

Women And Serving In The Church

There exists a great deal of confusion and disagreement among followers of Jesus over how God feels about women and men and their roles in His church.

- Depending on what your church experience has been, you may or may not know that in some churches there are many restrictions on a woman's contribution to the church.
 - In some churches even today women can't serve communion, but they can iron the tablecloth over the communion table.
 - In some churches men serve on a board called the deacon board and they make financial and leadership decisions for the church. And there is another board of women called the deaconesses, and their primary responsibility was to wash the baptism robes and towels and decorate the church at Christmas.
- John R. Rice wrote a book a number of years ago called, "Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers" In it he writes, "I have no doubt millions will go to hell because of the unscriptural practice of women preachers."

The real question is what is God's plan and intention for male and female?

- At Eastside we believe that the Bible, in its entirety, is our authoritative guide as a church.
- Our commitment is that the Bible—not culture, not trends, not society—but Scripture is our authoritative guide.

Before jumping into the subject matter it's probably important to talk about a hermeneutical principle about the interpretation of scripture. Hermeneutics simply refers to the science of biblical interpretation.

- One important hermeneutical principle states that to reach a biblical position on any subject, you must make a decision based on what might be called the preponderance of the evidence in Scripture versus any one isolated passage.
- You have to look for the preponderance of evidence on complex issues.
 - For instance in 2 Peter 2:18, Peter writes, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh."
 - There are a couple of other similar verses in Ephesians 6:5 and Col 3:22.
 - In debates about slavery in the South 150 years ago Southern Christians would sometimes point to this verse in 1 Peter 2:18 and say, "It says right there in the Bible, 'Slaves, obey your master.' Thus the Bible is pro-slavery."
 - That was a real problem because the Bible never says any place, "Slavery is a bad institution, so get rid of it." That would have made the discussion much easier.
 - But on the other hand, the great moral force behind abolition was overwhelmingly Christian. And it was Christians like William Wilberforce

Women And Serving In The Church

- and others who devoted their lives to the cause of freedom because of their Christian faith.
- They believed that when you look at the whole of Scripture, it leads to the conclusion that all human beings should be free and they appealed to the preponderance of the evidence in Scripture.
- Think of trying to understand the issue of slavery in the Bible on a giant scale.
 - On one side of the scale you put verses like 1 Peter 2:18 that appear to be pro-slavery.
 - But on the other side you put scriptures like Genesis 1 that all human beings are created in the image of God.
 - Then look at the prophets, like Isaiah and Amos and others who burn with righteous indignation with God's hatred of oppression and injustice.
 - Look at the book of Acts where you see radical equality in the church.
 - Look at the book of Philemon where Paul writes, "Receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a dear brother."
 - Look at Galatians 3:28 where Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
- Christians who fought for freedom said if you look at the preponderance of the evidence in Scripture and take into account the entire Bible, then clearly slavery is not most consistent with God's will for the human race.
- So when it comes to complex issues of Scripture, it's critical to look at the preponderance of evidence in Scripture.

This brings us to the confusing subject of women serving in the church.

- This subject matter is one of those areas where Christians disagree. And whatever position Christians take or whichever side they find themselves on, sometimes they become contentious in a way that damages the body of Christ. And we are committed not to have that spirit here.
- This is a complex discussion and well-meaning, very bright, sincere Christians disagree about it.
- There are many topics that Christians disagree over that are not essentials of the faith dealing with God, Jesus, or salvation.
 - For instance within the body of Christ there are multiple different views over Bible prophecy and the end times, and we've learned not to divide over that.
 - There are different understandings of the gifts and activity of God the Holy Spirit today, and we've learned not to divide over that.
 - There are different views on how old the earth is, and we've learned not to divide over that.

Women And Serving In The Church

- And of course, there are different understandings of this subject matter, and we don't need to divide over it.
- However, unlike Bible prophecy a church has to decide what its practice will involve when it comes to women and serving.

The following notes are an attempt to articulate how the Eastside elders, in looking at the preponderance of evidence in Scripture, have concluded that God's intention for His church is for all roles of service not to be defined by gender, but giftedness.

Old Testament

To understand God's original intention we must go back to the early scenes of Genesis, before sin entered the world; before male and female relationships got corrupted.

- All through creation God is creating the earth, the sky, birds, fish, and after creating everything He says, "It is... good." But then all of a sudden there's something that's not good.
- Genesis 2:18 (NIV), The Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."
 - God says, "Being alone is not good."
 - The man had no one to experience life and community with.
 - So God says I will create a helper.
 - Now at first reading you might interpret that to mean, "Oh, I get it, the woman is to be the assistant to the man... to help him get all of his many responsibilities done."
 - However the word helper is used many other times in the Old Testament, and it almost always refers to God.
 - So if God is our helper, clearly helper does not mean someone who's a little lower on the org chart than the man.
 - And Genesis 2:18 doesn't say God created woman to be a helper to help him get his chores done, but in order for him not to be alone, so they could experience community, so they could experience oneness.
- God gave those first human beings a command, *Genesis 1:27-28 (NIV)... So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*
 - Now who did God bless?. God blessed Them!
 - And who was to fill the earth and subdue it?. Them!
 - And who was to rule over the fish and the birds and living creatures? Them (both male and female)
 - It does not say the man is to rule over the woman, but that they're both to rule over the earth.

Women And Serving In The Church

- Now there are different understandings in Christian circles about this, and depending on your background, you may wrestle with this, but our understanding of this is that God's original intent was for men and women to be co-regents with God, to share dominion together.
- Sometimes people argue since God made the man first and the woman second, that the man is superior. The problem with that argument is that you could say, "Well God made the animals first before the man, so they're superior."
- Or you could go the opposite way and say, "God started with the animals as a warm-up, then He made man as an improvement. Then finally God said, "I'm through warming up" and He made woman.
- The truth is nobody is over the other. It's about both being equally made in the image of God.
- The idea of one gender ruling over another was not God's plan laid out at the beginning of creation. It's part of what happened as the result of sin and the curse in Genesis 3, just like pain and childbirth and alienation from labor.

Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, you find women playing incredibly significant roles.

- God chose women like Miriam and Huldah as prophets, to speak authoritatively on His behalf. Instead of God opposing women teaching and leading men, Huldah gave instructions to a male priest and male king.
- Deborah was a prophet and judge of Israel, and that didn't mean she was part of the judicial branch of government. Judges were the highest authoritative leaders of Israel at that time (this was before they had a King), exercising political leadership, national leadership, and spiritual leadership.
 - She was married, but Deborah (not her husband) was chosen by God to be the leader of Israel.
 - Again, evidently God is not opposed to women in leadership.
 - What's eye-opening about these kinds of accounts in the Old Testament is that Old Testament writers accept these accounts of women leaders and prophets without comment.

New Testament

When reading the New Testament look carefully at the historical records of how Jesus treated women, for His day it was revolutionary and breathtaking.

- Jesus was a revolutionary who busted open the door to value, dignity, equality, and serving for women as well as men.
- Jesus was polar-opposite to the Rabbis of his day who generally held women to be inferior.
 - Rabbis taught that it was better to burn the Torah, the Old Testament law than to teach it to a woman. (Jewish Talmud)

Women And Serving In The Church

- Jewish men would pray, “God, thank you that you have not made me a gentile, a slave.... or a woman.” (Still a practice today in Jewish Prayer books)
- A devout Rabbi wouldn’t even talk to a woman.
- There’s a very revealing scene in John 4 that gives us a clear picture of Jesus and His respect for women.
 - The text tells about an encounter that Jesus had with a Samaritan woman at a well one hot day around noon, who had come to draw water and Jesus asks, “Will you give me a drink?”
 - In our day we can’t even begin to fully appreciate what a shocking thing it was for a man to even speak to a woman publicly.
 - This is happening at an era in history when women were so demeaned that Socrates had argued that being a woman is divine punishment, “since a woman is halfway between a man and an animal.”
 - Yet, on this day Jesus did what no other man in His culture would do, and He broke down this gender wall and talked with this woman... and treated her with respect and dignity.
 - John 4:27 (NIV) ...*Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman.*
 - Now why were they surprised by that?
 - Because rabbis didn’t do that it Jesus’ day, but Jesus did.
- In the 33 and a half years of Jesus’ life on this planet He brought to women (like the sisters Mary and Martha; a woman brought to Him caught in the act of adultery, Mary Magdalene, and others) something they had never experienced before--dignity, respect, value, and worth.
 - His mother Mary was the vehicle by which He came to earth.
 - Anna the prophetess spoke in the temple of Jesus’ future ministry.
 - Some of Jesus’ closest and most devoted followers and friends were women.
 - Jesus traveled and interacted frequently with women and served with them. To have a rabbi traveling with a group of men and women, relating to one another as brothers and sisters was revolutionary for that day.
 - Even the first witnesses of His resurrection, the first ones to hear the words “He is risen,” were women.
 - One of the marks of the authenticity of the resurrection is that historians say nobody in the first century would have manufactured a story in those days of women being the first eyewitnesses. In those days women were not even allowed to serve as witnesses in legal proceedings.
 - Jesus was a revolutionary who busted open the door to value, dignity, equality, and serving for women as well as men.

In Acts chapter 2 the church was born and we begin to see the role women played in the New Testament Church.

Women And Serving In The Church

- On the day of Pentecost Peter gets up and makes one of the most important speeches in the history of the church and he cites an Old Testament reference in *Acts 2:17 (NIV)* and says, *“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy.”*
 - It’s striking that of all the texts in the Old Testament Peter could have referenced he cites here as evidence the promise that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (male and female) and that there would come a Spirit-inspired prophetic ministry that would include men and women, without regard to gender, as a sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And that’s exactly what happened.
- Some of the most significant leaders of the early church, according to the Bible, were women.
 - In Acts 18 we find Priscilla teaching a man named Apollos. Even though Apollos is well versed in Scripture he is receiving authoritative instruction from a woman. There is nothing in the text to suggest that she was doing it under the authority of her husband Aquila. If anything, because of the order of names it suggests that her husband was doing it under her leadership.
 - We read about Lydia, who had her own international export business and was a key player in the launching of the first church in Philippi. –She housed the church in her home.
 - We read about the 4 daughters of Philip in Acts 21:9 who preached and prophesied. They weren’t silent in the church. Prophecy comes from the Greek word “propheteuo” which means to speak the authoritative word of God.
 - Paul writes about 9 different women in Romans 16 who were significant to him in his ministry.
 - He honors them using extraordinary language.
 - Phoebe is commended as a servant or deacon (diakonos) which is a masculine word. Paul almost always used that word in the sense of a minister of the gospel, an office.
 - It’s worth noting that some suggest 1 Timothy 3’s qualifications for elders and deacons limit the role to men because Paul talks about both an elder and deacon as being “faithful to his wife.” (vv. 2, 12).
 - However clearly Phoebe was considered a deacon.
 - In Romans 9:7 Paul says, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles...”
 - Andronicus is a male name, but Junia is a female name. And notice both are counted as apostles, the highest title that could be conferred.
 - Interestingly, this has bothered translators so much that some of them in a few translations have changed the spelling from Junia to Junias, which would be a man’s name. But in all the best ancient manuscripts it’s a woman’s name.

Women And Serving In The Church

- It is our understanding, following the Biblical hermeneutic of looking at the preponderance of the evidence, that Jesus busted open the door to value, dignity, equality, and serving for women as well as men that women in the early church were not given roles based on their gender, but based on their gifts.
 - 1 Peter 2:9 teaches all followers of Jesus are part of a Royal Priesthood, the priesthood of all believers, not just male believers.
 - Galatians 3:28 (NIV) says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

What about 1 Corinthians 14; 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1?

- Again if we were looking at the preponderance of the evidence of Scripture for women serving in the church as a scale, there is a great deal of weight on one side of the scale, but on the other side people often cite passages like 1 Corinthians 14; 1 Timothy 2 and 3, and Titus 2 as problem passages that preclude women serving as elders.
- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NIV) “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.”
 - The obvious problem is how do you reconcile this text with passages like Acts 21:9 where Philip’s daughters are prophesying or 1 Corinthians 11 where it assumes women will be praying and prophesying out loud in church?
 - There are a couple of different positions on this:
 - Some say you don’t reconcile this. They just contradict each other. But part of our belief as a church is the authority of Scripture so we believe it’s not acceptable to conclude that Paul was contradicting himself.
 - Others say when Paul was talking in 1 Corinthians 11 about women prophesying and preaching that he wasn’t talking about being in church, like an auditorium or sanctuary, but in a small group or something. The difficulty with that is they didn’t have auditoriums or buildings and all churches were house churches.
 - Our understanding is that Paul was addressing a particular situation.
 - In the church women were now able to learn and that was a revolutionary thing. They didn’t used to be able to learn.
 - So most likely women were asking questions that were disrupting the learning for everybody in their public gatherings. They didn’t know how to catch up, so they would just turn and ask things right in the middle of a church gathering.
 - So Paul was saying, “Stop disrupting the public gathering and ask these questions at home.”
 - Evangelical scholars generally believe this passage is referring to what happens in a new day when learning is taking place for women, but it’s disruptive.

Women And Serving In The Church

- 1 Timothy 2:9-12 (NIV) “I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”
 - The apostle Paul gives a number of commands in this passage which raises the question: Are these commands universal principles for all times and all places, or is he addressing a particular situation unique to that culture?
 - When Paul writes: “I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety...not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,” was he giving a universal principle for all time and places, or addressing a particular situation unique to that culture?
 - Most Christians have determined Paul wasn’t talking about a universal principle but was addressing a specific situation in the culture.
 - Similarly, could it be that Paul is addressing a specific situation in a specific culture when he says “I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”? --Because in other places in the New Testament Paul does permit women to preach and teach.
 - In another example in 1 Corinthians 11 when Paul instructed women to cover their hair when praying or prophesying (v. 5) or that for a woman to cut her hair off or shave her head (v. 6) was a disgrace, most Bible students understand he was responding to the specific local context in Corinth where the leading religion of the city promoted prostitution and the prostitutes would not cover their head and sometimes shave their head.
 - So maybe in 1 Timothy 3 Paul was addressing a specific situation where women had grown up in a world and received no education.
 - One translation is, “I’m not currently permitting a woman to teach,” because a person has to learn before they can teach.
 - In this case Paul’s point would be that women must learn before they can teach, and they haven’t learned yet, so of course they can’t teach yet and shouldn’t carry themselves as having authority.
- A frequent question that comes up is “What about having women elders in view of what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1?”
 - 1 Timothy 3:2-4 (NIV) Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.
 - It is certainly most likely that the elders or overseers of these congregations were men. That would not be unexpected because of the levels of education and their experience and so on.

Women And Serving In The Church

- Some contend that because of the way Paul has worded this passage, women cannot serve as elders and that Paul here is restricting it to only someone who fits exactly this description.
- This will certainly be one of those debated topics, but if you're going to restrict the eldership to someone who fits exactly this description, then for example, a divorced man could never be restored and serve as an overseer. A widow who gets remarried could never serve as an overseer. No single man could serve as an overseer because Paul says you must be the husband of one wife with children who obey. But Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 7:8, "It is good for those who are unmarried to remain single, as I am, so they could have greater capacity to serve." By that description, Paul himself and Jesus himself could not have served as elders.
- Our understanding is that Paul is most likely saying here, "If an elder is a married man (which again would have been normal given that society and education levels), he must live his married life and his family life with integrity."
- This would be a similar principle to the passage in Titus 1 which refers to an elder as being "blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe, and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient."

Eastside Christian Church

At Eastside we want to encourage you to be willing to study on your own, pray, and think and work hard toward your best understanding of what Scripture teaches.

- Maybe you've been parroting the word or the position of someone you heard a long time ago.
- Please be open to the work of the Holy Spirit on this as best you can.
- Individual Christians will have to come to their own conclusion about these matters, and at Eastside we will respect that.

However, in carefully and prayerfully determining our own practices we have concluded through following the Biblical hermeneutic of looking at the preponderance of the evidence, that God's intention for His church is for all roles of service are not to be defined by gender, but by giftedness.

- If your position is different and you disagree, please know that we love you.
- It is possible to find ourselves in different positions on this topic and still love and deeply respect other brothers and sisters in Christ.
- But it's not one we have to break our unity over....and it doesn't mean we can stop loving each other.

