



Women in Leadership

Perhaps no other issue has caused controversy among churches in the last few years as much as the issue of women in leadership roles in the Christian church. With the rise of the feminist movement and increased recognition of women in the workplace, a whole host of questions arise about what aspects of leadership are open to women in the local church. *Can women be ordained? Can women teach the Bible to men? Should women be elders?* This pamphlet will give you an overview of what we believe the Bible says about this issue, and to summarize Life Bible Fellowship's position. This is not an attempt to defend our position. For this we refer you to the suggested reading at the end of the pamphlet. We recognize that this is an issue that many Bible believing Christians disagree on. We don't claim to have the final word, nor do we break fellowship with those who would disagree with our position.

The most important factor to consider on this issue is the Bible's teaching about men and women. In the short space available here, we can only survey this teaching. As a church that considers the Bible to be infallible and without error, we seek to understand God's Word to our particular situation on this important issue.

The Old Testament

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the earth." So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in numbers; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

This creation account presents us with a window into life before sin entered into our world. God created the first man and woman in His image and likeness. In fact, many translations render "man" with the more generic word "humanity," since both Adam and Eve are included in this description (see Piper and Grudem chap. 3). God commissioned both Adam and Eve to rule over creation and subdue it; He blessed both and told them to increase in number. We see nothing here to indicate any distinction or difference in roles between the first man and first woman.

Genesis 2:18, 20-25

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."...So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

While the account in Genesis chapter 1 merely mentions the creation of humanity, chapter 2 zeros in on the specifics of that event. For the first time since the beginning of creation something is said to be "not good" (v. 18) – The aloneness of the man. Therefore, God creates a suitable helper for the man. Some have understood the word "helper" to imply that the woman has an inferior role in the relationship; however, a careful study of the Hebrew word *ezer* (translated "helper" here) shows that it does not imply inferiority. For example, the Bible calls



God Israel's "helper" (Hebrew, ezer) in Psalm 121:1-2 and 1 Samuel 7:12. The only possible implications of a subordination are the facts that the man gave the woman her name and the man was created first. The New Testament refers to this order to support a distinction in gender roles in 1 Timothy 2:13, as we will see later. However, the author of Genesis does not state this. All we see is equality in relationship without the effects of sin.

Genesis 3:16

To the woman (God) said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

This passage is part of the curse that came into God's creation as a consequence of the man and woman's disobedience to God. From this point on, sin dominates the world of men and women. This whole chapter has been called the Fall of Humanity because it reveals how sin effects human relationships and human life. Some people interpret the woman's "desire" for her husband as a sexual desire; however, this hardly fits the context. Surely she had a sexual desire for her husband before the fall. The key to understanding this verse is to compare it to another verse that is nearly identical in Hebrew. This verse is Genesis 4:7, where it says, "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." The words "desire" and "master" in this verse are the same Hebrew words translated "desire" and "rule" in Genesis 3:16. In both cases the desire is for control. As a result of the fall of humanity, the woman will struggle to control the relationship. However, the grim reality is that the man will rule over the woman, if by nothing else than sheer strength alone. Here we see the beginning of the battle of the sexes. This is not a positive statement about how life should be, nor is it a description of what God's plan for marriage is. This is a bleak description of the effect of sin on the relationship between men and women.

Judges 4:4

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.

During the time of the judges, godly men and women were rare. Among the few godly people who ruled Israel we find Deborah. The text does not tell us how Deborah became the ruler of Israel, or how the people felt about it, or even if this was considered a good thing. The writer of Judges only mentions it, and then tells the story of how Deborah and her military commander Barak delivered the nation of Israel from their enemies. Deborah is also called a prophetess, which was a fairly common role for women in Israel (see Exodus 15:20, 2 Kings 22:14). Some infer that since there were no qualified men to lead Israel, God allowed a woman to be in the role. However, this is purely inference. All we can say with certainty is that God allowed a woman to serve as a political and spiritual leader in Israel during this very dark time in its history.

The New Testament

Luke 10:38-39

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

In our own Western culture we don't realize what a radical statement this was. In the first century, to sit at the feet of a teacher was a privilege enjoyed only by men. In fact, some Jewish rabbis considered it illegal for a woman to learn the Word of God. Yet here we see Jesus, not only allowing Mary to be instructed, but also commending her for it: "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42b). Throughout the gospel accounts we see Jesus going against the cultural grain in his attitude toward woman. Although his twelve



apostles were all men, women played an important role in the broader circle of people who followed and supported Christ's ministry (see Luke 8:1-3).

Acts 2:14, 16-18

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you... This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."

This passage in Acts recounts the birth of the Christian Church. That day was marked by the Church's reception of the Holy Spirit. When the crowd of spectators marveled at what was happening, Peter explained it by quoting a prophecy from the Old Testament, Joel 2:28-32. This prophecy looked forward to a new era when God's Spirit would come in full measure upon all people, regardless of their gender, age, or social status. The day of Pentecost marked the fulfillment of that promise. God's Spirit was given to all who confessed Christ as Lord. There is also the statement that women will use the gift of prophecy, which we have already seen in the Old Testament. Prophecy is a spiritual gift that carries with it a measure of leadership, as we will see in 1 Corinthians 11. In summary, the birth of the Christian Church marked new freedom for all people, since they equally received the Holy Spirit regardless of gender, age, or social status.

Acts 18:26

(Apollos) 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.

This is a case of a person gifted by God to be a great preacher, but who's understanding of the Christian message was lacking. Priscilla and Aquila were a husband/wife ministry team who traveled with the apostle Paul on many of his church planting journeys. After these seasoned missionaries heard Apollos preach and discerned that his understanding of the Christian message was lacking, they took him aside and explained the message more accurately to him. The Greek text is clear that both Priscilla and Aquila explained the message to Apollos, and this surely involved instruction in Biblical truth. Luke doesn't make a judgment as to the rightness or wrongness of this action; he only records it for us. So, in this case we have at least one instance of a woman (in conjunction with her husband) involved in teaching a man Biblical truth.

1 Corinthians 11:3-5, 10

I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved... For this reason, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

This whole section of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is an extremely difficult passage to interpret, and even harder to apply to modern life.¹ However, without getting too bogged down in the details, a few observations are relevant to the issue of women in leadership roles. Paul is giving his permission for women to both pray and prophesy during public worship services, provided that these women do not disregard the distinctions between men and women by ignoring the cultural standards of their day. Both public praying and prophesying are up front, leadership roles, whether it is leading the congregation in prayer or bringing God's message to the congregation. Paul's concern is that there be proper recognition of headship while this is being done. In the first century culture, this was expressed by long hair and a veil. This "sign of authority" (v. 10) then enabled the woman to freely pray or prophesy during worship services.²

Women in Leadership



1 Corinthians 12:4-7

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Although this passage does not directly address the issue of women in leadership roles, it indirectly deals with the issue. The principle given here is that the Holy Spirit gives “spiritual gifts” according to God’s grace and His will. In fact, the word “spiritual gift” (Greek charisma) means “grace gift.” There is nothing a Christian can do to earn or merit his or her spiritual gifts. This means that the Holy Spirit gives gifts regardless of a person’s social status, ethnic origin, or gender. Nowhere in the Bible do we find any statement that some spiritual gifts are reserved for men only. If this were true, they would no longer be grace gifts. As we will see later, there may be different ways these gifts are used by men and women in a church’s leadership structure; however, no gifts are withheld from women simply because of their gender.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

For God is not a God of disorder, but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, 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.

This passage can be very perplexing because it appears to contradict what Paul has already said in chap. 11, where he gives permission for women to pray and prophesy in the church during worship. Does Paul mean absolute silence here? Can women even sing? Or share? The answer to this dilemma lies in the immediate context. All of chaps. 12-14 are a discussion of spiritual gifts, which the Corinthians were very confused about. Chapter 14 compares and contrasts the gift of tongues with the gift of prophecy. In the paragraph preceding this one, Paul gives specific instructions regarding use of the gift of prophecy during worship services: “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (14:20). Although it is somewhat ambiguous, the “others” here is probably a reference to the other prophets. On the basis of what Paul has already said, both men and women who are gifted in prophecy are free to use their gift in an orderly manner. But when it comes to judging the authenticity of prophecies, “women should remain silent in the churches.”³ Weighing prophecies is beyond the scope of the gift of prophecy, fitting more into the function of an elder. Paul is forbidding women from involvement in this activity, which is an elder activity. Granted the weakness of this interpretation is that it makes a prohibition that at first sounds absolute into one that is relative to a particular situation. However, the alternative is to face a glaring contradiction between what Paul says in chap. 11 and what he says here.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This verse seems very straightforward—salvation in Christ sets people free from ethnic, socio-economic and gender limitations. In the Galatian church, some people were teaching that non-Jewish Christians were second-class Christians, and they were pressuring these Christians to conform to the customs and traditions of Judaism. The whole book of Galatians is Paul’s response to this false teaching, which he denounces as a “different gospel” (1:6). Now obviously these ethnic, economic, and gender distinctions do not cease to exist when a person becomes a Christian. However, these distinctions are not significant when it comes to God’s gift of salvation or using the Holy Spirit’s gifts in ministry. As we have already seen, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost marked a new era for God’s people. All the Spirit’s gifts became available to God’s people on the basis of grace. This passage continues to affirm that reality.



These distinctions don't disappear, but they are not a basis of separation for God's people (See Piper and Grudem chap. 7).

1 Timothy 2:11-14

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 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.

Paul wrote 1 Timothy to encourage his co-worker Timothy, whom he had left at the church in Ephesus to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1:3). The Ephesian church was in a crisis because many of the elders of the church were teaching false doctrines and leading the rest of the church astray. Paul had predicted that this would happen many years prior, when he had warned the elders of the Ephesian church, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).⁴ By the time 1 Timothy was written, this prediction had become a reality, and several of the elders in Ephesus had abandoned the truth and were teaching others false doctrines. The whole purpose of Paul's letter was to instruct Timothy to remove these erring elders and to place new elders in the church who teach sound doctrine and live godly lives. That's why Paul devotes chap. 3 of 1 Timothy to the qualifications for elders.

In this context, Paul prohibits women from teaching and having authority over men. This is not a prohibition against the two separate activities of teaching on the one hand, and having authority over men on the other hand. This would contradict Paul's instructions elsewhere for older women to teach younger women (Titus 2:3-5) and for all Christians to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom..." (Colossians 3:15). Paul is forbidding women from the kind of teaching that is associated with exercising authority over men, and this is the function of the elders of a local church. That's why Paul lists the qualifications for elders immediately after this prohibition. Paul appeals to the creation order of Genesis chap. 2 and to the Fall of humanity in Genesis chap. 3 as the basis for this limitation on women. Paul's limitation is consistent with the Bible's teaching and practice elsewhere, that women may use any spiritual gift God gives them, including leadership gifts, but they may not serve as the ruling elders of a church.

Application to Life Bible Fellowship

Based on our understanding of the Bible's teaching on this issue, we believe that all avenues of ministry are open to women at Life Bible Fellowship except that of being an elder. Eldership is not a spiritual gift, but an office that a person aspires to. At Life Bible Fellowship, all ultimate church decisions are made by the Elder Board. These decisions include the doctrinal distinctives of the church. Everyone involved in teaching and instruction in the church (whether men and women) must teach consistently with these doctrinal distinctives, thus being in submission to the Elder Board. This means women may teach both men and women in certain contexts, provided that the material being taught is consistent with LBF's doctrine and that the person teaching is under the authority of the Elder Board. These contexts include adult Sunday School classes, Share & Care Groups, Support Groups, etc.

Ordination is a slightly more difficult issue. Nowhere does the Bible directly address ordination. However, our government allows churches to ordain and license "ministers." We believe the Bible teaches that every Christian is a minister, uniquely endowed with spiritual gifts, special abilities, and God given burdens for specific areas of ministry. God raises up leaders to "equip" these ministers to become effective in their service to God (see Ephesians 4:11-12). Therefore, we do not ordain or license people to "ministry" in general because that is God's calling for all Christians. We do ordain and license people to "equipping" ministries. According to our current



by-laws, "Ordination is the local church's recognition of God's calling and preparation in a person's life to a vocational equipping ministry."

Based on this definition, a person may be ordained as a missionary, church planter, children's ministry director, prison chaplain, pastor/teacher, evangelist, etc. The specific sphere of equipping ministry is defined in the ordination, and the ordination is limited to that particular area. Some vocational ministries are elder functions; some are not. For instance, in our church a pastor/teacher or a church planter would be an elder function. However, a prison chaplain, children's ministry director, or women's ministry pastor would not be an elder function. We will ordain women to non-elder vocational ministries provided that person has demonstrated God's calling to that area and has received the necessary preparation to perform that ministry. We will not ordain women to elder equipping ministries. So LBF would never have a female Pastor of Teaching, since that person must be an elder. Licensure is essentially the same as ordination, though on a more temporary basis. Licensure must be renewed annually, while ordination lasts a lifetime.

We believe this position best reflects the Bible's teaching on men and women as it applies to Life Bible Fellowship. Different local churches have different leadership structures, and we encourage a spirit of love and tolerance among Christians who apply the Bible differently to their particular situation.

Suggested Reading

John Piper and Wayne Grudem (editors), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991. This huge volume (471 pages of text) deals with this issue from a moderate traditional perspective.

Alvera Mickelsen (editor), *Women, Authority & the Bible*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986. This is a collection of essays from several different perspectives.

Notes

1For one of the best detailed explanations of this passage, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 491-530.

2I purposefully don't deal with the issues of headcoverings, veils, and long hair on women here. To explore the application of this passage to such issues, see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 491-530.

3This explanation basically follows Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 217-24.

4For a detailed explanation of the background to 1 Timothy, see Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), pp. 7-10.