

Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction

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Preface by Joseph Tkach

In 2003, we announced that we would be formally considering the role of women in the church. We invited members and pastors to send us their research. As we expected on this controversial issue, we received a variety of responses. Some were well thought out; others gave opinions without any particular support.

Members of our doctrinal team read these papers and discussed the issue for several months—and several more months of discussion are scheduled. Here, we are publishing an introduction to the topic. This article is a committee product, and although not every member of the doctrinal team sees this issue in exactly the same light, we present here some introductory matters that we agree on.

The question is sometimes phrased as “women in ministry,” but we should note that we have always had women in ministry. That is, we have always had women who served in the church, in a variety of roles, and we’ve had women who were leaders of groups within the church (although their role as leader was not always acknowledged with a specific title). The question before us is whether women can be ordained as elders. A related question would be whether women can serve in leadership offices that are generally reserved for elders, such as senior pastor, district superintendent, etc.

This is not simply an academic question. In some of our smaller congregations, women are already serving in roles of spiritual leadership. As we have learned more about spiritual gifts and lay ministries, we have also observed that gifts in areas of spiritual service, such as worship, biblical studies, public speaking, and pastoral care, are not limited to men. In some cases, women are currently serving on congregational leadership teams, not because of any push for feminine representation, but because the congregation believed, and the district superintendent agreed, that these particular women had spiritual maturity and belonged on the pastoral leadership team.

Before we entered this study, some members of our doctrinal team felt that these women could be ordained as elders; other members believed that the Scriptures forbid the ordination of women as elders, and some were undecided.

Our goal is to understand what the *Bible* says to us about this subject. We are in agreement on the introductory issues, as the article below presents them.

We plan to publish more articles as we continue to work through the questions in a systematic way. Our next paper will be on the subject of ordination: just what does it mean to ordain a person to a role in the church? Future articles will examine the major relevant scriptures to see what they do and do not teach.

We believe it is just as important for members to see *how* we reach our decision, as it is to read the final decision. It is my prayer that we will all learn from the process, and be filled “with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that [we] may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10).

In Jesus’ service,
Joseph Tkach

Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction to the Question

Our *Statement of Beliefs* does not say anything about women in church leadership. However, it does say that the Bible is “fully authoritative for all matters of faith and practice.” Our question, then, is what the Bible says about women’s role in the church. Our starting point, and the final authority, is Scripture.

Our *Statement of Beliefs* also says that we are willing to grow in knowledge, willing to respond to God’s guidance. We recognize that we do not always understand Scripture perfectly. Some parts of Scripture are difficult to understand. Others parts are easy to understand but difficult to apply.

Scripture often calls on us to resist trends within society; at other times it encourages us follow cultural customs. For example, Scripture includes the following command: “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Pet. 5:14). Although Christians in some cultures have no problems with this command, people in America generally do, and we have long considered this command to be based in culture and not a timeless truth. We encourage members to implement the *principle* of the command, without obeying it literally, even though Paul probably

never thought the day would come when a kiss would be offensive rather than friendly.

When Peter and Paul wrote their commands for a holy kiss, they were influenced by their culture. When Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:1), he was accommodating himself to culture. He was not advocating slavery itself. There is no question that *some* of his commands apply only to his culture. Others just as clearly are timeless, and there are a few in the middle that are debatable.

So, the question is, how do we tell when a biblical command is based on culture and in need of modification for the different cultures we live in today? How do we tell when a command is timeless? When Paul writes that he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12), is he just expressing his own opinion (after all, he states it as what *he* does, and not as a command), or should we treat his policy as a permanent rule for the church?

How do we decide what God's will is? It is a question not just of what Scripture says, but *what it means for us today*. Should we apply it literally? Or should we (as with Rom. 16:16) analyze what principle lay behind Paul's words, and follow that? Let us look at an example of a conflict between Scripture and culture. Although this example is *not* an exact prototype for the issue of women in the church, it does help illustrate the question.

Comparison with slavery

In 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Paul tells Christian slaves to respect their Christian masters, and he never commands the masters to free their slaves. Is Paul therefore supporting slavery, as many 19th-century Americans argued? Or was he simply going along with culture, so the gospel would not be seen as an enemy of society—"so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered"?

Slavery had a few positive functions in ancient society, but Paul could have challenged slavery itself as demeaning, as contrary to the love that should characterize God's people, and as a violation of the created order. But he did not; neither did he challenge the political system of Rome, the frequent brutality of the army, or unfair methods by which taxes were collected.

Nevertheless, the gospel challenges culture. It challenges us to treat poor people with respect, not to favor the rich (Jas. 2:1-7). The gospel challenged Jews to treat Gentiles as equals; it challenged Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus "as

a dear brother” (Phm. 16). If masters treated their slaves as family members, then slavery would soon disappear—and in this way the gospel challenged the attitudes that allowed slavery to exist. The gospel sowed the seeds that undermined the injustice of slavery—but the Bible does not attack slavery directly.

Some people today say that the gospel sows the seeds that undermine gender restrictions, too. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse is about equality in salvation, but does it sow the seeds for leadership equality within the church, too? Is it not possible for people to have equal importance within the church without having the same roles? However, the church no longer treats Jews and Gentiles differently; we denounce as unjust the existence of slavery; should we also stop differentiating between men and women when it comes to leadership in the church?

In other words, when Paul said that women should be silent in the churches, was he simply going along with his culture, just as he went along with slavery, knowing that the gospel would eventually correct the problem? Did he expect his comments in Gal. 3:28 to eventually counteract his comments in 1 Tim. 2:12? Or was he so close to his culture that he never really thought about it, just as he probably assumed that a holy kiss would always be fitting and appropriate? Or was Paul giving a policy that provides permanent guidance for the church?

History

The church has not always been on the right side of cultural questions. When it came to slavery, some Christian churches were in the forefront of the move for emancipation. But in the 20th century, many churches resisted the cultural move for social equality for the descendants of those slaves. Sometimes culture is right, sometimes it is not.

Culture sometimes asks ethical questions, but for Christians, culture cannot answer them. Rather, we look to Scripture as the foundation for what we do. Even if some cultures in the 1930s said that we should treat Jews as subhuman annoyances, the gospel says that Christians should have resisted the cultural trend, even though some church bodies went along with it. But when it comes to the authority of women in the church, it seems that the church is *responding* to culture rather than being an initiating force.

Nevertheless, we believe that the scriptural record as it pertains to women in roles of leadership requires careful study and a detailed response to the question of the ordination of women as elders.

Dealing with differences

The issue *does* require careful study. When it comes to a holy kiss, we can't just say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." That approach may sound humble, but it is simplistic and arrogant, because it assumes that "I" have the only accurate understanding of what Scripture teaches.

The truth is that we all come to Scripture with some assumptions from our own culture. Some of us come from a culture where women are expected to submit to men in particularly restrictive ways; others of us come from a culture that encourages women to think for themselves and to take leadership roles. Some cultures today are similar to ancient culture in their attitudes about women; others are quite different. Some people are afraid that any change in gender roles will cause more social chaos; others feel that changes are necessary. Each of us needs to be aware of the bias we bring to the Bible and, through discussion with one another, see how our particular bias might be influencing our understanding. In that way we let the Bible speak to our biases.

Prayer is an indispensable part of the process—we want to discern God's will, rather than assuming that we have already got it right. We want to understand why some sincere Christians come to different conclusions on this issue, and then we want to decide which explanation seems more likely to be what God intended when he inspired the Scriptures. We want the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13)—and that means that we don't have it all yet. No one does.

Since no one group has a perfect understanding of all the issues, there are some differences of opinion on biblical interpretation, even when there is agreement on the most basic doctrines of the faith. Some Christians think that the Bible instructs women to be completely silent in church; others do not, even when those holding each view have an equal belief in the authority and accuracy of the Bible. Some Bible-believing Christians believe that women must wear a covering on their head when in church; others do not. The question we have is not whether to believe the Bible; it is how to understand what the Bible is teaching. Are the

biblical restrictions on women cultural, like the holy kiss, or are they permanent, like the prohibition on adultery?

Since conservative Christians are divided on this issue, we would be naïve to think that we will achieve unanimous agreement. No matter what conclusion we come to, *some* members will think we have not weighed the evidence fairly. What should they do then? Is this issue important enough to leave the church? We don't think so (and it is possible that not even the doctrinal team will be unanimous). Our unity depends on Christ, not on complete agreement on every point of doctrine.

There are many doctrines that are essential to Christian faith—for example, the church must teach that there is only one God, and that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet there are many other doctrines that are not essential to our faith, but are practical guidelines or policies for our physical life, and these may differ from culture to culture, or from one time in history to another. We *want* to get them right, but we must also understand they are not essential to what it means to be a Christian. We believe that eldership of women is one of those doctrines. It is a policy matter, not part of the *Statement of Beliefs*. People do not need to leave the church if they think we are wrong about the millennium, nor do they need to leave if they think we are wrong about women's role in the church.

No matter who our congregational elders are, they are not perfect, and we all have to respect them anyway. We have to weigh what they say, accept the true and overlook minor mistakes. That will be the case whether an elder *is or is not* a woman. We might like to be part of a church with all the guaranteed correct answers, but such a church does not exist. Spiritual growth does not depend on being in a perfect church. Rather, we must learn to do the best we can in the circumstances we are in, trusting in Christ to cover us with his righteousness.

Some members will be disappointed if we permit women to be elders; others will be equally disappointed if we do not. We do not know how many hold one opinion, or how many the other—for our task, it does not matter. Our job is to discern what God wants us to do, and we will therefore concentrate on prayerful study. We will be consulting with pastors and their supervisors frequently as we share the preliminary results of our research, and we will keep everyone informed on our website.

We do ask for your prayers, and for you to study the issue along with us. We will all learn, and as we share the strengths and weaknesses of various arguments, we hope the great majority of us will agree on the results.