

## Heirs According to Promise: Why Santa Barbara Community Church Has Women Elders and Teachers

Few issues in the evangelical church are as divisive as the question of women in leadership in the local church. On the one hand, some churches take an exclusionist stance and limit women to supportive roles. On the other hand, some churches and denominations swing to the opposite extreme and *ordain* women as bishops, priests or as pastors. Salvos are fired from both sides. One side derides *ministers in skirts*, while another speaks snidely of a *patriarchal oligarchy*.

Scores of books have been published on this issue over the past few decades. And even though they rehearse the same arguments *for* and *against* women in leadership roles in the church, they keep being published year after year as if new soil is being overturned. What follows is meant to be a leisurely explanation as to why Santa Barbara Community Church falls on the *Women are embraced as elders in the local church*, side of the fence. After all, this is not one of those issues where a church can decide not to decide. A church need not adopt a specific eschatology for example (pre-tribulational, post-tribulational, pre-millennial, a-millennial, etc.). A church need not take a stance on doctrinal issues such as the eternal security of the believer, predestination, or on the extent of Christ's atonement. But every church must answer this question: *Are women permitted, biblically and ecclesiastically, to occupy all of the offices God ordained for the church?*

### Framing the Question

How we frame the question we are asking will, at least, clarify what answer we are looking for. If we ask, *Does the Bible permit women in ministry*, our question is so broad that the answer doesn't tell us much. Of course the Bible permits women in ministry. The question, then, does not concern women in *ministry*, but rather women in leadership, particularly the leadership role of elder in the local church. In both Testaments God is clearly in the habit of using men and women to accomplish his purposes.

While women leaders are certainly rare in the older testament, they are there! Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron is one of the leaders of Israel. Apparently she felt free to criticize Moses for his marriage outside the house of Israel (Numbers 12). Indeed, she was rebuked by God himself for her insolence. But the Lord's rebuke is itself instructive. Miriam is chastised not because she exercised leadership as a woman, but because she spoke against Moses, the Lord's unique prophet.

Deborah was one of the judges of Israel. She is called both a *prophet* and a *judge* (Judges 4:4-5). Because of her success in restoring order to Israel Deborah is given the title *mother in Israel*.

During the time of Jeremiah we meet a prophetess named Huldah. When the good king Josiah discovers the *book of the law* in the temple, a book apparently long-forgotten by those living in Israel, he commands Hilkiah the priest to *inquire of the Lord* as to the meaning of this book. Hilkiah in turn goes to Huldah to ascertain the meaning of this strange manuscript (2 Kings 22:11ff.).

And there were other female prophets, both good and evil, in Old Testament times. Isaiah married an unnamed prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). Ezekiel thundered prophecies against women prophets who *prophesy out of their own minds* (Ezekiel 13:17ff.). Noadiah was a prophetess who gave Nehemiah a degree of trouble as he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

By any measure, the list of women leaders and ministers mentioned in the Old Testament is short. Nevertheless, women were employed by God to lead the nation at various points in Israel's history.

When we turn to the New Testament women play an increasingly prominent role.

The virgin Mary is the central character of the beginning of the story. Martha claims that a woman's place is in the kitchen only to be rebuffed by Jesus who sides with her sister Mary because she is learning in the living room (Luke 10:38). Luke points out the women were the first to talk with Jesus after his resurrection and the first to proclaim that he had risen from the dead (Luke 24).

After the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit indwells the early followers of the Messiah. The apostle Peter explains this phenomena by citing a passage from the prophet Joel that specifies that in the last days God's Spirit will be dispensed upon all peoples, including men and women.

*And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)<sup>1</sup>*

And thus, the new economy of the church began.<sup>2</sup> In Christ we have the first fruits of our redemption and restoration. The effects of the fall are still with us, but the Christian community lives in tension between the present evil age of sin and darkness and the coming age of God's kingdom. It should not surprise us, therefore, that women are elevated to a new status in the society of God's people. Paul succinctly articulates this status in Galatians 3:28. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Racial, economic and sexual barriers are

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other Bible citations are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> More on this passage below.

destroyed by the work of Christ on the cross! In another letter, Paul takes this principle to its shocking conclusion when he commands that the husband and the wife enter into marriage as a covenant of mutual submission. Indeed, one of the marks of the fullness of the Holy Spirit (along with speaking, singing and giving thanks) is the mark of submission. Ephesians 5:21 reads, literally, *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*. But Paul pauses here to explain how dramatic this last mark of the Spirit's fullness is in the life of the church. *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord, and, Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her* (Eph. 5:22,25).

If it clear that in both Testaments women are called to ministry, and if it is clear that in the new covenant women play an increasingly prominent role in God's economy, how then shall we frame our question about women in leadership in the New Testament church? We could put the question negatively and ask, *Are women prohibited from serving as elders in the church?* But perhaps it would be more fair to both sides to ask the question positively, *Are all offices in the church open to both men and women?*

### **In the Beginning**

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. To understand how male-female relations should and will be played out in the kingdom of God, we should take a look at God's intention for men and women at their creation. Even a casual reading of Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 shows that God created both the man and the woman in His image. Before sin creeps into the equation, Adam and Eve serve God equally. They have dominion over creation together. But then sin enters the world through Eve's and then Adam's disobedience. When God judges Eve for her sin he says,

*I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children.  
Your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you. (Genesis 2:16)*

Many have argued that God's judgment on Eve is prescriptive, that is, God is saying, *From now on your Husband will be your ruler*. In this reading, hierarchy in marriage is God's punishment because of Eve's sin. But let's look more closely at the passage. The words *desire* (*teshuqah*) and *rule* (*mashal*) occur together only here and in Genesis 4:7 in the Old Testament. In 4:7 God says to Cain, who has just murdered his brother,

*If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*

Comparing these two verses would lead us to conclude that the *desire* Eve has for her husband is not necessarily filial or sexual. As *sin* desires to *rule* over

Cain, Eve now desires to rule over her husband. And Adam wants to rule her. The war between the sexes has begun. As one Old Testament scholar puts it,

. . . Genesis 3:16-17 is best understood as a description of the new order of things, of how life *will* be lived as the result of the Fall, rather than how it *should* be lived. It is not a command for one sex to rule over the other any more than Genesis 3:17-19 is a command for all Israelite men to be farmers or a prohibition of the use of weed-killer.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, do we see in the beginning? We find God creating man, male and female, in his own image. God gives man, Adam and Eve, dominion over his creation. There is no hint in these chapters of Eve's subordination or inferiority to her husband. But when this first couple sin against their creator, to put it curtly, all hell breaks lose. No longer will they dwell in the Garden worshipping God in his nearness. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden and will now have to deal with the ramifications of the sin they have committed. Now they are alienated from one another and from their God. Their need for reconciliation and restoration will dominate their lives, and the breach between men and women will drive history.

### **In the New Beginning**

Careful readers of the Old Testament will notice that the law given to Moses tends to be written from a man's perspective. A cursory look at Leviticus 20, for example, shows this "man's perspective" in the law.

*If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor. . . (20:10)*

*If a man lies with his father's wife. . . (20:11)*

*If a man lies with his daughter-in-law. . . (20:12)*

Much of the law is written from this *manly* perspective. Of course women are accountable to the law as men are, but they are sometimes treated differently than men with regard to the law's stipulations. When we get to the New Testament we strain to find a similar male-female distinction in Christian ethics. Indeed, in the new covenant, all things are new. The sometimes sharp male-female distinctions found in the *old* economy are obliterated in the new. In Christ any ethical disparity between Jew and Gentile, slave and free and even men and women has been erased. We do not find in the epistles of Paul, Peter, John or James a different set of instructions given for men and women.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the apostles address the church as a whole. As noted above, the assumption from

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hess, *Equality With and Without Innocence*, in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, edited by Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, p. 92. This volume will hereafter be referred to as DBE.

<sup>2</sup> Of course there are some exceptions to this rule. Paul address husbands, wives, children and slaves in Ephesians 5. He has specific instructions for *older women* and *older men*, and *young men* in Titus 2.

which the New Testament writers operate is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

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

F.F. Bruce, a New Testament, says this verse contains the basic principle of Paul's view of the sexes. *If restrictions on [Galatians 3:28] are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in 1 Corinthians 14:34f. . . . or 1 Timothy 2:11f., they are to be understood in relation to Galatians 3:28, and not vice versa.* Bruce goes on to explain the importance of this verse.

The breaking down of the middle wall of partition between [Jew and Greek] was fundamental to Paul's gospel (Ephesians 2:14f.). By similarly excluding the religious distinction between slaves and free-born, and between male and female, Paul makes a threefold affirmation which corresponds to a number of Jewish formulas in which the threefold distinction is maintained, as in the morning prayer in which the male Jew thanks God that he was not made a Gentile, a slave or a woman. . . . The reason for the threefold thanksgiving was not any positive disparagement of Gentiles, slaves or women as persons but the fact that they were disqualified from several religious privileges which were open to free Jewish males. . . . [Paul] takes up each of these distinctions which had considerable importance in Judaism and affirms that in Christ they are all irrelevant.<sup>1</sup>

Galatians 3:28 is followed by, of course, 3:29.

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The *you* in this sentence is plural. *You slaves, you free, you Jews, you Gentiles, you men, you women. . . you are all heirs of Abraham, you are all included according to the promise.*

While some hold that Galatians is Paul's earliest letter, Peter's sermon at the Feast of Pentecost was earlier still. Shortly after the ascension of Jesus to the Father, the Holy Spirit comes upon the early followers of the messiah. The immediate consequence of this outpouring is that the gospel is preached in numerous unlearned languages to Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast. Moments later Peter preaches the first sermon in the history of the church. He attempts to explain what has transpired by quoting from the prophet Joel. The people, who had been speaking in foreign tongues, were not drunk as

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*, 1997, (hereafter referred to as GNW), p. 26.

some had surmised. Instead, the Spirit of God was fulfilling what was prophesied by Joel. Ministry in the old covenant, which might have been reserved for Levite men or for a select group of prophets, has now, as it were, gone global. The gift of God's Spirit is for everyone who believes. Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32.

*And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. . .*

Peter's message is clear. In citing this prophecy from Joel he announces that the new age of the Spirit has arrived and that *all flesh* will be used by God for the purposes of God. Clearly men and women are endowed with the Holy Spirit and will be used by the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the church.

### **Leadership and Teaching in the New Testament Church**

This brings us, finally, to the question at hand: *Are all offices in the church open to both men and women?*

As New Testament scholar Gordon Fee puts it,

What is at stake is not whether all people are equally gifted; they are not. What is at stake is whether God the Holy Spirit, in his gifting the people of God, ever makes gender a prior requirement for certain kinds of gifting.

Fee then goes on to argue, . . . . *the Spirit does not.*<sup>1</sup>

Why would Fee make such a claim? He points out what should be obvious to readers of the New Testament, but is rarely noticed. The New Testament says very little about officers and their roles in the church! Nor do the pages of the New Testament prescribe a definitive model for church governance.

With regard to the model for the church, sometimes we find the assembly patterned after the Jewish synagogue (James 2:2, 1 Corinthians 14) or a larger public gathering (Acts 5:42). Other times the church seems to be patterned after a house church model (Colossians 4:15, Acts 5:42). The point is that there is not one model for church gatherings presented.

We find a similar ambiguity with regard to church government. In the pages of the epistles of Paul, etc., the polity of the church is defined very loosely. In Leviticus we find verse after verse describing the role and responsibility of the

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<sup>1</sup>*The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry in Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. by Gordon Fee, 2004, p. 241 (hereafter referred to as DBE).

Old Testament priesthood, but in Titus and 1 Timothy virtually nothing is said about how elders and deacons are to function in their churches. We're not told how many pastors a church should have. We look in vain to learn how long elders are to serve in their position. And were not told how they should govern (By voting? By representative government? By Robert's Rules of Order?). The pastoral letters have two substantial lists of qualifications for elders, but virtually nothing about what role these pastors were to play in their churches. The point is profound with regard to our question in this paper:

The net result is that we know very little about the "organization" of the early church, either as a whole or in its local expressions. And what we do learn, we gather from "gleanings" of texts, not from intentional instruction. (DBE, pp. 242-243)

Fee draws the following conclusion from the above.

Thus regarding church order, the ambiguity between the synagogue model and the household model should probably leave plenty of room for variety within the ongoing life of the church. And since the New Testament does *not* teach explicitly that only men may lead or serve in certain ways, and in fact seems to leave the door open on this matter. . . , the issue should more likely be giftedness, not gender. Indeed, I for one have as much resistance to the notion that women *ought to* be in leadership along with men as to the notion that *only* males are gifted to lead. The former notion also assumes a gender-based, not gift based, model for leadership; and both Scripture and common experience give lie to the second notion. (DBE, pp. 248-249)

Fee's point is two-fold. We don't really know very much about how the New Testament church was actually structured, and the overall witness of the New Testament places the emphasis on gifting rather than gender when it comes to either teaching or leadership.

### **What About Headship?**

One passage often cited by those who favor a male-only eldership is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

*2 Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. 6 For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover*

*her head. 7 For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.*

From this it is argued that because Paul speaks of the husband as the *head* of his wife therefore women shouldn't be permitted to serve as elders. This line of reasoning says that if a woman served as an elder, her authority in the church might possibly collide with her husband's authority in the home. Therefore, it is suggested, she shouldn't serve in this office.

Let's look at this perplexing passage and ask what it actually says, and doesn't say?

First, this section of Paul's letter is robust with interpretive difficulties.

- We don't know what *traditions* Paul delivered to the Corinthians (11:2).
- What is the dishonor that would result from a man praying with his head covered (11:4)?
- What are the historical-cultural assumptions behind Paul's statement that a woman *prays or prophesies* with her head *uncovered* (11:5)?
- What exactly is the problem? Are the women of the church discarding their head coverings during worship, or are they letting down their hair in some seductive manner during worship?
- Why would short hair remove the woman's shame (11:6)?
- It is not even entirely clear from the passage whether Paul is speaking to wives and husbands or to all women with regard to all men in the church (see 11:3-4).
- What do the *angels* have to do with a woman's head covering (11:10)?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Confused? You are in good company. Charles Hodge, an eminent New Testament scholar of the nineteenth century writes, *There is scarcely a passage in the New Testament which has*



Furthermore, is it only *husbands* and *wives* that Paul has in mind? The translation of one of the key words is subject to debate. The Greek term Paul uses in 11:3 is *guné*, a term that can be translated either *wife* or *woman*. If *woman* is what Paul had in mind then 11:3 would imply that *all women* are to be subject to *all men* in the church.

A paper such as this is far from the place to disable all the mines in the field of Paul's argument. But what is clear from this passage? What can we deduce from these verses that requires little interpretation?

At a minimum all interpreters of this passage should see that something has gone wrong in the Corinthian's worship service. This is the dominant theme of the chapters 11-14. Paul is correcting a worship service that has gotten out of hand. The Corinthians, apparently, have patterned their worship services after the pagan feasts in the nearby temple. Even drunkenness seems to be a problem (11:21)! The whole tone of these chapters pleads for order and restraint (see 14:23, 26-33). Furthermore something has gone wrong with the way women are worshipping in the church. What went wrong with the women's worship? We are not sure. David Prior offers a possible scenario.

Now there was no special 'dressing-up' for attending the fellowship-meetings of the church at worship: the men came without any head-coverings:<sup>1</sup> the women came with them, as in normal everyday life. Apparently in the 'excitement' of the worship, certain women were tempted to throw back their head-dresses<sup>2</sup> and allow their hair (which they always wore long) to fall loose. . . . This naturally caused severe distraction to the men at worship and was, in addition, a denial of the submission in the Lord of married women to their husbands. (Prior, *1 Corinthians*, 1985. p. 180)

But we still need to ask, does Paul's assertion that the husband is the *head* of the wife (11:3) prevent his wife from serving as an elder in the church?

At least in part it depends on what Paul meant by *head*. The Greek word *head* can mean *chief*, *ruler*. But it can also mean *source* or *origin*. At several points the passage in view seems to imply that we should understand the word *head* as a synonym for *source*, or *origin*. The woman was *made from* man, not man *from* the woman (11:8, 10). As Gordon Fee writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians,

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*taxed the learning and ingenuity of commentators as this. After all that has been written, it remains just as obscure as ever.*

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the way a Jewish man would worship in a synagogue.

<sup>2</sup> Corinthian women were not veiled over their face, as in Arab cultures. Paul is referring to a covering of the hair.

. . . Paul's concern is not hierarchical (who has authority over whom), but relational (the unique relationships that are predicated on one's being the source of the other's existence). Indeed, he says nothing about man's authority; his concern is with the woman's being man's *glory*, the one without whom he is not complete (vv. 7c-9). To blur that relationship is to bring shame on her "head." This means that the middle clause [in verse 3], "the man is the head of woman," refers to the creation account also alluded to in vv. 8 and 12. "The man" would refer to Adam, and "the woman" to Eve; thus "the man is the source of the woman's life." But as v. 12 makes plain, that is only part of the story; in a much more significant way, "all things," both man and woman, "come from God." (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 1987, p. 504)

Rebecca Groothuis adds,

The passage itself offers no reason to understand the metaphorical meaning of "head" as authority, especially considering that the only reference to authority in the entire passages speaks of the woman's own authority (v. 10) and not of any authority that her husband has over her. (GNW, p. 160)

One assumption that Paul makes is often missed by those who use this passage to teach the subordination of women under men in the church. Paul assumes that women are *praying* and *prophesying* in the public worship services in Corinth. If they are not then the paragraph makes no sense. That both men and women are participating in the worship services of Corinth is in harmony with the rest of Paul's letter. In chapter 14 we find that *all* speak in tongues (14:23, though Paul is critical of the way this is done), *all can prophesy one by one* (14:31), etc. And here Paul assumes that women are participating in the critical activities of *praying* and *prophesying*. While this passage does not argue that women should serve as elders in the church, in no way does it argue against them holding this office. It does, however, show us that women were involved in leading Corinthian worship services. Paul corrects the women's flamboyant behavior (?), but he does not forbid their public prayers and prophecies.

### **What kind of silence?**

In this same section of 1 Corinthians Paul throws out a zinger.

*As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (14:33b-35)*

Of course the question that comes to mind immediately is, what does Paul mean by *silence*?<sup>1</sup> Assuming a church service in Corinth was at least remotely similar to what takes place in our churches, how would the Corinthians have applied this paragraph? Would a woman be permitted to sing in the choir? Make an announcement? Teach Sunday School? And, how can a woman *pray and prophesy* while maintaining silence? Obviously the silence Paul encourages is not absolute. We need to look at the context of the passage to ascertain Paul's meaning. What kind of *silence* does Paul have in mind in this passage?

The immediate context of verses 34 and 35b is, of course, 35a. The *silence* Paul commends in the former is set in the context of the latter.

14:33b-34a	14:35a	14:35b
<i>As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says</i>	<i>If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home.</i>	<i>For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.</i>

It seems highly unlikely that Paul is abruptly changing the subject from women keeping silence in the church, to asking their husbands questions at home and then returning again to the subject of women keeping silence in the church. Asking questions in public worship services seems, then, to be the primary sort of speech Paul seeks to forbid. (DBE, p. 165). Could Paul simply mean, *Be quiet in the worship service*? Such would seem to be the case. Again, the whole tenor of these chapters is one of bringing order to a disorderly worship service. Accordingly, the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in an orderly manner (11:33ff.), the unity of the Body of Christ is to be emphasized (12:1ff.), love is to trump the dramatic gift of tongues (13:1ff) and prophecy is to be emphasized over speaking in tongues (14:1-5). If the Corinthians are to speak in tongues let two or three do so, taking their own turn and only if there is someone to interpret (14:26ff.). All of this expresses Paul's yearning for temperance in the Corinthian's corporate worship.

With all of the above in mind, it appears that Paul is simply saying, *Be quiet*.

Again, Groothuis:

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly many New Testament scholars, including conservative ones, argue that this paragraph was not written by Paul but was a latter addition to the letter. The list of those who argue this way includes F. F. Bruce, Wayne Meeks and Gordon Fee. There is some manuscript evidence for this position.

Paul's intent is evidently to silence only disruptive speaking. The particular type of disruptive speaking that is mentioned with respect to women probably has to do with interrupting the public speaker with a question—a practice that was common at this time. Paul says the women should save their questions to ask their husbands after they get home (v. 35). . . . The universal principle behind Paul's words is not the permanent silencing and subordinating of women in the church, but the curtailing of practices that disrupt the flow and order of the public assembly of believers.<sup>1</sup> (GNW, p. 203)

### Forbidden to Teach?

Whether or not women should be encouraged to teach and preach in the church is the close cousin of the deeper question we are addressing in this position paper. Santa Barbara Community Church has welcomed, embraced and benefited from male and female teachers throughout her history as a church. Some might ask, don't the Scriptures forbid women teachers?

At the center of the debate over women teachers are Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.*

How shall we understand such a paragraph? To begin, let us note that the seemingly absolute restriction on women teaching is qualified by nearly everyone. Some say a woman cannot *preach*, but she can *teach* an adult Sunday school class. Others churches say she cannot *teach* adult men in any circumstance, but a woman can *teach* young boys and girls in a Sunday school class. Some churches that would never allow a woman to *teach* on the home front see no problem with the same woman teaching new converts on the foreign missionary field. And so on.

Of course the first issue is not how we apply this paragraph, but how we interpret it? What does Paul mean in 1 Timothy 2:11-15? The paragraph is unique in Paul's writings. It doesn't seem to testify to something normative in Paul's doctrine. We find nothing like it in Paul's letters to his various churches, at least

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<sup>1</sup> Prior clarifies further, "It seems the principle of submissiveness was being ignored (*they should be subordinate*, 34), that a spirit of defiance was uppermost (*it is shameful*. . . , 35), and that an isolationist tendency was turning these wives into arbitrators of their own church and even doctrine (*Did the word of God originate with you?*, 36). In other words, these married women were the source of some of the arrogance in the Corinthian church which Paul has already had cause to castigate (4:7ff.; 5:2ff.; 6:1ff.; 8:1; 13:5)." (Prior, p. 252)

nothing quite so strong and quite so exacting. If Paul absolutely forbids women teachers wouldn't we expect a similar injunction in his letters to his churches? Wouldn't we expect to find some similar rule expressed to the Philippians, the Colossians or the Thessalonians? And, if women are absolutely forbidden to teach in all churches, how do we explain Paul's instruction on how women are to prophesy in the Corinthian church?

Accordingly, when we come to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 we need to ask questions of context, translation, the meaning of the Greek word *authentain*, and the cultural backdrop.<sup>1</sup>

First, the context of this pastoral letter to Timothy is Paul's instructions to his protégé on how to quell some significant problems with the church in Ephesus. About half of the letter details Paul's concerns with false teaching in the church. At the very beginning of 1 Timothy Paul recalls his instruction to Timothy to put a stop to false teaching (1 Timothy 1:3) and the letter concludes on the same note (6:2b-10). Unlike the Galatian situation where Paul was concerned about false teachers coming from the outside, here Paul is concerned about false teachers from within the church. When meeting with the elders from Ephesus, Paul spoke of *fierce wolves* from inside the church who would devour the flock (Acts 20:29ff.).

Belleville points out that Paul's concern is corrective rather than didactic.

For example, we learn very little about what various leaders do, and what we do learn, we learn incidentally. Yet there is quite a bit about how not to choose church leaders (1 Tim 5:21-22) and what to do with those who stumble (1 Tim 5:19-20). There is also little interest in the professional qualifications of church leader. Instead we find a concern for character, family life and commitment to sound teaching (1 Tim 3:1-13). This is perfectly understandable against a background of false teaching. (DBE, p. 206)

Furthermore, we might note that two leaders have been expelled from the church (1 Timothy 1:20) and other elders need to be publicly rebuked because of persistent sin in their lives (1 Timothy 5:20)! Theological controversy seems to be afflicting the church significantly (1 Timothy 6:3ff.).

Against this backdrop of false teaching and theological in-fighting Paul has a special concern for the women of the church. In the Ephesian church the women seem most susceptible to, and perhaps encouraging of, the false teaching in the church. Women figure prominently in this letter,<sup>2</sup> and women seem most

<sup>1</sup> Much of the following is based on Belleville, DBE, pp. 205-223.

<sup>2</sup> "Women receive a great deal of attention in 1 Timothy. Indeed there is no other New Testament letter in which they figure so prominently. Behavior befitting women in worship (1 Tim 2:10-15), qualification for women deacons (1 Tim 3:11), appropriate pastoral behavior toward

predisposed to accept the content of the false teachers. Gordon Fee notes the placement of our paragraph in 1 Timothy. It comes right after Paul has addressed how the men ought to pray.

The word to the men is an obvious response to their controversies and strife. The word to the women, therefore, may be assumed also to respond to this conflict. But how?

The answer lies close at hand—in 5:3-16 and 2 Timothy 3:5-9. It is clear from the latter passage that the false teachers are finding their most fruitful hearing among some “weak women who are burdened by the guilt of their sins and driven by all kinds of desires, women who are always trying to learn but who can never come to know the truth.” According to 1 Timothy 5, among these women are some younger widows who have “given themselves to pleasure” (v. 6), have become “foolish talkers and busybodies, *talking of things they should not*” (v. 13), and by so doing are bringing the gospel into disrepute (v. 14). Some of them, Paul says, “have already turned away to follow Satan” (v. 15; cf. 2:14 and 4:2). His advice there is similar to what is given here. They should marry (cf. 4:3), have children (cf. 2:15), and take care of their homes (5:14). Within that context, both the instructions on modest dress and on neither teaching nor having authority over men, as well as the illustration of Eve, who was equally deceived, plus the final instruction in verse 15 on bearing children, can all be shown to make sense. (Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 1984, pp. 33-34)

In other words, Fee *contextualizes* this instruction. The command for women not to *teach or exercise authority* over a man is specific to the situation in Ephesus.

This brings us to most important word in the paragraph, the Greek infinitive *authentēin*. How should this verbal noun be rendered in English? Recent translations (including the NIV, ESV, NASB, TNIV and the Holman Christian Standard) have translated verse 12 very close to,

*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority (or to exercise authority ) over a man.*

The Greek infinitive, however, seems to be much stronger than *to have authority*, or, *to exercise authority*. The verb only occurs here in the New Testament so we are forced to look elsewhere for comparable uses of the word. Bellville points out that early translations of Paul’s letter used a much stronger word to render this Greek word.

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older and younger women (1 Tim 5:2), support of widows in service of the church (1 Tim 5:9-10), correction of younger widows (1 Tim 5:11-15) and familial responsibilities toward desperate widows (1 Tim 5:3-8, 16) are all concerns of Paul.” (DBE, pp. 206-207)

[T]here is a virtually unbroken tradition, stemming from the older versions and running down to the twenty-first century, that translates *authentein* as “to dominate” rather than “to exercise authority over.” (DBE, p. 209)

Accordingly, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Latin Vulgate translated this verse, *I permit not a woman to teach, neither to domineer over a man*. Goodspeed, an able translator from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, used, *I do not allow women to teach or domineer over men*. The 1961 New English Bible, *I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man*.<sup>1</sup> The point is that Paul is addressing a significant concern in the church of Ephesus. Some women, apparently, have not only become enticed by a heresy afloat in the church, these same women are insisting on usurping their authority over men.

Paul, then, is advising Timothy to put an end to this.

The cultural backdrop also figures in to how we should understand 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Ephesus was both the provincial capital of Asia and a religious center for Greco-Roman paganism. Ephesus was the home of the temple of Artemis (or Diana) and, accordingly, was a center for pagan rituals, orgies and religious syncretism. Apparently all of this wore off on the church. According to Richard and Catherine Kroger, Ephesus was *a bastion of feminine supremacy and dominance*.<sup>2</sup> In the Artemis cult, the female was exalted and superior to the male.

Belleville explains:

An Artemis influence would help explain Paul’s correctives in 1 Timothy 2:13-14. While some may have believed that Artemis appeared first and then her male consort, the true story was just the opposite. For Adam was formed first, then Eve (1 Tim 2:13). And Eve was deceived to boot (1 Tim 2:14)—hardly a basis on which to claim superiority. It would also shed light on Paul’s statement that Christian “women will be kept safe [or ‘saved’] through “childbirth” (1 Tim 2:15 NIV), presumably by faith in Christ. Thus they need not look to Artemis as the protector of women, as did other Ephesian women who turned to her for safe travel through the childbearing process. (DBE, pp. 210-220)

Paul then is teaching that in the Ephesian situation the women should not teach, they should not dominate the men; rather they should *learn quietly with all submissiveness*.

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<sup>1</sup> Belleville shows how it was particularly in English translations after the 1940s that this verb was softened. See DBE, pp. 209-211.

<sup>2</sup> *Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, cited in John Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 1996, p. 76.

Because the women in the Ephesian church were being deceived by false teaching (see 1 Tim. 5:13-15; 2 Tim. 3:6-7), and because Eve's experience show deception to have very serious consequences, the women in Ephesus were to guard themselves from false teaching submitting themselves to the teaching of the men who were qualified to teach. (GNW, p. 217)

### **The Husband of One Wife**

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 Paul explains the qualifications for eldership from a man's perspective. One of his stated requirements is that an elder be *the husband of one wife*. Does this mean, then, that elders throughout the history of the church were always to be men? If so, would a childless husband be allowed to serve as an elder? Would an unmarried man qualify for eldership? And, if not, how would we reconcile that requirement with 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 that holds up celibacy as a means to greater Christian service?

Paul's point is not that an elder *needs* to be married, but rather that if married he not be a polygamist or an adulterer. He should be a responsible family man who loves his wife and disciplines his children *if* he is married and has children.

Admittedly, Paul's two lists of qualifications for elders assume that men will occupy this office in the church. But

. . . room is left for women to qualify for the position. First Timothy 3:1 says, "If anyone aspires. . ." which refers not to a male but to a person of either gender. Once women had submitted to theological instruction, they too could meet the qualification of being "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). (GNW, p. 206)

### **Un-contentiously Convinced**

This meandering essay has tried to grapple with the biblical evidence that has persuaded the leaders of Santa Barbara Community Church to take the position that women are gifted and called to service within the church and that their gender does not restrict those avenues of service. To restate a comment by Gordon Fee,

What is at stake is not whether all people are equally gifted; they are not. What is at stake is whether God the Holy Spirit, in his gifting the people of God, ever makes gender a prior requirement for certain kinds of gifting. I will argue that on this point what biblical data we do have seems clear: the Spirit does not. (DBE, p. 241)



We agree for the reasons stated above and for a host of other reasons<sup>1</sup>. We are convinced of our position on women in leadership in the church exegetically, theological and practically. Exegetically we see no reason that women are forbidden to serve in this office. Theologically we understand the new covenant to embrace men and women at every area of leadership in the church. And practically we have experienced harmony, unity and blessing with an eldership composed of both men and women for almost three decades of church life.

We are confident of our posture on women elders. Indeed, we feel strongly about this position and, unless persuaded by Scripture we will not give up this position. Nevertheless, we want to be convinced without contention toward those brothers and sisters and those churches with whom we disagree. While we hold to the convictions expressed in this paper, we do not see this as a fellowship breaking issue in the church. To paraphrase Rodney King, *Can't we all get along?* We hope so, and accordingly we will work alongside and pray with and for those who take a different stance on this issue.

The phrase has been attributed to several figures in the history of the church, but regardless of who said it, we agree with the statement,

In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, diversity and in all things, charity.

May God grant us charity as we work together for His kingly rule.

The elders of Santa Barbara Community Church, 10/07

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, to do justice to our question and debate would require hundreds of pages, pages that you wouldn't want to read and we wouldn't want to write. . . Mercy!