

Gender and Authority in the Church

Elder Explanation Articles for OCC



At Orchard Community Church we believe Scripture teaches that only men are to be elders. It is not a decision we have come to lightly and it was not something we had already determined before our careful study of Scripture regarding this matter. This decision is based on many hours of bible study, prayer, discussion, and research concerning how other churches and theologians have addressed this issue. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the biblical basis for our decision at Orchard to restrict elders to men only.

Gender and Equality in Scripture

Before dealing with the issue of gender and authority it is essential to understand the biblical teaching on gender and equality. The bible does not differentiate between men and women when it comes to our sinful condition. Romans 3:10-11 states, "there is no one righteous, not even one; no one who understands, no one who serves God. All have turned away and become worthless, no one who does good, not even one." Romans 3:23 states, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." These verses (and many others) teach that no one can claim to be better than anyone else based on anything about themselves – including gender.

Men and women are also considered equal in Christ in regards to salvation. The complete thought of Romans 3:23-24 is "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 states that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This equality in Christ in the New Testament church was absolutely stunning when compared with the gender inequality in the culture in which the church lived. God's plan always involved the breaking down of societal barriers. In Joel 2:28-29 there is a prophecy which is quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-18 which states, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." This prophecy was about God being among his people in a new and powerful way. He would live in his people and give them spiritual gifts to be used for his service. Both genders are specifically mentioned in this prophecy giving both genders an important place in the work of the kingdom of God.

The involvement of women in God's plan, in the ministry of Jesus, and in the New Testament church is incredibly counter-cultural to the male dominated society of the biblical times. Two entire books of the Bible (Ruth and Esther) are written specifically about the role of women in God's plan. The roles of women such as Mary and Martha in the ministry of Jesus are highlighted by the gospel writers rather than ignored or downplayed. Paul also makes a point of mentioning several women working with him in his missionary endeavors (such as Phoebe, Lydia, and Priscilla to name a few).

The issue of gender equality in Scripture is clearly taught. Nobody is more or less important in the Body of Christ due to gender. Restricting eldership to men only has nothing to do with something spiritually lacking in women or with men being somehow spiritually superior. Men and women have equal status in the kingdom of God.

Gender and Authority in Scripture

While Scripture clearly teaches equality in status, it also clearly teaches a distinction between the genders in roles, particularly in regards to authority. We live in a world that sees this as a contradiction, but the greatest evidence that there can be equality in status while still maintaining a distinction in roles is seen in the Trinity. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” It is tempting to see the “headship” of men over women in the church as being demeaning, oppressive, or to indicate inequality, but Paul roots this idea of difference in authority between men and women in the relationship within the Trinity between God the Father and God the Son. Any explanation of the Trinity that destroys the equality between the persons of the Trinity is heresy, yet Scripture teaches that God the Father is in some way the head of (in authority over) God the Son. God has used himself as a pattern for equality and authority among his people.

While the issue of gender and authority is dealt with in several different places in Scripture, there are two key passages we will look at for the purpose of this article.

1 Timothy Chapter 2

Timothy served as a leader of the church in Ephesus and Paul knew that the church was facing many difficulties. There was a lot of arguing and posturing among the people of the church – both men and women. Everyone was claiming equal authority and no one was able to actually lead. In 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul instructs the men to quit arguing with each other and instead to focus on submitting to God through prayer. In verses 9-10 he tells the women of the church not to show off their freedom through lavish dress, jewelry or other adornments, but rather to focus on worshipping God through correct living.

What follows in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is a key passage on gender and authority in the church. It is also a passage that if not examined carefully can lead to many errors. Verse 11 says, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.” Right away many will want to use this to say Paul is teaching male domination and/or that women can’t even speak in church. But the language Paul uses in this verse is the same as he uses in verse 2 of the same chapter which says that we should pray for all people “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” The words for “quiet” and “quietness” in these two verses are exactly the same (*hēsychia*) so if Paul is teaching that women are not allowed to speak in church then he is also teaching that no one is allowed to speak ever because we must all live “quiet” lives. This is not the intent of Paul’s teaching in verse 2 and is therefore not the intent in regards to women in verse 11. In 2 Thessalonians 3:12, Paul uses the same word to tell people that they should “settle down” and not be disruptive. The teaching concerning the quietness of women in this passage is about not being disruptive rather than being completely silent.

In verse 12 Paul writes, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” The word for “quiet” is the same as that in verse 11 and verse 3 (*hēsychia*) which, as we have already seen, is about proper respect and about not being disruptive. Verse 12 adds to this the idea of limit in authority and teaching. The word for “have authority” (*authenteō*) is probably best translated “take authority.” It was used of someone taking authority from someone else rather than merely having authority over someone. This fits with how Paul is using the term “quiet”. He is saying that in Ephesus the women are to stop being disruptive and to stop trying to take the authority away from those who are called to lead the church.

Verses 13-15 are not easy to understand at first glance. The verses read:

¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

It is very interesting to note that whatever Paul is saying about gender and authority in these verses, he is grounding his ideas in God's order of creation. This means that the issue of gender and authority are not cultural issues. They were not adaptations to the culture of the day and should not be changed to adapt to the culture of today. They go beyond culture and are rooted in God's choice to create a man first and then the woman.

But is Paul blaming women for sin in the world? Nowhere else in Scripture are women blamed more than men for sin. In fact, in most of the passages dealing with sin it is Adam (as the "head" of the human race) who is said to have brought sin into the world – especially in the teachings of Paul (see Romans 5:12-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22) so it would be extremely out of place for Paul to blame Eve for sin and then to base his teachings on male eldership on this. A closer examination reveals something much more nuanced in what Paul is saying.

There is a pattern to these verses. In verse 13, Paul refers to God's purposeful order of creating Adam first and then Eve. Then, in verse 14 Paul refers to the reverse of this order in the Fall – the deception did not come through Adam but rather through Eve. Finally, Paul makes mention of salvation through childbirth in verse 15. This last one is extremely confusing on its own, but seeing the pattern Paul is using will greatly help in understanding what Paul is talking about. Paul is taking this pattern straight out of the Genesis account. There we see God intentionally create Adam first and then Eve. Then we see the serpent ignore this order, speak to and tempt Eve who then leads her husband to sin (Gen. 3:6). Then in Genesis 3:15 God mentions that this upset order would be made right through Eve giving birth and producing an offspring (Christ) who would one day crush the serpent's head. Paul is rooting his teaching on gender and authority on the most tragic example ever of God's order of authority between men and women being ignored. The point of 1 Timothy 2:13-15 is not to say that women can't lead because it's their fault sin is in the world, it is to say that God intentionally created men to be in a position of authority (as mentioned in 1 Tim. 2:12) and that very bad things can happen when this order of authority is ignored.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 leads into 3:1-7 where Paul lays out the qualifications for elders. It is the elders who are to have the leadership authority God intends in the church, the same authority Paul has just said women are not to have and therefore only men are to be elders.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

1 Corinthians 14:34-45 is another key passage for understanding the New Testament teaching on the difference in authority between men and women in the church. Like 1 Timothy chapter 2, it is very easily misunderstood and abused. The passage reads:

³⁴Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵If 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.

When these verses are read on their own it appears that women were never allowed to speak during a church service. The context is essential to understand what Paul is really saying. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul gives guidelines for women who pray or prophesy and throughout 1 Corinthians these two things are considered part of the church gatherings. So it does not make sense for Paul to say that women cannot speak at all when the church gathers and at the same time give guidelines for how they should speak through prayer and prophecy in the public gatherings. One of the biggest issues Paul is writing to correct in the Corinthian church is the chaos in their worship gatherings. 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 is about the use of spiritual gifts in the worship service in an orderly way. The goal of this article is not to explain the spiritual gifts, but rather to examine how the instructions Paul gives for their expression applies to issue of gender and authority in the church.

Paul starts with the gift of tongues in verses 26-28. He gives instructions on the number of people who should speak, the fact that they should take turns, and introduces a form of oversight to the expression of the gift in the form of needing someone who can interpret the speech for the congregation.

Then, in verses 29-38 he gives instructions for people who bring a prophecy (a message from God) to the church. Paul limits the number of people who can speak in a given gathering to two or three and he gives instructions on the necessity of prophets taking turns. He also introduces a form of oversight. In verse 29 he says, "the others should weigh carefully what is said." The word for "weigh carefully" does not mean to contemplate what was said, it means to judge it. They had to be discerning to be sure that what was said was truly from God. So we see the pattern just as Paul used with the gift of tongues: restriction on number of people, instruction on taking turns, and a form of oversight.

What is interesting in his discussion of the prophetic gift is that Paul gives further explanation. In verses 31-33 he elaborates on why they should limit the number of prophets and why they should take turns. Then Paul includes the instructions concerning women remaining silent in verses 34-35. Finally, in verses 36-38 he concludes his teaching on prophecy and in verses 39-40 he concludes the whole section on the use of prophecy and tongues in the public gathering. This is important because the verses about women remaining silent are part of this discussion on prophecy in the worship gatherings rather than some separate, general teaching about women having to be silent in the church. It is also important because Paul has already given further instructions concerning the number of prophets who are to speak and the need for them to take turns, but what appears to be missing is an explanation for how the judging or weighing of the prophetic message should take place. This is what the teaching concerning women being silent in verses 34-35 is about! When the church was judging whether or not a message was from the Lord, the women were to remain silent. Why? Because it was not appropriate for them to exercise authority in the church by judging the prophet or his/her message. Just like in 1 Timothy 2, Paul is not saying in these verses that women cannot speak in the church, he is saying that they are not to exercise authority over the church.

Conclusion

These two key passages show that there is an authority in the church that women are not to have. It is this very same authority that is given to elders. As a church we are limiting eldership to men only not because it is practical or because it is popular, but because we believe it is the teaching of the Word of God. Elders must work hard to involve all people and their spiritual gifts in the ministry of the church and should recognize and appreciate the unique input and involvement of women in the church.