

Women and Church Leadership: The Traditional View

by

J. Paul Tanner, ThM, PhD

I am excited about two women, both of whom are personal friends of my wife and I, who are having significant ministries for Jesus Christ here in Singapore. In the two cases that I am thinking of, these dear Christian sisters are each having a ministry of teaching the Word of God to other Christian women. They are seeing some very encouraging results, as other women are being disciplined and built up in the Word. In some cases, their ministry into the lives of these other women has even had an influence upon other members of the family. The spiritual growth of the participating women has often impacted an unbelieving husband or resulted in children being drawn to the Lord. Yet, in neither of the cases that I am thinking of do these women make any claim to being an "elder" of their church nor are they seeking to have a teaching ministry over the congregation at large. Rather, they are gifted by the Spirit of God as teachers, but using their gifts in a God-ordained way to teach spiritual truth to other women. In doing so, they are fulfilling God's will as expressed in Titus 2:3-5:

"Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God."

In our generation, the whole question of the role of women in the church has been thrown into dishevel. Paralleling the rise of the feminist movement in the secular arena has been the reexamination of the proper role of women in the church. In both cases, I think that we can say that both good and bad have emerged from this. When it comes to the matter of the church, however, we have a responsibility to be in obedience to the Word of God, whether or not this conforms to the expectations of the secular world. In speaking for the "traditional view" regarding women, I realize that I am *walking on eggshells*. This is a sensitive matter and for many a very emotional one. I would be among the first to acknowledge that women have often been abused in the course of history by those who have used (read *misused*) the Bible as a club to defend their demands and actions. Yet, for those of us who are mature, we should agree that abuse of a biblical doctrine does not indicate that the doctrine itself is wrong. The Bible has often been misused by zealots who had their own goals and agenda in mind. In the brief comments that I can make in such a short amount of space, I would also like to clarify that I am not addressing the spiritual giftedness of women nor whether God uses women for His glory. The Bible clearly portrays that both are true. My task, in the space of this article, is to specifically address the issue of women in church leadership. Or, to put the question quite plainly, should women serve as elders or in teaching the Word over both men and women in the context of the assembled church? I think that God has spoken to this issue and that the Bible reveals that He has called men *who are spiritually mature* to these functions. In stating my case, I would like to make three arguments in favor of this position, and then respond to a few arguments often used to the contrary.

Argument #1: Contextually Appropriate Scriptural Support

Both those who favor the traditional view as well as those who argue that there should be no restrictions on women whatsoever make appeals to the Bible in support of their view. Preference, however, should be given to passages which specifically address the issue of teaching and leadership. In 1 Timothy, a book written to a pastor to specifically clarify church leadership and practice, we do find instruction about the role of women. In 1 Tim 2:11-12 we read, "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." This is a verse that clearly addresses the issue and establishes a normative principle that all churches should practice. Not surprisingly, numerous attacks have been made upon these verses in an effort to undermine the obvious implications. David Scholer, for instance, has argued

that Paul is not addressing all women but only those women who had been deceived by a form of false teaching that undermined the behavior and conduct appropriate for godly women in the church ("1 Timothy 2:9-15 & The Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," in *Women, Authority & The Bible*, ed. Alvera Michelsen). The main problem with this view is that both the preceding and following paragraphs are not dealing with issues of false teaching but with *normative principles* governing the church. For instance, the following paragraph lists the qualifications for elders. We certainly would not want to say that Paul wrote this paragraph about elders in light of false teaching, and that it is therefore not normative for churches today. [For those who are interested in a more technical evaluation of this passage, I have written a 10-page paper in response to Scholer's view that I would be glad to furnish upon request].

Argument #2: The Continuity with Biblical Practice

A second argument in favor of male leadership in the church is the continuity with biblical principle. Under the Old Covenant, the spiritual leadership of the nation was entrusted primarily to the priests and Levites. They served at the tabernacle and temple and were also entrusted with the teaching of the Word of God (Lev 10:8-11; Deut 33:8-10; cf. Neh 8:7-9). This responsibility was only entrusted to males (Num 3:10; 4:46-49). Furthermore, when the Lord Jesus came to earth, He chose twelve *men* to be His apostles. He certainly did not do this out of a bias for the male gender!

Argument #3: The Biblical Qualifications for Elders

According to the New Testament, "elders" are to be entrusted with the oversight of the local church. So important is this role that a list of qualifications appears in both 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Not just any man is to be entrusted with this responsibility, but only those who are spiritually mature and meet the qualifications. What is quite clear, however, is that the role of elder is for men who have been the husband of one wife and who have managed their own households well. There is a reason for this stipulation of male leadership in the church. The church is to uphold and reflect what is true in the family. Within the family, the husband has been entrusted with the responsibility of being the spiritual leader. Col 3:18 states, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." God's design is for the wife to willingly submit herself to her husband (since this reflects the church's submission to Christ—and He Himself modeled this by submitting to the Father), and for the husband to gently and lovingly nurture and lead his wife (since this reflects Christ's model of leadership over the church). So important is this principle for the family unit that the local church is to reflect this at the community level by choosing godly men to serve as elders.

A Response to Those Who Argue Against the Traditional View

Those who argue against the traditional view quite commonly appeal to Gal 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Is Paul arguing in this verse that all gender-based roles are to be eliminated in the church, as some would claim? He certainly is not . . . if we are careful to read this verse in context. The preceding verse pointed out that all those who have been baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ. This great blessing of being justified by faith and positionally "in Christ" is not to be limited by gender, ethnicity or social status. When it comes to our *spiritual standing* before God, we who are "in Christ" are equals. This verse, however, has nothing to do with our function in the body. Just because we have the same spiritual standing does not mean we are to have the same spiritual function. God has clearly determined certain functions for the home, and He has done the same for the church as well.

Another argument against the traditional view is to point to any one of a number of passages that speak of women involved in spiritual ministry (e.g., Acts 1:14; Rom 16:1-7; Phil 4:2-3). The fact that the Bible mentions women who prayed or women whom Paul called his "fellow workers" proves little in regard to the specific issue of leadership and authority in the church. Let's be careful not to confuse the two. I am certainly not arguing against women doing ministry nor the fact that God mightily uses women. I rejoice before the Lord that He does. The specific issue, however, is whether God has chosen to restrict the leadership of the local church to male elders and the authoritative teaching of the Word in the public assembly to spiritually gifted men. Even if we say that God has used women to

bring prophecy (2 Kgs 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11), that in itself is not a sufficient proof that women *therefore* ought to teach from the pulpit or exercise authority as elders.

Conclusion

We certainly need spiritually gifted and spiritually mature women to help serve in the cause of Christ. As for my two Christian sisters that I mentioned in the opening paragraph, I consider them my "fellow workers" for the kingdom. They are doing a wonderful job of leading significant Bible studies among women, and I am confident that our Lord will reward their faithfulness when He comes again. In the same breath, I would say to my brothers in Christ, "Men, we need to be serious about spiritual growth and maturity, and assume the spiritual responsibility and leadership for our families and churches." God has ordained certain roles for the men and certain roles for the women. The whole church will be blessed if we honor God's Word and follow His design of having male leadership in the church.

For those who would like a more in-depth treatment of the viewpoint presented in this article, I would refer you to the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway Books, 1991). You may also wish to consult the website for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (<http://www.cbmw.org/>).