

A Message from your Leadership Team

We Christians are called to image the kingdom of God into the culture around us. Our culture is wrestling, often confusingly and painfully, with male and female roles in families, businesses, government, and religion. The question that we – the elders and ministers (Elmwood’s leadership team) – have been discussing, studying, and praying about for months (actually for four decades under various elderships and ministers), pertains to the roles of men and women in the Elmwood Church of Christ. We believe that the only valid answer to this question is in the Bible because the Bible is God’s Word.

The members of your leadership team have been humbled and blessed by seeing the way how the Holy Spirit has gifted both women and men in this congregation. We know that Christians, including the members of the Elmwood Church of Christ, hold diverse viewpoints on this subject. We believe that the diversity of theological opinions at Elmwood, and the love among the members of Elmwood, have historically been strengths of this congregation. Another strength of Elmwood is that it is a family that recognizes different understandings of scripture while not letting this interfere with our love for each other. We hope and pray that all will extend grace to those who have differing views on the subject.

The following passages are some of those that influenced and guided our prayer, study, and discussions.

A. Genesis 1 – 3

Genesis 1 and 2 seem to show that before the Fall, men and women were equal before God but different, though neither was complete without the other. Yet we are together a whole humanity. The sin resulting in the Fall in Genesis 3 set in motion a system of patriarchy, part of the curse, but was not what God had intended as an original part of his creation.

B. The Gospels

The Gospel writers reveal how the good news of Jesus reverses the curse of Genesis 3 and restores equality to all humankind. In the first century AD, Jewish women were typically separated from men in private, public, and religious life. Women did not have the same rights and status as men, but the Gospels reveal how God was at work in repairing this divide. We often miss these details when reading with modern eyes, but once seen in cultural context, Jesus' teachings and interactions with women are very different from the norms of his day.

Perhaps one of the most obvious ways Jesus exhibits God's desire for restoration is when he takes on women disciples which would have been very uncommon in his day (Luke 8:13; 23:49, 55-56). Men were not really supposed to associate with women in public much less travel around with them. A woman's role was typically confined to the private life of caring for the home, much like when Jesus was visiting Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). Martha assumes the more traditional role, but Mary sits at Jesus' feet, a place traditionally reserved for male disciples. These women, also disciples, were crucial to Jesus' ministry. Not only did they help fund the ministry, but also they were actually the first to declare the good news of Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:1-11).

Another place where Jesus breaks these cultural norms in favor of God's justice is with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Even though this interaction was taboo, it resulted in the conversion of many Samaritans.

These examples are by no means an exhaustive list. However, they do reflect how God came to earth, took on flesh, and participated in the mission and vision that God had set out for humankind from the beginning. Jesus, the true image of God, restores dignity to women in a first century culture where women did not have the status bestowed upon them in the creation story. We then, being the bearers of God's image and called to be like Christ, are to participate in caring for all creation and restoring dignity and personhood to all whom God has created.

C. Acts 18:24-28

Prisca (Priscilla) and her husband Aquila were highly respected Christian workers who instructed Apollos on Christian baptism. Her name (Priscilla) is mentioned before his (Aquila) which would imply her primacy in a first-century context.

D. Romans 16:1-2

A Christian woman named Phoebe is mentioned as a deacon (Gr. διάκονος, diakonos) in the church.

E. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Paul expresses frustration with the fact that Christians in Corinth were disregarding common cultural norms, being disrespectful, and lacking unity. This leads him to command that in public worship, they should pray and prophesy in ways that would not dishonor others. Verse 5, “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head . . .” reveals that women in Corinth did pray and prophesy.

F. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

In this text, Paul makes two statements that we find important and relevant to our understanding of how and why individuals are gifted by the Spirit. We find first that individuals are gifted by the Spirit in both verses 4 and 11. Secondly, the gifts of the Spirit are given to individuals not for their own benefit but for “the common good” (vs. 7). Paul continues in this chapter to show that the diversity of gifts and the individuals to whom they are given are critical for the proper functioning of the body. We believe that all believers using their gifts for the good of the body produce a healthier body that is more able to join God’s work in the world.

G. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

In this passage, Paul is not contradicting what he said in the same letter, (11:2-16). In this case, rather than banning women from ever speaking in public worship, he is attempting to address disorderly worship in that congregation and to put a stop to certain women who were asking questions in a chaotic way that disrupted the orderliness of worship in that place.

H. Galatians 3:26-29

Here Paul is expressing some of the ways that the Church is supposed to reflect new creation in Christ Jesus: vs. 28, “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” This view of the Church causes us to question the traditional limits placed on women’s roles in worship and in the Church overall. The whole of new creation is to undo the damage done by the power of sin in the original creation. Thus the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is called to image that saving and healing aspect of new creation even in the midst of old creation.

I. 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Here Paul wrote to Timothy to help him deal with a specific group of women under the influence of false teaching in Ephesus. Paul is prohibiting women from dressing immodestly, teaching without adequate knowledge, and teaching with an overbearing attitude. In this passage, Paul does command that:

1. Men are to lift up holy hands in prayer
2. Women are not to braid their hair, wear gold, pearls, or expensive clothes

Items 1 and 2 above lead us to believe that any references that Paul makes to women being silent are flavored by the history, the culture that he lived in and specific concerns for issues in specific churches. We obviously don’t treat items 1 and 2 as requirements today.

J. 1 Timothy 3:8-11

Verses 8 through 10 describe the characteristics of men who serve as deacons. Verse 11 in the original Greek reads, “*In the same way, the women likewise (Gr. γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως, gynaikas hōsautōs) are to be women worthy of respect . . .*”

1 Timothy 3:8-10 lays out some characteristics of male deacons and many scholars interpret verse 11 as giving us similar characteristics for female deacons.

Careful attention to the passages of scripture mentioned previously have led us to believe that women, like men, may be called by God to serve his church in the following ways, some of which are different than our historical practices:

1. Lead prayer in public worship
2. Read scripture in public worship.
3. Serve the Lord's Supper.
4. Serve as deacons.
5. Speak to the congregation during worship.
6. Lead singing.
7. Baptize both male and female believers.
8. Give communion comments.
9. Teach classes and lead or teach small groups where adult male believers are in attendance.

We understand that some will be uncomfortable with such changes. It is always difficult to break with years of established practice. This is common to all people; it was true in the first century. For example, think of these first century questions, "Can gentiles be Christians without first being circumcised?" or "Must Christians follow Jewish Kosher Laws?"

We must always, in the power of the Spirit, humbly, prayerfully, and faithfully grow in our Christian lives. And, as we grow in our understanding of God's word, scripture must overcome tradition, a key biblical concept in the Restoration Movement. It is also part of our Restoration heritage that we must go, in mutual love and grace, where scripture leads us. Knowing this, we must follow what God has shown us in scripture in the light of his Spirit.

It is our mutual responsibility to proceed with love, to extend grace to each other even when we differ in the way we read scripture, to honor each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and as new creatures in Jesus, in order to reflect as much of the coming new creation into his church as possible.

May the grace of our God and our Lord Jesus continue to bless this church with his wisdom, love, and power as we move forward serving his kingdom, following his lead in all that we do.