



Frequently Asked Questions on Women in Leadership

In the coming months we will explore a variety of questions, texts, and related topics. Below are a few “frequently asked questions.” These answers are not exhaustive, but indicative of areas to be explored in classes and teaching times.

“Why would we do this?”

Because by doing so, we believe we are being faithful to the story of Scripture. We believe God created men and women in equality and mutual partnership. Patriarchy, however, comes as a result of sin and the fall (Genesis 3). Yet the prophet Joel anticipated the coming day in which the Spirit would be poured out equally upon both sons and daughters, men and women. In the ministry of Jesus, numerous women participated in crucial and integral ways, including the financial support of the ministry. Mary, chided by her sister Martha, “sat at the feet of Jesus,” which is a way of saying that she was granted her desire to become a rabbi-in-training. Then with the start of the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled, with the Spirit of God poured out on people of all lands, both men and women. The Apostle Paul then would, of much importance, stipulate that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, no male and female, neither slave nor free”: which is to say that the bonds of hostility between the various parties had been broken down in Christ. Thus women—unlike the patriarchal society around them—served in a great number of roles in the early church (with Romans 16, for example, listing numerous women involved in various roles, including Junia listed as an apostle, and Phoebe listed as a deacon).

This step forward at Otter Creek is an opportunity for us to bear witness to this liberating power of the Gospel, to honor the gifts of all women and all men, to be employed equally in service to the Kingdom of God. Acknowledging that this is a sharply debated matter on which Christians differ, we desire to exhibit humility. But we do not make this move with any fear that we are ignoring Scripture. We make this move with the conviction that we are better honoring the Gospel by doing so.

“Is this just some sort of culturally-driven political-correctness that ignores Scripture?”

No. An immense amount of time has been spent studying Scripture on this topic, and we believe that the gospel stands timelessly opposed to forms of silencing and limiting women, at best, or oppressing women, at worst. Otter Creek has for decades pushed against such forms of patriarchy in various ways. We are at this point taking the next step forward in such faithfulness, as best we know how.

That said, it’s important to note that while our foundational reason for taking this step is not culturally-driven, we do believe that it is entirely missionally appropriate. As the Apostle Paul insisted—when it does not compromise our faithfulness to do so—we should “become all things to all people” for the sake of the Gospel. That is, we must be attuned to the cultural context in which we find ourselves, and adapt to the degree that Gospel principles and commitments allow, so that we not needlessly alienate our neighbors and thus inhibit evangelism. Given the ways that women and their leadership capacities are



commonly honored in numerous contexts in our cultural setting—as CEO’s, entrepreneurs, college presidents, and in countless other ways—we find this step at Otter Creek not only faithful, but also missionally pressing.

“But, the New Testament has very clear language about the role of women. For example, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that ‘women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak.’ Doesn’t the practice of women preaching, or praying publicly, or leading worship publicly, clearly violate this direct commandment?”

This is a helpful text to consider, because it points us toward two major considerations: (a) All texts must be interpreted in light of their biblical and historical context. For example, elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (chapter 11), Paul tells women how to conduct themselves when they pray in the assembly. If they are praying in the assembly, then what sense does the command to “be silent” make? Could it mean—as many have supposed—that there was a group of women causing a disturbance in the congregation at Corinth, and Paul is commanding them to keep quiet and stop making a scene? (b) Our own history at Otter Creek is noteworthy here. We made the decision years ago that this text should not be employed to silence women, and have encouraged women to use their gifts in publicly teaching, praying, singing, and serving. That decision did not lead to a minimizing the authority of Scripture, but was made because of careful study of the Scriptures.

“In 1 Timothy 3 a list of traits is given for elders in the church. It says ‘he’ numerous times, and it says ‘husband of one wife.’ This is very clear. Why should this even be a question open for discussion?”

The original text does *not* say ‘he’ numerous times; there are no masculine pronouns in this text (just as Romans 12:6-8 has no masculine pronouns). The gender is unspecified. It is worth noting that many translations have supplied ‘he’ when the original Greek text does not say ‘he.’ It is better translated ‘if anyone desires the work of a bishop [or elder], then such a one desires a good work. Such a one should be the sort of person who...’

With regard to the phrase ‘husband of one wife’ (which in the original Greek is literally ‘one woman man’): this language may be better understood as an idiom—a culturally bound way of saying something that should *not* be understood literally. (If someone says “it’s raining cats and dogs,” we know they simply mean it’s raining really hard; they do not mean cats and dogs are falling from the sky. Scripture, like all literature, often uses idiomatic expressions.) In its first century context, adultery was a widespread, culturally accepted practice. To enjoin leaders in the church to be a ‘one woman man’ is a way of saying this: an elder in the church should be one who takes marriage vows seriously.

In addition, it is worth noting that ‘one woman man’ is also specified as a trait for deacons (1 Timothy 3:12). But Paul elsewhere refers to the woman Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1. Whatever ‘one woman man’ precisely means, it did not exclude the woman Phoebe from being a deacon. Similarly, in 1995 Otter Creek began the practice of appointing women as ministry leaders, and in 2009, Otter Creek began to appoint women as deacons, whom we called Ministry Coordinating Committee members; we



did not then and do not now believe this phrase excludes women from that role, nor do we think it excludes women from the role of elder.

“All the twelve apostles were men. If Jesus was really interested in overthrowing patriarchy, he had a perfect opportunity to do so in choosing women to be included in the twelve.”

The twelve apostles were indeed all men. But they were all also Jews, which we do not consider a binding example with regard to leadership in the church. The more likely reason for Jesus selecting twelve Jewish men is the importance of his symbolic re-constitution of Israel, represented by the twelve tribes of Israel, identified in relation to their twelve Jewish forefathers. Meanwhile, Jesus’s ministry was characterized by numerous instances of friendship, partnership, and engagement with women. Later, the Apostle Paul refers to the woman Junia as an apostle (Romans 16:7).

“If women begin to serve in this role, the men will increasingly shrink back from leadership in the church.”

We have 90+ years of history of both men and women serving with great passion and intensity, and anticipate that this decision will only strengthen that tradition.

“Surely knowing the will of God can’t be this complicated, and surely we don’t need a PhD to understand Scripture.”

It can be quite complicated. The Christian church is in fact dependent upon the work of biblical scholars and theologians. This dependence shows itself, for just one example, every time we open our Bibles. Our English Bible translations are the fruit of immense study by many, many scholars who have given their lives to learn ancient languages, cultures, and historical contexts in order to translate texts with fidelity. Even among such faithful scholars, there is often disagreement about the best way to translate texts (just compare, for example, the many different ways English translations render the phrase ‘one woman man’ in 1 Timothy 3), and disagreement (often spirited disagreement!) about the most faithful way to apply and interpret many biblical texts. (It’s worth noting that even 2 Peter 3:16 says that in the beloved Apostle Paul’s writings “there are some things in them hard to understand.”[!])

It’s not always so complicated. The big themes—such as the sacrificial love of Christ exhibited in his ministry, death, burial, and resurrection—come through clearly, repeatedly, and without equivocation. While we are still dependent upon scholars for their work of translating Scripture even here, these life-changing and redemptive themes can be grasped with greater ease.