



# Women's Roles in Ministry

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## Acknowledgements:

This document draws heavily from teaching and documents by John Piper, Ray Stedman and Wayne Grudem. The Danvers Statement was prepared by a team of evangelical leaders at a Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood meeting.

Based on our understanding of Biblical teachings, we affirm the following CBMW **Danvers Statement<sup>1</sup>**:

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood (Gen 1:26-27, 2:18).
2. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart (Gen 2:18, 21-24; 1 Cor 11:7-9; 1 Tim 2:12-14).
3. Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin (Gen 2:16-18, 21-24, 3:1-13; 1 Cor 11:7-9).
4. The Fall introduced distortions into the relationships between men and women (Gen 3:1-7, 12, 16).
  - *In the home, the husband's loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife's intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility.*
  - *In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries.*
5. The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, manifests the equally high value and dignity which God attached to the roles of both men and women (Gen 1:26-27, 2:18; Gal 3:28). Both Old and New Testaments also affirm the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community (Gen 2:18; Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:11-15).
6. Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the curse.
  - *In the family, husbands should forsake harsh or selfish leadership and grow in love and care for their wives; wives should forsake resistance to their husbands' authority and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands' leadership (Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; Tit 2:3-5; 1 Pet 3:1-7).*
  - *In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:11-15).*
7. In all of life Christ is the supreme authority and guide for men and women, so that no earthly submission-domestic, religious, or civil-ever implies a mandate to follow a human authority into sin (Dan 3:10-18; Acts 4:19-20, 5:27-29; 1 Pet 3:1-2).
8. In both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries (1 Tim 2:11-15, 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9). Rather, Biblical teaching should remain the authority for testing our subjective discernment of God's will.
9. With half the world's population outside the reach of indigenous evangelism; with countless other lost people in those societies that have heard the gospel; with the stresses and miseries of sickness, malnutrition, homelessness, illiteracy, ignorance, aging, addiction, crime, incarceration, neuroses, and loneliness, no man or woman who feels a passion from God to make His grace known in word and deed need ever live without a fulfilling ministry for the glory of Christ and the good of this fallen world (1 Cor 12:7-21).
10. We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was prepared by a team of evangelical leaders at a Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) meeting in Danvers, Massachusetts, in December of 1987. It was first published in final form by the CBMW in Wheaton, Illinois in November of 1988.

## **The Importance of Humbly Defining a Position**

First, it is important to recognize that even among genuine Christians there are a variety of opinions on the role of women in the church. Some Christians are more conservative or traditional on this matter than we are, while others are more liberal. They all love Jesus Christ, they all consider the Bible to be the Word of God, and they all are being used by God to further His kingdom. Part of the reason for the differing opinions is due to the fact that some of the most difficult passages in the Bible deal with this issue. It is not unusual to pick up three different commentaries by three different evangelical scholars and discover that each gives a different interpretation of the same passage!

For a church, order is important, and so it is important that we come to a position of our own practice. We hold it with both conviction and humility as we do not regard what one believes about this as a litmus test for their spirituality or their commitment to the Word of God. This matter is not in the same category as, say, the deity of Christ, or salvation by faith. It is an issue where Christians may agree to disagree and continue to dialogue and learn from each other in a spirit of mutual respect.

## **Biblical Examples of Women Serving in the Church**

The way Jesus treated women was revolutionary. In His encounter with the Samaritan woman, both she and His disciples were shocked that He would even speak to a woman. Yet Jesus often departed from the norm of His culture. He not only spoke to women, He taught them important spiritual truths. Jesus challenged the stereotypes regarding women. He called attention to the great faith of several women. He addressed one woman as a "daughter of Abraham," a title of great honor. In His teaching, He often used illustrations that involved both men and women. At a time when women were rarely allowed to even appear in public, Jesus had an entourage of women who followed Him and supported Him from their own means. It was primarily women who were present at His crucifixion and burial. And it was a woman, Mary, whom Jesus made the first witness to the resurrection. Women weren't considered reliable witnesses in court then, but Jesus instructed Mary to tell His disciples that He was alive.

We see the same pattern in the New Testament churches. Women played a huge part in the spread of the gospel. Acts 1 records that women were among the first disciples in the upper room. The Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost and they spoke in tongues, just as the men did. The first convert to Christianity in Europe was a businesswoman named Lydia. She was one of the founders of the church at Philippi. In Acts 18 we read of a woman named Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, who taught the great Apollos. They are mentioned many times in the New Testament, and in most instances Priscilla's name comes first. This is most unusual. It is likely that Priscilla was a more prominent teacher than her husband. In Acts 21 we read of Philip the evangelist who lived in Caesarea with his four prophesying daughters. These girls were prophets. They spoke forth the Word of God. In Romans 16 we find Paul greeting several people in the church at Rome, many of whom were women, who had labored with him in spreading the gospel. He mentions Phoebe and calls her a "servant." The word could be translated "deacon" or "minister." It refers to a formal position of

leadership which Phoebe held in the church at Cenchrea. The apostle also calls her a "helper of many." That word "helper" is used in the New Testament to describe the work of church leaders as managers of God's household.

In Titus 2:3 he says that the older women are to teach the younger women and in 2 Timothy 3:14 Paul tells Timothy to remember from whom he learned the scriptures. And the persons he has in mind (we can tell from 2 Tim. 1:5) are Eunice and Lois, Timothy's mother and grandmother. (His father was not a believer or even a Jew, Acts 16:3).

So it is clear that women served in a variety of leadership roles in the early church. This is consistent with the Bible's teaching on spiritual gifts. There are four passages in the New Testament that refer to the spiritual gifts of believers, gifts like teaching, prophecy, evangelism, exhortation, helps, mercy, giving, administration, leadership, and many others (Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:7-13; I Peter 4:10-12). There is not even a hint of gender distinction in any of these passages. Women possess all those gifts! And they are commanded to use them.

### **Application to the Life and Ministry of Village Bible Church**

Women are free to minister in the church according to their gifts and calling. This includes teaching as Priscilla did and as did the women who prophesied in Corinth. It also includes leading in ministries, as Phoebe did. Yet we have also learned that in Scripture there is also a clear pattern of male headship.

### **Scripture Sets Aside Some Roles Specifically for Men**

As radical as Jesus was, He did not choose a woman as one of his twelve apostles. Some people say that was because the culture of His day would not have stood for that, but Jesus never pandered to people's cultural sensitivities. We see this as another indication that there is a biblical pattern of male headship within which women are free to serve and minister.

### **Serving as an Elder**

The New Testament gives no examples of a woman serving in the official capacity of an Elder. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, where the qualifications for an Elder are set out, it is clearly assumed that these Elders will be men. Women serve as deacons, and deacons lead in their own right, but not in an overall governing sense like Elders.

This headship is not a reflection of ability or competence, but of the order of creation and the way each gender uniquely contributes to the image of God. So we believe it is clear that men alone are to serve as Elders in the capacity of primary authority in the church, and women who lead and teach ought to serve in a way that demonstrates respect for that headship.

### **Preaching**

In 1 Corinthians 11 we see that women were free to pray and prophecy. However, Paul says (1 Timothy 2:13-1 & 1 Corinthians 14:34-37) that a woman is not allowed to "teach or have authority in the church." These words, which are to be taken together, describe the role of an Elder. This is not saying that a woman can never teach. We know from other Scriptures that women did teach in both the home and the church. It

means that a woman cannot teach in an authoritative capacity that violates the principle of headship.

Elder-authority is servant-authority. Elder-leadership is servant-leadership. That's why teaching is at the heart of this calling. Elder-authority leads by persuasion — by teaching — not by coercion or political maneuvering. Elder-authority is always subordinate to Biblical texts. It can always be called to account by Scripture. Therefore teaching is the primary instrument of leadership in the church.

When the church assembles, there is a teaching and governing authority over the congregation which is reserved for men. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul makes clear that the headship of man is to be displayed in the public worship of the church while he also affirms the appropriate public ministry of women in the church.

In our church, the exposition of God's Word from the pulpit is at the very heart of who we are. We view the pulpit as an expression of an Elder's teaching authority. Thus, we believe that women can and should use their gifts to publicly pray, read scripture, lead singing, or host on a Sunday morning, under the authority of the elders present. However, we would not have a woman be responsible for the preaching ministry.

### **Bible Teaching**

We feel that it is inappropriate for a woman to be the Bible teacher in a mixed gender adult class where much instruction is carried out. We think Paul would have thought of this as included in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men."

### **Small Group Leader**

We do not think it is appropriate for a woman to be a permanent leader or instructor of a mixed gender home small group or Bible Study, especially if the group regularly carries out pastoral care of its members and functions as a sort of mini-church within the church. This is because the leader of such a group carries a level of authority that seems very similar to the authority over the assembled congregation that Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 2. Given the frequently small nature of churches meeting in homes in the first century, and given the "pastoral" nature of the responsibility of leading a home fellowship group, we again think Paul would have thought of this as included in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men."

At the same time, it would be appropriate for a leader to ask a woman in the group to facilitate components of the time, such as prayer or discussion, under his authority.

## **Fields of Opportunity**

For men and women who have a heart to minister — to save souls and heal broken lives and resist evil and meet needs — there are fields of opportunity that are simply endless. God intends for the entire church to be mobilized in ministry, male and female. We encourage women to serve the Lord their God with all of their heart - we are impoverished by not having them do so.

We resonate with the comment that probably expresses how many women feel: "Women can sit through an entire service and not hear a word uttered in a female voice - not in prayer, Scripture reading, or in testimony. Something is tragically amiss when gifted daughters of the King of kings haven't grasped their significance and value. Could it be that the church has failed to grasp their vital role in the kingdom?" We hope, pray and strive for that not to be the case at VBC.

There are unique challenges in this for both men and women. Women, it may feel awkward for you at first to use your gifts in some of these areas. It may be threatening for you to have other women do the same. But God calls you to use your gifts. Men, don't make women have to fight for their ministry. Make it easy for them to move into these areas of giftedness that may be new. Husbands, how much time and effort are we investing into seeing that our wives can develop their gifts? We ought to be encouraging them. Headship is all about investing in our wives the way Christ invested in us.

In the end, whether you are a man or a woman, the issue is not seeking your significance in a role, but rather in relationships that are defined by love and humility. We pray that this is what would mark us as a church.