

WHY WOMEN SHOULD BE GIVEN EQUAL CONSIDERATION FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP AS MEN

by Fred Miller

Foundational Biblical Understandings

1. Men ruling over women is a result of sin - they were designed for partnership.

In Genesis 3:16 God said to the woman, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." This ruling over the woman, God said, would be the result of sin entering the world. It is not his intended plan. She wants a mate, but gets a master. She wants a partner, and encounters power. So just as it is okay to decrease childbirth pain (vs. 16), and to pull weeds out of the garden (another "curse" in verse 15), so man's rule over a woman can be overcome as well. God wants to restore this marital pattern to mutual love and unity of "one flesh."

2. The Greek word "kephale" ("head") does not primarily mean "decision-maker."

In our culture today, we speak of the "head" of a corporation and this carries with it the primary meaning of authority. But when Paul used it in the 1st century, it had a broader meaning. "Head," when used as a metaphor, meant primarily "prominent one." For example, when a robe was worn, the person's physical head would be visibly prominent - in a position of honor. So we Americans would tend to think of the Prime Minister as the "head" of England, but in Paul's day the "head" of England would likely be the Queen because of the honor given her. In 1 Cor. 11:3, this prominence is seen in that "God is the head of Christ," "Christ is the head of man," and "man is the head of woman." In each of these, one is in a position of honor in relationship to the other. 1 Cor. 11:7-9 elaborates on this: "the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man." Thus, there is a sense of prominence of man due to origin and due to purpose.

However, lest men think they are to rule over women, Paul clarifies what being "in the Lord" means to this relationship in vs. 11-12: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God." The husband may be prominent, but there is still a mutuality in relationship. Men cannot use the fact that woman was made from man (his rib) as a means of authority because Paul reminds them that men owe their birth to a woman. The conclusion is that "everything comes from God." He is our common source. Thus, the concept of "male leadership" is not taught in these texts.

So what, in practice, does it mean for a man to be the "head" of a woman? It means he is to receive special honor from a woman. And it means he is to provide loving initiative towards her care. When Paul uses the headship/submission dynamic to describe the relationship Christ has with the church in Eph. 5:22-32, we must not take the analogy any further than Paul does. To him it meant husbands should sacrificially give of themselves in love to their wives for their good. Though the concept of "ruling" is involved in this concept, it is a ruling of servanthood - not of authority. And it is to be exercised in the context of treating them with "respect" and as "heirs with you of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). Thus, "loving initiator" is perhaps the best way for a man to express his headship - not decision-maker or leader. Though some say that there needs to be someone to break ties in the marriage, this is not true. Just as the church is exhorted to make decisions through mutual respect, love and wisdom (with no one person getting the final word), so marriages can - and should - function the same way.

3. To "submit" (Greek "hupotage") does not mean "obey."

Children are to obey their parents, and slaves are to obey their masters, but wives are to submit to their husbands. This means to "voluntarily place oneself under" another. It is primarily an attitude. It doesn't mean a wife can't

disagree with her husband or share her wisdom or understanding with him. But it means she will not insist on having her way. She will be especially marked by humility and contentment, even in the midst of discussing different points of view. Furthermore, the husband, too, is called to express his love to his wife in an attitude of submission in Eph. 5:21. Though this spirit is to be more dominant in the wife's spirit, the husband will often find that yielding to his wife is an expression of love to her.

4. *The primary way men and women relate "in Christ" is as equals, which includes equal ministry.*

From the beginning of creation, both man and woman were given equal responsibilities to be stewards of creation (Gen. 1:27-28). When God made woman to be a helper for him (2:18) he made them partners, and he called them to become "one" (2:24). There is no sense that the husband is to lead his wife. God used women in prominent places throughout the Old Testament as prophets (2 Kings 22:11-20) and even to rule (Deborah in Judges 4). In a culture where men oppressed and dominated women, Jesus treated women with dignity and compassion and God even chose to have women be the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Paul summarizes the implications well: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), and Col. 3:9-11 shows that this new identity in Christ not only describes the unity of our salvation as male and female, but the unity of the way we live it out as well. Mutual respect and submission and love are to be the marks of the church, not rights and authority (Col. 3:12-17; Eph. 5:21).

We thus find the couple Priscilla and Aquilla instructing together (Acts 18:24-26), and since Priscilla's name is always listed first (men were usually listed first in the culture), it's likely that she was the primary teacher. This all fits with what Peter said was going to happen as a result of Joel's prophecy in Acts 2:17: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." (Philip's four daughters all prophesied in Acts 21:9.) Furthermore, none of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the early church (1 Cor. 12:7-31) were given with gender restrictions. And it is equally of note that the O.T. sign of the covenant, circumcision, was given to males, but the N.T. sign of the covenant, baptism, is given to male and female alike.

Thus, to be equals in ministry means mutual consideration of thoughts, opinions and feelings. It involves dialog - and sometimes even loving debate. But it happens with both desiring the other person's good. Men are not to see themselves as rulers over women but as co-laborers with women in the home and the church, growing into unity through mutual respect and understanding.

5. *God's revelation to us is not fulfilled completely in the New Testament church, and further changes need to take place as Jesus' teachings are applied by the Spirit in later years, including today.*

God has revealed himself progressively: First to Adam, then the covenant to Abraham, then the law to Moses and Israel, then the prophets, then Jesus, then the Spirit. With each age, we learn more about God's ideal. But the fullness of God's plan is *still* happening. For example, it took the church hundreds of years to recognize the sinfulness of slavery. Jesus and the N.T. epistles accepted slavery as a social reality, though they sought to regulate it by calling both slave and master to mutual respect. But it wasn't until many years later that the actual practice was seen as sinful and was abolished (despite many sermons and books by Southern preachers who made passionate biblical arguments for the continuance of it).

The point is that just because a particular practice exists in the Bible, that doesn't mean it must continue as it is - even if God used it at times. God often accommodates our culture for the sake of his purposes, just as he never rebukes King David for his multiple wives, and just as Jesus tells his apostles not to take any money with them in their missions, and just as Paul instructs the women at Ephesus not to have braided hair in 1 Tim. 2:9, and just as Timothy is told to "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Tim. 5:23). Another example of progressive application of God's Spirit is how women have increasingly been given more inheritance rights over the years - rather than property solely going to sons as was accepted in biblical times.

Thus there is a “redemptive trend” in Scripture, pointing to further fullness of God’s kingdom. Texts like Gal. 3:28 and 1 Cor. 11:11-12 are “seeds” pointing to the ideal that was to come as the Spirit of God helped people break free from cultural constraints. This progressive trend throughout the Bible – *and continuing into today* – results in overturning cultural male-dominated patterns and is bringing equality and freedom to women as the people of God – as Acts 2:17 predicted.

Some express concern that these same arguments are sometimes used to justify homosexuality. But the fact is, every instance of homosexuality in the Bible is negative – none are positive – which is not the case with female leaders. Also, creation itself, not culture, argues against same-sex unions both biologically and procreatively - but God’s one-flesh male-female partnership at creation points to equal opportunity for ministry. In the end, it is Scripture and it’s signposts of God’s ideal – not culture – that must form our basis for truth.

But what about . . . ?

1. “What about the fact that men are almost always the leaders God, Jesus and the early church chose?”

As we have seen, men are to serve as “heads,” receiving prominence and giving loving initiative. So it is natural that men might take on leadership roles. And given their general greater physical strength – and given the woman’s priority calling as the nurturer of her children (including the commitment in biblical times to breastfeed her children for many years!) – men naturally assumed most leadership roles in society. But this doesn’t mean God *commands* it to be this way. In other words, certainly men often do make good leaders (Abraham, Moses, David, the apostles, etc.) but that doesn’t mean that women *can’t* make good leaders (e.g. Deborah in Judges 6, the Proverbs chapter 31 woman, Lydia, Phoebe, etc.).

So when Paul says elders must be “the husband of but one wife” in 1 Tim. 3:2, he is merely acknowledging the fact that in the church at Ephesus the elders *were* men - and given the culture, that was best. The command here is that they should not have multiple wives – not that they should be men. And given the principle of progressive application of God’s heart in our cultures (5 above), we can see this description of male leaders as culturally formed, not theologically formed.

2. “What about the command for women to be silent in the church?”

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 says “As in all the congregations of the saints, 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.” Paul’s two reasons here are “as the Law says” and “it is disgraceful.” Yet the law (Jewish O.T.) never said women are to be “silent” - only that the man was created first and the woman was created for man. Then his second reason is that it was a disgrace. But could not what is disgraceful in one culture (e.g. women with bare arms) be acceptable in another?

In Paul’s day, a woman speaking in public could appear to signify a moral problem, and for her to preach or teach in church could bring shame on the church and on the Lord, keeping people from Christ. That is not true in most cultures today. Paul’s concerns were for orderly worship (1 Cor. 14:26-33) and for a submissive spirit of wives to their husbands (14:34). These are eternal principles, but they can be applied in different ways in different cultures.

Also, “silent” here is the Greek “laleo” and is applied by Paul to both tongues-speakers and prophets in this same chapter (vs. 28, 30). Since we do not think “silence” is an eternal command to them, neither should we think that the silence of women is an eternal command. They are to be silent as long as they are unsubmitive and spiritually immature. Furthermore, 1 Cor. 11:5 makes it clear that women *may* speak in church through prayer and prophecy. Also, when 1 Timothy 2:11 says “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission” and “she must be silent” (2:12), the words “quietness” and “silent” (both Greek “hesuchia”) have more to do with her attitude than a prohibition of speech. For example, the same word is used in 2:2, telling *all* people to live a “quiet” life - which

certainly doesn't mean that all people should not speak.

3. *"What about the prohibition for women to teach?"*

1 Timothy 2:12 says, "I do not permit a woman to teach . . ." The Greek verb actually means "I am not permitting," implying a present command, not a permanent one. But the question still remains, "Why"? As we have seen, Priscilla was involved in teaching Apollos in Acts 18:26 and certainly she was not sinning. And women are encouraged to teach younger women in Titus 2:3-4. In 1 Timothy 2:13-14 Paul continues: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." The word "for" in Greek can mean "for this reason," but it can also mean "for recall that." And this latter meaning makes more sense since women are *not* always more susceptible to deception than men. In fact, in Romans 5:17 Paul blames Adam, not Eve, for sin entering the world. So Paul is likely saying here that Eve's deception is an *illustration* of what happens when a woman is not submissive. His point is that woman is made to be submissive to man by nature of the created order (Adam first) and if this is not done, she is easily deceived - as Eve *was* deceived and as new women converts at Ephesus were being deceived. The implication is that if she has a submissive spirit she would not necessarily be prohibited from teaching. This is further confirmed by vs. 15: "But women will be saved through childbearing" (a puzzling phrase for biblical scholars, but a likely meaning is the birth of Jesus) "if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." So as women embrace the gospel of Jesus, they are saved, "but" as they continue in "faith, love and holiness" they will confirm their salvation - and also remove the prohibitions of not teaching or "having authority" over men.

The situation in the church at Ephesus (where Timothy was a leader) involved false teachers taking sexual advantage of susceptible women (2 Tim. 3:6-7), so this weakness among the women could also contribute to why women were not allowed to teach. In addition, the Greek women in this city were not educated, and they certainly did not possess understanding of the O.T. Scriptures (which would have been the only "Bible" available to them at the time). So it would not be wise for them to teach. Today, however, women (and the church as a whole) have access to both Old and New Testaments and they have the opportunity to learn and study them. We don't depend upon someone's faithful oral transmission of the apostle's teaching as in the first century - we depend upon someone's correct teaching of the written Word of God. And all teachers (both men and women) are now held accountable to the written Word of God by the church as a whole. Furthermore, since God explicitly gave women the gift of prophecy (which means to tell God's word) in Acts 2:17, and since the primary purpose of prophecy is to "strengthen, encourage and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3), we should expect qualified women to have the freedom in the church to teach both men and women alike.

4. *"What about the prohibition for women not to have authority over men?"*

1 Timothy 2:12 says "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." The Greek here for "have authority over" is "authentein," which occurs only here in the whole Bible. Paul did not use the more common word "exousia", which means "to have authority or power over another." Most scholars believe "authentein" means "to domineer" or "lord over." Thus, Paul prohibits women here from doing what all elders are commanded not to do in 1 Peter 5:3 - boss others. This command is not a prohibition of women in church leadership. It merely warns strong-willed women that until they are taught adequately and mature spiritually, they should not speak up in the meetings and try to get their own way.

Addressing Some Common Concerns

1. *"Would women elders undermine the spiritual leadership of men?"*

Elders (or deacons or church board members) are appointed based on their spiritual maturity and ability to teach God's Word. If men are only seeking spiritual maturity in order to serve, they are not the kind of individuals we would want leading the church. Also, if women serve on boards, they would naturally have as much concern for the spiritual development of the men in the church as the current men on the board of elders have concern for the spiritual development of women in the church. The desire to see both men and women having a passion for God is

commendable. But there is no reason to think that a church that lives and proclaims the reality of the gospel will not naturally result in godly men (and women), even if women served as elders, deacons or board members. In fact, this *is* the case in other Christ-centered churches where women serve in spiritual leadership roles. The answer to the problem that some men do not take spiritual initiative in their homes or the church is not to prohibit women from serving as elders, but to nurture and equip the men in ways that connect God's truth and life with them. When men are truly humbled before God, seeing women in leadership roles will not deter them from pursuing leadership roles as well.

2. *"Is this a concession to our culture?"*

Sadly, sometimes God uses our culture to make the church re-evaluate Scripture. It happened when scientists said the earth was not the center of our universe (and the church had to eventually change its view). It happened in the issue of slavery. And it happened in the matter of women's right to vote. Sometimes culture is ahead of the church in what is right (though, granted, most of the time it isn't)! In the matter of women in leadership, many N.T. scholars in Bible colleges and seminaries across the land have admitted that *they* were the ones who had previously brought a culturally-biased interpretation to scripture, and now they are more faithful to the scriptures in allowing women to lead in churches! In fact, it is possible that many of those who hang on to exclusively male leadership patterns in church are the ones who are being overly influenced by culture (such as male pride and power, and female insecurity and fears), not those who accept women! This certainly isn't the case with all those who hold to male-only leadership, but it is undoubtedly a partial factor in the minds of some.

3. *"Don't wives of male elders accomplish the same thing? And don't women already have input to Leadership?"*

When we appoint leaders, we appoint them based on (1) their spiritual maturity and (2) ability to teach the Scriptures (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). A wife may or may not meet these qualifications, thus she should not automatically have access to leadership issues. Furthermore, the issue is not primarily the need to get a female perspective on a church board, since in a Spirit-led church there should be a many opportunities for women (and men) to give input to the spiritual life of the church without placing women on the board. Though distinctly "female" perspectives to a leadership board could be helpful at times (though what this actually means is not fully clear), the primary issue is not female input but female calling. If a woman feels gifted and called to serve in this way, she should not be constrained. In fact, it is possible that the spiritual maturity, biblical knowledge and spiritual insights of a particular woman may serve the church better as an elder than the spiritual maturity, biblical knowledge and spiritual insights of a particular man - not because she is female but because she is who she is! Our desire should be to avail ourselves of the most gifted and mature leaders we have, regardless of gender, so that the church might serve our Christ most fully.

Conclusion: Women should be given equal consideration as men to serve as church leaders, so that all God's gifted servants are used to strengthen the church and lead the church into the world for the glory of God.

Fred Miller is senior pastor of the Cumberland Valley Church, Dillsburg, Pennsylvania.