

Women in Church Leadership, Conclusion

December 2006

Preface by Joseph Tkach

Many people can probably agree with Thomas Schreiner when he writes, “The role of women in the church is probably the most emotionally charged issue in American evangelicalism today.”¹ It is being debated among Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox as well as among Evangelical Protestants. It is a difficult subject, sometimes filled with bitter accusations, sometimes with claims about the Bible that are not biblically substantiated or justified, and sometimes with fears about what might happen if a change is made, or fears about what might happen if one isn’t.

Over the past nearly three years, our doctrinal team has been studying this issue cautiously, with prayer, with a desire to understand what the Bible teaches us to do. At each stage of our work, we shared the preliminary results with pastoral supervisors and then pastors, seeking comments and feedback. After revising the study papers based on their input, we published them in print or on our website. We did not want to ignore any evidence, nor any important question. Sometimes we had to acknowledge that there is not sufficient information available to be completely certain about a few issues, but this does not, in the final analysis, prevent a conclusion about the overall question.

In this final paper, the team summarizes what we have found, and then tackles some questions about how we will apply these findings in the church today. It is my prayer that we all approach this subject with the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of God’s Spirit.

Joseph Tkach

Biblical Teaching and Modern Application

In the previous ten studies, we have surveyed the teaching of Scripture as it pertains to women in leadership. Here is a summary of each paper:

¹ Thomas Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church* (2nd ed.; edited by Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner; Baker, 2005), 85.

Paper 1: “Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction” (May 2004). The question is complex, and scholars with equal allegiance to the Scriptures come to different conclusions on the matter. It is not a question over which Christians should condemn one another, nor a question about which we need to break fellowship with people who come to different conclusions.

Paper 2: “The Nature of Leadership in the Church” (July 2004). Leadership in the church entails service—it is not a right, nor a personal privilege. People should not be seeking positions of leadership (or defending them) in order to get respect or any other personal benefit. People do not have to become leaders in order to be fully human, fully Christian, or equal to others. People can have leadership gifts without necessarily being leaders *in the church*.

A leader in the church must set a good example, have a good reputation, and be able to teach. The effectiveness of a person’s leadership in the church is largely dependent on whether members actually look to that person for spiritual leadership. With authority comes responsibility, and authority must be used to serve others.

Paper 3: “Men and Women in Genesis 1–3” (September 2004). In the beginning, God created male and female in the image of God, as persons who could be equal heirs of eternal life as his children. God gave both male and female authority over Earth and its creatures (Gen. 1:26-27). Genesis 2 tells us that God created the man before the woman, but it does not draw any conclusion about authority from this. The point being emphasized in Genesis 2 is that it is not good for a man to be alone.

The apostle Paul uses Genesis in a selective way. He notes that men are made in the image of God without mentioning that women also are (1 Cor. 11:7); he notes that men were created first when he argues that women should wear head coverings when they prophesy in church (vv. 8-10). Paul is not commenting on the meaning of Genesis itself, and the fact that he uses Scripture in his argument does not automatically mean that his conclusions about head coverings apply in all cultures.

The first biblical mention of the rule of men over women comes in Gen. 3:16, in which God describes the consequences of sin. The verse indicates a *change* in the relationship between men and women—that man’s rule over woman is a result of sin. This suggests (but does not prove) that when men and women are in the Lord, authority is not based on gender.

Paper 4: “Men and Women in the Books of Moses” (October 2004). Old Testament laws sometimes mentioned women specifically, but they were normally written as if only men were involved. Both in custom and in law, men had advantages over women. As Jesus noted, the laws of Moses did not prescribe an ideal society, but those laws were often concessions to an imperfect society (Matt. 19:8). The fact that only men were priests (only from one tribe, we should note), therefore, carries no weight in the question we have regarding leadership in the church. It was a rule for a different culture and a different covenant.

Paper 5: “Women in Ancient Israel, From the Conquest to the Exile” (March 2005). Although Israelite culture gave advantages to men, there are examples of women who had important roles. God chose Deborah to be a prophetess and a judge; the people “came to her to have their disputes decided” (Judges 4:5). She was a civil leader, and as a prophetess, she gave orders from God to the male leader of Israel’s army. God gave this woman authority over men—an authority that was both religious and civil.

God used Huldah the prophetess to give authoritative words to Hilkiah the priest and other men (2 Kings 22:14-20). She had spiritual authority. Later, God gave Esther civil authority over Jews in the Persian Empire. These examples show that, even in a patriarchal society, God permitted certain women to have significant civil and/or spiritual authority.

Paper 6: “Women in the Ministry and Teachings of Jesus” (April 2005). Jesus treated women with more respect than was common in that culture, and women had important roles in his ministry, traveling with him and providing for him. Jesus did not try to correct every social wrong. It would have been nearly impossible for women to function as apostles in that society, and the fact that all twelve apostles were men may also be due to the fact that they corresponded to the twelve sons of Jacob. Further, the twelve did not set a pattern for future church leaders—not in ethnicity, not in number, and therefore possibly not in gender.

Paper 7: “Women in the Early Church” (June 2005). Women had important roles in the early church—influential enough that when Saul persecuted the church, he imprisoned women as well as men. After Saul’s conversion, women were some of his most-praised co-workers. Paul mentioned women who worked “at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Phil. 4:3). This indicates that women had a significant role in evangelism. Gal. 3:28 mentions three prominent social divisions in the first-century world, and proclaims that these disparate social groups become one in

Christ. This equality should affect relationships among believers, although it may not require identical roles.

Paper 8: “Women Who Pray or Prophecy: 1 Cor. 11:3-16” (Nov. 2005). In 1 Cor. 11, Paul argues that women who pray or prophesy in the church should wear a head covering. Although we cannot be sure what this covering was, or its role in Greco-Roman society, we conclude that Paul was telling the believers to conform to certain cultural customs. He uses several supporting arguments, some of which do not apply in our culture, and others that are not clear today because he was arguing for a custom of his own culture.

Although the custom was based in culture, Paul uses Genesis as one of his supporting arguments (vv. 7-12), showing that an argument from Scripture does not necessarily indicate a normative or permanent conclusion. Paul’s instructions were appropriate for his society, but the specific details are not necessary today. However, this passage clearly shows that women may prophesy in church, and Paul later describes this type of speaking as something that strengthens, encourages, comforts and edifies the church (1 Cor. 14:3-4).

Paper 9: “‘Women Should Remain Silent’: 1 Cor. 14:34-35” (Dec. 2005). In 1 Cor. 14, Paul calls for orderliness in the worship service. He says that people should speak in turn, and then be quiet. He says that women were not allowed to talk, but should be quiet and ask their questions later. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul has already acknowledged that women were speaking in church; he does not mean here that they cannot speak at all. Since we assume that chapter 14 does not contradict chapter 11, we conclude that Paul prohibits some other form of talking. He calls for women to be quiet not as a universal rule, but apparently because they were causing problems with disruptive questions in Corinth.

Paper 10: “Questions About 1 Timothy 2:11-15” (May 2006). When Paul wrote 1 Tim. 2:12, he again wrote that women should be quiet; he did not permit them to teach or to have authority over men. The reasons he gave for this policy are less than clear, since it is not self-evident that males should have exclusive authority in church simply because the man was created before the woman.² The obscurity of vv. 14-15 suggests that Paul was addressing erroneous ideas that were

² Scripture allows women to have authority over men in civil government, and it is not self-evident why this would be allowed in civil matters but not in religious matters. It is not self-evident that temporal priority should be connected to authority in one sphere but not the other.

being taught in Ephesus at the time.

Paul clearly permitted women to speak edifying messages in the Corinthian church; his prohibition here should be seen not as revoking that permission, but as a policy needed for the situation that Timothy faced.³ We believe it is not a universal rule that must govern all churches for all time. It was, just as Paul stated, a *policy*, not a permanent restriction based on gender.

Just as Paul counseled slaves to be obedient without endorsing slavery itself, he counseled women to be submissive in Ephesus without intending to make that social situation permanent. Just as we accept his policies about widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16) as temporary, so we accept his policies about women in church leadership as temporary.

An elder must be a husband?

We will add here a further comment on 1 Tim. 3:2—“The overseer must be...the husband of but one wife.” There are a number of questions about this verse, but we will focus on one: Does this mean that elders must be husbands, and therefore male?

No. There are five responses.

1. Paul wrote to the situation that Timothy was in, and that situation did not then allow female elders, so Paul did not cover possibilities that were not viable options at the time, just as he did not discuss what pastors should do with widows after social situations had changed.
2. We do not believe that elders must be married only once. Single men, and widowers who remarry, may also be elders. The focus of the passage is that *if* the elder is a husband, he should be faithful to his wife. The verse covers the most common situation, and Paul assumed that Timothy could figure out the other situations.

³ In the Old Testament, the office of prophet was open to women as well as men. It had more spiritual authority than the office of priest, which was restricted to men. Priests had authority only to carry out rituals and teach previous laws, but prophets could give new information and new directives with divine authority. In the New Testament, too, prophecy can involve information newly revealed by God; teaching requires that old material be repeated accurately. This again suggests that prophecy requires a greater authority than teaching does, and since women can have the authority to prophesy, they can also have the lesser authority, to teach; the prohibition in 1 Tim. 2 is best seen as a temporary prohibition.

3. Paul did not intend his list to be interpreted in a legalistic way—his recommendation that new Christians not be appointed as elders (1 Tim. 3:6) would not apply in new churches (and consequently Paul does not include this requirement in Titus 1:6-9).
4. Biblical laws are often phrased in the masculine even when they apply to women as well. (Paul’s frequent use of “brothers” includes female believers, too.) Throughout 1 Tim. 3, Paul stresses that an elder should be a good example; v. 2 simply gives details about what this means for a husband: *If* the elder is a husband, he should be a good one. It does not address all other possible situations.
5. Even though Paul told Timothy that “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (v. 12), it is still possible to have a woman deacon (v. 11; Rom. 16:1)—this rule was written in the masculine even though it also applied to women. In the same way, verse 2 may apply to women even though it is written in the masculine.

Difficulties in application

In our detailed examination of the Bible, we did not find any scripture that forbids women from being recognized as spiritual leaders in the church; there is no verse that makes a permanent restriction on women. Our understanding is that the question of whether women may serve as elders and pastors is a cultural question on which the Bible doesn’t set forth a permanent restriction. The scriptures concerning this question are cultural and social in character, concerning the leadership of the church in the first century. In most parts of the world, today’s cultural context is not the same as it was in the first century. For example, in the first century the church allowed slavery, something we would not allow today. And the role of women in the public sphere was different in the first century than it is today.

Selection of elders and pastors should be based on seeking out the best person to fill the responsibility, according to the principles in the Scriptures, the needs of the congregation, how the congregation sees these issues, the cultural environment, and whom God can be seen using, without regard to whether the candidate is male or female.

Just as we consider the holy kiss, footwashing, the widows’ roster, and

headcoverings to be rooted in culture and not required today, we conclude that Paul’s restrictions on women in leadership were rooted in culture or based on specific circumstances in his churches, and it is not necessary for the church to consider that restriction permanent. Since we do not want to forbid something that the Bible does not forbid, we will no longer forbid women from being ordained as elders and appointed as pastors. We want churches to be led by the best personnel available, without making unnecessary restrictions on who that might be.

Appointment of pastors

Senior pastors are appointed by the denomination. Before a pastor is appointed, the district superintendent consults with the CAD office and the congregation’s leaders to explore the viable alternatives.

If the person has not been a pastor in our denomination before, the person is called a pastoral team leader and is not installed as a senior pastor until after six months of service and a positive review from the congregation.

Based on the U.S. *Church Administration Manual* (2006) sections 6.3.4-5. See section 6.4 of the 2011 edition.

However, we recognize that there are a number of practical considerations involved in applying this change in policy.

First, not all members will agree with our conclusion. Reasonable, well-trained scholars sometimes come to a different conclusion—perhaps by concluding that 1 Tim. 2:12 is the “clear” scripture and 1 Cor. 11 is the unclear one.⁴ We respect honest differences of opinion, and do not want to impose leaders on congregations in which most of the members will resist their leadership.⁵

⁴ They may be influenced by their culture, or their fears of cultural change, in ways they do not realize, just as we may be influenced by our culture in ways *we* do not realize. Despite the inability of anyone to achieve complete objectivity, we all have to make conclusions as best we can, without condemning those who come to different conclusions. Some evangelical churches began ordaining women in the 19th century, long before the modern push for women’s rights.

⁵ Conservative Thomas Schreiner writes, “Some women unquestionably have the spiritual gift of teaching. Men should be open to receiving biblical and doctrinal instruction from women.... Moreover, women should be encouraged to share what they have learned from the Scriptures when the church gathers. The mutual teaching recommended in Colossians 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 14:26 is not limited to men” (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [Zondervan, 2001], 191).

Second, not all women are suited for leadership, just as not all men are. Only people who have the spiritual gifts needed for leadership should be appointed as leaders. We expect that if spiritual gifts are present and the need exists within the congregation, they will be recognized by the congregation.

Ordination of elders emerges out of the local congregational situation where a person's recognized spiritual gifts and heart for ministry, regardless of gender, determine aptness for ordination.

Third, there are local situations (just as there were in Ephesus) in which it would be counterproductive to have female leaders. Some cultures and subcultures around the world view female leadership as offensive. Although cultures sometimes surprise us in allowing exceptions to tradition, it is still necessary to assess which leaders will have "a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Tim. 3:7).

In short, our denominational position is that women may be ordained as elders and appointed as pastors.⁶ This is a permission, not a requirement. We do not plan to seek female candidates for the office of elder or pastor merely on the basis of their being female, but elders and pastors may from henceforth be chosen from among males and females alike. Elders and pastors, whether male or female,

⁶ Some people might call this an "egalitarian" position, but that label is not an adequate description of our position; we have seen numerous exegetical excesses as egalitarian scholars have attempted to push their agenda into the Scriptures, and we do not approve of such excesses. Similarly, we do not accept the label "feminist," for that label is often associated with agendas we do not endorse.

Selection and ordination of elders

The pastor usually initiates the process of recommending an individual for ordination as an elder. The pastor usually discusses the matter with the candidate to determine ability, availability and willingness to serve. The pastor may also discuss the proposed ordination with the advisory council and other leaders in the congregation.

The pastor may then ask the candidate to complete an application. This is reviewed by the senior pastor, the supervisor, and the superintendent of ministers. If all levels approve, the pastor will be authorized to ordain the candidate on behalf of the denomination.

An elder's ordination continues to be valid within our denomination unless and until it is revoked or is surrendered. It is transferable between all our congregations so long as that elder remains a member in good standing.

Based on the U.S. *Church Administration Manual* (2006) section 5.2.5; this corresponds to section 5.2.3 in the 2011 edition.

should be ordained and/or appointed based on 1) whether the person has the appropriate leadership gifts, 2) whether members of the congregation affirm these gifts by looking to that person for spiritual leadership, and whether the congregation needs another elder or a pastor.

Questions and concerns

What happens when a woman ordained as an elder in a given congregation moves to a different congregation? When an elder, male or female, moves to a different congregation, the ordination continues to be valid, but the person is not automatically licensed as an elder in the new congregation.⁷ Leadership in our congregations depends on congregational need and the approval of denominational supervisors. A candidate for ordination, male or female, is thus affirmed through recognition of that person's ministry and leadership capabilities. If the person has leadership gifts, those gifts will presumably be apparent as they are used in other roles, although it may take some time.⁸

Functional titles for ordained personnel vary locally. Some elders function as ministry leaders, some as assistant pastors, etc. Some pastoral spouses may function informally in a sort of "co-pastor" role; others may not, according to their own spiritual gifts. Elders should under no circumstances initiate the ordination of their own spouses, nor be on the committees that make such recommendations. A pastor's spouse who wishes to be a candidate for ordination as an elder will be subject to the same selection process as any other potential candidate.

Some members, even if they have a male pastor in their own congregation, may be troubled that a congregation within our denomination in some other part of the world happens to have a female pastor. If they are troubled by this, we believe that they are looking for conformity in the wrong place. Just as we can have differing opinions about what the Bible says about soul-sleep, the millennium, or

⁷ Church Administration Manual (2006), section 5.2.6, posted at <http://www.gci.org/church/manual>. See section 5.3.4 in the 2011 edition. In the same way, someone who leads worship in one congregation should not assume that the same ministry position should be available in another congregation.

⁸ Since the style of leadership can differ considerably from one culture to another, subtle in one and blunt in another, it is possible that the spiritual gifts that helped a person lead in one congregation are simply not useful in the other.

the rapture, we can also have different opinions about what the Bible says about women in leadership.

Often the matter boils down to how a person prefers to resolve Paul's statements: in one place Paul permits women to speak, and in another he prohibits it. Which policy is more likely to be the permanent one? Is the prohibition temporary in the same way as his policy on widows is?⁹ We believe that there is room in our denomination for people of either viewpoint regarding female ordination, and that this is not a matter on which people should accuse, condemn, or break fellowship.

Some people are worried that if churches allow women as well as men to be leaders in church, then they are unwittingly contributing to the gender confusion found in Western society. This is a "fear of the consequences" argument that touches deep emotional concerns, but is not logically or biblically valid.¹⁰ The fact that God called women to leadership roles in ancient Israel is evidence against the validity of this argument. People could just as easily claim that female civil leaders create gender confusion, but we have to acknowledge that God raised up a female civil leader for ancient Israel.¹¹

We believe that Scripture allows society to have females as schoolteachers, doctors, and political leaders without causing gender confusion; the church can also have female leaders without causing confusion.¹² The church teaches that we are all made in God's image and are equal heirs of salvation. The gender confusion found in society today is regrettable, but it cannot be solved by the church making

⁹ As another example of a temporary policy, Paul tolerated slavery, even though it was less than ideal, due to its prevalence in the first century.

¹⁰ A few people have expressed concern that the principles used in reaching our conclusions about the ordination of women might also lead us to revise our teaching about the ordination of practicing homosexuals. In our view, arguments in favor of the ordination of homosexuals, while perhaps overlapping in certain ways with arguments about ordaining women, are nonetheless in the final analysis substantially different from the arguments about ordaining women, and it is our position that the former cannot be argued to from the latter.

¹¹ Some say that God raised up Deborah only because of exceptional circumstances. We could also note that there are exceptional circumstances in some of our churches today.

¹² The presence of female leaders does not—and cannot—do away with the obvious biological and reproductive differences between males and females. Our study has not addressed the question of the role of men and women in families.

restrictions that are not supported by Scripture.

We have dedicated several years to an in-depth study of the role of women in church leadership—specifically focusing on the question of the ordination of women as elders and the related topic of women serving as church pastors. All along the way, input has been sought, received and carefully considered from our members, our pastors, our pastoral supervisors, our doctrinal review team and other church staff. We based our study on the Bible, not contemporary culture or experience.

While we have read and weighed the writings of many authors on this topic, we have done so with the purpose of gaining a clearer understanding of the Scriptures, surrendered to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Not wanting to forbid what the Bible does not forbid, and desiring to allow all our members to use their God-given gifts to their fullest potential for the benefit of the church, our denominational position is that, based on local circumstances and an individual’s characteristics, women may be ordained as elders and appointed as pastors.

“God did not assemble that body [the church] and give gifts to its members so that we may quarrel or pass our time contemplating who shall be greatest in the kingdom. He has done these things so that both men and women, joint heirs of the gracious gift of life, may use all their talents and gifts in his service to spread his kingdom and to call humans of all sorts from death to new life in Jesus Christ.” —James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Zondervan, 1981), 253.