

Gender Roles in the Church

I

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to set forth the Village Church of Barrington's position on gender roles. We do so for at least three reasons. First, though gender roles is not an essential doctrine of the Christian faith on par with the deity of Christ or the atonement, it is nevertheless indispensable for Christian *practice*. A church's position on this issue affects how women serve in the church. It also affects how husbands and wives relate to one another in the home. So a church cannot remain neutral; it must draw the line somewhere.

Second, what the Bible says about gender roles is increasingly out-of-step with the culture at large. As evangelical Christians, we must be faithful to the Word of God and resist pressure to conform to the spirit of the age. God's design will receive God's blessing, bearing good fruit in both home and church. So we must clearly and unapologetically affirm the biblical worldview. At the same time, we do not want to swing the pendulum to the other extreme, unwittingly importing cultural stereotypes from a previous generation. Being faithful to Scripture also means not restricting the role of women in ways unwarranted by Scripture. Women have made an immeasurable contribution to Christ's kingdom, and that should be valued and honored.

Third, even though this issue is not on par with the great doctrines of the faith, it nevertheless has implications for theology. Paul uses the relationship between Christ and the Church as an analogy for gender roles within the home (Eph 5:22-33). If we distort these roles, it could affect the way we view Christ and/or the Church. Likewise, our position on gender roles can affect our view of the inner workings of the Trinity, particularly how the Godhead balances equality of essence with difference in role. So we need to get this right.

Therefore, this paper will first survey the relevant biblical texts. Then it will detail how our church's position on gender roles plays out in a number of actual ministry settings.

II

Overview of Relevant Scriptures

Scripture teaches that men and women are equal in personhood, yet possess distinct roles. This can be demonstrated in creation, the Fall, Old Testament history, New Testament history, and the teaching of the apostles.

Creation

We see in creation the fundamental equality of men and women. Both sexes share in the image of God: '*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*' (Gen 1:27).¹ They both share dominion over creation as God's vice-

¹ All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (ESV).

regents (v.28). They are one flesh (Gen 2:23-24). So in terms of dignity and worth, women and men are equal.

At the same time, we see a distinction in roles. Adam was formed first, which has implications for gender roles (Gen 2:7; cp. 1 Tim 2:13). Eve was not formed independently, but rather *from Adam*, which also has implications for gender roles (Gen 2:21-22; cp. 1 Cor 11:8). Eve was created to be ‘*a helper fit for him*’ (Gen 2:18, 20). Not identical nor interchangeable, but rather complementary. Finally, Adam named Eve (Gen 2:23; cp. 3:20), which implies some level of authority over her. So when God designed the first family, he entrusted to the husband a leadership role and to the wife a complementary role. This was God’s original design, not a byproduct of sin. It becomes paradigmatic for all of their descendants.

We also see a distinction in roles from the way men and women are designed physiologically (i.e. a *natural law* perspective). While the two sexes are able to do many of the same things, it is evident that men generally have an advantage when it comes to physical exertion, whereas women have been given the privilege of bearing and nursing children. That implies role distinction. Since it is God who grants conception (Ruth 4:13) and knits us together in the womb (Psa 139:13), the determination of gender falls within his sovereign will.

The Fall

We also see a distinction of roles in mankind’s fall into sin. The Fall came about because God’s order was reversed. Instead of leading his wife away from sin, Adam followed his wife into sin (Gen 3:6, 17; cp. 1 Tim 2:14). Though Eve was first to partake of the forbidden fruit, Adam was held responsible (Gen 3:9; cp. Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22). The fact that she was deceived has implications for gender roles (Gen 3:1-6; cp. 1 Tim 2:14).

The curse affected Adam and Eve differently. Eve was cursed with respect to childbearing and her relationship with her husband (Gen 3:16). Adam was cursed with respect to his work (vv.17-19). This corresponds to their respective roles.

This was the beginning of the power struggle in the home. With sin now part of the picture, Eve would desire to control her husband, and he would rule over her (Gen 3:16; cp. 4:7).² The battle of the sexes had begun.

Old Testament History

The Old Testament contains many stories involving women and the important role they played in the history of God’s people: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, etc. While many of these exercised their influence at home as wives and mothers, some had more public ministries or positions of leadership: Miriam, Deborah and Huldah (Exo 15:20; Judg 4:4-5; 2 Kings 22:14-20). The ‘*excellent wife*’ of Proverbs 31:10-31 is praised for her wisdom, initiative, and hard work.

² Though the word *desire* can denote romantic or sexual desire (cp. Song 7:11), it can also be used in an adversative sense: ‘a desire to control or master.’ This latter sense is how it is used in Gen 4:7, which not only bears a striking similarity to the Hebrew grammar of Gen 3:16, but is also much closer in context—just fifteen verses later. Another factor for taking it in the adversative sense: it is used in the context of the curse, whereas Song 7:11 is love poetry. So it seems wiser to let Gen 4:7 determine the meaning of Gen 3:16.

Notwithstanding the presence of these godly women, the pattern for leadership in the Old Testament is male. It was the responsibility of the priests to teach the Law to the people of Israel, and they were all males (Exo 28:1). The Old Testament does not show women teaching Scripture to adult males. A distinction in roles was maintained.

New Testament History

When we get to the Gospels, we find that Jesus had a number of committed female followers (Luke 8:1-3). These women displayed the highest level of loyalty to him. They were last at the cross and first at the tomb (Matt 27:55-56; Luke 23:49, 55). Indeed, they were the first witnesses of his resurrection (Luke 24:10, 22). In Acts and the Epistles, we read of women who labored alongside of the apostles, such as Priscilla (Acts 18:26), Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Junia (Rom 16:7), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:3). So women played a significant role in the spread of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, the apostles were all male. Pastors and elders were also male (1 Tim 3:2). The New Testament does not show women teaching Scripture to adult males nor exercising authority over them.

Now much has been made of Priscilla. In some Scriptures she is mentioned ahead of her husband (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3; 2 Tim 4:19).³ She and Aquila took Apollos aside and ‘*explained to him the way of God more accurately*’ (Acts 18:26). Yet one should not read too much into this. It was a private meeting, with her husband present. We do not know how much of the conversation she carried, nor her tone or demeanor.

Much has been made of Junia as well (Rom 16:7), with some referring to her as an authoritative apostle. But the evidence is slender, and sweeping conclusions are unwarranted.⁴ Likewise, there is no indication that Phoebe taught men or exercised authority over them (Rom 16:1-2).

Apostolic Teaching

Our survey to this point has been primarily *descriptive*, that is, we have looked to historical examples in Scripture and drawn inferences from them. Now when we get to the teaching of the apostles, we move from descriptive to *prescriptive*. It is the difference between “what happened” and “what should happen.” We find that the apostles echo the same principle seen in the rest of Scripture: women and men are equal in personhood, but distinct in role.

In terms of equality, men and women are saved the same way—through faith in Jesus Christ: ‘*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*’ (Gal 3:28). This does not mean that all gender distinctions are

³ This could simply indicate that she was from a higher social class than her husband. In other places, her husband is listed first (Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:9).

⁴ This individual is likely a woman, but it is possible that it was a man named *Junias*. The Greek name is ambiguous; it could be masculine or feminine. Also, Paul could be using *apostle* in the ordinary sense of ‘messenger’ rather than in the technical sense of ‘the Twelve’ (cp. 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25). If so, then Andronicus and Junia were messengers between the churches, not authoritative apostles. Finally, it is not clear whether these two were highly esteemed *among the apostles* or *in the eyes of the apostles*. Either rendering is possible, although the latter is more likely given that we never hear of these two again in Acts or the rest of the New Testament. So to declare confidently Junia as an authoritative female apostle is to claim too much.

eradicated. For gender roles are not in the context. Paul is talking about the unity believers share, despite our differences, by virtue of our union with Christ. Men and women are ‘*coheirs of the grace of life*’ (1 Pet 3:7 HCSB).

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:5, 9). This does not mean that everyone is a pastor or elder. It is a poetic way of saying that we no longer need human intermediaries between us and God.

The Holy Spirit is poured out on women and men alike (Acts 2:17-18; cp. Joel 2:28-29). Women are given spiritual gifts for the good of the body (1 Cor 12:7). All but one of these gifts can be used to bless and strengthen males, including the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 11:5).⁵

Yet role distinctions remain. Christian wives are instructed to submit to their husbands as head of the home (Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1-6).⁶ This is not passivity, but rather influence exerted in a respectful way (cp. Eph 5:33).⁷ Submission is offered voluntarily, not coerced.⁸ The model for a wife is the church’s submission to Christ (Eph 5:24). Though submission is largely despised in our culture, Peter says it is beautiful and precious in God’s sight (1 Pet 3:3-5).⁹

Christian husbands are to love their wives sacrificially, ‘*as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*’ (v.25). They should not be harsh, lest they find their prayers hindered (Col 3:19; 1 Pet 3:7). But neither should they be passive, abdicating their role as spiritual leader in the home. Able-bodied husbands have a responsibility to provide for the members of their household (1 Tim 5:8).¹⁰

There is a clear hierarchy: ‘*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 Cor 11:3). Woman was created from man (v.8) and for man (v.9), and therefore should visibly show respect for her husband’s authority (v.10).¹¹ Nevertheless, man is not independent from woman, because man is born of woman (vv.11-12). So there is interdependence.¹²

⁵ We will discuss the gift of teaching below.

⁶ The term is implicitly hierarchical. It is the same word used for citizens submitting to governmental authorities (Rom 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13); for a congregation submitting to church leaders (1 Cor 16:16; 1 Pet 5:5); and for slaves submitting to masters (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18). It does not imply inferiority of personhood. Rather, it is necessary for the preservation of order in various social groupings.

⁷ We are not saying that a woman cannot make decisions on her own. A wise husband will entrust many decisions to his wife. This is not an abdication of leadership, but rather good leadership. It reflects the complementarity of the sexes.

⁸ The passive form of the Greek verb *hypotassō* has the sense of ‘submit voluntarily.’

⁹ It is common today to speak of “mutual submission.” This is an oxymoron. It is not what Paul means in Eph 5:21. He is not saying that everyone should submit to everyone, but rather that certain groups should submit to other groups: wives to husbands (Eph 5:22-24, 33); children to parents (Eph 6:1-3); and slaves to masters (Eph 6:5-8). What is noteworthy about this household code is that it gives duties to those in leadership positions, which was unique in that day. Husbands are to love wives (Eph 5:25-33); fathers are not to exasperate children (Eph 6:4); and masters are not to abuse their slaves (Eph 6:9).

¹⁰ Special circumstances may make this difficult or even impossible. Paul is not talking about that.

¹¹ This is not to say that all women are subject to all men, as a class. The Bible enjoins wives to submit to *their own husbands* (Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1, 5), not to men generally.

¹² We should not get hung up on the issue of head coverings. In the ancient world, it symbolized that the woman was married and in proper relationship to her husband. While we do not have head coverings today (the

In the context of the church, we find the same principle of male-female equality with role distinction.¹³ The Apostle Paul says, *‘Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor’* (1 Tim 2:11-14). Several observations are in order. First, women are to learn Scripture alongside of men (v.11). This was not always the case in the first century Judaism. Second, women are prohibited from teaching adult males and from exercising authority over them (v.12). These two functions are connected, but distinct. The teaching in view here would involve the exposition of Scripture—both doctrine and practice. It is linked with authority, for there are consequences for disobedience. Third, Paul does not allude to a certain circumstance in Ephesus, such as women false teachers, as the background for this prohibition.¹⁴ Instead, he roots his argument in the creation order—God’s original design (v.13). Thus, the prohibition *transcends* culture. He also mentions consequences stemming from the Fall (v.14).

This does not mean that a woman with the gift of teaching is prohibited from using her gift, because she can teach other women. In particular, older women are to *‘train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled’* (Titus 2:4-5). Women can also teach boys and girls, raising up the next generation. So her gift need not languish.

One of the most difficult texts on this issue is 1 Cor 14:33b-35: *‘As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.’* These verses pose a difficulty for both sides of the debate, because—on the surface—they appear to forbid women from speaking in church at all. But that is to yank the verses from their context. Paul is talking about the gifts of tongues and prophesy in the context of orderly worship (1 Cor 14:26-40). When one person is speaking in tongues, the others should remain silent (vv.27-28). Similarly, in order to limit confusion, only one person should prophesy at a time, and the others should weigh what is said (vv.29-32). It is in this context that Paul tells women to keep silent. So the prohibition seems to deal with passing judgment on prophecies, which would be linked with Scripture and authority. If this understanding is correct, then the injunction was not intended to be absolute. For earlier in the letter Paul mentions that women prayed and prophesied (1 Cor 11:5, 13). Nevertheless, there is something men can do in a mixed-gender setting that would be inappropriate for women. Paul also recognizes the spiritual leadership of the husband (14:35).

concrete cultural expression), the underlying principle still applies—married women should act like married women. This affects the way they dress, their demeanor and their comportment.

¹³ You cannot have one set of rules for home and another for church. It would be strange if a wife followed her husband’s spiritual leadership in the home, but then he followed hers in the church. They must reinforce one another, not work at cross purposes with one another.

¹⁴ Besides, the false teachers were men (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17). Priscilla may have been in Ephesus when Paul was writing to Timothy (cp. 2 Tim 4:19). If egalitarians are correct that she was an authoritative teacher in the church, why would Paul prohibit her from teaching?

This survey of Scripture's teaching on gender roles shows that men and women share an equality of personhood, yet possess distinctive roles. There are two stipulations for the role of women in the church: women are prohibited from teaching or exercising authority over men. Apart from that, they are able to use their gifts for the strengthening of the body of Christ and the spread of the Gospel.

III

Our Practice at the Village Church of Barrington

Embracing a complementarian view of gender roles, the Village Church of Barrington reserves the highest level of leadership and teaching for spiritually qualified men.¹⁵ This includes the offices of elder and pastor. Nevertheless, we do not see the ministry of women as any less valuable. So we equip and empower godly, doctrinally-sound women to use their spiritual gifts within the boundaries drawn by Scripture.

In terms of ministry roles, women are encouraged to serve as:

- Deacons
- Ministry Team Leaders
- Ministry Directors on the church staff, whether paid or volunteer
- Administrative Assistants on the church staff, whether paid or volunteer

Women are not permitted to serve as:

- Elders
- Pastors

In terms of ministry functions, women are encouraged to:

- Teach women's Bible studies and discipleship groups
- Teach Equipping Center classes for women¹⁶
- Teach children¹⁷
- Evangelize¹⁸
- Prophecy¹⁹

¹⁵ Much of this section was inspired by and adapted from "Gender Roles, Responsibility and Authority at The Village Church" (2011): http://www.thevillagechurch.net/mediafiles/uploaded/a/0e1140619_article-gender-roles-responsibility-and-authority-at-the-village-church.pdf, as accessed on 2/8/17.

¹⁶ Such classes will be designated as "Women's Bible Studies." If a man chooses to attend such a class, that is his own choice. We will not make him leave.

¹⁷ Women can teach boys Scripture until they are recognized as adults (normally at the Rite of Passage event). Thus, women could teach in the Junior High Ministry but not the Senior High Ministry.

¹⁸ Women can share the Gospel with men. But if a man comes to faith, it would be wise to have another man disciple him.

¹⁹ Paul mentions women who prophesied and prayed publically in Corinth (1 Cor 11:5). Prophecy is not preaching, but rather sharing something that God spontaneously brings to mind. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic*

- Co-teach with their husband (or another man) a mixed-gendered class on marriage, childrearing or the like
- Co-facilitate discussions with their husband in mixed-gendered community groups
- Lead worship
- Read Scripture
- Pray in public
- Share a testimony
- Serve as ushers and greeters
- Serve communion
- Perform works of service and compassion
- Officiate child dedications²⁰

Women are not permitted to:

- Preach in the weekend worship services
- Teach men's Bible studies or discipleship groups
- Teach mixed-gender Bible studies
- Be the sole or primary leader of mixed-gender community groups
- Administer the rite of baptism
- Officiate the Lord's Supper
- Evaluate a prophetic utterance in the assembly

In short, women are encouraged to serve in any role or perform any function not prohibited by Scripture. One caveat: when ministering in mixed-gendered groups, she should do so in a way that demonstrates respect for her husband and any other men present. She must be careful not to cross over into restricted behavior (teaching or exercising authority over men).

IV *Conclusion*

We affirm that men and women share equally in the image of God and in salvation. We affirm that women are given spiritual gifts and work hard for the Gospel alongside men. Yet men and women are not the same, and therefore not interchangeable. Equality does not equal *sameness*. God, in his wisdom, created two genders with complementary strengths. When women and men live out their respective roles, it creates a dynamic context for the raising of children within the home, and for shepherding God's people within the church. When we do not follow God's design, it leads to problems. We forfeit his blessing.

From the beginning, the Church has benefitted immeasurably from the ministries of women, and it is no different today. The Church needs women to be involved. Their contributions to the advance of the kingdom should be made known and appreciated.

Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1049. Prophecy does not have the same level of authority as preaching and teaching.

²⁰ Child dedications are normally done by the church's ministry staff, so this woman would need to be on staff as a Director of one of the church's ministries.