

Men and Women in Church Leadership

Adopted by The Grace Chapel Council of Elders August 8, 2024

The identity and role of men and women in the life of the church is very important and yet it is also controversial. It demands Biblical clarity, explanation, and room for learning and growth. The Council of Elders at Grace Chapel offers this position paper in that vein as an explanation of our theological commitments as well as our applications of this Biblical theology of gender in our church. Not every issue will be handled and articulated in this paper, but we hope to craft a clear expression of our Biblical beliefs and some key areas of ministry implication. We offer this in a spirit of shepherding, love, and unity for the good of Grace Chapel and the glory of God.

Introduction

Men and women are equal in essence, dignity, and worth. At the same time, men and women are unique in significant ways, designed by God to complement one another in important and loving creation roles, most notably in the home and the church. As it relates to the home, husband and wife are both expected to lead, serve, and love; however, God has established the husband as a uniquely responsible leader and the wife as a uniquely trusting abider in that loving leadership (Eph. 5). As it relates to the church, men and women are both expected to lead and serve in love; however, there are biblical role differences outlined in scripture. Particularly, the office of elder/pastor¹ is reserved for qualified men (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and women are not to teach or exercise authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12). This paper will focus on the roles of men and women in the church body.

Equal and Alike Humanity

The Bible stresses the shared humanity of men and women in the opening chapters of Genesis. Men and women are both made in the image of God with no hint of inequality or subordination of personhood (Genesis 1:27-28, Galatians 3:28). The woman is created as a helper for the man, but that term connotes partnership in a complementary manner in order to follow God in his call to steward the creation (Genesis 2:18-25). Marriage is a picture of unity and partnership from its very beginning.

Therefore, it is important to begin with the sameness of men and women, rather than difference. Both men and women are fully human, and humanity is fully expressed when men and women use their gifts, time, and resources to worship and serve God together. There are three important values that we want to promote, given our sameness.

¹ The title “pastor” is the name given to male staff at Grace Chapel who meet the qualifications of elder and function in elder-like pastoral roles.

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The first value is **unity**. Men and women are created as unified in our common humanity and our common design to know and love God. We must begin with a spirit of that unity in our discussions on spiritual leadership, church life, church governance, and ministry opportunities (1 Corinthians 12:4-31). This unity is more than practical and relational. It goes to the deepest level of our beings. Therefore, we must be in obedience to who we actually are as men and women, namely, two parts of a whole as God intends, for the health of the church and kingdom.

The second value is the imagery of **family**. The Bible refers to the relationship between members of the church, universal and local, to be one of brothers and sisters in the Lord, as frequently expressed in the New Testament. We are family partners, and this is a primary metaphor in the New Testament for our relationships. This family relationship emphasizes our unity, our common Heavenly Father, and frees us to embrace love and loyalty, rather than competition and threat. There is no subordination of value, dignity, and ability in families. Rather, there is mutuality, joy, and common identity. The family metaphor also enables us to serve together with a relational carefulness, knowing that men and women living and serving in intimate settings, like a church, can unwittingly invite sexualized feelings. When men and women see each other primarily in terms of spiritual siblings, it empowers careful integrity, and the commensurate protection of sexuality within marriage alone. Therefore, we want to cultivate an environment of brotherly and sisterly love within complementarian gender commitments. Our aim is to foster healthy ministry and relationship between men and women, where honor, care, loyalty, and sacrifice are hallmarks.

The third value is that we are **Great Commandment and Great Commission Partners**. Both men and women are called to love God and others, and to proclaim the gospel to the world. If the heralding of the gospel were carried out by only one gender, the kingdom would be impoverished. The gospel identity of the believer is for men and women. Both men and women are examples of dedicated service and gospel proclamation in the Bible (Acts 18:26; 16:14-15).

Different and Complementary Roles

We have already stated that men and women are equal in essence, dignity, and worth, and there is no subordination of being among them, but the Bible does teach that there are differing roles for men and women. That is not to say there are no overlapping roles. Our previous discussion on sameness has established that. But, nonetheless, there are clear, beautiful, and significant role differences between the callings of men and women in church ministry.

Though men and women are unified by creation and redemption, are brothers and sisters, and partners in gospel love and proclamation, we nonetheless affirm that we are not interchangeable. Men and women are wonderfully different in many ways by creation design, not simply by cultural formation.

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The first Biblical implication of this is that we believe the office of elder/pastor is reserved for qualified men. The qualifications for elder in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 only address men, and the whole of the New Testament passages dealing with elders involves only men in that role. Also, only elders are said to have spiritual authority in the church (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17), and since women are not to exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12), it follows that they cannot exercise the role of authority over the church that would include men. Therefore, although we encourage men and women alike to actively participate in the life of the church, we reserve the office of elder, and the responsibilities unique to it, for certain qualified men within the church. Apart from the role of elder/pastor, we believe the Bible explicitly encourages and assumes that women will be involved in the ministry of the church. Women have always played a significant role in the growth of the church, even being among the few who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ when most of the disciples had run away (Matthew 27:55; John 19:25). The apostle Paul held women in high regard, and in many of his letters to the churches he greeted specific women by name (Romans 16:6, 12; Colossians 4:15; Philippians 4:2-3; Philemon 1:2). Paul addresses these women as "co-workers," and they clearly served the Lord to the benefit of the whole church (Philippians 4:3; Colossians 4:15).

The second Biblical implication involves teaching. First Timothy 2:12 states that a woman should not teach a man. We believe the context of this verse is the church (1 Timothy 3:14-15) and that it includes all the various teaching venues of the church. By "teaching" we mean someone recognized, formally or informally, as a designated teacher of a group where this person is expounding on portions of the Bible with the intent of interpreting and giving applications of the biblical texts.

Another Biblical implication, though not the focus of this position paper, is that in marriage the husband is the head (spiritual leader) of the wife (Ephesians 5:21-33). This is important to note in passing because the familial imagery of the church reflects the nature of the marriage and family design. Some argue that what is clearly taught in the marriage relationship is more ambiguous and questionable when it comes to the elder office. But when the strong family identity is traced between the family and the local church, theological and exegetical weight comes to bear on a complementarian understanding of church life and leadership.

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Affirmations and Denials

Based on the conclusions drawn from Scripture, we have created a list of affirmations and denials that encompass our beliefs on gender and the role of men and women in ministry.

We affirm that both men and women have been created in the image of God and are entitled to the privileges and held accountable to the responsibilities that come with reflecting our Creator.

We deny that either gender has been given or is entitled to greater dignity in society, the home, the church, or the kingdom of God.

We affirm that complementarianism, rightly practiced, will lead to the recognizable flourishing of both sexes.

We deny any version of complementarianism or theological position that leads to the subjugation, abuse, or neglect of any man or woman. We strongly denounce any distorted view of Scripture that contributes to the belief that biblical manhood or womanhood includes or permits practices such as marginalization, subjugation, intimidation, neglect, or any form of misogyny or abuse.

We affirm that both men and women are needed and necessary for the health and ministry of the church. Godly men and women should be visible partners in the corporate life of the church, deploying their diverse gifts for the good of the body. Simply put, all Christians contribute to the ministry of the church.

We deny that the church can flourish without brotherly/sisterly partnership. We deny that a church can exist in which the men flourish, and the women do not, or vice versa.

We affirm that the role/function of elder/pastor is reserved for qualified men. Elders are distinctly responsible for overseeing the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2) and preaching/teaching the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9).

We deny that reserving for men the roles and function of elder/pastor diminishes the importance of women or their influence in the church. The indispensable help women were created to give can and should be exercised in all manner of roles/offices in the church, excepting those reserved for qualified men.

We affirm that all members of the church should be in glad submission to the elder body, and that all should be in glad and sacrificial submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church.

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We deny that all women are subject to the leadership and authority of all men. Further, biblical submission is not indicative of subordination or inequality, as seen in Jesus' submission to the Father (Philippians 2:1-11).

We affirm that all men and women have been created in the image of God, whether single or married.

We deny that single men and women must be married to be meaningful participants in the corporate life of the church. We deny that single men possess any authority over single women. The way that they love and serve their sisters should not patronize, victimize, or show force, but rather should be the fruit of brotherly love, and vice versa.

We affirm that both men and women can take up positions of leadership and authority in secular realms since these areas are not directed in the same way by Biblical instructions on marriage, family, and the local church.

We deny that basic maleness and femaleness are done away with outside marriage, family, and local church life. Though there is great flexibility in roles in the secular realm or para-church organizations, we still want to value the general nature, habits, and commitments of complementarity, whenever and wherever those might play out. Prudence and prayer must guide the way, alongside a strong commitment to stay as close to Scriptural instruction and framework as possible.

Ministry at Grace Chapel Ministry Applications

We recognize that some will find our position and practice on women in ministry too conservative while others will find our position and practice on women in ministry too liberal. We ask for charity from both as we focus on the primary task of leading people to find and follow Jesus Christ.

The Grace Chapel practices of ministry below are not meant to be so rigid that there is no room for adaptation and contextualization. Please read the following paragraphs as normative practices, but where Scripture does give freedom, the elders and pastoral staff can utilize that freedom to apply Biblical truth in order to meet a particular need or extenuating circumstance.

Ministry Venues Involving Regular Preaching and/or Teaching of the Bible

Both men and women can read Scripture, lead musical worship, lead public readings, testify publicly, give announcements, pray publicly, and serve in many other roles that enable our times of gathered worship to unfold to the glory of God.

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Gathered Worship: Every member of Grace Chapel participates in our gathered worship, regardless of the role they play. Every area of service is open to men and women except those that define the elder/pastor office or specifically involve preaching or teaching (due to the nature of ‘teaching and authority’ named in 1 Timothy 2:12).

Adult Small and Mid-Sized Groups: In ministry venues such as Adult Sunday Communities, Small Groups, and equipping/training classes, where there are both men and women attending, the Bible teaching shall be led by qualified men. If the people being taught are all women, a woman or man could serve as the teacher.

Biblical Counseling: Since biblical counseling involves teaching, a woman should not be the sole counselor of a man or couples. Where a couple is being counseled, the counselor should be a man or a man and a woman with the man taking the lead role. Furthermore, the woman should counsel the wife rather than directly counsel the husband.

Children and Youth Ministries: In children and youth ministries, the structure of leadership and teaching will be sensitive to the specific ages of the group or class. There may be, however, the issue of how to avoid women teaching males in their late-teenage years who might be considered men. The consideration of at what age a male should be considered a man can vary from culture to culture, but in general we assume that young adulthood begins in the late teenage years. In light of that, we do not think it appropriate for women to teach males in their late-teenage years. A related desire is to model the overarching good of godly male leadership before our youth who are experiencing biblical worldview formation.

Professional/Organizational Status: As noted earlier, the title “pastor” is the name we give male staff at Grace Chapel who meet the qualifications of elder and function in elder-like pastoral roles. In this paper, we refer to our pastors and elders interchangeably as elder/pastor. The pastoral role is reserved for qualified men. Many staff roles are available to qualified men and women, as are internships, residencies, and other trainee positions. The deacon office is available to qualified men and women. Every professional or volunteer role, other than that of elder/pastor, is open to qualified men and women. This provides both men and women opportunities to advance and grow in leadership and includes women participating in every level of the organization, except that of elder/pastor.