

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION:

AVPC holds to a high view of Scripture, believing the Bible to be God's infallible and inerrant word to us, authoritative in all matters. Such a view leads to opposition in matters like the role of women in the church. Many charge that traditional Christianity (the kind we hold to) is oppressive to women. Some churches have agreed with this charge and as a result have changed their views from the traditional understanding of the role of women to an understanding that makes no distinction of roles. Other churches have dug in their heels against this pressure and have doggedly held to a traditional view simply because it is the traditional view. We want to be neither liberal nor traditional, but biblical. In our attempt to be faithful to the Bible, it is important that we recognize that the Bible is consistent in its teachings. If it seems to us to be otherwise, we need to dig deeper and try to understand it more fully. A practical application of this is that we need to take into account the teaching of all of God's word on this matter and that we need to let the clearer passages guide us in understanding the more obscure. For example, it would be a violation of this principle to build our entire understanding of this question on a passage like 1 Timothy 2:15 – "But women will be saved through childbearing..." Rather, we must interpret this passage in light of clearer passages.

The following are the major and clearest passages on this topic, in light of which the more obscure ones should be interpreted. The passages are listed from the more general to the specific.

Galatians 3:28 - *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

This passage is probably the central one used by those who want to say that there is no distinction of role between men and women. Clearly, it teaches a certain equality of the sexes, but the equality taught here is not an equality of role but an equality of status before God. In Galatians, Paul's purpose is to defend the gospel against the error of adding law-keeping to faith as a means of gaining God's approval for either justification or sanctification. When it comes to becoming a son or daughter of God or of enjoying the privileges of sonship, no one has an advantage by race (Jew or Greek), social status (slave or free), or sex (male or female). All are on an equal footing as sinners who have no claim on God by their own works, but

only by God's grace in making them sons and daughters of his through faith in Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:3 - *Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*

This passage clarifies two very important matters in this discussion. First, it is possible for there to be equality of essence and distinctions of role in the same relationship. For example, a husband and wife are of equal essence at the same time that they possess different roles. The role of the husband, as given him by God, is that of headship, but such headship in no way takes away from equality of essence. The clearest example of this is the Trinity. This same passage says that "the head of Christ is God." The Bible teaches that the Father and the Son are of equal essence (John 10:30; Hebrews 1:3), but possess different roles. The Father's role is that of headship, while the Son's role is one of subordination. Equality and subordination can coexist in the Trinity, and they also coexist in certain male/female relationships.

The second matter clarified in this passage concerns the nature of the headship role, seen in the headship of Christ over man. Headship means authority. Christ has authority over man and we owe submission to him. Jesus' authority, however, is expressed through sacrificial service. Jesus did not come to "please himself" but to please us for our good (Romans 15:2-3). The job of a "head" is to use his authority to please the one over whom he has been given authority for the purpose of meeting that person's needs.

This passage also brings up an important question. What does it mean when it says that "the head of the woman is man?" Does this mean that all men have authority over all women? Our understanding is that the Bible restricts the headship-submission roles of men and women to two spheres: marriage and the church. The operation of these roles within marriage can be seen in Ephesians 5:22-33, and in the case of marriage, every married woman is under the headship of a man—namely, her husband. It is primarily this headship of a man in the marital relationship that is in view here in 1 Corinthians. There is also a headship role given to men in the church, but it is not given to every man and it doesn't preclude women from serving in many roles of leadership (see more on this below, under 1 Timothy 2:12). As we are going to see below, the office of headship in the church (the office of elder) is limited to men. But only a few men possess this office, those whom God calls to do so, and their headship extends over everyone in the church, both men and women. Outside of these two spheres of marriage and church, the Bible doesn't forbid to women the role of authority and headship. There is nothing unbiblical about a woman serving in a role of authority at the workplace or in the political arena. A Christian man serving under her authority in such a situation is commanded by God to submit to her authority (Romans 13:1; Ephesians 6:5). The Bible doesn't teach that women are unsuited by nature from exercising roles of

authority. On the contrary, both experience and the Bible teach us that many women are very gifted in areas of leadership.

1 Timothy 2:12 - *I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*

Before discussing the exact nature of this limitation, let's notice the biblical example of some of the roles and duties of women in the early church. Tim Keller summarizes it like this:

Women were full members of the covenant community (Acts 1:14). They were deaconesses (1 Tim. 3:11; Romans 16:2); this meant they were ministry leaders, initiating and supervising ministries. It is wrong, therefore, to say that women cannot be area directors in para-church ministries, or to say that women cannot lead evangelistic, discipling, educational, or teaching ministries. Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42) was a leader of mercy ministry to the poor, while Euodia and Synteche (Phil. 4:2,3) were Paul's evangelistic associates. Priscilla [along with her husband Aquila – ed.] discipled and instructed Apollos (Acts 18:26) and led a house church (Rom. 16:4,5). As in the Old Testament (Exodus 15), women were prophets and did prophesy. They spoke and prayed in public worship (1 Cor. 11:5) [unpublished paper on the role of women in the church]

What is the precise limitation of 1 Timothy 2:12? It is not an absolute requirement of silence in all church functions. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, the assumption is that the women will be praying and prophesying in the worship service. Nor is it an outright ban on women teaching men, because that would contradict the example of Priscilla in Acts 18:26 and Romans 16:4,5. Our position is that 1 Timothy 2:12 forbids women from occupying the office of elder in the church. That's what Paul means when he forbids a woman to have authority over a man in the church.

Elders perform two functions that are unique to their office. First, they have the authority to admit or dismiss people from the membership role of the church through membership interviews and church discipline (compare 1 Timothy 5:17 with Matt. 18:17-18). Second, they monitor the doctrinal purity of the church (Titus 1:9-11). An example of this second function can be found in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." Again, the kind of "speaking" being referred to here is that of making a judgment as to the soundness of the teaching of the prophets. Elders do many other things, but the two duties above are the ones the elders **alone** can do. To summarize, the teaching and speaking Paul forbids to women in 1 Timothy 2:12 is the speaking and teaching done in the context of the authoritative office of elder. To see it as applying more broadly than that would lead to contradictions with other passages of Scripture, as listed above.

Our conclusion from the above passages is that a woman in the church can do anything an unordained man in the church can do. More specifically, that applies in the following ways.

- (1). **Worship.** Women participate in many ways already in our worship service, including prayer, sharing a testimony, drama, announcements, and taking part in the musical leadership. We have not had any women involved in a role of worship leader, but see no biblical reason why this could not be done.
- (2). **Preaching.** We believe that the preaching of the Word of God is a central part of the office of elder, since it is the authoritative declaration of God's Word, as spoken of in 1 Timothy 2. Therefore, it is to be done on a regular basis only by those who are ordained as Teaching Elders or licensed by the presbytery to preach.
- (3). **Teaching.** God gives to the elders the task of overseeing all the teaching of the church, whether it's done by men or women. We believe that women are permitted to teach both men and women under this oversight.
- (4). **The Diaconate.** Although theologians can make a reasoned argument for ordaining deaconesses, our Book of Church Order, to which we are bound by the ordination vows, currently allows for women to serve in a diaconal role, though it does not permit their ordination (BOCO 9-7). It is our belief that the women of AVPC have played and will continue to play a valuable and essential role in this diaconal capacity. Our desire is to encourage more coordination and integration between the Deacons and the women of AVPC who labor in the diaconal role.
- (5). **General Leadership.** Other than the two exclusive duties of the elders listed above, we see no biblical reason why a woman cannot serve in any leadership capacity in the church. Such leadership roles could include things like chairing the Missions Committee, being Treasurer of the Church, heading up a prayer ministry, outreach ministry, discipleship ministry, etc.

The church is the body of Christ, endowed by our Lord with many gifted people, male and female. We are strongest when these different gifts are allowed to flourish. We need one another and are incomplete without one another. We believe that the work of God's kingdom through AVPC will flourish to the glory of God as we recognize and rejoice in this interdependence and encourage the utilization of the unique gifts possessed by the women of the church.