



Lakewood
CHURCH

6284 Fairview Road N, Baxter, MN 56425

The Role of Women in Church Ministry (Eldership)

Lakewood Evangelical Free Church's position on Women in Church Ministry

"Women can hold any leadership or teaching position in our church except that of elder or pastor. That means women will be able to teach or lead men, which includes leading the singing portion of our Sunday morning worship services, provided they are under the authority of a man (elder)."

Introduction

These are exciting times for women who serve in the local church today. Not only do we see more women serving on church staff teams, but a higher percentage of these women have graduated with advanced degrees (MA, MDiv, ThM, DMin, PhD) from seminaries as well. Within the scope of evangelical Christianity, the role of elder has traditionally been fulfilled by men. As women continue to answer God's call for them to serve in church ministry, a question for the local church concerning their ministry role needs to be addressed. In short, what is the women's leadership role in the local church?

In general, there are two views about the women's roles in church leadership (complementarian, egalitarian). (1) Complementarians believe that God has placed restrictions on leadership roles for women within the local church. (2) Egalitarians believe that there are no gender restrictions for women in church leadership positions. Lakewood Evangelical Free Church believes that Scripture supports the complementarian view.

Lakewood Evangelical Free Church believes that God has called men to exercise the role of elder. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14, Genesis 2-3, and 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 this position is supported, and in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6 are Paul's identification of elders being male. Before proceeding however, here are two background issues: (1) God's calling and spiritual gifts and (2) women in the Old Testament (prophetess, Miriam, Deborah).

Background: God's Calling and Spiritual Gifts

The Bible testifies to God calling men and women into ministry (Moses, Deborah, Paul, Priscilla). In addition, the Spirit gives gifts to Christ-followers to equip and serve the body of Christ (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-31; 1 Peter 4:10). Regarding leadership roles in the church, some believe that God has (1) called women to serve as elders and pastors and (2) given them spiritual gifts (e.g., teaching, leadership) to serve in these roles. How should we respond to those who believe that God has called women to serve as elders and pastors?

First, God's calling should always be tested with Scripture. For this issue, the question should not be, "What role has God called me to serve?". Rather, the primary question should be, "Does Scripture affirm the calling of female elders and pastors?" Second, is it possible that God

has called women to shepherd His people, but within certain parameters such as male-female leadership (Priscilla, Aquilla: Acts 18:1-4; 24-28; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19), women and children's ministry (Titus 2:3-5), or other roles such as evangelism or outreach (John 4:28-29; 39-42)?

Women in the Old Testament: Prophetess, Miriam, Deborah

Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) served as prophetesses in the Old Testament.¹ A prophetess (or prophet) received and delivered God's revelation to His people. Whether male or female, the role for this person was to bring God's message to Israel. In contrast to this role, a priest was given the authority, privilege and responsibility for teaching God's Word (Leviticus 10:11; Malachi 2:6-7) and performing ritual/worship activities and sacrifices (Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31; Joel 1:9, 13; 2:17). The nation of Israel had no female priests. In short, we have distinct gender roles for a prophetess/prophet and priest in the Old Testament.

Concerning Miriam, she was not only a prophetess, but she was also regarded along with Moses and Aaron as a key spiritual leader of Israel (Numbers 12:2, 6; Micah 6:4).² But, what was her specific role? While she may have had other responsibilities, the most explicit example is found in Exodus 15:20-21. These verses highlight her leading women with tambourines, dancing and singing (after the Red Sea swallowed up Pharaoh's army). Furthermore, it is also significant that Moses did not select her, or any female, as one of the elders for Israel (Numbers 11:16-25).

While Deborah (also a prophetess) played a key role in Israel's history as one of the judges (Judges 4:1-5:31), her leadership role was not equivalent to a ruling/teaching elder or pastor of a local assembly or congregation. A "judge" in the historical context (following Joshua's conquest of Canaan, Israel was comprised of a loose confederation of tribes) was primarily a military leader from a specific Israelite tribe. They were like forerunners for the Kings of Israel (Saul, David, Solomon).

Drawing insights from Judges 4:4-5:15, we may observe four points. First, Deborah provided private counsel and wisdom for people who had disputes (4:4-5). Second, Deborah summoned Barak, who lacked courage, to gather Israel's army to fight against Sisera (4:6-9). Third, although Deborah encourages Barak, it is Barak, and not Deborah, who leads Zebulun and Naphtali in battle (4:10; 4:14). Fourth, both Deborah and Barak are praised in a song (5:1-31). In short, while Deborah exhibited political/military courage, she did not have spiritual authority (ruling, teaching, worship) over her tribe or nation of Israel.

¹ Due to the limitations of this paper only these three examples were used from the Old Testament because egalitarians highlight their leadership and service.

² Miriam is also mentioned in Numbers 12:1-16 where her role as a prophetess is supported (vs. 2, 6). In these verses God judges her (and Aaron) for speaking out against Moses (he married a Cushite woman).

1 Timothy 2:11-14

The Apostle Paul teaches that only men exercise the role of elder in the local church (1 Timothy 2:11-14). The key verse is 1 Timothy 2:12. Here, Paul issues a command: "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." Paul outlines, though indirectly, the primary role of an elder. Elders are to be male, with the role of governing, teaching and exercising authority in the local church.

Contrary to Lakewood's complementarian position, some egalitarians believe that Paul issued this command because (1) women in Ephesus were uneducated, (2) false doctrine was being taught, or (3) it would not be practical and not affirmed due to cultural circumstances (patriarchal society). Regarding the first point, Ephesus had many educated women and several served in roles similar to "superintendents." Also, Paul does not mention a lack of education as a reason for prohibiting women from exercising authority over men.

Concerning the second point, the clear examples of false teaching were males (Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus: 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:17-18) not females. While 1 Timothy 5:13 and 2 Timothy 3:6-7 mention women who gossip and may be led astray by false teaching, this does not necessarily mean that women were the false teachers. Even if it was true that some women were teaching false doctrine (no explicit evidence can be cited), this would not lead Paul to issue a universal prohibitive against all women.

Regarding the third point, Paul based his restriction/command on the order of creation (Genesis 2). It was not because he was concerned about offending the patriarchal culture or impeding the spread of the gospel. As noted above, women in Ephesus possessed key societal civic and religious roles. Although Paul was aware of these leadership roles for women, he nevertheless, limited their governing and teaching roles in the context of church ministry.

Paul provides a reason for teaching male eldership: "Adam was formed first, then Eve." (1 Timothy 2:13) Paul highlights the significance of Adam in the creation account (cf. Genesis 2-3) to explain church leadership roles. So, in order to understand 1 Timothy 2:11-14, Genesis 2-3 needs to be examined.

Genesis 2-3

Genesis 2 teaches an order of creation: Adam was the spiritual leader and possessed spiritual authority. Scripture provides four reasons to support this interpretation. (1) Adam was created before Eve and given the charge "to work and keep" (Genesis 2:15) the Garden of Eden. This command was issued by God before Eve was created. (2) God's interaction with Adam supports the notion that he—not Eve was the spiritual leader. For example, God warned Adam that he would die if he eats from "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." (Genesis 2:16-17) Also, Adam giving his wife the name "woman" also highlights his leadership role (Genesis 2:23). (3) Adam's authority demonstrated in naming all the animals brought before him (Genesis 1:19-20). (4) Paul refers to Adam, even though both Adam and Eve sinned as the one who brought sin into the world (Romans 5:12-21; cf. Genesis 3).

Some egalitarians believe that God gave men spiritual authority and leadership over women as a consequence of one of his judgments from Genesis 3. Some refer to this as the curse of women (Genesis 3:16, "To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbirth; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.'") According to this view, Christ, however, has redeemed women from this "judgment." (Galatians 3:23-29).

According to egalitarians, since all men and women are children of God and heirs to God's promise, it follows that this previous relationship of a man's spiritual authority over woman no longer exists. In the complementarian response, there are two points to consider. First, Paul's command in 1 Timothy 2:12 highlights the order of creation (Genesis 2). This order existed prior to Adam and Eve's sin. Second, Galatians 3:23-29 focuses on our spiritual identity in Christ: whether you are a Jew or Greek, slaves or free person, male or female, everyone is one in Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:3-10

This passage addresses the issue of head coverings in relation to praying and prophesying in the church. The context is the local church and while it's true that wearing a head covering was a cultural element, Paul grounds his discussion about women's roles in the church in the order of creation as well. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 the same reasoning is employed for spiritual authority in the church. God has established an order in creation. This order in creation has implications for church leadership roles.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:3, "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, the head of Christ is God." Concerning spiritual authority and leadership, Paul highlights three relationships, Christ/man, husband/wife, God/Christ. Briefly, Christ has spiritual authority over man, the husband has spiritual authority over his wife, and God (Father) has spiritual authority over Christ (Son). "Headship" is a universal characteristic (God, church ministry, family) and is necessary for both order and unity. The first relationship (Christ/man) is indisputable: Christ has spiritual authority over every man. What about the other two relationships (Father/Christ, husband/wife)?

When we say that the Father is the head of Christ it means that the Father has authority over the Son. This doesn't mean that Jesus was/is inferior to his Father. Jesus, the Son of God, is equal to the Father in essence—they are both divine, but nevertheless, He honors and submits to His Father (John 14:28; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28). For example, the Father has sent the Son into the world (John 3:16).

This is an important point because within the relationship of the Trinity, equality in nature between the Father and Son does not necessarily lead to identical roles. Jesus' eternal relationship to the Father (equal in essence, but submissive to the Father) is called the doctrine of "eternal subordination." In short, Jesus was not only submissive to the Father in a limited manner, while on earth for the purpose of redemption, but has been submissive to the Father from all eternity (cf. John 5:19; 8:28).

Paul also claims that the husband is the head of his wife. The idea of "headship" refers to authority. That is why this passage refers to Christ as being the "head" of man and God

(Father) as being the "head" of Christ. Concerning the spiritual authority of men, Paul also refers to the order of creation to emphasize his point. According to 1 Corinthians 11:8-9: "man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man."

Both men and women have been equally created in God's image (Gen 1:26-28). This equality, however, does not mean that men and women have been called to the same spiritual leadership roles in ministry. This is the most natural interpretation of these verses, and parallel to Christ having spiritual authority over man and the Father having spiritual authority over the Son. These role distinctions should not be understood to mean that women have a less important role or less spiritual giftedness.

1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6 and Elders

The books of Timothy and Titus have often been referred to as Paul's "Pastoral Letters" because of their emphasis on church leadership. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he identifies several qualities for an elder (3:1-7). One such trait for eldership is for them to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2). Likewise, Paul's letter to Titus also supports this view, "the husband of but one wife" (Titus 1:6). These men were selected and served as the spiritual leaders of the local churches. The idea of male elders is a continuous theme throughout the Scriptures.

In Numbers 11:16-25, God commands Moses to gather and appoint seventy men to serve as elders for the Israelites. These men helped Moses to bear the burdens of the people, received the Spirit's presence and power, and consecrated themselves for their service. Jesus also selected men; he prayed and then chose men to be his disciples (Luke 6:12-16). These men, except Judas, would later become prominent spiritual leaders in the early Church (Acts). In the future, these men will also assist Jesus in judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). In Acts 20:17-38, Paul addresses the Ephesian elders as he bids them farewell. This passage makes no explicit mention of women serving as elders. In fact, there are no explicit New Testament verses that link women with the role of elder.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul and other leaders appointed pastors and elders to provide spiritual leadership and teaching duties for the body of Christ. Lakewood Evangelical Free Church understands the roles of pastors and elders as "church offices." As a "church office", the position of elder is identified by present leadership and confirmed by the members of the church.

This understanding of the office of elder should be seen in contrast to the role of a "shepherd" at Lakewood. Lakewood has many "shepherds" serving our spiritual community including small group leaders, Adult Bible Communities, and men's and women's groups. In short, a person may be called a "shepherd" (in a general sense), but an elder is a church office that is limited to male leadership (identified by present church leadership and confirmed by church membership).

Summary and Moving Forward: Women and Ministry

The position of Lakewood Evangelical Free Church is that only males can hold the church leadership office of an elder or pastor. This conclusion is based on the teaching of Scripture. Rather than focus on roles and positions which exclude women from serving, it is important that women know they have opportunities to serve in other significant roles and positions in the church.

What kinds of roles are available for women in light of church ministry? The following is not an exhaustive list, but one that encourages a wide variety of teaching and leadership positions in the local body of Christ:

- Sunday morning Worship leading and music
- Sunday School and Wednesday night classes
- Counseling
- Women's Ministry
- Children's Ministry
- Evangelism
- Discipleship
- Small Groups
- Local Outreach and Global Missions
- Student Ministry³
- Care Ministry
- Administrative Roles

Adapted from a position statement on the 'Role of Women in the Church' at Bridges Community Church, Fremont, CA.

³ Concerning Student Ministry (junior high, high school), Lakewood Evangelical Free Church does not limit this ministry to men only. However, if we only hire "pastors" for these positions, then only men will be offered these positions. The EFCA licenses women for ministry, but does not ordain them.