

The Calling of Women in Ministry

by Mark Mitchell

The deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa have taken from us two famous and very significant people who had made a huge impact on the world. These two women, who were acquainted with each other, had common humanitarian concerns, but they were two very different people. One was taken in the prime of her life; the other had lived as long as anyone could expect. One was strikingly beautiful; the other was plain looking. One was known for her taste and elegance in clothes; the other was rarely seen dressed in anything but a sari. One spent most of her time with the rich and the famous; the other lived with the poorest of the poor. One could dialogue on a variety of subjects; the other rarely spoke of anything but her love for Jesus and the poor. In referring to these contrasts, I am not making a moral judgment on either of them, but they were very different. Yet the one thing that is easy to overlook about these two people is the obvious: they were both women, great women who had made a universal impact on our generation, each in her own way.

As I come to this subject, I can't help but ask the question: Is the church of Jesus Christ a place where women can have the kind of impact and significance that these two women had? Some of us would say: "Of course. Why not? What's the big deal?" But others might wonder. For you, the church has been a place where as a woman you have felt like a second-class citizen. Perhaps you have been made to feel that your particular gifts could not be used in church because they did not have to do with cooking, cleaning or taking care of small children. Perhaps you have wondered if there is a place in church for a woman who has a strong personality or who has gifts in the area of teaching or leadership. Perhaps you have even felt that at this church.

Before we begin, I want to make a few preliminary comments. First, we must take the Bible as the final word in working through these kinds of issues. Frankly, if we were to take our cue from the world around us it would be ridiculous to even raise this issue. In the business world, even talking about the respective roles of men and women is considered archaic. But the fact is, the Bible has some critically important things to say about this matter. As Christians, we need to build our convictions upon the Bible and not the world, or even our own experience.

Second, 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! Whatever view we hold, we must hold it with humility. This does not mean that we cannot have convictions about this issue, but we should not regard what one believes about it 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.

Finally, it is important that we allow Scripture and not our own preconceived notions or past experiences to determine what we believe regarding this issue. Some of you who are more conservative in this area may find what we say about this to be challenging. Others who are more open may also find what I have to say to be challenging. But I would ask you to approach the Scripture with an open mind. I can say that over the years my own thinking has been challenged on this issue. For example, Lynn and I were married just before we graduated from college. Since her parents had supported her through university, she wanted to have her maiden name put on her diploma. Not a big thing, you say. Well, I took offense and demanded she put her married name there. Do you know what I think about that now? It was no big deal, although I made it one at the time.

One mistake people often make in this area is that they fail to consider the broad spectrum of what the Bible says. They tend to focus on one or two passages that prove their point, but they fail to deal adequately with others. I'm going to try and give you a "broad brush" view of the teaching of the Bible on the ministry of women in the church. I will not be able to

cover any one passage in great detail. I should say, too, that I am narrowing my focus this morning to deal solely with women in the ministry of the church. I'm not speaking on the relationship between wives and husbands, nor am I dealing with a woman's role in the secular workplace. So with that in mind, let's look at what the Scripture says. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the Old Testament as it relates to this issue.

The Old Testament and Women

In the book of Genesis there are two complementary accounts of the creation of man and woman. In Genesis 1 we read that God created humanity in two distinct genders. The emphasis there is on the equality of man and woman, and their both being made in the image of God. Together they are blessed by God and commanded to subdue the earth. So they are equal in relation to God and in their responsibility to care for God's creation. In Genesis 2 we learn more about their relationship. The emphasis here is on the distinctive roles that men and women are to play. They are equal in value and dignity, but they are different in function. Man was created first, and then God said it was not good for man to be alone. He would provide a "helper suitable for man." This points to the unique role that a woman plays in the life of a man. The word "helper" does not mean servant. Rather, it is a term of great honor. In the Old Testament, God is often described as the "helper" of His people. Genesis 2 goes on to say how God created the woman out of the man. The man, therefore, was the source from whom woman was created. In the New Testament, this is interpreted as pointing to the role of headship, saying headship belongs to men.

So in Genesis we see that men and women are equal in worth and dignity, but they have different roles. They were not designed to compete with one another, but to complete one another. This truth is reflected throughout the Old Testament. This book broke with the surrounding cultures which considered women to be the property of men. The Old Testament teaches that women are to be treated as persons of worth. God made His covenant with women as well as men. Women were encouraged to listen to God's Word as it was being read aloud, just as men were. Women ministered at the door of the Tabernacle. They offered their own sacrifices. God spoke directly to women. They could become Nazarites devoted to God. Women like Miriam were prophetesses; women like Deborah were judges. As parents, women were on an equal footing with men. Honor is commanded for both father and mother. In Proverbs, a mother's instruction is just as important as a father's.

Nevertheless, we still see a pattern of male headship in the Old Testament. For instance, a woman could not be a priest, while most other religions of the time had priestesses.

Jesus and Women

So this is what the Old Testament teaches. But between the time when the Old Testament was completed and the time when Jesus came on the scene, the relationship between men and women in the Jewish religion had deteriorated. The rabbis had a prayer: "*Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.*" Rabbis would not speak to women in public. They held that it was better to burn God's law than to allow a woman to read it and learn from it.

That is why, when Jesus came on the scene, the way he 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. To the rabbis, women were a source of sexual temptation who were incapable of learning. But Jesus challenged the stereotype that said a woman belonged in the kitchen or the bedroom, not the classroom. 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.

Yet, 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. I prefer to see this as another indication that there is a biblical pattern of male headship within which women are free to serve and minister as equals.

Women in New Testament Churches

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 couple named Priscilla and 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 with authority. 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. Whatever this woman was doing, it was more than serving brownies and coffee!

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 three 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. 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. A woman with the gift of pastor-teacher is commanded to shepherd and to teach the Scripture. Nowhere is she told to do so only with other women or young children. Although all of this is true, however, 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 leads us to two of the most controversial and debated passages on this subject. While we cannot look at these in great detail, I will explain in general terms how I see them.

Women in the Apostles' Teaching

The first passage is 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Paul makes two things clear here. First, it is clear that the headship of man

is to be displayed in the public worship of the church. Paul affirms this in a number of ways. In verse 3 he says that "*the man is the head of a woman.*" Then he talks about veils in verses 4–6. A woman was to wear a veil, because in that culture failing to do so communicated disrespect and sexual promiscuity. Paul likens this to a woman having her head shaved, which was akin to being a prostitute in those times. And then in verses 7–9 Paul defends the concept of headship by the order of creation. Woman was created from man, not vice versa. So this passage affirms headship.

One of the problems some women today have with this idea of headship is that men have misused it. Referring to husbands and wives, Ephesians 5:21ff describes the role of headship better than any other passage. It instructs men that when it comes to headship, we are to take our cue from Christ. For Christ, headship meant laying down His life, serving, washing and blessing. Headship does not mean sole decision-making responsibility and wielding unlimited power. It means washing feet! It means caring, not crushing. It means self-sacrifice, not self-assertion. It means love, not pride. And it results in the affirmation and liberation of women, not the tearing down and enslavement of women.

The second thing I want you to notice from 1 Corinthians 11 is that, while affirming headship, this passage also affirms the ministry and the equality of women. In verse 5 Paul speaks women offering prophecy in church. In verse 13 he speaks of women praying out loud in church. These are very important functions! As we have already pointed out, prophesying was akin to speaking forth the Word of God. And what could be more important than leading a body in prayer? This passage also affirms in verses 11–12 that men and women are truly inter-dependent:

"However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God."

That is a statement of equality.

The second passage is 1 Timothy 2:11–12.

"Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet."

Once again, there are two things I want you to notice. First, a woman is given the right and privilege of learning or receiving instruction. That is not an issue to us, but in the first century

that was unusual. So in a sense this passage affirms the fundamental right of women to be educated and to participate in worship.

Second, notice that women are also prohibited from doing certain things. They are told to be quiet and submissive. What does that mean? This passage is somewhat similar to the one in 1 Corinthians 14, where women are told to remain silent in the church. Now here is where we have to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. We know that Paul is not saying that women can never speak in church, because we just saw in 1 Corinthians 11 that women were free to pray and prophesy. Most scholars agree that Paul is prohibiting them from speaking in an inappropriate manner. Perhaps the women in Corinth and Ephesus had taken their newfound liberation in Christ so far that they were standing up and questioning the Elders or even their husbands in church. Since women and men sat on different sides, perhaps they were shouting to each other across the room, disrupting the worship and acting in a way that would give the church a bad reputation in the community. Notice that Paul tells the Corinthians 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. These women were acting in a way that violated that principle.

Application

How does this apply to life and ministry at Central Peninsula Church? We have learned today that women are free to minister in the church according to their gifts and calling. This includes teaching other men 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 a clear pattern of male headship. 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 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.

A friend once told me that she knew why God had given the headship role to men. The reason, she said, was found in 1 Corinthians 1:27: “*God has chosen the foolish things of the world*

to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.” She may be right!

As we speak about how this applies to the practice of the church, we have to keep in mind that churches are governed differently, so how this plays out in practice may vary from church to church. Perception plays a role here. What is perceived as a violation of the principle of headship in one church is not so regarded in another. But because of who we are as a church and how we are governed, here is how this principle plays out for us.

We believe that God has given the role of governing authority in the church to the Elders. These men are called to submit to the Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit as they give direction to the entire church. They are called to shepherd the entire flock, and this includes guiding, feeding, caring and protecting. This is the job of qualified men only. There are many fine churches where women serve as Elders, but that is not how we understand the Scripture. However, let me add something here. Elders should also recognize the unique perspective and insights of women and they should seek them out in fulfilling their role.

I want to say a word here with regard to how we view the pulpit ministry in this context. 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 would not have a woman be regularly responsible for the preaching ministry on Sunday mornings. That does not mean women are not capable preachers, nor does it mean we could never have a woman in the pulpit. I think of women like Joni Eareckson Tada, Elizabeth Elliot, or the late Corrie Ten Boom. I hope we would not deny those or other similarly gifted women an opportunity to teach us.

This leads to the question of women on our pastoral staff. We have a large pastoral staff, some of whom but not all are Elders, and not all of whom preach. We believe it is entirely appropriate for us to have women on our pastoral staff because they will be ministering under the direction of the Elders. They are free to teach and lead both men and women in their ministries as an expression of their spiritual gifts and their God-given calling which, as we have seen, is not limited to the male gender. Now it is important for you to know that we will not hire these persons because they are women. We do not have a quota system here. Instead, we will hire them because they were the best people for the positions.

We will continue to have women serving as pastors in a variety of ministries at CPC. Once again, it is clear that these

are ministries where women ought to be encouraged and trained to use their gifts, just as men are. This also applies to Sunday morning worship. Because of how we view these roles, we believe women can and should use their gifts to pray, lead worship, or host here on Sunday mornings. There is no reason why women cannot serve in those capacities. I would even say that we are impoverished by not having women do so. We need the perspective that only a woman can bring in these areas. Someone in our church sent me a quote by Pamela Heim that probably expresses how many of you feel. She says: “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?” I believe we have.

For some of us, this is hard to accept. This is where we have to be honest with ourselves. Is our comfort level governed by our own personal feelings, or is it governed by the Scripture? Some who are overly conservative in this area are afraid to loosen up because we associate these things with the liberal church where Scripture is ignored. That is a poor reason to not be willing to change. Some who are on the other side are unwilling to accept male headship because of men who have mishandled their role. That, too, is a poor reason not to be willing change. It was hard for the Jews to accept Gentiles into the full fellowship and ministry of the New Testament church. Is this issue really that different? Whichever side you are on, I want to challenge you to confess your prejudice to God and ask Him to help you to be open to what the Scripture says.

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 leadership 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. As a husband, I haven’t always done this well. A lot more time and effort has gone into my training than my wife’s. But headship is all about investing in our wives the way Christ invested in us.

We have to remember that Jesus did not put a lot of weight on believers holding onto their rights. He always emphasized taking a back seat and serving. It is important to remember that as we speak about rights and equality and roles. The world, as we well know, fights for equality and vies for roles. Recently I heard Dave Dravecky say something that has stuck with me. He said that since losing his career as a baseball player he has learned to define his success not in terms of his achievements, but in terms of his relationships—his relationship with God and with people. That is not the way I normally evaluate success. But that should be true for both men and women. And in the church, those relationships ought to look different from how they are in the world. So 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. I pray that this is what would mark us as a church.