

Women Leadership in the Church

A THEOLOGICAL POSITION PAPER

Introduction

The topic of women leadership in the church is a complex topic and scholars with equal allegiance to the recorded Word of God arrive at differing conclusions on the matter. It is not an essential question whereby Christians should condemn one another or break fellowship with those who come to differing conclusions, however. In some churches the topic does have the potential to become a divisive matter, and we at Hill City do not want it to be elevated to that position. There will be those who disagree, but we will choose to value, engage, and attempt to understand the individuals with differing opinions.

We believe that there are essential and non-essential theological stances to our saving faith. Some topics are important, but not essential. We believe the topic of women leadership in the church is one of those matters. We, as a church, can have unified relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ without holding the same view on this issue. We understand that there are a variety of opinions regarding the role of women in the church among God-fearing Christians. Although there are outlining beliefs on this matter, two main positions are held. These positions will be simplified to provide clarity and a framework for this paper.

A **complementarian** approach believes that while men and women are created equal before God in their being and person-hood, they are created to complement each other through different responsibilities in the church and family.¹

An **egalitarian** approach believes that not only are men and women equal before God in their being and personhood, but that God has given no different responsibilities to men and women in the church and family.¹

Christians on both sides of this topic love Jesus Christ, consider the Bible to be the inspired recorded word of God, and work towards further building the Kingdom of God. God has and will continue to use churches and Christians with differing views on this matter. One reason for the differing views is that some of the most difficult passages in the Bible speak about women in leadership roles within the church. It is not uncommon to have three different evangelical theologians provide three different commentaries and interpretations of the same passages.

Hill City's Position

At Hill City Church, we place a high value on both men and women and their roles within the body of Christ, the Church. We believe men and women are equal before God in their person-hood and priesthood. We have women on our ministry staff and women serving as volunteers in key ministry leadership roles across the church. We place a high value on the voices of all Hill City's leaders. We believe God granted men and women freedom to learn and use their gifts in the church and our community. We believe the roles of elder, pastor, deacon, and teacher are servant-leadership positions and can be held by both men and women.

Key Passages on the Matter

Paul writes to Timothy regarding leadership in the church in First Timothy, the second chapter gives instruction around the worship service. "Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

¹ Clouse, B., Clouse, R. and Culver, R., 1989. Women in ministry. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”²

Another letter written by Paul to the Church in Galatia spoke a value statement over the community there stating, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”³

Paul gave Timothy additional instructions regarding the qualifications of an elder and deacon, “Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”⁴

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, the sixteenth chapter, Paul commends and asks the church in Rome to receive a

handful of people stating, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon⁵ of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.”⁶

In Corinth, Paul meets up with a husband and wife. This couple has an encounter with Apollos, recorded in Acts, “After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.”⁷

“Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.”⁸

“Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.”⁹

“My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.”¹⁰

“Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”¹¹

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow

² 1 Timothy 2:8-15. New International Version. ³ Galatians 3:28. New International Version. ⁴ 1 Timothy 3:1-13. New International Version. ⁵ The word deacon refers here to a Christian designated to serve with the overseers/elders of the church in a variety of ways; similarly in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8,12. ⁶ Romans 16:1-5. New International Version. ⁷ Romans 18:1-2. New International Version. ⁸ Acts 18:24-26. English Standard Version. ⁹ Acts 21:8-9. New International Version. ¹⁰ Colossians 4:15. New International Version. ¹¹ Philemon 1:1-3. New International Version.

worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹²

Basic Understanding of Exegesis

Most forms of biblical interpretation include these four elements: Text, Observation, Context, and Meaning.

Text

All biblical interpretation starts with interpretation of the text and the structure of the passage. Determination of the genre (literary form, subject matter, and function of the passage), comparison to similar genres, and consideration of the implications for interpretation will be the first steps in exegesis study. A critical look at the text to understand the limits and basic structure of the passage’s original wording. Translate the text from the original wording and compare different translations.

Observation

It is best practice to understand next how the passage is communicated to the intended audience. Assess the structure and relationship of words, phrases, clauses, and larger text units. Finish tracing the literary argument and create a message-driven outline tied to the passage’s main point. Clarify the meaning of key words, phrases, and concepts.

Context

Awareness of the historical culture and events when the text was composed is critical along with making note of any historical details that the author mentions or assumes. Comprehend the role that the passage plays in relationship with the rest of the writing.

Meaning

Discern the theology the text is communicating by considering how the passage connects to the Bible’s overall flow and message, specifically how does it point to Christ and how does the passage theologically contribute to the entirety of the Testament, assessing key doctrines especially in direct relation to the gospel.¹³

Common Misinterpretation

There are several New Testament passages often referenced on the topic of women in leadership. Some are used as cases against and understandably at first glance. But if we dig into the context of the why Paul was writing on this topic, we can more fully understand the original writing.

First, we must remember that in Paul’s writings are letters written to churches and individuals containing instruction regarding their questions or matters of which Paul was made aware. Some instruction can be taken as applicable to all Christians and churches, other instruction were meant for that specific audience. Context matters in interpreting all scripture.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If 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.¹⁴

Paul was providing instruction to the Church in Corinth around orderly conduct within the assembly. The Church in Corinth was experiencing issues around disruptions and intelligibility in their worship services. He first covers the need of for order during times of spoken prophesy and speaking in tongues and then shifts his attention to women speaking in disruptive ways.

In context, there were women within the Corinth church who were being disrespectful, asking questions that disrupted the orderly flow of worship. What Paul is actually calling out, is the lack of order and not women themselves speaking in church. We come to this conclusion because it would contradict Paul’s other writing within the same letter. We know he was an advocate for such roles because Paul had already

¹³ DeRouchie, J., 2022. Interpreting Scripture: A General Introduction - The Gospel Coalition. [online] The Gospel Coalition. www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/interpreting-scripture-a-general-introduction. Accessed 19 September 2022.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. New International Version.

established the gifting of ministry roles to both genders in 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14:3-5, and in 1 Corinthians 11:5 we see Paul mention women as participants in prayer and prophesy in the assembly.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.¹⁵

A little background on Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul sent Timothy to the church in Ephesus because there were problems to be addressed for continued growth of the body of Christ. The primary purpose of the first letter was to help Timothy combat false teaching seeping into the church community. "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer."¹⁶ Paul addresses high-profile false teachers, Hymenaeus and Alexander, earlier in his letter, 1 Timothy 1:20 and continues speaking to the false teachers in 1 Timothy 4. He concludes his letter, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge."¹⁷ Ephesus was a troubled congregation in a place that had an interesting context.

The Cult of Artemis had a significant impact on the Ephesian Church. The shrine dedicated to the goddess Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and located in Ephesus.¹⁸ Early in the history of the cult of Artemis, religious prostitution with a priestess comprised an important feature of worship.¹⁹ However, the Roman government abolished those practices throughout their empire by the time of Paul.²⁰ Once an Anatolian fertility goddess, Artemis of Ephesus morphed into a tomboy virgin,²¹ pure and inviolable with a retinue of dancing nymphs. Temple priestesses were highly elevated in Ephesus. Ephesus was a troubled congregation. It would be easy to ignore the context in which the letter was written, but Ephesus was a mess, full of bad doctrine. Women were being targeted by false teachers, specifically

widows and wealthy women (1 Timothy 5:13-15; 2 Timothy 3:6). We need to be cautious applying theology without first understanding context.

If care in interpretation is not taken, the context and meaning of Paul's writings, could build an entire framework from a single verse taken out of context. It is clear in other writings from Paul that he affirmed women in leadership positions. Paul in Romans 16:1 mentioned Phoebe to be a deaconess from the Cenchræa church. Junia was considered outstanding by Paul among the circle of the apostles (Romans 16:7). Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), Lydia (Acts 16:15, 40), and Apphia (Philemon 1:2) all led house churches. Priscilla was a church planter (Romans 16:5) and someone highly regarded by Paul.

1 Timothy 3:1-6

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer²² desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.²³

Paul takes the time to describe to Timothy the type of people he needs to lead the church in Ephesus. The key misunderstood characteristic is "faithful to his wife."²⁴ Many interpret this verse to demand that only men can be elders. At face value that would make sense, but the same

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 2:11-15. New International Version. ¹⁶ 1 Timothy 1:3. New International Version. ¹⁷ 1 Timothy 6:20. New International Version. ¹⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, "Ephesus," DPL 249–52, 250. ¹⁹ Chris Church, "Fertility Cult," HoLBD, 566. ²⁰ S. M. Baugh, "Cultic Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal," JETS 42, no. 3. ²¹ Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae* (vol. 2 of *The Complete Greek Drama*; trans. Jr. Eugene O'Neill; New York: Random House, 1938), 115–9. ²² Other translations use the term elder. ²³ 1 Timothy 3:1-6. New International Version. ²⁴ 1 Timothy 3:2. New International Version. ²⁵ 1 Timothy 3:12. New International Version. ²⁶ Romans 16:1. New International Version.

exact phrase is used again later in the letter to describe the characteristics of a good deacon. “A deacon must be faithful to his wife”²⁵ and Paul commends a female deacon by name in the Cenchreae church. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.”²⁶ The Greek word used to describe Phoebe’s position is *diakonos*. The same word is used in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 in describing the qualifications of a Deacon. The conclusion we can draw is Paul did not have issue with women in leadership positions, but that Paul was speaking to the fact that the leader should be faithful in their monogamous marriage. A characteristic that would align with the Christian way of living and by not doing so, dishonor would be brought about causing others to be hesitant in following. We do not have a credible interpretation of a named female Elder in Paul’s letters, but we do see a woman fulfilling the role of an elder in Priscilla. “Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”²⁷ Priscilla and Aquila corrected Apollos’ theology and explained the ways of God more adequately. Protecting and correcting another teacher in their church would be a role fulfilled by elders. It would be improper for members of the church to correct the theology of a teacher.

Conclusion

It is no surprise women were active in the early church. From the very start—the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus—women were significantly involved. In fact, women were the major witnesses of his crucifixion and resurrection. The first generations of the Church, as the scriptures record, attests to women being in prominent leadership roles. As such we will follow suit, and affirm the roles of elder, pastor, deacon, and teacher as servant-leadership positions which can be held by both men and women.

We believe that this topic is a non-essential theological position. As we previously stated, there are those highly regarded as strong evangelical theologians, with whom we disagree and still hold in high respect. Though we hold this topic as non-essential, some have made this matter essential which has prompted us to write our position. We will continue minister alongside those who do not align with our position given continued alignment on our essential beliefs.

²⁷ Acts 18:24-26. New International Version.