

MINISTRY BEFORE CONSENSUS ON WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE CHURCH

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Introduction

Practical situations have a way of forcing us to “get on with it” despite unresolved questions. While pragmatics fosters “caving in” to illegitimate pressures, it also keeps us from letting theoretical matters make the system dysfunctional and pushes us to put things in perspective. Current differences of understanding about the range of women’s roles in the church and the home offer one more example of the qualifying effect of practical need on doctrinal theory. The need to fulfill the mission mandate suggests that we adopt an interim approach that does justice to everything we are sure about in connection with this issue.

Preliminary Guidelines

Proposed understandings of women’s roles must assume an acceptable view of scripture. Denying or discarding part of the biblical data to maintain a position is tantamount to admitting that it is the wrong position. We become judges of scripture rather than keepers of scripture. It is not appropriate to suggest, for example, that Paul was a woman hater or that he did not see the contradiction between his statement in Galatians 3:28 (“*there is neither male nor female . . . in Christ Jesus*”) and his restrictions on female leadership in the home and in the church.

The question about women’s roles raises an exegetical issue. For the sake of unity and mission, we have to divest ourselves of cultural expectancies, personality tendencies, and limited perspectives as much as possible. When we interact with alternative interpretations, we must put them in their best form to avoid creating “straw men.” It does none of us any good to be wrong.

Interpretations need to meet the test of consistency. Any assumption or line of thought that cannot be applied consistently to **arranged marriages** (1 Corinthians 7:36-38), **veil-wearing** (1 Corinthians 11:2-16) and other matters of **dress code** (1 Corinthians 11:14-15; 1 Peter 3:3-5; cp. 1 Timothy 2:9), **slavery** (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9; Philemon; 1 Peter 2:18-25), **table fellowship** (Acts 11:2-3; 1 Corinthians 5:11; Galatians 2:11-14ff.), **footwashing** (Luke 7:36-50; John 13:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:10), **anointing the head** (Matthew 6:17; Luke 7:46); **the holy kiss** (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14; cp. Luke 7:45; 15:20; Acts 20:37), **homosexuality** (Romans 1:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10), and the like, does not belong in a discussion about women’s roles. Similarly, conclusions about women’s work in the church must fit with our understanding of marriage and the home as well as the nature of church leadership.

Cultural relativity is a relevant consideration but not a decisive one. God stands above culture; so his word establishes the boundaries for social norms as much as for any others; it does not just eradicate excesses and redeem human norms.

I. Roles Women Filled in the Bible

The point of this summary is twofold. First, it is to avoid the trap in Genesis 3. Our focus must be on the many fruits that have already been offered, not on one “forbidden fruit.” Second, it is to broaden perhaps our horizons of what women in the first century did, to keep modern practices from becoming too restrictive.

Prophesying. Several women prophesied or were at least called “prophetesses” in both Testaments: Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20-21); Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth (Judges 4:4; she is also called a *judge* of Israel in 4:4; see 4:1-5:31); Huldah, the wife of Shallum (2 Kings 22:14-20 = 2 Chronicles 34:22-28), Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:3); Noadiah, a false prophetess (Nehemiah 6:14); Anna (Luke 2:36-38); Jezebel, a false prophetess in the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29; cp. 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4-19; 19:1-2; 21:5-25; 2 Kings 9); Philip’s four daughters (Acts 21:9); the general prediction in Joel 2:28 (= Acts 2:18) about daughters prophesying, and Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 about women needing to prophesy with the head covered (note also 14:26-36). In Luke’s infancy narrative, what Elizabeth (and Mary) did in 2:41-45 (cp. 2:46-55) is called prophecy when Zachariah did it (2:67-79; note Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10).

“Prophet” and “prophesy” are broad terms that could include even the Cretan poet Epimenides (Titus 1:12) and Caiaphas the high priest, who merely said more than he realized when he argued that it was better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish (John 11:49-50; 18:14). Some women like Isaiah’s wife may have been called prophetesses because they were wives of prophets.

Teaching. Older women were to be “*teachers of good*” (Titus 2:3). They were to teach younger women to love their husbands and children (Titus 2:3-5). They taught children (2 Timothy 3:14-15 + 1:5). We may note as well that Acts 18:26 says, “*Priscilla and Aquila . . . took [Apollos] aside and expounded to him the way of the Lord more accurately.*” Aquila may have actually done the teaching, the husband-wife being named together only because they were a team; but Luke words the account in connection with both of them.

Praying. Paul’s comments about women praying in 1 Corinthians 11:5, 13 appear to mean audible public prayer. Praying and prophesying by women are put parallel to praying and prophesying by men (11:4 + 5).

“Special music.” Miriam led the women of Israel in singing Moses’ Song of Triumph after the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21; cp. 1-18). Heman had three daughters who were instrumentalists in the temple services (1 Chronicles 25:5-6).

Hospitality. Widows enrolled in the church’s benevolence program were to have washed the feet of the saints (1 Timothy 5:10). Housing itinerant Christians was a kind of hospitality shown by Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15, 40).

Benevolence. A circle of women accompanied Jesus and the apostles during Christ’s ministry (Luke 8:2-3; Matthew 27:55 = Mark 15:40-41 = Luke 23:49 = John 19:25-27). They ministered to him and the twelve out of their means. Some were relatives of Jesus or the Twelve; another had been delivered from demon possession, and so on. Dorcas was an early saint well-known for her benevolence work (Acts 9:36-43).

Bearing news. Anna spoke of Jesus to everyone that was looking for redemption in Israel (Luke 2:36-38). Mary told people what Jesus had done in raising her brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11:45). Mary Magdalene announced the empty tomb (John 20:1-2), being the first recorded person Jesus appeared to after his resurrection (John 20:18 = Mark 16:9-11 = Luke 24:1-10, 22-23).

Evangelizing. The Samaritan woman announced the presence of Jesus as Messiah (John 4:1-39-42). Peter encourages wives to win their husbands by chaste behavior and respectful attitudes (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Heading households. Some women have households named after them in the New Testament: Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Lydia (Acts 16:15), and possibly Nympha (Colossians 4:15 in some mss). A wife can even be said to “rule the household” (1 Timothy 5:14), though not in place of her husband obviously (Ephesians 5:23, etc.). Heading households included taking care of widows, which possibly means one unmarried woman taking care of another (1 Timothy 5:16).

Business dealings. Lemuel’s oracle about a worthy woman includes buying land and carrying on commercial transactions (Proverbs 31:16, 18, 22). Lydia of Thyatira was a seller of purple whose business was based in Philippi (Acts 16:14); Sheerah built three fortified towns (1 Chronicles 7:24).

Undefined. Phoebe is called a “servant,” perhaps “deaconess” (*διάκονος, diakonos*) in the church in Cenchreæ and a “helper [*προστάτις, prostatis*] of many,” including Paul (Romans 16:1-2). The apostle commends her to the Roman church as someone they should help in her work. Phoebe is an interesting example because she is the only woman possibly involved in interchurch ministry (though she may have been going to work in the Roman church), and may have delivered the Roman letter. Priscilla together with her husband Aquila was a “fellow-worker” of Paul (Romans 16:3-5; cp. Acts 18:2, 18, 24-26; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19; see also above). Mary of Rome bestowed much “labor” on the Roman Christians (Romans 16:6), a comment similarly made of another lady there named Persis (16:12). Two women named Tryphaena and Tryphosa were likewise “laborers” in the Lord (Romans 16:12). Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche, who worked with him “in the gospel” (Philippians 4:3).

Evidently widows enrolled in the church’s benevolence program had responsibilities in the church. Paul speaks of not enrolling younger widows because they would want to remarry, which was somehow a setting aside or rejection of their “first pledge” (1 Timothy 5:12; cp. John Mark in Acts 15:36-41 and Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10?). Their sheer desire to remarry was apparently not the problem, because in the same context Paul urges them to remarry (1 Timothy 4:14-15). These women may have been doing what Phoebe was doing. In their enrollment they may have been expected to continue doing in a concerted way what they had done before voluntarily (2 Timothy 5:10), which gives rationale for the requirements.

In 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 Paul tells the Corinthians that the “house” of Stephanas have set themselves to minister to the saints, which in some way would involve the women of the home. The statement need not mean more than that ministry impacts and involves the whole family to a significant degree. Characteristics of elders (1 Timothy 3:2-4; Titus 1:6) and deacons (1 Timothy 3:11), therefore, include domestic considerations. In the case of deacons it is sometimes suggested that 1 Timothy 3:8-10 describes deacons generally, 3:11 women deacons specifically, 3:12 men deacons specifically, and 3:13 deacons generally again. While it is true that “wives” (that is, of deacons) in 3:11 could be translated “women” (*γυναῖκες, gynaikes*), 3:12 does not come back and say “men” (*ἀνδρες, andres*), but “deacons” (*διάκονοι, diakonoi*), and then describes them as men. Sometimes deacons’ work may have called for a husband-wife effort, especially in matters like those of Acts 6. It is also tempting to consider the work of enrolled widows as an aspect of the diaconate (see previous ¶). Deacons were selected, however, because the church had need, but widows were enrolled because they had need, although both had to meet “qualifications.” In as many as four cases, husbands and wives are mentioned

together as having a church in their home (Aquila and Prisca/Priscilla, Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Andronicus and Junia?, 16:7; Philologus and Julia, 16:15; Philemon and Apphia?, Philemon 1-2. [The last three pairs might be brothers and sisters.]).

From what we can tell, in the first-century local church, women did everything that men did except teach men officially and exercise authority over them, that is, except serve as elders. (a) All the instances of “*teaching*” they did were “un-official.” When Paul says, then, that he did not allow a woman to teach (1 Timothy 2:10), he means “teach/er” in the sense of elder—official teacher; he was not forbidding women to teach in every sense or circumstance (cp. 1 Timothy 3:14-17; Titus 2:3-5). (b) *Teacher* is an alternate word for elder (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:7? James 3:1? note Acts 20:28, “feed”). (c) Along with “*ruling*” (1 Timothy 3:5; 5:17; cp. Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24), teaching was one of the elders’ two distinctive responsibilities (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9-11), and it is teaching and ruling that Paul combines in 1 Timothy 2:12-14 as activities lying outside the responsibilities of women. (d) In his comments on women’s roles, Paul is heading into a listing of eldership characteristics. “*Prophesying*” evidently differed from teaching in not implying “official,” authoritative, or normative presentation, because prophesying is approved but teaching prohibited. Consequently, women did not take final responsibility in the church.

At the very least, 1 Timothy 2:15 teaches women first to fulfill the calling for which God has most distinctively gifted them. “*Childbearing*” obviously covers the whole process of child-rearing (15b). Wives and mothers are not to shirk those responsibilities to do something else. That may explain why many female workers in scripture were apparently women that would not have had child-rearing responsibilities: virgins, widows, older wives with grown children, or perhaps barren women. Women that do not want to fulfill the calling for which they are best gifted should be careful about trying to do something else. Disinterest in children and their needs may itself signal a relevant weakness. If a woman does not have a personality for children, she is not likely to have a personality appropriate for Christian leadership, because Christian leadership leads in a personal-interpersonal enterprise, not in achieving some impersonal goal or producing some impersonal result. Women who are dysfunctional as wives and mothers should no more expect to function as church leaders than men who are dysfunctional as husbands and fathers. For that reason also domestic qualifications appear among church leadership characteristics. As the lack of domestic competence disqualifies men so also it disqualifies women from the relevant purposes of the body of Christ in the world.

II. Principles to Be Kept in Mind

A. Principles of Interpersonal Process. What we cannot solve in fact we can often “solve” in attitude. Problems that cannot yet be resolved theologically must meantime be handled pastorally. Kingdom matters always take place in an interpersonal context. That fact establishes the primary principles for leadership itself in all its forms and circumstances. Interpersonalism draws on resources like attitude toward other people, motivation for wanting to lead, and how people carry themselves among personal equals.

B. Principles of Christian Leadership. If women are going to lead men, they need to meet the same qualifications and lead the same way. How people lead is established by the nature of people. The qualities sought in leaders are established by the nature of leadership and the purposes of the group. “*Do not many of you be teachers*” (James 3:1) would apply as much to

one sex as the other. Neither men nor women are free to bypass the dynamics of leadership appointment and operation.

Leaders are called, not just accepted. Leadership is not our own sense of calling, but a matter of being called.¹ There are two important reasons for this. (a) Often we cannot see that we are ill-suited to the role. In fact, the same lack of self-perception that disqualifies us from leadership often blinds us to our inadequacy for it. (b) Leaders do not lead unless followers follow. Leadership in the church is not a matter of “taking charge.” It is not gained or maintained by competition or a competitive spirit. Leaders are not the headstrong tellers in the group. They are people who can listen as well as tell. That is why leaders are appointed up front—to avoid the power plays that inevitably accompany a formal-leadership vacuum. Essentially the doctrine of calling says that the right to lead comes to us from beyond us. We do not arrogate it to ourselves (cp. Hebrews 5:4-6). Leadership does not mean taking the chief seats, but being called to a larger task (Luke 14:10; Matthew 20:23 = Mark 10:40; cp. Matthew 23:6).

Leadership is earned before it is given. Natural leadership precedes formal leadership, and formal should correspond to natural. Appropriate qualifications must be possessed to a reasonable extent and a positive record of their use should already be established to an appreciable degree before we are made official leaders.

Leadership is primarily through interpersonal influence rather than legal authority (or physical force). In marriage, parenting, the church, business, education, or public office, a leader does as much as possible through the first means before appealing to the second (invoking force only in exceptional cases and in restrained degree). Even though leaders do have supervisory authority, they, in fact, lead mostly by influence. Influence takes place by persuading, modeling, motivating, and other ways that work through the will of the others, not aside from it (manipulation) or contrary to it (force). Especially since the church is a voluntary society, its leaders must operate through the free will of its constituency. Members are not locked into the church as much as children are locked into a family, spouses into a marriage, citizens into a state, or employees into a job. In all these cases, leading without the will of the led does not last long. It is all the more so in the church.

Since leadership occurs primarily through influence, it is often possible to do about as much good through influence as through office; and the rewards are the same. So to speak, those who do a prophet’s work receives a prophet’s reward even if they are not prophets (cp. Matthew 10:41).

Leadership is for facilitating purpose. So, leadership is responsibility before it is anything else—like authority. Authority is added to responsibility only for practical reasons—to take care of what influence does not readily accomplish by itself. Leadership exists for orderliness, efficiency, and power. Even if a woman has a theological right to be an elder, she will not “eld” if the people feel insecure under her. If men do not respond to her, claiming her right to lead them is pointless. Furthermore, if people will not follow her outside of office, where she must lead by influence alone, they are not apt to follow her in office. If she cannot lead men naturally, she will not lead them officially. Incompetent men and women often want to get authority so people have to follow them, but such “short-cutting” is counterproductive. If a person cannot shape people’s beliefs, lives, and ministries, ordination or a diploma does not help. Trying to lead men who do not respond is an exercise in frustration for the would-be woman leader and a fruitless endeavor for the kingdom. If people do not feel secure in a voluntary society, they leave. In practice, leadership-for-purpose limits how we minister and who does what ministry, whatever theory might allow.

Even if women's roles were a purely cultural issue, that factor could not be set aside, because fulfilling purpose is what determines personnel. Even the apostles included that pragmatic approach to veil-wearing, eating shamble meat (sacrificed meat for sale in the market), and the like. They used interpersonal process even to redeem the slavery institution.

Leadership is for the led, not the leader. It is not a matter of occupying a position or gaining prestige. So, fulfillment in leading should not come from directing the program, but from helping people achieve God's purposes.

Leadership is for the Lord. We do not establish our own agenda in the kingdom, so we do not do what we want to do, the way we want to do it. If from a biblical standpoint that clearly includes or excludes female leadership, we comply even if we do not understand why. By experience we may not always be able to verify readily the wisdom of certain divine directives. Although it is not likely, it is conceivable that for the home and the church God simply commanded a pattern of sex-related role emphases without any corresponding difference in his relative gifting of men and women. Especially in the home, appointing responsibilities up front would reduce the tendency to determine leadership by competition and would help ensure that all the bases get covered adequately in providing for the family and raising the children.

Since the church, society, and the home consist of both sexes interdependently, women disqualify themselves from leadership by (1) negative attitudes toward men, (2) demeaning attitudes toward children, (3) a competitive spirit toward peers, (4) compulsive telling and verbalizing, and (5) insecurity in their sexuality just as surely as men disqualify themselves by such weaknesses. Church leadership is not the place to establish self-esteem. That needs to be in place beforehand.

Leadership is earned before given, and given, not taken. It is responsibility, not dominion or prestige. It is by influence more than by authority or force. It is for the led, for group purposes, and for the one who gives it.

III. False Issues

“Missing in action.” There is enough work in the church to keep everyone profitably involved aside from serving in the teaching-ruling office, that is, the distinctive eldership functions or their equivalent. Under supposed “restrictions,” women could bestow “*much labor*” (Romans 16:6).

“Second-class citizens.” Not being a top-level leader or having that option implies nothing about the worth of any person or class of persons. It may say something about the relative strengths of men and women in some areas, statistically speaking, but we would expect God to assign responsibilities in the home and the church in a way that optimizes relative gifting.

“Male domination.” Accusing male leadership of domination indicates a misunderstanding of Christian leadership, and may indicate a woman’s insecurity with her own sexuality as well. Leading is not dominating (Luke 20:25-28), and deference is not a “put down.” Leadership is primarily responsibility; so deference is acting in ways that recognize that the other person is being held responsible.

“Chauvinism.” Christians who restrict women from being preachers and elders do so for hermeneutical reasons, not just social, cultural, psychological, or personality ones. Unless their hermeneutical concerns are answered legitimately, they cannot help practicing what they believe the Bible teaches. A certain humility and patience must then accompany people’s discussion of

this problem. Egos and motive judgments confuse the issue, stifle discussion, and polarize people who need to unite in solving the exegetical matters.

“Discrimination.” Claiming discrimination against women begs the question. It assumes that limiting female leadership is wrong when that is the issue scripture apparently raises. Female desire to lead cannot smack of clamoring for rights and prestige, or betray a “victim” mentality or persecution complex. Leadership emphasizes service, not power, responsibility for results, not authority to control. No one should try to push himself or herself into leadership by threatening to cry discrimination.

“Stalling.” Accusing men of stalling when they want to study the issue further is just one more way of displacing the question from its exegetical context and personalizing it in a bad light. The implication is that avoidance is the real motive. The appeal for time may be a gracious offer men are willing to make instead of dismissing the alternative viewpoint out of hand.

“Insubordination.” The desire to lead does not necessarily indicate egotism or weakness behavior in women any more than in men. A woman may genuinely want to make a positive contribution by doing what she believes she can do. Negative examples among feminists do not legitimize a stereotype that men would not want to be accused of when they desire a good work.

Regarding male-female roles in the church, the issue is not leadership in every circumstance or in every sense. The issue is formal leadership of men by women in the final level of supervisory responsibility in the church—the teaching-ruling function. That leaves natural leadership entirely open, and places no limits on leadership among women and children, who together comprise a significant majority in the faith community.

Concluding Observations

On the negative side, if women avoid the excesses of American secular feminism, they remove many negative aspects of the question about female leadership in the church. On the positive side, if women begin with love for Christ, their husbands, and their children, they automatically make the best kinds of contributions to the kingdom in whatever functions they perform beyond those.

In leadership work, (a) women must prioritize the characteristics of interpersonal process, because that is the context in which all expressions of kingdom life take place and that is the kind of purpose Christ gave the church. (b) Women need to exercise their leadership according to the principles of Christian leadership, which does as much as possible through influence rather than authority or force, which is earned before it is given and given rather than taken, and which exists for results rather than prestige. Finally, (c) women should not leave to other people the responsibilities of the calling for which they are distinctively equipped and most needed in an effort to find fulfillment in other leadership roles men can do and perhaps do more effectively, all other things being equal. Mothering in the home is itself a leadership role that in many ways is more important than being an elder in the church. Somebody has to give primary attention to raising the children, and God has laid on the husband the primary responsibility for providing for the family. It is difficult to be the primary provider and primary child-raiser at the same time. So a division of labor is best.² In a society that is not faring very well in family matters, these ancient exhortations in scripture ought to receive special attention.

In general, the approach that Paul used in problem issues was to interpersonalize them. He did that with the slavery issue (Philemon; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1). He did it

also with the languages problem in Corinth (1 Corinthians **12-14**) and with the challenge to his apostolic leadership in Corinth (1 Corinthians **9**; 2 Corinthians **10-13**). His approach to several marriage issues turns on this same mechanism (1 Corinthians 7; Ephesians **5**). In some instances, the requirements of interpersonal process in effect eliminate the practice, because it cannot be done if it is not genuine (cp. language speaking especially).

This interim approach may end up having to serve as a permanent one, because the resolution of this difficulty could be a long time coming. We must proceed interpersonally both in mutual respect toward those with different understanding and interpersonally in the manner of exercising leadership whether we are men or women. Taking an interpersonal approach can ameliorate the situation until we attain the unity of purpose Christ prayed for and died for and leadership roles were established for (Ephesians **4:7-16**).

¹The calling we are talking about here is not a supernatural, divine calling through a mystical experience or objective sign. It is an invitation by the Christian community, who hopefully reflects the values, purposes, and spirit that God himself would have if he were himself issuing the invitation directly.

²That the husband remain at home while the wife works as primary provider is urged as a possibility in egalitarian circles. What is theoretically possible—and may have to be done in some cases—is a different thing from what is best. I suspect that such “role reversal” runs much more against the grain of the male psyche than it does against female inclinations and does so in a way that is not explained by social conditioning. Furthermore, I have a hard time discounting some kind of connection between the rise of secular feminism, the dissolution of the American home, and the increase of sexual dysphorias.