

The Role of Women in Ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Today there are few issues facing the local Presbyterian Church in America congregation that are likely to generate more discussion than the role of women in ministry. At Redeemer we have experienced a wide variety of opinions about how gender should affect our approach to ministry. As a Session we recognize that the Bible serves as our first and final authority in all matters of faith and practice and under it have sought to listen carefully to individuals seeking clarity about Redeemer's approach to women in ministry. For these reasons, we have concluded that a formal explanation paper would help inform our membership and guide our practices on this very important issue. Before we formally address the issue, though, it is important to outline three key assumptions about the Bible, church and our contemporary context that inform our conclusions.

Our View of the Bible

Redeemer holds a high view of the Bible. In agreement with the PCA we believe that the Bible is the infallible and inerrant Word of God. Consequently, it serves as our final authority in all matters of faith and practice. *Without God's Word as our final authority we would endlessly confuse what we see and experience in this world.* In life there are infinite competing viewpoints about what is right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, and absolute and relative. *However, when we recognize that the author of the Scriptures is also the one who made the world, we are given a transcendent perspective which informs all peoples, places, times and cultures.* In other words, the Bible protects us from what we could call "anything goes theology," which reduces truth to popular opinion, culture-bound perspective or personal preference.

Nevertheless, because of our high view of the Biblical inspiration, we do not believe that all Biblical interpretations are equally valid and also recognize that they do not have the same implications for life. Church history is replete with examples of those who sought Biblical justification for ideas and behaviors clearly contrary to God's word (i.e., the so-called Biblical defense of slavery). On the issue of gender in particular, many claim that a plain reading of the Bible yields a view of women that is oppressive and fails to recognize their equal worth and dignity with men. In light of this, Redeemer seeks to provide sound interpretations of the pertinent passages in their original contexts and also within the overall sweep of the Bible as a whole. Subsequently, careful applications of Scripture to our contemporary situation reveal how God fully honors the dignity, equality and gifts of women in ministry.

The Church

In addition, Redeemer recognizes the important role of the Church as both an institution and an organism. As the body of Christ, the Church is a living entity, filled with the Holy Spirit. The Church is the primary and active agent of the Kingdom of Christ, sent by him to carry forward his mission to make disciples of all nations by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all

that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). The Church is comprised of all those who are united to Christ by faith and their children (WCF XXV.1, 2). Within the communion of Christ all believers are co-heirs of this redemption so that in him there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

We also recognize that the Church is a visible institution. As such, the Lord has given to her a structure of authority or governance, which enables her to fulfill her mission. The authority of the Church derives from Jesus Christ himself, who is the “sole priest, prophet, king, savior and head of the church” (PCA BCO Preface, I). Jesus Christ has chosen to exercise his authority through the ministry of his Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 15:26-27; 16:12-15). To exercise the ministry of the Word in the Spirit, Christ instituted the offices of the elder and deacon. Elders exercise spiritual authority and have oversight of the Church, including its teaching. The office of deacon is not a ruling office, but deacons do exercise spiritual authority in ministry to the physical and spiritual needs of the Church.

It is important that we make a distinction between the particular calling of Church officers and the more general calling given to disciples of Jesus Christ. While all believers are disciples of Jesus, not all disciples are officers in his Church. In light of this distinction, the Scripture must be our guide for who should serve as officers in the Church.

Contemporary Context

In the latter decades of the 20th century, we witnessed a revolution in how women and their roles were viewed. It is not necessary to document the history or scope of this cultural conversation. It is sufficient to recognize that it calls for a reassessment of how women relate to every cultural institution—marriage, family, the public sphere and vocation. It is understandable that this conversation should also intersect with both the beliefs and practices of the Church.

This important conversation is taking place both within the local church and wider culture. How do we, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, answer these questions? What are our beliefs as they pertain to women in ministry and in the family? What are our practices?

- **Summary Position:** It is the view of Redeemer Presbyterian Church that men and women, being equal image bearers of God, are fully equal in dignity and worth before God and one another. Both men and women are also of equal need and, upon exercising faith, equal recipients of the saving grace found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, men and women are to exercise the full range of their gifts in the Church. There are no gifts of the Spirit that are to be exclusively exercised by men, meaning men and women are to be real partners in ministry. At the same time, Scripture teaches an authority structure for humanity established at creation and rooted in God’s Trinitarian identity. It is

called “headship” by the Apostle Paul (Gen. 2:18-20; 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:21; 1 Tim. 2:11-14). For Christians, the pattern of Biblical headship has particular application to the family and the church. Importantly, this authority structure does not violate equality, but rather provides for distinction, which complements both men and women in wonderful ways. **Therefore, at Redeemer Presbyterian Church women may join and participate in any ministry responsibilities except those distinctive to the ordained offices of elder and deacon.**

What the Doctrine of Creation Teaches

The Bible teaches us that God made the world, declared his creation ‘good,’ and by his power sustains all that he has made. So, Christians are to affirm the natural world as good. The pinnacle of God’s creative handiwork is humanity—male and female. Only after their creation does God pronounce his work “very good.” This divine pronouncement highlights a “relational need” within humanity as God-given. This is made explicit in Gen. 2:18, “It is not good that the man should be alone...” Humanity, as the image of God, is both male and female. Man is for woman and woman is for man. Importantly though, while both are equally the image of God, distinction remains. The woman corresponds to man (Gen. 2:18) in a way that nothing else in all creation could (Gen. 2:19-20). This ideal order established at creation, that men and women are fully equal, interdependent and meaningfully distinct is a view, which is preserved throughout the entire Scriptures (1 Cor. 11:8-11; 15:22-23).

Contrary to egalitarian feminists, masculinity and femininity are not simply biological realities, but rather reflect more fundamental distinctions, which though mysterious must not be minimized. For example, John Stackhouse flattens out the male female distinction in his book Finally Feminist. “I propose, then, a paradigm of gender that does, indeed, draw no lines between men and women as to role in home, church, or society—beyond those required by biology.”¹ However, this begs the question why God would draw such attention to the complementary relationship between man and woman in Genesis two and continually refer to this distinction throughout the Scriptures. Certainly more than biology is going on here. Traditionally, Christian theology has recognized gender distinctions to be important, beautiful and mysterious. To remove, denigrate or make them interchangeable is to lose an important aspect of our humanity.

One helpful way to understand this relationship is through the metaphor of a dance. For the dance to be enjoyed, each partner must assume their role. We conclude, then, that God made the divine image as male and female to exist in a beautiful, complementary relationship with itself. Important corollaries, which we can draw from this include:

- From the very beginning of creation the distinction of gender and the subsequent dance inherent in our sexuality are declared good. They are to be received and celebrated accordingly within the boundaries set by Scripture.

¹ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., Finally Feminist, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005, p. 35.

- The Bible’s understanding of gender is never set in opposition to the ideal of creation itself. Rather, the Bible always elucidates creation’s original goal by revealing how God’s redemptive actions in Christ are renewing creation. Therefore, God is at work renewing humanity’s incorrect views on gender, not only those which propagate unjust inequalities, but also those which further an egalitarian sameness devoid of creation’s beauty.

At Redeemer we recognize that God’s Word, gender, and sexuality were originally intended to work in concert with one another, not in opposition. Gender distinctions are intended to be complementary versions of God’s image so that humanity might live in full communion with God in worship, nurture relationships through family and communities, and jointly exercise dominion in the world by unlocking all of its creative potentialities.

What We Learn from the Trinity

Importantly, the pattern of distinction among those fully equal reflects God’s own Trinitarian character. In answer to question number nine of the Westminster Larger Catechism we together confess, “There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.” Nevertheless, the Scriptures also teach that there exists a voluntary submission among the equal members of the Trinity.

“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” 1 Corinthians 11:3

“So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.” John 8:28

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are each persons of the one, true and eternal God. They are completely equal. The Son is not inferior to the Father. Yet, Paul clearly teaches that the “head of Christ is God, [the Father].” *There is equality in identity and distinction in role.* The passage from John 8 reminds us that the Son voluntarily took on a subordinate role to accomplish our salvation. It is this form of voluntary and servant-oriented headship, which becomes the basis for Paul’s view of man’s headship of woman.

From this we can conclude:

- Headship does not imply superiority and submission does not imply inferiority, but reflects a Godlike cooperation in the accomplishment of a greater good.
- The headship of man over a woman is to be like that of Christ, which means it is an exercise of authority. Yet, that authority is exercised in order to serve the one

who is led. Male headship is never to be exercised in order to please the self (Romans 15:3), but rather to understand and minister to the needs of others.

What the Apostle Paul Teaches in Ephesians

Headship is most clearly delineated in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. Here Paul applies male headship to the institution of marriage. The passage from chapter five reads,

²¹ ...Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:21-33)

Let us make the following observations from the passage:

- Mutual submission within the marriage relationship is the background for the husband-wife distinctions in roles. In other words, both husband and wives are called to submit to one another so that neither one seeks to serve or please oneself. Submission sees as its goal the edification of the other. Nevertheless, as the above verses make clear this mutual submission does not mitigate the difference in roles for the man and woman.
- Submission is a ministry a wife gives to her husband because of her devotion to Christ. It is because of Christ and his grace given, not the excellence of her husband, that a wife is to submit to her husband. In other words, a wife's submission to her husband is a "gift" of grace to the husband. But how? The wife's submission serves the husband in that it affirms his God-given calling to be the leader of the family, a calling compromised and distorted by the fall. Without a wife's submitting respect, a husband will increasingly abnegate his role of leadership, which comes with its own challenges. Her submission creates a context for the husband to flourish in his leadership.
- The headship men are to give their wives is patterned after the headship of Jesus Christ, which means it is both real leadership and real sacrifice. While husbands

are called to serve their wives in sacrificial ways, it does not mean that they must never disagree with or overrule their wives. This leadership and service can be understood in two ways:

- Tie-breaking authority². Husbands are to enlist their wives wisdom in all decisions reflecting marriage as true partnership. Furthermore, that woman is specifically designed to be the complementary helper of the man (Genesis 2:18) implies that man should rely upon woman's insights and aptitudes. Nevertheless, there must be tie-breaking authority in every relationship to address the issue of a stalemate. In this case, a man ought to overrule his spouse only when it is his conviction that the alternative would be destructive to the interests of the marriage or family. Without this provision of leadership, marriage lacks direction. Moreover, God ordains who is to lead. He has not left the decision up to a husband's or wife's judgment, which would tend to be based upon self-assessed aptitudes, gifts or interpersonal skills. This rescues the marriage relationship from a potentially devastating power struggle. In summary, while headship does grant real authority, it requires the man to submit to his role given by God, which brings greater responsibility and accountability.
- Sacrificial service. It is important that husbands understand the lengths to which Christ went in order to save his church. Christ did not regard the glory of heaven worth holding on to, but gave it up for us and for our salvation (Phil. 2:5-11). That service is most clearly seen in Jesus death on the cross. In the same way, a husband's service must have real, tangible expression. Such service extends beyond "honey-do lists" and implies sacrifices in schedules, temperaments, agendas, goals, etc. in the pursuit of the wife's best. The result is that husbands increasingly reflect both the strength and tenderness of Christ in how they lead and serve their wives. In this way, they love their wives as Christ loves the church.

When husbands and wives embrace their equal, yet distinct roles in the marriage relationship they begin to experience the wonder of God's original intention for humanity. The equal dignity husbands and wives possess guards against a male chauvinism. Yet, the distinction in role also guards against a bland sameness, as well as struggles for authority by the wife or abnegation of authority by the husband. Distinction requires participation and cooperation in order that the goals of the marriage can be achieved.

What the Apostle Paul Teaches Timothy

The central passage in our discussion reads,

² Tim Keller, "Women and Ministry", position paper for Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 1989.

¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (ESV)

Paul clearly prohibits women from certain roles within the life of the church. However, it is also plain from other passages of Scripture that Paul's restrictions are not without modification. For example in 1 Corinthians 11: 5, 13 he gives instructions about women praying and prophesying. Moreover, women play a vital role in the instruction of younger women and children (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14, 15; Tit. 2:3, 4). In Acts 18:26, we learn that Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, "explained to [Apollos] the way of God more accurately." Therefore, whatever Paul's restrictions, he certainly envisions a wide-range of involvement for women as clear partners with men in ministry. It seems right to conclude that Paul's prohibition of women teaching is permanent, but also partial.³ Paul restricts a certain kind of teaching and a certain kind of rule. We must address both of these.

Given that the surrounding context of 1 Timothy 2 is worship, Paul's comments about teaching refer to the particular teaching that takes place when the church gathers in corporate worship or other public venues. Therefore, the teaching in view here is the teaching done by the recognized leaders of the church. Secondly, when Paul uses the verb "to teach" or the noun "teaching" he refers to the teaching of the core or foundational truths of Christian doctrine (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:9; 2 Thess. 2:14-15; Gal. 1:6-12).⁴ What Paul designates to men only is the preaching and teaching ministry of the church in the core truths of the Gospel. In the words of Daniel Doriani, "The point is not that men must do all the teaching or that women must never teach men anything. Rather, Paul says that men who are tested, approved, and consecrated by the church must preach, teach, and defend the gospel of Christ (2 Tim. 2:24-26)."⁵

Paul also restricts the exercise of authority to men only. Some have suggested that Paul is referring to women abusing their authority over men or usurping authority from men. Paul does not envision an abuse of authority, but has in view a right or positive exercise of authority, which he forbids women from practicing.⁶ However, like teaching, Paul is not forbidding every sort of leadership for women in the church. Women certainly did lead in the early church and do lead in many important ways. Paul's instruction is that men must bear the final responsibility for the direction and governance of the church.

This passage then, helps us understand why the offices of elder and deacon are closed to women (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3: 2; 12; Titus 1:6). It is from these offices that the authoritative governance and spiritual direction of the church is exercised. Paul's instructions do allow the case where those who are not yet elders might share duties in

³ Daniel Doriani, Women and Ministry: What the Bible Teaches, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003, p. 91.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

the regular teaching in the core foundational truths of the Gospel. Nevertheless, it seems right to conclude that his focus is mostly on the officers of the church.

Before we ask how this looks in our local congregation, we need to ask why Paul makes this restriction. In verse 13 Paul grounds his reasoning in the creation order. However, there are challenges to this view:

- Some traditionalists suggest that headship of man over woman is somehow a product of fallen creation or that women are inherently more prone to deception and thus have inferior leadership capacities. Yet, Paul's appeal for male headship is not rooted in failure of woman, but as verse 13 clearly states, this order is constitutive of God's good creation, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve." However we interpret the more difficult verse 14, it does not violate Paul's clear intention to ground male headship in the creation order. This order does not arise from some deficiency in woman. While the differences between women and men do warrant further investigation, we cannot assert that men are inherently superior leaders. The most we could assert is that men and women lead in different ways.

What can be said about verse 14 is that it reveals the distortion and damage, which arises when male headship is not honored. Eve's initiative in taking the forbidden fruit first and then giving it to Adam reversed the roles that God had created.⁷ This was a usurping of authority on the part of Eve and an abrogation of authority on the part of Adam. For this reason, Paul especially wants to protect God's original intention or design for man and woman subsequent to their fall by retaining this God-ordained authority structure.

- Egalitarian, evangelical feminists suggest that Paul's argument for headship is rooted in a "culture bound" problem, which no longer has application in a modern day context.⁸ While there can be no objecting that the problem he addressed and the answer he gave was expressed in a specific cultural context, neither does this imply that Paul's solution is time bound, nor does it require that the problem he addressed be bound to any one cultural context. Commenting on the similar text of 1 Cor. 11:3, 7-8, Edmund Clowney comments, "Paul is not just accommodating to the current culture in order to win respect for the Christian community. He is urging the Church to express in its cultural context a fundamental principle revealed in God's creation order."⁹ In other words, the relation of the sexes is not changeable, even in changing cultural circumstances. Tim Keller wisely comments on this view's weakness:

Everything Paul teaches is to a specific situation. To distinguish between "timeless" and "temporary" is to set up a "canon within the canon," and one based on your own opinion. In fact, if the ordination of women is a

⁷ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995, p. 219.

⁸ For a recent and popular presentation of this view, see John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Finally Feminist*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

⁹ Clowney, p. 217.

“justice issue,” then surely to preclude women from speaking (i.e. preaching) or having authority in even one church would be horribly wrong.¹⁰

More to the point, those who argue that male headship is culture bound and to be rejected in light of a new cultural situation inherently embrace a bias against any established structure of authority. They suggest that submission is inherently contradictory to equality. For example, they claim that “[m]any Christians thus speak of a wife’s being equal to her husband in personhood, but subordinate in function. However, this is just playing word games and is a contradiction in terms. Equality and subordination are contradictions.”¹¹ Similarly, John Stackhouse asks the question, “What are Christians supposed to do when society itself shifts to egalitarianism? There is no longer any rationale for the woman to remain in the culturally expected role of dependence and submission...”¹²

The problem with such a view is that it fails to recognize the goodness of dependent submission and its abiding value to the Christian. In fact, submission can be used to characterize our entire relationship to Jesus. He is Lord. Christians are to live in dependent submission upon Jesus Christ at all times. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us because his is a delightful burden (Matt. 11:28-30). However, let us not forget; it is “his yoke.” Paul boldly asserts that our lives are not our own, but they have been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). *When we relate to submission as something inherently contradictory to equality and dignity then we sow seeds which subvert our very relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.*

We must also address 1 Timothy 3:11 because some have argued that this text gives evidence for women to serve as deacons.

¹¹ Their wives [or women] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

In general, deacons are those set apart to lead the church in the ministries of mercy and deed. As elders lead the church authoritatively in the ministry of the word, so deacons lead the church in the actions of mercy they take. While their authority is of a lesser degree than that of elders, the necessity of creating an official office with clear qualifications makes clear that spiritual authority is present (Acts 6:2ff).

However, some have asserted from 1 Timothy 3:11 that Paul is making provision for women to serve as deacons alongside of men. While both the NIV and the ESV translate the Greek *gynē* (γυνή) as wives, it can legitimately mean either woman or wife.

¹⁰ Tim Keller, “Women and Ministry”, position paper for Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 1989.

¹¹ L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, Waco: Word, 1974, p. 110.

¹² Stackhouse, p. 72.

These two interpretive options create uncertainty about how the women Paul speaks of relate to the general order of deacons. There are three basic options:

- First, there is the possibility that these women are a part of the general order of deacons, and here Paul is clearly identifying women to serve in this official capacity in the church. However, this is unlikely because Paul sets them apart from the earlier deacons with the word “likewise” and by distinct qualities. Paul is definitely instructing women to serve in some capacity, but it seems to be a capacity distinct from that of the official deacon.
- Secondly, Paul could be referring to the wives of deacons who would have been crucial assets in dealing with the needs of the local congregation, particularly the needs of women. In defense of this position, it can be said that this verse’s placing in between comments about the general order of deacons make it likely that Paul is referring to the deacons’ wives. Also, Paul uses this same word in verse 12 to refer to the wife of the deacon. Nevertheless, there is an important argument against this position. Why would Paul comment about the involvement of deacons’ wives in ministry and not elders’ wives? Are not the wives of elders as crucial to their ministry as the wives of deacons?
- Thirdly, Paul refers to women who serve or assist deacons in the mercy ministry of the church, especially those needs that are particular to women. This is likely for several reasons. First, diaconal needs are inherently time and labor intensive. Many helpers make the work go more efficiently. In addition, there are some needs women have, which can be more suitably handled by women. Finally, 1 Timothy 5:9-10 and Titus 2:3-5 refer to women who seem to have fulfilled recognized roles in the local servant congregation, which especially aided in the ministry to women.

In our judgment, option three is most plausible. We understand verse 11 in chapter 3 to refer to women who assist in the diaconal ministry of the church. It suggests that women should be vitally involved in the diaconal ministry of the local congregation by serving as assistants to those holding the office of deacon.

What conclusions can we draw from 1 Timothy as it pertains to ministry in the local church?

- The offices of elder and deacon are open to men only at Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Elders and deacons both practice spiritual authority, although deacons do not ordinarily teach. The deacons’ authority is real, but also subject to the elders, with whom the ultimate governance of the church rests.
- Women should be involved in the diaconal ministry of the local congregation. At Redeemer, the official title given for women who have been trained, approved by the Session and publically recognized to serve in this capacity will be “Deacon

Assistants.”¹³ Deacon Assistants can be both women and men and will serve alongside the Deacons, accountable to the Board of Deacons. In addition, Deacon Assistants shall serve in an advisory capacity to the Board of Deacons.

- Women and men who are not elders or deacons are encouraged to discover and practice their spiritual gifts for ministry.

¹³ Recognition of those who “assist the deacons caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners and others who may be in any distress or need” is supported by 9-7 of The Book of Church Order (BCO) of the Presbyterian Church in America. In the case of women who serve as Deacon Assistants, there shall be no objection to the term “deaconess.”