

Women In Ministry

Bent Tree Bible Fellowship Carrollton, Texas

The issue of the place of women in ministry in the church, both universal and local, has been a much-debated topic within biblical evangelical Christianity for years. The debate continues today among highly respected theologians. The purpose of this paper is to state the position of the elders of Bent Tree Bible Fellowship regarding this issue and the resulting impact on the acceptable teachings and practice within our local church.¹

As a basis for our approach to this issue (and other potentially divisive issues which have both doctrinal and practical implications for the church), we rely primarily on three core values and beliefs:

- 1) The inerrancy of Scripture and its authority in our lives and in the conduct of all church affairs. We seek to understand our culture and world through the truth of Scripture, and we seek to guard against viewing Scriptural truth through the lens of our culture. Colossians 2:8 instructs us to “see to it that you are not taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophies which depend on the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world, rather than on Christ.”
- 2) Unity in the body of Christ. Within the bounds of devotion to the authority of Scripture, we believe that believers should seek to be respectful and considerate of each other when we arrive at different understandings of non-essential Scriptural teaching. There are essential core doctrines of the faith which are clear in Scripture to which all of biblical evangelical Christianity must adhere (i.e. authority of Scripture, Deity of Christ, salvation by grace alone, and others). There are other issues on which Scripture is less clear, and as a result, sincere and diligent believers end up with differing understandings (i.e. the use of sign gifts, the mode of baptism, the timing of Christ’s return, even the style of musical worship). Satan wishes to divide us on these secondary issues to prevent us from focusing on our mission and to damage our witness to the world. God wishes us to love, nurture, and edify each other to His glory and as a witness to a lost world.
- 3) Stewardship of the gifts that God has given each of us, including our time and our abilities. We believe it would be wrong to hinder any believer from utilizing his or her gifts to the glory of God. God can accomplish whatever he wants without us, but he has called each of us to a special purpose. As leaders in the church, the elders believe we should not only eliminate unnecessary impediments to each

¹ This paper replaces the BTBF Position Paper on Women in Ministry dated 1996.

person's exercising his or her gifts, we also should proactively develop and encourage each person in using their gifts in active ministry.

Within biblical evangelical Christianity there is a spectrum of opinions on gender issues within the church, the family, and creation in general. The elders have devoted extensive time in recent years studying, discussing, and praying over the relevant Bible passages and theological literature on the subject. Most of the current debate centers around positions with the labels egalitarian, complementarian, traditionalism, Christian feminism, etc. Beyond the labels, there are real implications for our lives at home, in the church and in society.

In an effort to remain true to the values we hold, we choose to not adopt any particular label but to take a position on the practical issues that affect our church life. These positions are based on *our collective understanding of the Scriptures*². We summarize these positions as follows:

- 1) The oversight of Bent Tree Bible Fellowship resides in a board of elders composed of men meeting the Scriptural qualification of elders.
- 2) The Senior Pastor, who provides senior leadership and the primary preaching ministry of the church, and who also serves as elder, shall be a man.
- 3) All other lay, pastoral, and staff leadership positions shall be assigned to gifted men and women who are called and gifted to serve.
- 4) Teaching is a greatly valued gift that is given by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to both men and women. All gifted teachers shall be encouraged and mobilized to teach in any setting according to their giftedness.
- 5) Both men and women may be called to perform preaching and teaching roles in the Sunday worship services. These individuals will be drawn from a pastoral teaching team and other gifted teachers from inside and outside of BTBF.

Appendix 1

"Our collective understanding of the Scriptures..." This statement requires explanation.

"Our Collective understanding..." It is not altogether difficult for one person to land on an understanding of a disputed text or secondary theology. However, when Christian brothers and sisters are gathered together in a community of faith from varied backgrounds, this process can be a challenge. This paper represents the unified and collective understanding of a group of elders. We consider this unity to be a gift from God and rejoice in it.

² For a description of our "collective understanding of Scripture" and a brief discussion about key texts, see Appendix 1.

“...of the Scriptures” Even though we have read many excellent books on this topic, at the end of the day Scripture is our guide. The Scriptures that speak to this specific topic are numerous. They can be divided into two categories: those that seem to encourage and free women to serve and those that seem to restrict them. *It is our collective position that the overwhelming preponderance of biblical evidence encourages women to utilize their gifts freely, exercise their authority carefully and teach their students thoughtfully.* Additionally, we agree that the second category of passages do not contradict the first type. We would encourage our members to read these passages carefully, respect/maintain unity throughout the process and come to their own conclusions.

A (non-exhaustive) listing of passages:

Category #1 Passages that seem to encourage and free women to serve.

There are five biblically defined spheres of authority, and women are encouraged or commanded to exercise authority in each sphere:³

1. Creation: In creation, God gives women authority over nature.

Gen. 1:26-29 Note the plural pronouns, not “man” but “them.”

Hebrews 2:6-8 James 3:7 In each of these passages the word translated “man” is *anthropos* (mankind – both genders) not *aner* (man as male).

2. Family: In the family, God gives mothers authority over male offspring.

Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16 equal, identical honor is due both parents.

Gen. 28:7, Deut. 21:18-21; Prov. 30:17, Luke 2:48-51. (In this text we see the Lord of the universe voluntarily submitting himself to a female on a continuous basis – note the word *them*.) Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20; Proverbs 23:15, 22, 25; Lev. 19:3; Exodus. 4:20-26; 1 Sam. 1:11; Prov. 31:15,21,27.

3. Workplace: In the workplace, God requires the submission of male employees to their female employers.

1 Sam. 25:18-19; 2 Kings 4:8,24; 1 Chron. 7:24 (Sheerah was the builder of a massive construction project); Esther 4:5.

In the New Testament, God commands servants to be subject to their masters (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18). The Bible also mentions many male servants as well as prominent noble women (Ruth 3:11; Luke 8:3; Acts 13:50; 17:4,12) who were mistresses over their households.

4. State: God gives authority to female magistrates over its male citizens.

Gen. 36:40-41; 1 Chron. 1:51 (both Timna and Oholibamah were women chiefs or dukes – see Gen. 36:12, 22 and Gen. 36:2,14,25; 1 Kings 10:1-13; 2 Chron. 9:1-12; Luke 11:31; 1 Kings 11:19; 15:13; 2 Kings 8:26; Neh. 2:1,6).

³ Many of these references and categories were drawn from [Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women](#) by George and Dora Winston.

5. Spiritual or religious authority: Women were given spiritual and religious authority over men and women.

A. Authority in writing Scripture The following sections of the Bible came to us through women: (Hagar) Gen. 16:7-13; Gen. 25:23 (Rebekah – quoted by Paul in Rom. 9:11-12); Judges 13:3-5,7 (through the wife of Manoah while her husband was not with her); Judges 5:1-31 (Deborah); 1 Sam. 2:1-10 (Hannah); Prov. 31:1-31 (The mother of King Lemuel); Luke 1:41-45 (Elizabeth); Luke 1:46-55 (Virgin Mary); Matt. 28:7,10 (Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James).

B. God established women in the prophetic function as spiritual leaders of His people. Women called Prophetess: Miriam (Exodus 15:20; Micah 6:4); Deborah (Judg. 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); Noadiah (Neh. 6:14); Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3); Anna (Luke 2:36) and other women were said to have prophesied: Hagar (Gen. 16:7-13); Rebekah (Gen 25:23); The Mother of Samson (Judges 13:3-5); Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10); Mary Magdalene (Matt 28:1-10); "your daughters" (Acts 2:7); the four virgin daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9); and "every woman prophesying" (1 Cor. 11:5). These women issued authoritative prophetic orders and commands (Deborah – Judges 4:6,14 and Huldah -2 Kings 22:15), they provided leadership which brought spiritual results on a national scale (Deborah Judg. 4:15,16; 5:11,31), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:13; 23:3), and they addressed God's people in public gatherings (Miriam –Exodus 15:20-21; Anna – Luke 2:36-38).

C. God gave women institutional authority in the religious life of His people. Miriam was sent as a leader in the same sense that Moses and Aaron were (Mic. 6:4), Deborah led Israel (Judg. 4:4), and we see the "sons of Israel" coming to her for judgments (Judg. 4:5). She directed Barak (Judg. 4:5ff who was a mighty warrior, see Heb. 11:32-34). Huldah was consulted by King Josiah's officials (instead of Jeremiah and Zephaniah (2 Kings 22:23) and Esther instituted the religious feast of Purim (Esther 9:29-32).

D. Speaking for God (including teaching/preaching God's word). Simply defined, *prophesying* is speaking for God to God's people. Prophesying by women in public is described (Ex. 15:1, 20-21; 1 Cor. 11:5), commended (Luke 2:36-38; Acts 2:17-18, 33; 1 Cor. 14:24, 26,31), and encouraged (1 Cor. 14:1, 5, 39). Women of the Bible addressed large mixed gatherings: (Num. 27:1-2; Luke 2:36-38; Luke 13:13; John 4:5-7); Sarah taught Abraham (Gen. 21:8-12); Manoah's wife taught her husband (Judg. 13:1-25); King Lemeual's mother taught her grown son (Prov. 1:8-13; 31:1-9). The female witnesses of the resurrection taught the disciples (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 23-24; and John 20); Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). 1 Peter 2:9 describes the church as "a chosen race, a royal *priesthood*, a holy nation." All believers are priests, both men and women. There are over 20 Old Testament passages that show teaching as one of the functions of priests (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 17:8-11, etc.).

Note: if it was the biblical testimony that women could teach only women, then we would expect to find references in Scripture to meetings that were exclusively female. The fact is there is no trace in either Testament of a uniquely female gathering.

E. Paul saw many women as crucial servants and leaders in the early church. Priscilla – a fellow worker (Rom. 16:3), Junias – outstanding among the apostles (Rom. 16:7), Persis, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Mary (all "hard workers" Rom. 16), Lydia - church planter – Acts 16:14,40.

Category #2 Passages that seem to restrict women from certain areas of service.

Titus 2:3ff seems to say that women should only teach women.

Titus 2:3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴ Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children...

- In this text, Paul instructs Titus to teach older women so they can, among other things, “*teach* what is good”. Note there is no restriction based on their teaching. They are also told to *train* the younger women how to be Godly wives. There is a specific audience for this training because men don’t need to learn how to be godly wives. This verse does not say that women should teach *only* the subject mentioned or *only* the people mentioned. (We would all agree that women should be able to teach middle aged women and older women along with children, too.) In vs. 4, Paul is simply saying that the best person to teach a young woman how to be a wife is an older woman with experience. We would be unwise to say that men can never teach young women about marriage based on this text (male pastors teach marriage all the time in their sermons), likewise we would be unwise to extrapolate and say that women should teach nothing else to no one else.

1 Cor. 14:34 seems to say that all women should be completely silent in the church.

As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ 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.

The beginning of this text makes it a timeless truth, “as in all the congregations of the saints”. But does the text say that all women should be silent in worship gatherings? We must read the context if we are to understand this verse correctly. Paul desires that *everyone*, regardless of gender, prophesy in church gatherings (1 Cor. 14:5; 14:24; 14:26; 14:31 – the word *all* appears three times in this brief sentence. In the same letter Paul assumes that women are prophesying in the church gathering -1 Cor. 11:5). There is, however, a prohibition in vs. 34, 35, so what does it mean?

“*Women...*”(There is strong evidence that the word translated “women” in this text should be translated “wives” or “married women.” Paul is obviously speaking to married women, otherwise, how could they “ask their own husbands at home”? Whereas “woman” is a possible translation, its broadness has led to the misapplication of this text for all females.)

“*...should remain silent*” (this is the 3rd time this word has appeared in this context – vs. 28, 30 and 34. The other two speak to a lessening of activity, not a complete prohibition. It would be wise to read this word in a similar fashion here).

“*...they are not allowed to speak*” (This is a broad word covering all types of speaking including singing hymns (Eph. 5:19), making a report (Acts 28:21), testifying (Acts 4:31-33) and praying (John 17:1). To interpret this phrase as a complete ban on all speaking would contradict the abundant texts encouraging the opposite. If we believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, we must believe in the harmony of Scripture as well. We must not presuppose that the early church’s worship service looked like our present day gathering. If we do, we assume that “speaking” in this context refers to the preaching

event. However, the early gathering was more interactive than our present experience with prophesying followed by response and questioning from the congregation. In this text both types of *speaking* is in mind. (vs. 31 – proclamation and teaching – done so the *hearer* may learn, vs. 35 a response to it – done so the *speaker* may learn. “If they want to inquire about something.”) If Paul wanted to ban prophesying, it would have been easy for him to do so in vs. 31, but he did not do so. “Speaking” in verse 35 describes only the questioning after the teaching.

So, what exactly is prohibited? *It is the public questioning of their own husband’s prophecies in the public gathering.*

... *but must be in submission...* (This qualifies the “speaking” as being unsubmitive or refractory in nature. It is not difficult to imagine how a wife and her husband could come to disagree in church when he had brought a prophetic message. She could easily embarrass him or show a lack of respect for him in front of the rest of the congregation. Because a wife’s responsibility to respect her husband is clearly stated in Scripture (Eph 5:33), this teaching applies specifically to wives of men teachers and not specifically to husbands of female ones.)

³⁵ *If they want to inquire about something,* (This implies they have a question after their husband is finished teaching.)

they should ask their own husbands at home; (The questions were always asked of the person teaching. This is how we know the woman’s “own” husband is the presenter. Wives are encouraged to ask these questions not in the public gathering but at home instead. Paul is simply saying that subjects of possible disagreement between spouses, whatever they might be, are better discussed in private than in public. There is no prohibition of wives asking clarification from other speakers in public, nor are there any instructions here for unmarried women.)

for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (In other words, it is troubling when a wife challenges her husband in front of the congregation instead of at home. Paul’s point in this entire section is that the worship service should be a place of order and reverence. In vs. 33 he says, “For God is not a God of disorder but of *peace*.” And in vs. 40 he concludes, “but everything should be done in a *fitting* and *orderly* way.” This specific section prohibits a married couple from breaking that peace by debating in front of the congregation.)

I Tim. 2:11,12 seems to say that women should not teach or have authority over men.

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

This passage is the crux of the debate concerning women’s roles in the church and ministry. There are highly respected scholars on various places on the interpretive spectrum concerning this passage. Among evangelical scholars there is discussion around:

- What role does the Ephesian context play in Paul’s words?
- The word translated “woman” in the NIV. Is it *woman* or *wife*?

- The word translated “man”, is it *man* or *husband*. (These questions speak to the scope of application.)
- The words translated “quietness” and “silent”. Is it *silence* or *quietness*?
- If it is silence, in what setting should this be applied?
- The phrase, “I do not permit”. Is this a timeless truth or context specific?
- Do the words “teach” and “have authority” go together, or is Paul talking about two separate things? (Meaning, is authority found in the teaching event or is Paul speaking separately about both teaching and leadership?)
- What does the word translated “have authority” mean? (The two words translated authority, *exousia* “authority” and *exousiazō* “to have authority over” together appear 107 times in the New Testament whereas the word *authentēo* “to domineer over” appears only once, here in 1 Tim. 2:12.)
- Is the restriction concerning teaching about teaching men, or teaching in general?
- Why did Paul refer back to the creation account in vs. 13?
- In Genesis, where did the idea of men ruling over women arise, in the creation order, or as a result of the fall?
- Why did Paul mention that it was Eve who was deceived? Is it because women are more easily deceived than men in general, or did it have something to do with experience? If Eve’s being deceived into sin disqualifies all women from teaching in the church, what must be said of Adam’s willful sin? If it is true that women are more easily deceived, then why does Paul allow them to teach women and children?
- What does “women are saved through childbearing” mean?

It would be impossible in a short paper to address each of these questions satisfactorily. In fact, there are volumes written about this one verse, with authors answering these (and many other questions) divergently. The elders of Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, after studying this text, find ourselves in different places regarding some of these questions. *We are unified, however, in the conviction that this passage does not, in a timeless way, restrict women from teaching or having authority over men in the church setting.*