

# **The Role of Women in the Local Church**

Bruce Reeves

Introduction: There was a time in which the question of women taking on leadership roles in the public worship of a local congregation was not among the most prominent risks to the peace and harmony of our brethren, however that time has passed. It is critical that we not fall asleep at the wheel or simply engage in denials of the reality of the challenge before us.

Among those who argue that cultural models and influences should shape our thinking there has been an aggressive effort to expand the role of women in local churches. This movement includes public leadership both within the worship assembly and the organization of the local church.

Let us never forget that although apostasy begins in small steps, it ends by striding continents. Brother Kyle Pope writes, “If history is any indication what begins in the mainstream doesn’t take long to creep in even among those who were once the most conservative. May we prepare ourselves to face this emotional and culturally explosive issue with love, courage and a fervent love for God and His word.”<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Is There A Real Threat Among Us?**

- a. A website known as *Where the Spirit Leads*, maintained by Willey Clarkson, expresses the objectives of the movement, which he describes as a call to “Gender Equality and Inclusivity in the Churches of Christ.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Kyle Pope, *The Gender Inclusive Movement*, (Bowling Green: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2013) 5.

- i. Clarkson maintains a listing of congregations he identifies as “Gender Inclusive Churches of Christ.” In order to be included on his list, five criteria must be met:
  - 1. Does this church use women in the worship to help lead by leading prayer, giving communion talks, leading singing, etc.?
  - 2. Are women used to their fullest capabilities to teach all groups regardless of gender in Bible classes?
  - 3. Do women serve in leadership positions such as pulpit minister, worship leader, deacon, and elder?
  - 4. Does the church publish a clear statement of purpose to be an egalitarian church or gender inclusive church on their website?
  - 5. Is a woman serving only in the position of Children’s Minister or Women’s Minister and none of the above apply?
- ii. Clarkson predicts, “the issue of women’s roles in the teaching, worship, ministry and leadership of the Churches of Christ...will be the single most discussed and divisive issue in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “Focusing on the Questions – Finding the Answers!” <http://www.clarksons.org/spiritleads/spiritleads.htm>.

## II. How Did We Get To This Place?

- a. Tragedy of an Emotionally Driven Hermeneutic.
  - i. Our commitment to the integrity, inspiration, and authority of the Bible, as well as our willingness to surrender to the instruction of the Lord has a deep influence on the stand we will take on moral and doctrinal questions.
  - ii. The hermeneutical approach that has been applied to a variety of doctrinal issues ranging from the mission of the local church to the worship of God's people is also being applied to stances on sexuality. It emanates from our understanding of "truth."
  - iii. Once the testimony of Scripture is dismissed for subjective feelings as the criteria of establishing truth there is no logical stopping point.
    1. A few years ago the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue church of Christ in Franklin, TN began a preaching internship for a young woman, Lauren King. Consider some of the reasons she said she knew it was the will of God for her to preach publicly among God's people: "The Lord made it very clear to me through prayer and discernment that I should put an emphasis on preaching...the way I perceive the Lord's will is when I have peace...when I have peace the Lord is telling me 'Yes.'"<sup>3</sup> (Jer. 23:16-22)

---

<sup>3</sup> Terry Francis <http://eastshelby.com/resources/blog/2014/12/18/a-female-intern>.

2. Likewise, in 2006, the Richland Hills church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas made “history” by incorporating the use of instrumental music in their worship. In a sermon delivered on December 10, 2006, Rick Atchley made the following statement regarding his reasoning: “Right there at that spot about 1994 the Holy Spirit said to me in the middle of my sermon, ‘and that is what you and all the preachers like you were doing, who have not for years believed that the worship of God with instruments is wrong. But you continue by your silence to let people think its wrong...’”<sup>4</sup>

iv. In a similar way the replacement of the objective standard of Scripture with a man centered approach to the determination of God’s will was seen several years ago regarding same-sex relationships in the Episcopalian Church.

1. Gene Robinson defended the acceptance of those practicing homosexuality by appealing to direct and on-going revelation of the Holy Spirit, “Is there any doubt in your minds that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and calling God’s Church to open itself to all those whom Jesus loves? We don’t worship a God who is all locked up in Scripture 2000 years ago” (Robinson, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Rick Atchley (December 10, 2006). *Sermons on Podcasts*, The Both/And Church. Retrieved September 1, 2015, from Richland Hills Church of Christ: [www.rhchurch.org](http://www.rhchurch.org)

2. According to Cathy Lynn Grossman of USA Today in an article entitled, “Gay Episcopal Bishop says, ‘Holy Spirit Led Us,’” Robinson once again attributed his position regarding homosexuality (in spite of scriptural condemnation of such conduct) to his belief in the progressive leading of the Holy Spirit.
  3. She went on to report the following in the same article, “The openly gay Episcopal bishop whose ordination threatens to fracture the worldwide Anglican Communion said Wednesday he ‘genuinely and deeply regrets’ the pain this caused some believers, but he sees no need to repent because ‘the Holy Spirit led us.’”
  4. It is critical for us to recognize that the confusion in the modern religion today, as well as among our brethren did not begin with the issues before us, but in a faulty approach to the Scriptures. This grows out of an effort to personalize God into our god, rather than allowing Him to reign as Sovereign (Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9-11).
- b. Failure to Emphasize the Significance of the Biblical Role of Women Among God’s People.
- i. It is important that we recognize how much our sisters in the Lord contribute to the work of Christ.

- ii. Our negligence to emphasize the power and influence of a godly woman can unintentionally develop a vacuum through which false teaching can enter.
- iii. In addition to the role of godly women in the home as mothers and wives women were prominent in the New Testament.
  - 1. Women prophesied (Acts 2:17-18; 21:9; I Cor. 11:5).
  - 2. We read of women offering corrective teaching (Acts 18:26).
  - 3. Older women are to teach and mentor younger women (Titus 2:3-5).
  - 4. Women were co-workers and supporters of those who proclaimed Christ (Rom. 16:2, 6, 12; I Timothy 5:3-16).
  - 5. It must be admitted that there have been times when we have failed to appreciate the role women of God are to play in scriptural ways among God's people.
  - 6. Women have obligations in common with men:
    - a. Worship in spirit and in truth.
    - b. Faithfully assemble to worship.
    - c. Give liberally.
    - d. Fully support each scriptural work of the church.
    - e. Show love and concern for others.
    - f. Pray for others.

7. We must not defend the suppression of women in the name of Biblical teaching regarding submission, but neither should we deny scriptural teaching about the role of women in the local church simply because women have been unnecessarily limited in certain areas in the past.

c. What Must Determine Our Practice?

- i. To reject or accept a teaching or practice merely on the basis of what has been done or what has not been done in the past is extremely dangerous. Religious history is filled with such pitfalls.
- ii. We must root our beliefs and practices in a consistent and honest examination of God's Word (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17; Eph. 3:3-5; 5:17).
- iii. When God's Word restricts our behavior or practice we must be willing to resist the impulse to advance our own agendas or perceived injustices over God's purpose (Jer. 10:23; Isa. 55:8-9).

### **III.What Is The Real Issue?**

a. What the issue is and is not:

- i. The issue is not:
  1. Are women of equal value in the sight of God to men?
  2. Are women gifted by God's providence?

3. Are women an integral part of the well being of a local church?
  4. Can women be extremely effective teachers?
  5. Are many women insightful and knowledgeable bible students?
- ii. The issue is:
    1. Understanding God's prescribed and authorized will for various roles within the local church.
    2. Recognizing the power and freedom of submission (Phil. 2:5-8).
    3. God's design and purpose (I Timothy 2:9-15).
- b. Progressives frequently use justice language in order to divert the issue.
    - i. Floyd E. Rose, in an e-book that Clarkson posts on his website entitled *An Idea Whose Time Has Come*, compares the treatment of women among churches of Christ to the treatment of African-Americans in slavery and discrimination.
    - ii. It is interesting that advocates of the acceptance of homosexuality offer the same line of argumentation in a variety of ways.
      1. Dismiss Paul's teaching as being culturally based.
      2. Argue that the Spirit has led them to believe and practice what they do.
      3. Argue that God's love accepts their behavior.

- c. Equality in Christ: Does Oneness in Nature and Purpose Deny Diversity of Function?
  - i. Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28).
  - ii. The context speaks of our standing before God through faith in Jesus Christ.
  - iii. Equality of relationship and nature does not deny distinction in function and roles.
    - 1. Paul writes, “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (I Corinthians 11:3).
    - 2. Jesus Christ is equal to His Father in His nature (Heb. 1:3), however he submits to him in his function (Heb. 5:8-9; John 14:28).
    - 3. We submit to civil authorities (Rom. 13:1).
    - 4. Members of a local church submit to their shepherds (Hebrews 13:17).
    - 5. A godly wife submits to her husband but she is a fellow-heir of salvation with him (Ephesians 5:22-33; I Peter 3:7).

#### **IV. Biblical Limitations on the Role of Women and Their Contexts.**

- a. Teaching Outside of the Assembly (Acts 18:24-26).

- i. We read of a Jew named Apollos who was well refined, eloquent, knowledgeable, and mighty in the Scriptures. Yet he only knew the baptism of John.
  - ii. Aquila and Priscilla “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (18:26).
  - iii. While Priscilla was always in submission to her husband she was involved in an active way in explaining the truth to Apollos.
- b. Demeanor of Godliness (I Timothy 2:11-13).
- i. Application of the Text:
    1. This text is intended to instruct the young preacher Timothy on a variety of subjects pertaining to godly conduct for believers.
    2. Prayer for men “everywhere” is encouraged (I Tim. 2:8).
    3. Women are to dress modestly both within and without the assembly (I Tim. 2:9-10).
    4. Paul then addresses the demeanor of women of God: “Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness” (2:11-12).
    5. Paul roots and grounds his teaching in the creation order and the sin in the Garden of Eden (2:13-15).

6. Paul's use of the word "quietness" is not an absolute silence, but a quiet disposition. Rather than a woman being loud and rebellious she is to be submissive, respectful, and faithful (Titus 2:11-12; 3:1-6).
  7. This demeanor will be seen in her behavior both in the assembly of worship and in her personal relationships and life in general.
  8. Timothy himself received great benefit from the teaching of his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15). Women can teach other women (Titus 2:3-5) and children (I Tim. 5:14; 2:15).
  9. Yet, the emphasis of this text is that a woman is not to "exercise authority over a man" (2:12) – Men do not have the right to authorize a woman to do that which God has forbidden.
- ii. The attempt to dismiss the text by appealing to culture is flawed.
1. The following quotations reveal this type of thinking, *"In the first century situation with its generally patriarchal society, where women played little part in public affairs, teaching by women could be regarded as an unacceptable breach of behavior patterns, whether among Jews or also among some Gentiles. Accordingly, the restriction can be interpreted as a culturally shaped prohibition that is no longer binding in a different setting."*<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 166.

2. *“In an ancient society, where illiteracy and lack of education were common, it was especially the women who would suffer from these disadvantages.”*<sup>6</sup>
3. But is this reasoning consistent with either the culture in which Paul and the early Christians lived or the context of scripture in which we find these admonitions?
  - a. Artemis/Diana was a female figure, not a male figure (Acts 19:35-41).
  - b. The Artemis cult had female leaders — not primarily male leaders. Thus, women in Ephesian culture possessed power and influence. Consider the following:
    - i. *...one of the main things we know about religion in Ephesus is that the main religion...was a female-only cult. The Temple of Artemis (that’s her Greek name; the Romans called her Diana) was a massive structure that dominated the area. As befitted worshippers of a female deity, the priests were all women. They ruled the show and kept the men in their place.*<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 167

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 80.

ii. *“...It is clear that women played a significant role and held important offices in many cults. The mythology of Ephesus [including the myth that Ephesus was founded by warrior women known as [Amazons](#)] bolstered their status in the Artemis cult. According to Pausanias...the Amazon women resided at the sacred place and performed rituals to Artemis there (7.2.4). Cultic activity for women was more prominent in Asia Minor than elsewhere (Ramsay 1900:67). Kearsley notes that the fifteen women who were archiereiai (“chief priests” or “high priests”) in Ephesus is the largest group known from any city (1986:186). At least some held the title in their own right and were not dependent on the title of their husbands. Women were prominent in the Artemis cults as priestesses....<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>8</sup> Rick Streland, *Paul, Artemis and the Jews in Ephesus* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1996), 120.

4. "Paul's teaching was very counter-cultural in Ephesus."<sup>9</sup>
  - a. Ironically, it is the pressure of our own culture that is motivating progressives to deny Paul's counter-cultural message!
  - b. Various cultures have multiple and diverse influences from various directions. Therefore to dismiss apostolic teaching upon that basis is highly suspicious.
  - c. It also is noteworthy that Paul's teaching being grounded in the creation account places the principle of a woman's submission outside of a mere cultural consideration.
- c. Restrictions in I Corinthians 14:34-35.
  - i. This section should be viewed in the context of chapters 11-14.
  - ii. Paul first addressed some general principles regarding the submission of females to men (I Corinthians 11:1-16), but he then narrows the context to "when you come together as a church."

---

<sup>9</sup> Shane Carrington, "Artemus of Ephesus and Women Preachers," *Truth Magazine*, 62.2 (February 2018): 26-27.

- iii. Paul first addresses issues concerning the Lord's Supper (11:17-34) and then transitions into a consideration of the use of spiritual gifts in the assembly (12:1-14:40).
- iv. The context irrefutably is "in the church," that is the congregational assembly (I Cor. 11:18, 22; 12:28; 14:4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 35).
- v. Women are not the only ones restricted in the context:
  - 1. Tongue speaker without an interpreter is to be "silent" (14:28).
  - 2. The prophet was to be "silent" until the other prophet had finished his "speaking" (14:30).
  - 3. Assemblies of the church are not to be chaotic, but things are to be done "decently and in order" (14:40).
  - 4. With Paul's statement in 14:34-35 there is no room for a woman to be involved in any leading, teaching, or preaching capacity in the assembly whatsoever.
    - a. A woman is commanded to sing with the congregation and in doing so she is "speaking," "teaching," and "admonishing" her brothers and sisters "in the church," but she is not "usurping authority over a man" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; I Tim. 2:11-13).

- b. A woman is to confess her faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:35-39; Rom. 10:9-10).
  - c. We must be careful about expanding the role for women in the assembly of the church in a way, which would violate the principles of Scripture.
5. Paul appeals to the word of God as his foundation and affirms that, “the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (14:37).
  6. Even if we do not replicate the specific situation, whatever it was, in Corinth we still must apply the principle. The solution is binding: “If they want to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home.” (I Cor. 14:34, 35; similarly I Cor. 11:34).<sup>10</sup>
  7. It is my conviction that women exercised their gifts such as prophecy in other contexts outside of the formal assembly, i.e. [in settings other than] “when the church comes together.”

---

<sup>10</sup> One must be careful about arbitrarily dismissing the principles of the New Testament because we are not in precisely the same setting in which we find such principles. Paul’s solutions to the problem both in I Corinthians 11:34 and 14:34-35 are quite revealing of the principle that should be applied in the churches.

- vi. “As the law says,” has been variously interpreted.
  - 1. Many trace it back to her call to submission in Genesis 3:16.<sup>11</sup>
  - 2. Kyle Pope argues that it may refer to the *qahal* of the congregation of Israel, which was a special assembly for worship and important purposes. Women were not to speak in such assemblies (Deut. 4:10; Judges 20:2; I Sam. 17:47; 2 Chronicles 1:5).<sup>12</sup>
  - 3. Regardless, the apostle makes it clear that this is a teaching founded on God’s truth and revealed by God, Himself.

d. When are we “in the church”?

- i. Universal sense of the word “church” refers to our relationship to Jesus Christ (Acts 2:47; Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23).
- ii. We are to identify with a faithful local church as we submit to biblical leadership (Phil. 1:1; I Cor. 1:2; Acts 9:26).
- iii. The assembly of a local church:
  - 1. “...Tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17).
  - 2. Paul instructed that his epistle to the Colossians was to be read “in the church of the Laodiceans” (Col. 4:16).

---

<sup>11</sup> Mike Willis, *Truth Commentaries: First Corinthians*. Bowling Green: (Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1994), 421.

<sup>12</sup> Kyle Pope, *The Gender Inclusive Movement Among Churches of Christ*, 26-27.

3. Paul rebuked the Corinthians for having divisions among them “when you come together as a church” (I Cor. 11:18).
4. Some are instructed to be silent “in the church” (I Cor. 14:28, 34, 35).
5. What determines when we are assembled as a local church?
  - a. It is not merely discharging individual responsibilities (Matt. 18:15-17; I Tim. 5:16).
  - b. It is not merely a group of Christians participating in an activity, even if it is a spiritual activity (i.e. elders meeting, separate bible studies, bible classes etc.)
  - c. Bible classes are an authorized work of the church and are worship to God, but it is my conviction that they should be viewed distinctly from those occasions when “the church has come together.”
  - d. If the stated purpose of an assembly is that a congregation has “come together as a church” (11:18) the principles of I Corinthians 14:34, 35 must be applied.

## **V. Can Women Serve As Elders and Deacons?**

- a. Both elders and deacons are to be “the husband of one wife” (I Tim. 3:2, 12).

- b. Were there deaconesses in the N.T.?
- i. There is a non-technical sense in which we are all deacons, ministers or servants among God's people (I Peter 4:10-11).
  - ii. But the technical use of the term *deacon* as in I Timothy 3:8-10, 12-13 demands that one be "the husband of one wife."
  - iii. It is worthy to note that the term "likewise" in 3:8 shifts from talking about elders to deacons. Similarly, the term "likewise" transitions from speaking of deacons to the wives of deacons.
  - iv. If there are deaconesses being discussed why is there no reference to her being the wife of one husband as there is of the widow in I Timothy 5:9.
- c. What about Phoebe in Romans 16:1
- i. She was a special servant of the church in a generic sense, but she was not a deacon in the sense of I Timothy 3 because she could not be the husband of one wife.
  - ii. In every congregation I have worked with there have been multiple sisters in the Lord that were known for their care and love for others, their support of the gospel, and their faithfulness to Christ.
  - iii. There were even times when they were asked by the leadership to help in some particular way, but they were not deacons in a technical sense.

*Conclusion: Thank God for our sisters in Christ (1 Tim. 5:1, 2). Let us all give our hearts to a deep reverence for God's truth and the authority of the word of God. Let us stand strongly against the dangerous slide into error we see among our brethren. Let us graciously and lovingly walk under the banner of our King!*