

Our Position on the Roles of Women in Church Leadership and Ministry at Life Church according to Scripture.

Introduction: Laying a God-honoring Foundation for Spirited Discussion

When considering the issue of women and their appropriate roles in ministry, it does not take long to discover a wide range of strongly-held views. There is a seemingly endless number of books and articles written on the subject, many of which claim to have the final word. Debates have raged over the meanings of a handful of texts from Paul's letters and how they sit alongside the ministry of Jesus and tie into the overall biblical narrative. Words within the texts such as "head", "authority", "silence", and "submission" have become points of intense focus and discussion. Questions are raised, such as what exactly was the role of Junia or Priscilla in the New Testament church? And how does this compare to Deborah or even Huldah in the Old Testament? Cultural backgrounds and what was happening in certain New Testament churches have been discussed at great length.

How are we to come to a conclusion that honors God's Word to the fullest? What does all this mean in practical terms when it comes to the function of this local church and the women who serve here? Before answering these questions, let it be said that we are thankful that the family which God himself has created at Life Church has not allowed the role of women in the church to be a source of contention.

The world around us clamors for control and power and positions of prominence. Unfortunately, there are some within the church at large who are doing the same in regard to the role women can and should be allowed to play in the church. Again, this has not been the case here. Both men and women at Life Church have come to this issue humbly to hear God's voice above all. We have done so with a few guiding principles which should be noted and adhered to throughout any discussion regarding this (or any) theological matter.

First, while we readily admit this to be an important issue that must be addressed, we will not allow this discussion to deteriorate into divisive speech or behavior. **How we treat one another matters.** This point will come up again and again for we are called to love one another as we have been loved. Indeed, how we treat one another was of such concern to Jesus that He prayed for our unity when time was of the essence on the night of His betrayal. How we listen, how we speak, how we disagree, how we love, and how we treat one another matters. May we never take this lightly even in the midst of theological debate.

Second, **doctrine matters.** There are some who may think that to stress our first point somehow means we would sacrifice this second point. That is not the case. Healthy dialogue and debate can and should happen around matters of our faith. Doctrine is a tangible reflection on of an understanding of scripture and how it applies to our lives today. It shapes not only who we are becoming as individual believers, but also how we

will function as a community of believers. This requires knowledge and wisdom that comes from the careful study of scripture. It must also include the input of those scholars and theologians who have sought to understand the historical context, the nuances of the original languages, and the broader implications to the biblical narrative.

Third, **scripture matters**. This point has already been made here, but it is worth repeating: we will honor God's Word to the fullest. We hold to an extremely high view of scripture as the inspired and authoritative revelation of God.

God. That is where we must always start in discussions such as these. Unfortunately, there are some on both sides of this particular debate who would question another's commitment to scriptural authority simply because they disagree on this issue. While this is perhaps an accurate description of some who have entered this debate, one cannot make such sweeping statements about those on either side. We will not do so here. Nor should anyone who disagrees with us make such baseless accusations. Such a lack of humility affects any attempt to learn from one another and, more importantly, shows a disregard for the manner in which we are to treat one another as followers of Jesus.

Keeping in mind the previous points, the very existence of such a profound diversity of opinion should caution us about making dogmatic assertions. Honest, thoughtful, intelligent Christians can differ on this issue.

Perhaps now it is time to summarize the two opposing viewpoints at either end of a continuum of conviction and practice. In so doing, remember that neither of these terms is found in scripture and there is in fact data in the Bible that does not fit neatly into either of these camps. Namely, we will call them "complementarians" and "egalitarian" positions.

On the one side, there are those who believe there is a "divine order" or hierarchy in the church and home (as well, perhaps, in all of life), which demands male leadership and female subordination for all times and in all cultures. People who hold to this position have titled themselves hierarchelists, traditionalists, and most recently, "complementarians". There is a great diversity of opinion, even among complementarians.

On the other side of the divide are egalitarians. According to this position, roles in the church (and often in marriage) are not determined by gender, but simply by calling and gifting. People who hold to this position emphasize mutual submission among believers, men and women alike, and affirm the notion that any role in the context of the church is available equally to women and men. Here too, there is a great diversity of opinion as to how this is lived out in both church and home.

Both of these viewpoints have biblical and reasonable arguments. As it happens in a church of our size and mission, we have believers from both viewpoints worshipping in our midst. The question must be asked by those who are now reading this, "how

theologically important is this issue?" Frankly, we do not see this as a core tenet of our faith. It is not what we often describe as a "nonnegotiable" issue, nor is it a doctrine so central, so essential, so clearly revealed, that to disagree with it would take us outside the pale of historic, biblical Christianity. The deity of our Lord Jesus, the mysterious reality of the Trinity, the promise that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone: these are a few of the essentials of the Christian faith from which there can be no departure.

But this does not fall into that category. It is not a theological matter of the utmost and essential kind. However, as others have noted (see Graham Cole, *Women Teaching Men the Bible: What's the Problem?* 2006), this is still a matter of great importance for the order and function of a local church. Additionally, it is a culturally sensitive issue that can carry great emotional weight. Thus, it is of utmost importance pastorally. As one becomes involved with this local church, it is important to know how the leadership of this church functions and how it has come to these conclusions. All are most welcome to worship and invest gifts here without fully agreeing, as long as we all remember to preserve unity and to respect one another in this matter. If there is no question to the authority of scripture and we are committed to a responsible exegesis of the scriptures (remembering that doctrine matters) we can still disagree on a few texts and their significance to women teaching and/or leading in the church. We would confidently suggest that this is one of the "debatable" issues Paul speaks of in Romans 14 where believers must accept each other with differing viewpoints.

Also, since this is really a matter of order and not how highly we view scripture or how we see the essentials of our faith, it does not and will not imply that this church has now stepped on to the infamous "slippery slope" of lessening what scripture clearly teaches about other matters that are frequently discussed in our culture. This is quite simply a non-issue. Though we understand the concern of those who might ask such questions, please notice how long we have taken to explain the process that has led us to this conclusion and how many times we have stated the authority of scripture thus far. We have not and will not cut and paste scripture to our liking or as a response to some cultural pressure.

Indeed, one of the great challenges of this issue is to consider the entirety of Scripture without allowing any particular passage to speak louder than the overall trajectory of the story. Each instance where this subject is addressed directly must be viewed in the context of what were deeply patriarchal societies, in which God seems to be pointing His people to a counter-cultural way of viewing life.

It is with these convictions in mind that we now enter into a more focused exploration of how we have arrived at our doctrinal position regarding women and their various roles in ministry.

Old Testament Survey

The opening chapters of Genesis present a picture of God's ideal for life prior to the entrance of sin and evil into human history and experience. For this reason, we can turn to these chapters to better understand God's best for our lives. Specifically, the

creational patterns in Genesis 1 and 2 help us understand what God's ideals are for relationships and give us insight into his goal of redeeming us from sin as male and female. Therefore, when discussing the roles of women in leadership, we must first begin with the creation narrative and the effects of sin upon God's design for men and women.

In Genesis 1 God creates male and female in his image (Genesis 1:27). In its ancient Near Eastern context, this is a royal designation. Those in the image of a god are to rule and reign as they exercise authority on behalf of the god in whose image they are made. This reading is confirmed in the following verse where male and female are instructed "to subdue and have dominion", which is also royal language (Genesis 1:28). In Genesis 1, then, men and women are created equal in dignity, value, and worth and equally given the task of ruling over God's creation and creatures on his behalf.

In Genesis 2 we are given even greater detail into the events of "day six" and God's creation of male and female. In light of the multiple parallels between creation and the garden in Eden and Israel's Tabernacle and Temple, as well as the man's task of "serving" and "guarding" the garden, the man is presented as the first priest (Genesis 2:15). Then in Genesis 2:18 God declares that it is not good for man to be alone and so will create a "help" for him. From this we may conclude that, in addition to the royal designations in Genesis 1, male and female are also given priestly roles in which they are to both participate.

We may say, then, that in Genesis 1 and 2 male and female are created as royal priests meant to exercise authority on behalf of God and mediate His presence in the world. This is God's ideal design for male and female prior to the entrance of sin and its effects in Genesis 3.

However, there are also features within the first three chapters of Genesis that present the man as occupying a position of preeminent responsibility within the male-female relationship. Some of these features are: the man being created first (Genesis 2:7, 22); the woman being designated as a "help" (Genesis 2:18); the man naming the woman (Genesis 2:23); God forming the woman from man (Genesis 2:22); God's giving of the prohibition not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil prior to creating the woman and the woman's subsequent appropriation of the command to herself (Genesis 2:16-17, 3:2-3); God's questioning of the man after the couple eats of the fruit and the man being highlighted as the primary actor (Genesis 3:10).

We should expect, then, to see these creational patterns preserved and play out through the rest of scripture. Furthermore, they should become more prominent as God's story of redemption unfolds and we move closer towards returning to the ideals of Genesis 1 and 2. Specifically, we should expect to find men and women ruling together occupying positions of authority, men and women exercising and participating in priestly roles, and men serving in those roles to which the most preeminent responsibility is attached, especially with regard to guarding and living out God's truth.

Surveying the Old Testament reveals women serving in a variety of leadership roles. Miriam was a prophetess who helped lead Israel along with her brothers Moses and Aaron. After God rescued Israel from the Egyptians, Miriam led the congregation in singing God's praise (Exodus 15:20-21). Deborah served as one of Israel's judges (Judges 4). Not only was a judge one of Israel's highest offices and a precursor to the office of king, they were also responsible for applying God's law to legal matters and their judgments were equal in authority to that of the priests (Deuteronomy 17:8-13). Another prophetess who exercised significant leadership at a pivotal moment in Israel's history was Huldah (2 Kings 22:8-10). Although both Zephaniah and Jeremiah were active at that time, King Josiah sought out Huldah to deliver a Word from the LORD. Abigail is another woman who wisely served and instructed King David to act like a man of God (1 Samuel 25).

In addition to these prominent women, the Bible also briefly mentions other prophetesses (Isaiah 8:3). Nehemiah denounces the prophetess Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Ezekiel condemns false prophetesses (Ezekiel 13:17-24). These women were not condemned for being prophets but for prophesying falsely.

Clearly, women in the Old Testament prayed and prophesied inside and outside of the Temple, instructed men, declared truths that are recorded in scripture, occupied one of the highest ruling positions in Israel, and many played significant roles in God's plan of redemption (including Sarai, Rebekah, Leah, Rahab, Ruth, and Naomi). At the same time, we do see a preservation of the original creation pattern of Genesis 1-2 in that the office of priest appears to have been reserved for only men. This did not mean, however, as mentioned above, that women did not help out in the temple. Nor did it mean that women did not have a priestly role or were not responsible for the spiritual leadership of God's people. We must be careful not to read our sacred/secular divides back into the text. Israel functioned as a theocracy, that is, a nation under the direct rule of God. There was much interplay between the office of prophet, priest, and king/judge. The judges in Israel were responsible for applying God's truth and wisdom to decide issues among God's people, and their judgments carried the weight of the authority of God (Deuteronomy 17:12).

In conclusion, the results of our Old Testament survey fit well with our earlier observations that both men and women were created equally to exercise authority, women were called to serve in a priestly role, but men bear a preeminent sense of responsibility for preserving the spiritual well-being of God's people.

New Testament Survey

Women appear to play an even more pervasive role in the New Testament. In the gospels women are found to be heralds of Christ and evangelists, as they proclaim both Jesus' coming and his resurrection. One of the first to publicly announce the good news of Jesus' coming was the prophetess Anna. Anna served in the Temple "worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day" (Luke 2:37). After Jesus was brought to be dedicated, Anna "began to give thanks to God and speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38).

In Luke's gospel, women are also the first to witness the empty tomb and receive the good news that the Lord Jesus has risen (Luke 24:1-8). What is more, these same women were the first to communicate this good news to Jesus' eleven disciples. Presumably the content of their message to the disciples included not only the news of the empty tomb, but also the reiteration of the words Jesus had spoken predicting his death and resurrection (Matthew 24:6-9).

In John 4:39, many come to believe in Jesus because of the Samaritan woman's testimony. In Luke 1:41-46 Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit and prophesies, declaring truth. As the early church continued to spread, women continued prophesying (Acts 21:9) and praying (Acts 1:1, 12:12). It is evident that women prayed and prophesied during the meetings of God's people (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Luke calls Tabitha a "disciple" (Acts 9:36). Many have recognized that Jesus had women disciples (Luke 10:38-40). As teachers, Priscilla and her husband Aquila are mentioned in Acts 18, Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and 2 Timothy 4:19. They first met Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3). They then accompanied him to Ephesus, where they led Apollos to Christ (Acts 18:18-26). A little later they are apparently in Rome, where they have another house church (Romans 16:3-5), but in 2 Timothy 4:19 they are back in Ephesus. Both their mobility and patronage of house churches indicate that they are probably wealthy. Many have pointed out that Priscilla's name being listed before Aquila's suggests that she was the primary teacher (Acts 18:26).

Even the roles of "apostle" and "deacon" are attributed to women in the New Testament. Paul writes, "Greet Andronicus and Junia... they are well known among the apostles." Romans 16:1 reads, "Phoebe... being a deacon in the church." As Robert Strimple observes, when Paul refers to Phoebe as "being a deacon" he is using a participial phrase that is consistently used to identify a person's performance of office in the New Testament. Examples of this usage are found in John 11:49, Acts 18:12, and Acts 24:10.

Paul also references women as his "co-workers" or "fellow workers", which was an authoritative position of leadership. 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 reads, "Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints—be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer."

What is clear from this passage is that Paul views co-workers as occupying a position among God's people which carries authority with it, so that he can say, "submit to every fellow-worker." We may also conclude that this leadership position involved authoritative speech. The list of those to whom Paul gives this designation further supports this, among whom are Timothy, Titus, and Mark and Luke. In addition to the women presumably present in the household of Stephanas, three women are explicitly named by Paul as his "fellow workers": Priscilla (Romans 16:3), and Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3). We may conclude from this, then, that Paul endorsed public leadership roles of women among God's people.

Despite the above examples, three passages have been traditionally enlisted to demonstrate that Paul did not allow for women to lead, teach, or have authority at the worship gatherings of God's people: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Each of these passages is written in the context of addressing disorderly worship gatherings. However, when we take into account the full body of Paul's writings, it is evident that women were to teach and have authority. This should give us great pause in concluding that Paul's prohibitions in these passages are for all times and all settings.

At the very least, what we see in 1 Timothy 2 is a concrete expression of the creation pattern. In other words, Paul takes an abstract principle found in Genesis 2, appeals to it, and tailors its application to fit the needs of the church in first century Ephesus. Conversely, at most, what we see is Paul giving a transcultural structure of leadership based on the creation pattern which reserves the primary teaching and authoritative position in the local church for a male.

However, in light of the numerous difficulties with this text, we echo William Webb's call for "interpretive humility". As stated above, we will respect those who differ in their interpretations of this passage. What is more we humbly admit that we have barely broached the exegetical and hermeneutical complexities, especially those present in verse 14 and 15.

As a whole, we seem to witness a display of the creation patterns previously discussed in the New Testament as well. Women played significant roles in the early Church, including teaching and participating in public worship, and occupying authoritative leadership roles. However, it also appears that the highest responsibility of oversight fell to the men.

Conclusion

We constantly work to live out the truths we see in Scripture regarding the roles of men and women. **Specifically we want to honor the creation account where men and women are created equal and given authority to rule, as well as the patterns of leadership evident in the New Testament, while preserving the position God has bestowed upon men. The way this plays out in our context here at Life Church is that we presently reserve the position of Lead Pastor for a male.** However, we believe all other leadership and ministry positions should be open to women as we seek to empower all of those in our community and celebrate the gifts God has given to each of us who follow Christ for the building up of his people.

—The Pastors/Elders at Life Church