



NORTHMETROCHURCH

The Role of Women in the Church

Introduction

We believe the Bible teaches that all believers are ministers; we are called to serve each other and the people in our community and spheres of influence. The spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to all believers for the building up of the church are given without regard to gender. The New Testament contains numerous examples of men and women who work together in the church in a variety of roles. But there are a few scriptures in some of the letters written by the Apostle Paul that raise the question: Are there any roles or offices in the church today that are not filled by both men and women? In particular, Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.” (ESV)

This paper provides North Metro Church’s position on this question. It will examine what the Bible teaches about women in ministry and what it teaches about women in church leadership. The critical question is: Do these teachings apply only to the time and culture when they were written, or do they contain principles that govern the practice of the church today?

There are traditionally two answers to this question. One view is called egalitarian; men and women are equal in essence and all roles. The other is called complementarian; men and women are equal in essence but different in some roles. The Elders of NMC affirm with both egalitarians and complementarians that having been created in God’s image, both male and female, we are equal in essence - the fundamental nature of what it means to be human. We are also equal in obtaining salvation, male and female, as described by Paul in Galatians 3:28.

The Elders also affirm with complementarians that the Bible makes a distinction between men and women in the roles that each fulfill in the church. It should be noted, however, that the complementarian view contains more than one interpretation regarding what roles are currently permitted to men and women. It ranges from the belief that all roles involving teaching and authority over adult men are not permitted for women, to a belief that the only role not permitted for women is that of Elder. The body of this paper discusses the ministry and leadership roles that women fill at NMC and the reasons why we believe the policy and practice at NMC on this issue expresses our understanding of the timeless principles we find in scripture. We are guided in particular by the following scriptures: Acts 18:24-28, Romans 16:1-2, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-38, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 5:21-33, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 3:1-15, and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Women Are Ministers, Deacons, and Leaders

The language of the New Testament reveals that women are fully engaged in ministry. In the Gospel of Luke, Paul's letters, and the letter to the Hebrews, three Greek words are commonly used to refer to those who minister: *diakonos* [servant, attendant, minister; one who executes the commands of another], *leitourgos* [public minister, servant of the state, temple, king], and *huperetes* [anyone who aids another in any work; who serves with hands; ministering or rendering service]. Each of these words essentially means 'servant' and are translated in most English bibles as 'minister' or 'servant'. It is also traditional in the church to use the English spelling of diakonos - deacon - to refer to these servant ministers. Furthermore, the references in Paul's letters to believers who minister and co-labor with him aren't limited to only men. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul discusses the qualifications and responsibilities of deacons and includes both men and women. In addition, in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is commended by Paul as a servant [diakonon] of the church at Cenchrea. Several women are greeted by Paul in Romans 16 as fellow workers in the Lord: Prisca [Priscilla], Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis. Just as we refer to men today who serve as deacons, we affirm that women who also serve in the same capacity are rightly referred to as deacons.

Servant ministry in the church generally requires some type of accompanying leadership authority, especially when a person is tasked with leading a group of individuals involved in ministry activity. The administrative demands of effective ministry require the engagement of persons who are gifted leaders. In Romans 16:2, Phoebe is singled out as such a person. Paul calls her a patron [*prostatis* - a woman set over others, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources]. Romans 12 contains a list of some of the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the church through individual believers. One of the gifts mentioned is that of leadership - "the one who leads".

At NMC, we believe that the Holy Spirit gives the gift of leadership to men and women who exercise some authority over persons serving in the ministries that they lead. Within the boundaries of Scripture, there is freedom to manage the ministries of the church by those who head up (lead) the ministries - both men and women.

Women Are Teachers

The role of women in the ministry of teaching at NMC is addressed in this paper because of what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man." ESV. The New Testament doesn't prohibit women from teaching children - male and female. It is accepted that this role is not at issue. In Titus 2:3-5, Paul commands older women to teach younger women and provides a robust list of what is to be taught. Again, this teaching role isn't at issue. But Acts 18:26 provides an example of a woman (along with her husband) teaching an adult man. Apollos' teaching about Jesus was fervent and accurate, but incomplete. Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately." Does this example of Priscilla teaching Apollos contradict what Paul wrote to Timothy? One interpretation is that it doesn't contradict the teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12 because Priscilla taught Apollos under the headship and authority of her husband, Aquila.

And so today, it is permissible for women to teach adult men as long as they are doing it under the headship and authority of the church Elders. However, this view isn't explicitly stated in the Acts 18:26 passage.

We believe this interpretation is not the best way to reconcile this example in Acts of a woman teaching a man with Paul's instruction to Timothy. The idea of granting a woman permission to teach a man as long as she does so under the headship or authority of her husband, or an Elder in the church, isn't a satisfactory explanation for two reasons. First, due to the nature and role of Elders as overseers, all ministry in the church by all believers is under the authority of the Elders. It isn't necessary to create a special class of teachers (women) who are only permitted to teach as long as they are under the authority of Elders. Second, it isn't possible for the authority of Elders to exceed or contradict the authority of scripture. If something is forbidden in scripture, Elders cannot sanction it "under their authority". If scripture forbids women to teach adult men under any circumstance, Elders do not have permission to grant them authority to do so. However, at NMC, we do not believe 1 Timothy 2:12 is forbidding women to teach men in all circumstances. Paul's prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 is limited to whether or not women may serve in the role of elder/overseer. We also believe that what Paul wrote applies to both his original readers and to the church today. Support for this view comes from the context of the passage, special language that Paul uses, and by the particular usage of Greek grammar.

Context

1 Timothy 3:14-15 provides relevant context as to why Paul wrote this letter. Not only is he combating false teaching, he is also concerned about how believers conduct themselves as the visible body of Christ: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." The rules for proper behavior listed in 1 Timothy 2:8-12 apply to both private and public conduct, but the overall tone of this chapter puts the setting in public worship gatherings. When men pray, they should do so without anger or quarreling. Women should dress modestly, not flaunting their wealth in a way that puts down their poorer sisters in the faith. When they enjoy the new-found practice of being taught at the same time and place as the men of the congregation, they should do so quietly in a way that isn't disruptive or disrespectful. All of these behaviors are right in any culture and time, although styles and expressions may be different. For example, raising hands while praying isn't the timeless behavior - praying without anger and quarreling is. Paul closes this list of appropriate Christian behavior with one more timeless principle - women are prohibited from the behavior of serving as elders. In 1 Timothy 2:13, Paul points to the timeless principle of male headship that God established when he created man and woman as the reason for prohibiting women from serving in the one role in the church that combines a special type of teaching and authority in a unique way - the role of Elder. The context continues into chapter 3 of 1 Timothy. Paul goes immediately into the qualifications for the role in the church that describes this unique teaching/authoritative role - the role or office of overseer/elder.

Special Language

Next, the Greek word chosen by Paul to express the idea of exercising authority is used only here in all of scripture. It is also rare in Greek literature. Instead of the more common *exousia*, he used the word *authenteo*. Until Paul's use of *authenteo*, it had a negative connotation of 'domineer' and even 'murder'. That leads some to interpret this verse to mean that first century Christian women could teach or exercise authority over men as long as they did so in a way that was not domineering, because usurping male authority would offend their culture and be viewed as inappropriate behavior. By itself, the meaning of *authenteo* could support this interpretation. However, because of the context and grammar of this passage, we believe instead that Paul chose to use this rare word to uniquely distinguish and clarify the role of Elder.

Grammar

Finally, the grammar of 1 Timothy 2:12 reveals why the Elders of NMC don't hold the extreme complementarian view that women are not permitted to teach men and they are not permitted to exercise authority over men in all circumstances. This verse is not addressing women teaching men or a domineering exercise of authority over men by women as being two separate behaviors. Two grammatical studies support this interpretation and point to the office of overseer/elder as the proper understanding of what Paul had in mind. First, Andreas Kostenberger has shown that pairs of infinitives such as the two in verse 12 ("to teach" and "to exercise authority") without exception in the New Testament (and consistently in Greek literature) join together either two positive or two negative concepts¹. Because "to teach" is positive in this context, "to exercise authority" must be as well. So, Paul cannot be prohibiting women from domineering or usurping authority over men. Second, Philip Payne has pointed out that the conjunction "nor" [*oude*] that joins these two infinitives together demonstrates the use of *hendiadys* - a grammatical tool that uses two ordinarily independent words to express a single idea². So, teaching and exercising authority in the context of this passage are not two separate behaviors. They are one behavior - authoritative teaching - which combines two important responsibilities of the qualified men in the church described in 1 Timothy 3 who serve in the role of overseer/elder. This combined responsibility entails having final authority in matters of defending the faith and Christian doctrine from false teaching. Titus 1:9 reveals that an elder "...must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." We state this responsibility in the Elder section of the NMC Foundations document: "For the purposes of NMC's faith, doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline NMC elders have interpretive authority on the Bible's meaning and application."

¹ See Andreas J. Kostenberger, "A Complex Sentence Structure in 1 Timothy 2:12," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis*, 81-103.

² See Philip B. Payne, "Oude in 1 Timothy 2:12", paper presented at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Atlanta, November 1986).

Conclusion

At NMC, we recognize and acknowledge that godly men and women interpret the role of women in the church through different theological and cultural lenses. We seek to understand and rightly apply scripture so that the ways in which we serve God, each other, and those in our spheres of influence reflect integrity and love. The Elders of North Metro Church have concluded that we shall apply the results of our prayer and careful study to the following practices:

1. The office of Elder is open only to men.
2. Because the term “pastor” is used interchangeably today with “elder”, the position of Staff Pastor is open only to men who are Elders, or who meet the qualifications of an elder and are on track to becoming one.
3. Both men and women may serve as deacons and may hold a variety of leadership and ministerial staff positions in the church.
4. Men and women may teach adults in mixed gender settings unless the occasion places them in a position of spiritual authority that is reserved for Elders. The Elders will provide guidance for similar situations consistent with the principles and practices identified in this paper. For example, teachers who disciple men-only or women-only groups should be the same gender as the persons in the group.