

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

I am a *complementarian*. The term, *complementarian* represents an understanding of the Bible's teaching which affirms that men and women are made in the image of God and share equal dignity and worth before our Creator and in His Church. God's image is reflected in maleness and femaleness (Gen 1:27). Becoming a member of the Body of Christ is to be inaugurated into a new society where ethnic, economic and gender barriers are removed, indeed, "the ground is level at the foot of the cross" (Gal 3:28). This is true in the home as well as the church. A wife is referred to as a "fellow heir of the grace of life" (I Pt 3:7).

It is also clear in Scripture that while men and women are equal, *they have been given by God different gender defined roles in the church and home*. My purpose here is to focus on the differing functions of men and women in the local church (although the model for the church finds a parallel in the home).

Jesus and the Apostles taught that men and women equally share the full blessings of salvation (such as baptism, spiritual giftedness and the fruits of the Holy Spirit) but that *some authoritative leadership and teaching roles are to be fulfilled only by men*.

By almost any standard of measurement, Jesus' view of women was radical in His day. Jesus treated women with respect, even those who were considered unworthy of respect (Lk 7:36-39; Jn 4:7-9). Jesus communicated the gospel to women as well as men and women felt free to approach Him, be taught by Him and follow Him (and this in a day when women could not worship side by side with men in synagogue and some Jewish leaders thought women not worthy to study God's Law!). Some of His closest friends included women (Jn 11:5) as were the first eyewitnesses of His resurrection (Jn 20:18; Mt 28:9-10). Along with His affirmation of women *Jesus also taught and practiced gender role distinctions*. In fulfilling the Law (Mt 5:17), Jesus did not call into question the fact that all of Israel's historic prominent prophets and leaders were males nor that only males could serve as priests. When it came time to prayerfully choose and train the twelve apostles, He chose only men (Lk 6:12-13).

The Apostle Paul teaches the doctrine of leadership (headship) and submission in several of his letters. All believers are called upon to submit in certain relationships. For example, children are to submit to parents (Col 3:20), slaves to masters (Titus 2:5), citizens to governing authorities (Rom 13:1), wives to husbands (Eph 5:23), believers to church leaders (Heb 13:17), and believers to one another (Eph 5:21). There is currently an increasing intolerance for the term *submission* that has been fueled by a relatively recent (in church history) effort by a segment of the evangelical church to redefine the word and clothe it with an obscure definition that does not possess sound lexical support. The doctrine of submission as evidenced in the verses above is not to be exercised identically in every relationship. Thus, the way a citizen submits to a government differs from the way a believer submits to an elder, or, the way believers submit to one another is distinct from the way a wife submits to her husband.

Women are prohibited from "teaching or exercising authority over a man" in the local church (I Tim 2:11-15). Thus, the office of pastor or elder is not available to women. Paul's stated reason rests upon the created order as set forth in Gen 2. Like Jesus, Paul appeals to the created order in Gen 2 to establish a proper understanding of the proper roles for men and women. The principles present in the ethics of the created order transcend cultural realities. Gen 2 is sited to show man's prior creation to woman (which entails a role of leadership and authority) and Eve's deception by Satan (I Tim 2:13-14). Elsewhere, Paul sites Gen 2 to demonstrate the leadership role of men over women in the local church due to the fact that woman originates from, and was created for, man (I Cor 11:8-9). Regardless of how one interprets the matter of head coverings in I Cor 11 or the issue of a woman's verbal participation in corporate worship in I Cor 14, it is evident that Paul is giving instruction to insure that men and women function in ways that are appropriate in light of their God assigned roles when assembled for worship.

There is no evidence in Scripture to suggest that women should not serve as pastors or elders because they are in some way inferior to men spiritually or mentally. The role distinction is not based upon ability, but upon God's revealed pattern of authority for the local church. Men who serve as pastors/elders have the primary responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the local church which includes the proper teaching of the Word of God and guarding against false doctrine.

Aside from the pastor/elder offices, there are numerous other areas of ministry in the local church where women have a vital role. The New Testament gives ample witness to the fact that women were visibly and actively involved in the churches. The Apostle Paul commends certain women by name for their courage, love and hard work for the Lord and counted some of them as his personal friends and co-

workers (Rom 16:1-16; Acts 18:26; Phil 4:2-3; I Tim 3:11). Women assisted the male leadership in caring for widows (I Tim 5:16) and serving in the deacon ministry (I am persuaded that the NT office of deacon had females as well as males). Early church history records that an order of female deacons (“deaconesses”) functioned to assist pastors in baptizing females and in visiting women in their homes. Mature women are given the charge to teach the younger married women to honor God by properly fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives (Titus 2:3-5). Indeed, many of the spiritual needs of women in the congregation are best met by women ministering to women. Women with the gift of teaching have significant avenues of ministry in teaching the Word to women, youth and children. Women should also be visible participants in aspects of the corporate worship of the church such as prayer, reading Scripture, music, ushering and assisting with the distribution of the Lord’s Supper and offering baskets.

At the outset I stated that the image of God is reflected in maleness and femaleness. The church should encourage women to use their spiritual gifts and their God-given female perspective to edify the church body in all the ways that the Scripture prescribes. A church that fails to do this is neglecting a valuable dimension of God’s image in our midst.

The role of women in the church (and home) has become an intensely controversial issue in our current day. Those who disagree with the “complementarian” interpretation presented here have in times past usually been the liberal “mainline denominational” churches. But, in recent years some professing evangelical Christians have offered interpretations of Biblical texts that question the complementarian position on male/female roles. This opposing view is referred to as the *egalitarian* view. In assessing the egalitarian view, I share the deep concern of the framers of **The Danvers Statement** when they observe, “*the increasing prevalence and acceptance of hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret plain meanings of Biblical texts; the consequent threat to Biblical authority as the clarity of Scripture is jeopardized and the accessibility of its meaning to ordinary people is withdrawn into the restricted realm of technical ingenuity; and behind all this the apparent accommodation of some within the church to the spirit of the age at the expense of winsome, radical Biblical authenticity which in the power of the Holy Spirit may reform rather than reflect our ailing culture.*” I highly recommend and endorse the Biblical affirmations of the **Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood** and their “Danvers Statement” in its entirety. (www.cbmw.org).

Women have been mistreated and abused throughout history and, according to governmental agencies worldwide, continue to be today. Unfortunately some elements within the Church have also been guilty of subjecting women to legalistic man made traditions that only serve to promote sinful desires for male supremacy. As we earnestly seek to expose un-Biblical views of women and their roles in the church we should be careful not to forfeit God’s revealed will for male/female roles. He has given a pattern for church life, that when followed, will benefit His people as we experience the beautiful harmony of men and women complementing one another as we love and serve the Lord together.

Suggested further reading:

1. *Men and Women-Equal Yet Different*, Alexander Strauch (brief treatment)
2. *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, John Piper & Wayne Grudem, editors (extensive treatment)