women and men believed in Christ (Acts 5:14; 8:12). Women participated in worship (1 Cor. 11:5; 1 Tim. 2:1-10; Eph. 5:18-21; Col. 3:16); some women functioned as prophets who most likely addressed the congregation (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor.11:5); women were active in demonstrating Christ's love through deeds of mercy and hospitality (1 Tim. 5:10; Acts 9:36-43); they were hosts to Paul (Acts 16:14,15) and to church gatherings (Acts 12:12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2); they were fellow-workers with Paul (Rom. 16:1-15 where nine out of fifteen people mentioned were women); (Phil. 4:3); they participated in a teaching ministry (Acts 18:24-26) and as missionaries (Rom.16:7); and they were involved in a recognized Deacon function (Rom. 16:1-2).\*

9. The key passage which sums up the Apostolic attitude toward women in relation to the Kingdom of God is Gal. 3:26-29. The immediate context here is that faith, not works, provides the basis for salvation. Anyone who approaches God in this way is a child of Abraham regardless of race, sex or civil status. The Gospel is for all who come to Christ by faith. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). This text has been used by some as the basis for erasing all functional distinctions between male and female both in the church and in the home, especially since those distinctions are based on the concept of subordination. We feel that this interpretation lacks on two counts: 1)

the context deals with membership in the Kingdom of God and not with the subject of authority, 2) Paul would be guilty of serious contradiction to other passages such as 1 Cor. 14:33-36; 1 Tim. 2:11-12; Eph. 5:22-24, all of which clearly continue the authority theme established in Genesis.

10. The final issue before us is to make an observation on the New Testament teaching regarding the role of women in the church, especially in relation to the office of the Elder.

a. We cannot dismiss the headship role of a man both in the home (Eph. 5:22-33) and in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-7) as mere cultural baggage. For one thing, it tends to compromise the authority of the Scriptures if one subjectively interprets a passage as merely cultural when the text itself gives no grounds for such an interpretation.

b. This authority/subordination theme, which has been in place since Creation, is a continual reminder and reflection of God's relation to His people (Eph.5:22-32) and will be operative until the resurrection (Mt. 22:30).

c. The New Testament clearly states that the exercise of religious authority within the church should be delegated to men who fit particular qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and that women should not have such authority (1 Tim. 2:11,12\*\*; 1 Cor. 14:33-36). The entire congregation is to honor God's calling of these certain men to shepherd the flock (Heb. 13:17). Their leadership/authority should not be characterized by worldly domination for selfish gain, but by a servanthood that desires to give oneself for another's gain (Luke 22:6; 1 Peter 5:1-3). The same is true in the home. The husband's loving leadership should be towards his wife as Christ's for His Church "and gave Himself up for her ..." (Eph. 5:25)

d. We believe that women, as well as those men not called to be Elders, are free to exercise their gifts and abilities in public worship (1 Cor. 12:11-26) including teaching/preaching (1 Cor. 11:5; 14:26), and to minister in a formal sense as Deacons (1 Tim 3:8-11; Rom. 16:1-2). The non-Elder who ministers or teaches within the congregation does not do so from a position of authority but on the basis of the priesthood of all believers.

## Conclusion

It is our view, therefore, that except for the exercising of spiritual authority enforced by church discipline, which is the role of the elder, women are free to minister alongside men and use their gifts in all areas of church life including the preaching and teaching ministry.

We have written this paper to express our position on the role of women and men in the Body of Christ. We recognize that not everyone will agree with our conclusion. We would humbly encourage you to join us in further study and dialogue as we “eagerly maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace” (Eph. 4:3-6). Let none of us lose sight that God has brought us together as women and men, joint heirs of the grace of life, so that we might use all our gifts and energies to share the love of Jesus Christ to a dying world.

Your Servants,

The Elders

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\* Deacon – *Diakonos* (servant, helper) Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8; Romans 16:1 - denotes the holder of a particular office which rendered practical assistance to those who were especially needy within the congregation. This office is parallel to that of the Elder (*episcopoi*) and functions according to the pattern of Acts 6:1-4 (even though the word *diakonos* is not used here, the Seven functioned in the role of what we now know as a Deacon.) It should also be noted that the term *diakonos* is one of those Greek words that though it is masculine in form can be applied to either men or women (like our English word “nurse”). Phoebe (Romans 16:1) is called a “deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea.” In 1 Timothy 3:11, the Greek word *gunaikas* could either refer to the wives of the deacons, or to women engaged in a deacon role. The context seems to favor the latter (“women”) since there is no list of character qualifications for the wives of the elders and no definite article (the) before the word. Also, the separation of the sexes dictated that acts of kindness and mercy

could only be properly given to women by other women. It should be noted that the office of the Deacon does not have a teaching function or a ruling function, but has primarily a praying and pastoral function. The office of the Deacon is subordinate to the Elders and is to insure the just and fair distribution of money and goods to those in need (Acts 4:35).

\*\* 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 – “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” Two things to note: “I do not permit” is in the indicative not the imperative thus, Paul seems to be stating a practice or making a suggestion rather than a command; the word *authentio* is only used here in the whole New Testament, and may indicate a stronger meaning of controlling, dominating, or assuming an independent authority. (Note: 1 Tim. 2:11-15 bears an amazing resemblance to Gen. 3:16, 17.) We recognize that there is a genuine hermeneutical (interpretive) question as to whether this text should be applied to women in all places at all times or whether it was addressing a serious circumstance in the Ephesian church of women who were being unduly influenced by false teachers. We believe the latter interpretation best fits with the larger picture of the various roles of women within the early church. A similar interpretive decision has to be made in relationship to the practice of head-coverings in 1 Cor. 11:2-16.