

Bridgeway Church Belief Statement for Women Serving as Elders

This statement sets out the theological stance of Bridgeway Church regarding women in leadership, specifically pertaining to the roles of pastor and elder. A sincere hope in this pursuit is to give the congregation, as well as those God would touch through our ministry in the future, the theological tools and framework to determine truth in Scripture and apply this truth accordingly. Before stating our viewpoint, consider these important foundational truths for discerning any Scriptural teaching, especially one such as this that can be a source of division in the church.

Approach the topic with humility and respect. Faithful men and women have different understandings of God's leading in this matter. At the same time, much of what we believe regarding this issue, we all hold in common—the equal value of women, the redemptive work of Jesus for all people, and the acknowledgment that women are free to exercise gifts such as prophecy, mercy, leadership, giving, and others. We celebrate that at the heart of this issue is a profound loyalty to Jesus. When viewed with charity, we can detect in each other a much deeper kindred spirit: the passion with which we hold our disparate views is—in reality—the passion of our common loyalty to the Word of God.

Desire to move past fear to a place of faith. People often take sides in this issue because of a fear that women will be subjected to an inferior role in the church or be kept from exercising gifts they have been given for the building up of the church. On the other hand, there are fears that men will fail to pursue their calling to lead and that we are reacting to radical feminism rather than to Scriptural truth. In viewing this issue from a sincere search of God's Word and from humility and love for one another, we can move forward in a spirit of unity, no matter our convictions on the issue itself. See Eph. 4:1-3 where Paul exhorts the church: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

As Christ followers, Paul calls us—in the strongest terms possible—to pursue unity in the body as we seek to obey God in this world. Unity simply will not happen without our commitment to live out the unity Christ has provided for us on the cross and to pursue that unity with vigor and intentionality. With this as our goal, we are moving forward by faith and not fear and approach this topic humbly before God.

This being said, **Bridgeway Church affirms the role of women in all places of leadership in the church, including that of elder and pastor, in respect to their fulfillment of the mandates Scripture places on all leaders in the church.**

Our belief, first of all, stems from the very act of God in creation. God is made known to us in the creation of man and woman as together they are made in his image. Many Bible translations refer to Eve's creation as a "helper," which has resulted in an image of someone subordinate. "It is clear from the usage of the word *helper*, however, that a case cannot be made for the subordination of women to men." The Hebrew word *ezer*, normally translated "helper" (Gen. 2:18), is frequently used of God (Ps. 30:10; 54:4) and does not imply subordination. Instead, we see the unfolding of the necessity of man and woman being joined together to reflect God's divine purposes and plans for humanity. A result of the fall was the breakdown of the union between man and woman which placed woman in roles which would reflect a hierarchy and domination by man (Gen. 3:16). With the coming of Christ into the world, God's message was to restore the brokenness between us and God and restore us back to his intended design.

(Gal. 3:26-28: As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.)

Paul sees this mystery in the renewed relationship between male and female as he says in 1 Cor. 11:11-12, *In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.*

The Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people without discrimination. Young and old, men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, by the Spirit's power would prophesy, dream dreams, and see visions (Acts 2:16-18). God's Spirit came on at Pentecost, burning through barriers of age, gender, class, and race. Indeed, these last days would be radically new days for God's people on earth (Joel 2:28-32).

Secondly, we see hints of God's redemptive work through the lives of women in the Old Testament, even in the midst of the patriarchal world that dominated the landscape. Examples include

- Miriam—who Micah names as a special gift from God to lead His people (Mic. 6:4). The mention of her name... among the males of the priestly tribe indicates the importance of her spiritual leadership (Num. 26:59, 1 Chr. 6:3, Heb. 11:23).
- Deborah—one of the judges who God raised up (Judg. 2:16, Neh. 9:27) who also served as a general and a prophet (Judg. 4:4, 5).
- The prophet Hulda was sought after to authenticate the Scripture King Josiah found in the temple rubble (2 Kng. 22:8-23, 2 Chr. 34:14-28) and her proclamation of repentance and obedience triggered a great revival (2 Kng. 23:4-27).
- During the restoration period there is a mention of Nehemiah's opponent Noadiah the prophetess; again, her gender is treated as irrelevant (Neh. 6:14).

Although these examples represent a minority of the people called to leadership in the Old Testament era, we must acknowledge that God has called women into the highest places of leadership to accomplish his purposes when he could have raised up men to lead in these regards.

Thirdly, we see the restoration of roles and responsibilities in the life of Jesus and the early church.

- The frequent mention of women among the followers of Jesus (Luke 8:1-3; 23:55-56; 24:10) and the prominence of women in the early church such as Priscilla (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19), the deaconess Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), and Mary (Rom. 16:6), among others, indicates they played an important role in the early church. Paul mentions several women as "fellow laborers" with him in ministry who worked powerfully in the Gospel. One of these, Junia, was described as a noteworthy apostle (Phil.4:2-3, Rom. 16:3-12).
- Women were major witnesses to the birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As the early church considered it essential that an apostle be a first-hand witness to the resurrection, women had this qualification (Acts 1:22).

Perhaps the strongest positive argument for the inclusion of women in the eldership is the recognition that official leadership in the New Testament church appears to have been modeled most directly *not* on the Old Testament priesthood, which was restricted to physically perfect men from the tribe of Levi, but on the Old Testament eldership, which appears to have been remarkably unrestrictive. For this reason, the New Testament designates its leaders as "elders," rather than "priests." (In the Old Testament there was no tribal requirement for eldership/judgship [Othniel was a Kenizzite and hence a convert of Edomite descent; Jephthah was the son of a prostitute], no health requirement [Ehud was handicapped], and, at least in the case of Deborah, no gender requirement.) Perhaps because God intended to make His strength perfect in human weakness, He often raised up to servant leadership those who were culturally least expected (Judges 2:16-18).

Understanding Difficult texts:

In discerning Scriptural truth for this issue, we also must be diligent in trying to understand the texts that bring questions and concern. Below you will find the main texts in question. The deep responsibility we have in our study of Scripture is not to simply find someone who supports our view, but do the difficult and diligent work of studying the Scriptures as the Bereans (Acts 17:11) to discover what God is teaching us. Below is a summary of the Scriptures from our study of the texts. It is important that we have humility as we allow the Holy Spirit to continue to guide us to truth.

1 Timothy 2 – “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent...”

1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 cannot be dismissed as merely culturally relative. Paul bases his teaching on universally applicable creation norms. On the other hand, we cannot believe that Paul misinterpreted Genesis 2-3 in its account of Adam and Eve, whose relationship is explicitly presented as the paradigm for marriage roles, not gender roles. One must keep in mind that the Greek terms for “man,” *anēr*, and “woman,” *gynē*, are also the normal terms that Greek uses for husband and wife. The fact that Eve is created *after* Adam is a consequence of the fact that she is created *from* Adam. Almost universally recognized is the concern to emphasize the fact that Eve is made of the same substance as Adam, and hence is in no way ontologically inferior to him, and also that Adam is now to love Eve as he loves his own body (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”). Appropriately, Paul confirms that this is also his own understanding of Adam and Eve in Eph. 5:22ff. Along with this, we must also understand the context of this passage as it relates to heresy being propagated in the church and the necessity to stamp out false teaching, whether by men or women.

1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5:21ff. “...the head of woman is man...”

Similarly, the “headship” mentioned in 1 Cor. 11:3 is exactly the same as the “headship” mentioned in Eph. 5:22. The husband is the “head” of the wife, who is compared in this metaphor to his own body, which he loves, cares for, etc. This “one flesh” image, which is based on Genesis 2 (to which both 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 make allusion), is a profound key to marital happiness: a husband is called to love his wife in the most sacrificial ways and the wife is called to submit to her husband in everything as a picture of the absolute necessity for unity in the marriage relationship. Both the call to sacrifice by the husband and submission by the wife stem from the mutual submission to one another that comes out of reverence for Christ and the model he provided for us (Eph. 5:21).

1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 “...the husband of but one wife...”

An appeal to the masculine requirements for overseers (elders) and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 (e.g., that a candidate should be *etc.*) is indecisive for the issue of the right of women to hold church office. As is widely recognized, it is the common practice of the Bible to express legal norms from the male vantage point, perhaps as much to achieve an economy of expression as a reflection of circumstances which would have been culturally typical. In the absence of other constraints, norms which utilize male-oriented terminology ought to be construed, in general, as including both sexes in their purview. Appropriately, Jesus recognized this principle with respect to the male-oriented divorce law of Deut. 24:1-4 as seen in Mark 10:12 when he applied its provision to a divorce initiated by a wife. In keeping with this recognized practice, it is noteworthy that in the Old Testament every text that offers a “job description” for an office is presented in an androcentric manner, precisely as is found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. This is so even where it is certain that the office in question did, in fact, permit women. Especially illuminating is the foundational description of the office of “prophet” in Num. 12:6-8: “*When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.*” In keeping with standard ancient practice, this job description is blatantly androcentric even though the Lord is addressing the concerns of the prophetess Miriam (Exod. 15:20), who is mentioned in the immediate context!

1 Cor. 14:33-40 – Paul instructs women to remain silent in the church

Similar to the command in 1 Timothy 2, we see Paul exhorting women to be silent in the church. Why, however, were there women who functioned as leaders in the church under his authority? Women still functioned in prominent leadership positions as seen by Phoebe, Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche, Priscilla, and Junia (Rom. 16:1-7, Phil. 4:2-9, Acts 2:14-18). The situation of which Paul was speaking warrants a response to a localized situation and was not a command that was given for all times and places for the church.

Conclusion: This teaching is simply a short summary of our study of Scripture. A more comprehensive teaching and study will be provided by the leadership of Bridgeway Church in the coming year, and helpful books will be made available for reading.