

# Women In The Church

---

June 2006

## General Biblical Principles

The Bible provides a framework for considering subjects on which there is no clear consensus among Christians regarding its teaching. The Biblical approach to women in the church, which is one such issue, requires acceptance and application of the following key principles.

**Authority of Scripture** – our church belief and practice is based on scripture which takes precedence over tradition or customs or the writings of the church fathers or claimed interpretations of history. The written word of God is the source of authority and we must seek, therefore, to be ruled by scripture and endeavour to understand what it says, even when the meaning is difficult. Our knowledge is imperfect as Paul points out to Christians in Corinth and, when the Bible is not clear on an issue and there are different interpretations, the governing principle must be love not discord.

*(Ps. 119:89-120; Mk. 7:1-13; Jn. 17:17; Matt. 4:1-11; 1 Cor. 13: 8-13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; & 2 Pet. 3:14-16)*

**Freedom of Conscience** – scripture sets out core beliefs and patterns of behaviour which are absolute and to which the church must adhere. However, beyond these it allows different positions to be held on a range of doctrinal matters and freedom in personal behaviour. The constitution of Windsor Baptist Church, while extending the fullest and freest liberty of conscience, requires members to accept 14 doctrines. Jesus taught his disciples a lesson in tolerance when he said that those who were not against them were for them. Paul warns against a judgemental attitude over what food may be eaten and keeping holy days and he challenged Galatian Christians to stand fast in the freedom they had

in Christ by resisting pressure to be circumcised. Subject to the authority of scripture, there is freedom to differ on matters which are not essential and it is the responsibility of all to follow the example of the Bereans who, on hearing Paul's preaching, searched the scriptures to see if it was true and the instruction to the Thessalonian believers to test everything.

*(Mark 9:38-41; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8; Acts 17, Gal. 5:1-6; Col. 3:16 & 1Thess. 5:21)*

**Unity** – David says in the Psalms that it is good to live together in unity and Jesus expressed that unity in terms of his followers being in him. Paul takes up this unity when he tells the Galatian believers that we are one in Christ Jesus. He emphasises the importance of this unity by exhorting Christians in Ephesus to make every effort to maintain unity in the body of Christ. While the Bible stresses our freedom in Christ, it also calls on us to restrict our freedom for the greater good of the community of believers and warns us to watch out for, and avoid, those who cause division. The underlying Biblical principle governing the exercise of Christian freedom is not to please ourselves but to serve others in love

*(Ps. 133; Jn. 8:32; Rom. 14; Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 8; Gal. 3:28; Gal. 5:13-15 & Eph. 4:3-5)*

# Principles and Practice of the Church

## Creation Principles

1. Man and woman are created in God's image – neither one nor the other reflects more of the image of God but together they, in distinction from all other living creatures, are invested with his image.
2. Man and woman are distinctive and complement each other in making the creation of mankind complete by having the ability to fulfil God's commands.
3. Man and woman jointly exercise stewardship over the rest of creation – some believe on the basis of male leadership and others on the basis of equality.

## Fall Principles

1. The fall distorted the creation model of male/ female relationships. Some believe this resulted in unacceptably harsh male rule within man's leadership role. Others believe it introduced sinful male dominance contrary to the creation principles of equality and mutuality.
2. Tensions and conflicts in male/female relationships are an inevitable result of the fall.

## Redemption Principles

1. Christ's redemptive work on the cross restores the broken relationship between men and women brought about by the fall. Some believe this should be reflected now as far as gender roles within the church are concerned and others take the view that that this awaits final fulfilment in future glory.

2. Men and women have equal status in Christ – some believe that this does not confer equality of function as there is male headship in the church and others believe that there is no gender distinction in role, including eldership.
3. Spiritual gifts are given by God to men and women without any gender distinction.

## **Practice**

The following practice reflects:

- the Biblical principles of the authority of scripture, freedom of conscience and maintenance of unity;
  - the views of those who believe that leadership in the church should be by male elders; and
  - the views of those who believe that women should not be excluded from teaching in a mixed- sex context.
1. The church shall, as at present, appoint only men as elders.
  2. Under the direction of the elders, having demonstrated gift and spiritual maturity, all other leadership roles and spiritual/practical activities, including teaching, shall be open to women on the same basis as men.
  3. The elders shall encourage, and provide opportunity for, women to develop and use their gifts for the benefit of the church.

## Scriptural Teaching

There are, broadly speaking, two views on this issue within Christian thinking - one is 'complementarian' and the other 'egalitarian'. Those holding these respective views adopt essentially different approaches in their use of the Old Testament creation account. Others hold views somewhere along a continuum between the complementarian and egalitarian views either by attaching more weight to some aspects of the respective views or on the basis of a different overall approach to the scriptures.

The Biblical basis of the two main views is summarised below under the headings creation, the fall and redemption. There is also brief comment on other views.

### Complementarian View

**Creation** – man and woman were created in the image of God to have a relationship with him. Both reflect God's character in their lives but they are distinctive and have different roles rooted in creation based on:

- Adam being created first and Eve being created as a helper for Adam;
- God's naming of the human race 'man' and Adam's naming of Eve;
- Adam's position as representing the human race in terms of our sinfulness.

The God-given differences in role and function under which man exercises leadership do not diminish or create a second-class citizenship within the kingdom of God as both men and women are equal in personhood, value and importance in his sight.

The leadership role of men is reflected in the Old Testament by the male priests, prophets and political leaders. While some women were prophets and leaders (Miriam, Deborah and Huldah), they did not teach as this was the role of the priests or lead in military terms (as did male judges and later kings). It is also significant that they prophesied to other women or to men in private.

*(Gen. 1:27-28; Gen.2:18-25; Gen. 5:2; Ex. 15:20-21; Lev. 10:8-11; Judges 4:6-14; 2 Kings 22:14; Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 15:15:22)*

**The Fall** – God's curses did not introduce new roles or functions for Adam and Eve but rather distorted the created order of the man and woman. Adam would misuse his authority by ruling harshly and Eve would desire to usurp his authority.

(Gen. 3:16)

**Redemption** - the distortion of the roles of men and women is addressed as the redemption of Christ is aimed at removing the results of sin in that he appeared to destroy the works of the devil. Accordingly, the order and distinction of roles that were there from the beginning of God's good creation are reaffirmed. Husbands are commanded not to be harsh with their wives but to love them and women are to be subject to their husbands in the Lord. Likewise all service in the church, including leadership, is not to be authoritarian but to follow the servant- model of Jesus and elders are to set an example to be followed. However, servant-leadership does not stand in opposition to authority as Jesus was both servant and Lord and elders are to rule in the church. A pattern of male leadership in the church is, therefore not incompatible with servant-leadership.

When Paul tells the Galatians that there is neither male nor female in Christ and all are one in him, the context is that all are united in Christ. There are to be no factions or divisions among Christians and there is no place in the church for superiority or domination or subjugation or jealousy as all are of equal value and dignity. However, what Paul says about unity has little to say about the relationships between men and women in the church as this equality neither obliterates the differences between the sexes nor abolishes distinction in terms of roles. While scripture is clear that the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, gives both men and women spiritual gifts for the common good, this cannot contradict God's word which states that the role of governing and teaching in the church is to be carried out by male pastors and elders.

Paul, when writing to the church at Corinth, uses the word "head" to describe the relationships between man and Christ, woman and man and Christ and God. Studies and lexicons show that the Greek word, "kephale" translated "head" does not mean "source" but rather "authority", thereby re-enforcing the male headship order of creation set out in Genesis. Although women may prophesy, Paul, consistent with the principle of male headship, tells those at Corinth that women should be silent in the church and not engage in judging prophecies. He later tells Timothy that the creation principle of Adam's prior creation (male headship) means that women should neither teach nor exercise authority over men in the church. This interpretation reflects the meaning of the Greek word he uses for "authority" and the grammatical structure followed in the text.

Jesus treated women with great respect by talking to them, engaging them in theological conversation, accepting their financial support and letting them accompany the band of disciples travelling with him. He challenged those who treated women as second-class citizens but his approach did not set aside the creation principle of male leadership in the church as he appointed only males as the twelve apostles. Women also played a

significant role in witnessing and testifying to the resurrection but this relates to their function as evangelists, not teachers.

Women prophesied in the early church but prophecy is a message brought to the mind by God and does not carry the same authority as teaching. Women who receive the teaching gift may teach men in a private situation outside the context of the assembled congregation in the way Priscilla taught Apollos and also other women and children. Paul had many women co-workers but this does not mean that they had equal authority to him or similar authority to other co-workers or that they held the office of elder or taught in the church.

In summary, therefore, while having greater authority does not mean having greater value in God's sight, the Biblical principle of male headship applies with men holding spiritual leadership and teaching roles in the church assembly.

*(Matt. 10:1-4; Matt19:28; Matt. 21:14; Matt. 28:5-10; Mark 10:42-45; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3; Luke 10:28-32, John 4:1-30; John 11:21-29; John 13:13; Acts 2:17-18; Acts 18:26; 1 Cor.11:2-16; 1 Cor.12:7&11; 1Cor.14:29-39; Eph. 5:22-33; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Tim. 2:1-15; 1 Tim 5:17; 2 Tim. 1:5 & 2Tim. 3:14-15; Titus 2:3-5; 1Pet. 3:1-7; 1 Pet. 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 1John 3:8)*

## **Egalitarian View**

**Creation** – God created man and woman in his image distinctive from all other living creatures and both reflect the divine image. Femaleness reflects the image of God as fully as maleness and this is demonstrated by the female images of the eagle and hen. God's mandate regarding man's stewardship over creation refers to both male and female. This delegated rule over creation does not distinguish between the sexes and there is no division of responsibility or suggestion of hierarchy or rank in carrying out this role. There is full equality in role and function from creation.

While man was created first, God proclaimed that it was not good for him to be alone as he needed a suitable 'helper' to make him complete. The word 'helper' does not necessarily suggest subordination as it is also used of God and it is only at the end of the sixth day when God had completed his creative work, including creating man and woman, that he declared all of his creation 'very good'. Adam in giving the name 'woman' and proclaiming 'flesh of my flesh' was not asserting ownership or his authority but rather unity.

In the Old Testament world, apart from the Aaronic priesthood, all other Israelites, male and female, could not be part of the priesthood. Women held every other major office in Hebrew political and spiritual life except that of priest – judge (Deborah), queen (Athaliah) and prophetesses (Miriam, Deborah and Huldah). Women did not teach, but then neither did men who were not priests.

*(Gen.1:26&28; Gen1:31; Gen.2:18-24; Exodus 15:20; Deut.32:9-11; Judges 4&5; 1 Sam. 25; 2 Kings 11:1-6; 2 Kings 22:14-20; Neh.6:14; Ezk. 13:17-23 Matt. 23:37)*

**The Fall** - the man and woman acted independently in their decision to eat the fruit and their sin was one of disobedience. There is no suggestion of Eve having been reprovved for usurping a leadership role which belonged to Adam. The fall distorted the relationship between man and woman from one of harmony to one of conflict. From then she would be subject to man's rule but as a command from God as a consequence of sin and not as God created her. The extent of the distortion of the male/female relationship was soon reflected in polygamy when Lamech married two women thereby breaching the 'one flesh' union and diminishing the dignity and worth of women.

*(Gen. 3:7-13 &17; Gen. 4:19)*

**Redemption** - Christ's redemptive work restored not only the broken relationship between man and God but also the disrupted and unequal relationship between man and woman arising from the fall. The relationship between men and women is inter-dependent in the Lord and there is neither male nor female in Christ. This equality in status before God must be reflected in the life of the church and roles should not be determined on the basis of gender but rather on gift and spiritual maturity. In Christ male and female share the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, have access to God in prayer and join together in worship. They prophesy (as foretold by Joel) which is one of the greater gifts listed by Paul, coming second after apostles and before teaching. There is no longer a male priesthood but, as God's elect, men and women are chosen in Christ to be holy and to serve as priests. This unity, equality of status and value in Christ, while not blotting out the obvious factual differences of race, social position and gender, affects social relationships within the church and participation in the life of the church is not to be based on these differences. Women, like men, receive spiritual gifts from God without gender distinction - they are as much part of the church as men and there is no place for gender division in the church in terms of leadership and teaching roles. Leadership and all service in the church are based on the principle of submission and the servant-model, not hierarchical authority. Both Jesus and Paul taught that authority lay with the church members and Jesus made it very clear that the hierarchical structure of authority prevalent in society as a whole was not acceptable in the church.

Jesus' attitude to women was revolutionary – while Jesus chose twelve male disciples, women were among his followers and he not only taught them, but engaged them in theological conversation. Jesus came to his own people, the Jews, and in this cultural context it is no more surprising that he did not choose women than that he did not choose Gentiles. Women were first to receive the revelation of the incarnation, to witness the resurrection and to be told by Jesus to spread the news of His resurrection. They were also active in the early church - Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, instructed Apollos, who became one of the foremost leaders of the early church, in doctrine; Phoebe was a deacon in the church at Cenchrea; Junias, was probably a female apostle; and at the end of his letter to the church at Rome, Paul sends greetings to twenty-six people, nine of whom were women. He uses the term 'fellow-workers' to describe both men and women and there is no good reason for concluding that it means something different when applied to women. While there is no reference in scripture to a woman holding the office of elder, texts relating to elders are descriptive rather than prescriptive, and the broad teaching and practice set out in scripture points towards women working alongside men in leadership and ministry roles.

Accordingly references in scripture to women being silent in the church or forbidding them to be involved in teaching men cannot, given the overall thrust of the Bible and practice of the early church, be taken as absolute or permanent. When Paul uses the Greek word 'kephale' when writing to the Corinthians it does not mean 'headship' but rather 'source'. This is demonstrated by evidence from lexicons/dictionaries and word studies. He is not, therefore, setting out a principle of male authority but demonstrating that the difference between men and women in terms of their origin in the creation allows them to follow different practices in worship. In telling Timothy that women should not teach men or have authority over them, he is not establishing a permanent pattern for the church based on Adam's priority in creation but rather the principle that like Eve women should not teach or lead without knowledge and preparation. The prohibitions are temporary and the permanent principle is that women should not teach or seek leadership roles until they are prepared through learning.

The underlying message of these texts is that everyone participating in church life, whether in prayer, teaching or other service should not unnecessarily flout social customs or promote disorder in worship or assume or usurp roles without appropriate recognition of their gifts and understanding through learning.

*(Joel 2:28-29; Matt.10:38-42; Matt. 15:21-28; Matt. 18:15-20; Matt. 20:20-28; Matt. 23:1-12; Matt. 26:6-13; Matt. 28:10; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 1:32-35; Luke 8:1-3; Luke 10:38-41; John 1:11; John 4:7-42; John 11:23-27; John 13:1-17; John 20:1-18; Acts 2:14-21; Acts 17:10-12; Acts 18:24-26; Acts 21:8-9; Rom. 12:1-10; Rom. 16:1-16; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Cor.11:2-16; 1 Cor.12:1-31; 1 Cor.14:26-39; Gal. 3:26-27; Eph. 5:18-21 Phil. 4:2-7;*

Col. 3:16; 1Tim. 2:9-15; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Heb.13:17; 1Pet. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 5:1-6; Rev. 1:6)

## Other Views

Other views reflect positions somewhere in between the full complementarian and egalitarian views and are largely based on a different understanding or application of some of the key texts. The main views held are:

Women may teach but not hold the office of elder – some holding this view stress that, while the creation account demonstrates the equality of men and women in terms of responsibility, there is no example of a female elder in the New Testament church and all the references to the qualifications for the office of elder relate to men. Furthermore it cannot be assumed that, while redemption in Christ is accomplished, all the consequences of the fall are as yet fully redeemed. For example Paul talks in Romans about the reality of sin in the life of the believer and about Christians and creation living in the expectation of future glory. This is true of the role of men and women as far as oversight in the church is concerned.

Some reach the same conclusion but on the basis that the emphasis of the creation account is not about the absolute complementarity or equality of the sexes. The Genesis text rather develops the themes of being fruitful and multiplying and the curses after the fall confirm this Submission is to God who delegates stewardship over the rest of creation to mankind– there is no explicit authority or submission in terms of gender. Christ's redemptive act restores the worth and dignity of women but there is no basis for concluding that the unequal relationship between man and woman has been restored. The relationship between Jesus and his Father provide an understanding of authority, equality, role and responsibility and headship remains important in understanding Christ and his kingdom which needs to be observed in relationships though not in terms of authority and obedience, Essentially authority has to be seen in terms of responsibility and service.

(Gen 1&2; John 5:16-30; John 8:12-30; John 10:30; John 14: 9-31; John 15:9-17 John 16:15; Rom.5:19; Rom. 7:21-15; Rom. 8:18-27; Tim. 3:1-; Titus1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Eph.1, 4&5)

Women may teach and may hold the office of elder in the context of team ministry under a male team leader – those holding this view say that the Bible teaches male headship as a creation principle but, in writing to Timothy, Paul was not placing an absolute prohibition

on women teaching men. He expresses two antitheses (or inverse parallels) the first between "learn in quietness" and "teach", and the second between "full submission" and "authority". The prohibition was against any kind of teaching which infringed the principle of male headship. The primary function of Christian teachers is to teach scripture ("guard the deposit") and they do not claim authority for themselves but put themselves and their teaching under the authority of scripture. Women, therefore, may teach provided the content is biblical and in the context of a team led by a man.

*(Gen.2:15-25; 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1Tim.2:11-15; 2 Tim. 1:14)*

Women may engage in teaching that is not authoritative but may not hold the office of elder – the principle of male headship is again emphasised and, as above, Paul is not understood to be prohibiting women from teaching men in all circumstances. However, male headship is reflected in that women may not engage in authoritative teaching; otherwise they may teach mixed-sex church assemblies. Authoritative teaching is generally all regular, official instruction in the doctrines of the faith which is the role of elders.

*(Gen.2:15-25; 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1Tim.2:11-15; 1Tim. 5:17; 2 Tim. 1:14)*

## **Selected Bibliography**

- Atkins, Anne, *Split Image*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1987
- Bilezekian, Gilbert, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Baker Book House, 1986.
- Evans, Mary, *Women in the Bible*, Paternoster Press, 1983.
- Groothius, Rebecca Merrill and Fee, Gordon D, *Discovering Biblical Equality – Complementarity without Hierarchy*, Apollos, 2004
- Grudem, Wayne, *Evangelical Feminism 7 Biblical Truth*, Apollos, 2005
- Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, IVP, 1994.
- Hurley, James, *Man & Woman in Biblical Perspective*, IVP, 1981.
- Knight, George W., *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, Moody Press, 1985
- Piper, John and Grudem, Wayne (ed.), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood; A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Crossway Books, 1991
- Lees, Shirley (ed.), *The Role of Women*, IVP, 1984.
- Porter, Fran, *Changing Women, Changing World*, Blackstaff Press, 2002.
- Storkey, Elaine, *What's Right with Feminism*, SPCK, 1985.
- Stott, John, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshalls, 1984.
- Sumner, Sarah, *Men and Women in the Church*, IVP, 2003