

## Considerations and Questions on the Role of Women in Church Leadership August 2017



The issue of women in ministry and in leadership is not a new discussion for any church, including Emmanuel. This is a complex issue and godly scholars of God's Word and the Church have not been able to resolve some of these questions for over 2000 years. This paper is offered to help us at least try to understand the nature of the discussion, relevant questions, and find a way to live with the tensions that surround this issue within the church. It is, accordingly, a lengthy document in an attempt to be somewhat thorough (though it admittedly does not address all questions/concerns/concepts regarding *Women in Leadership* in the church.) Despite our greatest hope this is not a simple issue, and the Bible overall is not clear on this issue (though specific texts may appear clear). In fact, texts related to this topic are some of the most difficult to translate and understand in the Bible.

With that in mind we believe it is helpful to revisit the history regarding leadership at Emmanuel and some of the core questions, even if we cannot expect to come to full resolution on those questions.

**History:** In its early years, Emmanuel was led by a board of men, but they were not formally called "elders." They were simply referred to as Board Members, and they gave overall leadership to the matters of the church, with accountability, support, and some direction provided by the membership who met quite regularly.

As time went on the shape of the Board changed to facilitate effectiveness, and by the 1970's the General Board consisted of several groups, including elders and deacons (elected leaders of committees). Women were included as voting members of the General Board as deacons but not as elders. Later the concept of members being assigned to the General Board by virtue of their function as elected committee chairs was eliminated, and the Board became a Ministry Council made up of male Elders (elected), Moderator (elected), and pastors (non-voting), with each elders responsible for oversight of a ministry (thus the name).

At a congregational meeting held in 2006 the congregation of Emmanuel had a considerable discussion regarding a constitutional change that would clearly allow the election of women to our Ministry Council. While the original recommendation was amended to ensure that Biblical references regarding character were including in our requirements for elders, the issue of women serving on Ministry Council was left still needing to be clarified. In 2010 our constitution was again revised further simplifying the description of elders. There is actually nothing in our present constitution or bylaws that directly excludes women from leadership.

**Why now?** We are grateful that an issue such as this can be discussed openly and proactively at Emmanuel. This allows us to be more objective and gracious with one another. For the past several years Ministry Council has been working on a model for governance and leadership for the present and future. Good governance and systems/structures are not antithetical to Biblical leadership, but rather are a component of it. It is, therefore, a logical time to bring further clarity to our position on the role of women in leadership as a part of our understanding and expression of Biblical leadership in the church.

It should be clearly understood that our desire to address this issue is not simply being done in response to pressure from our society and its values. Certainly culture has its ideas on changes the church should make, and many, if not most, of those must be rejected if the church is to remain effective and obedient ambassadors for God. Some might then ask: "why make any change?" First of all, our question is not whether society allows this, but whether or not Scripture does. Our intent is to be true to Scripture, and to be as consistent as we can in our application of Scripture. For example, for years we have allowed women to teach children, other women, and men in oral and written form, we have sent women into positions of authority in other cultures, and have given women the right to have final authority in the church through a vote at congregation level. We are finally attempting to

address how the rationale for those decisions impacts women in leadership in the church as a whole. Our goal is to clear away any accretions of the past while resisting any unbiblical accommodations to society.

Further, while society is not the guide for the church, movement in society now generally respects the gift of leadership in women. This puts women into a position where their leadership can be effective. In previous generations our culture would not have readily accepted this, but with its present acceptance it now brings to the fore the question of whether that is appropriate in the church.

Further, in our continuing challenge of finding, enlisting, and empowering find godly leadership that is willing to serve, we must be certain that we are looking for leaders in all the places where God is providing. Does God have leaders equipped and willing to serve who are not being given opportunity because of their gender? And if so, should that opportunity be extended to our Ministry Council?

Finally, the ultimate mission of the church is the spread of the gospel and the maturing of God's people as they work together in love. It is important to occasionally review any potential obstacles to this mission.

**Foundational Comments:** Understanding that this issue can be divisive or confusing, there are some foundational comments that must be made.

1. From the very beginning of this discussion we affirm that the Bible is the final authority for life and faith for the Christian and the church. That authority is found in God's Word, inspired by His Holy Spirit, and inerrant in its original manuscripts. Our Statement of Faith affirms that commitment. Thus this discussion is not intended to be a question of the *authority* of Scripture, but of the *interpretation* of Scripture. We must not defend an understanding of women in leadership in any way that imputes error to the Bible.
2. Recognizing the authority of Scripture does not remove all the thorny issues of understanding the Bible. As we attempt to understand the Bible we wrestle with literal versus figurative language, normative versus descriptive messages, eternal versus situational instruction, and a text written to a culture that existed 2000+ years ago in languages not our own. Additionally, we are all influenced by our own culture and tradition. Thankfully we have the work of the Holy Spirit to help us as we wrestle with the question of "what position best explains **all** the data of Scripture?" We therefore look for the consistency of all Scripture and attempt to use texts where the meaning is plain to help us understand texts that are more obscure.
3. It must also be stated that although we believe in progressive understanding of Scripture, that is, we learn more and more each day about what God says in His Word and understand it better, we do not hold to a progressive revelation that renders the Biblical text secondary or subservient to newer ideas and proclamations.
4. With the above in mind, we then must acknowledge that a biblical understanding of the issue of women in positions of leadership has additional challenges.
  - a. There are Scriptures that support some kind of exclusion of women in some positions in the church. There are also portions of Scripture (both of a teaching genre and of a descriptive genre) that seem to run counter to the exclusion of women in leadership positions in Christian ministry. In other words, there are exceptions in the Bible to what is perceived as the norm of a patriarchal or hierarchal position which would place a permanent limit on the role of women in church.
  - b. While there are texts that seem to exclude women from certain positions in the church, our understanding of what kind of situations those injunctions were applied to, and the meaning behind the supporting comments in Scripture, is less than clear.
  - c. In respect to "a" and "b" there are biblical scholars that are committed to the inerrancy and authority of God's Word, and are very knowledgeable in the original languages of Scripture, that come to differing conclusions on the same issue and texts. This, in and of itself, should be a clue for us about our ability to resolve all questions on this topic.

We believe that these difficulties should not stop us, but that we should do our best to understand and reconcile this issue for Emmanuel with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For years, a number of our church family have lived and served harmoniously in our church while personally holding a position different than the practice of our church. This proves that we can hold this issue with an open hand and it is not an issue worth dividing over. We believe it is beneficial for our church to have this discussion even if we may never all agree. Obviously, leadership believes that at this time it is good for us to consider moving forward with further constitutional changes regarding governance which would clarify an openness to women serving on Ministry Council.

Given that the core of this discussion revolves around an understanding of Scripture, an interaction with the relevant texts is presented in this document should anyone want to read through those details. Efforts to apply a consistent and appropriate method of interpretation to the various texts are not easy. Since we see exceptions in Scripture to most restrictions presented on this issue, and the reconciliation of diverse passages of Scripture is clearly difficult, we believe that to assert dogmatically an absolute injunction one way or another is questionable at best. Our desire is to be true to Scripture's absolute principles and apply those wisely, which is what we believe is evidenced in Paul's example throughout his epistles. It is obvious in the texts that there are demands for propriety and order in Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Our concern is to interpret rightly and truly the original intent of the text, to discern how it coheres with the rest of Scripture and how it applies to us today.

To put this more plainly, the bible in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians has prohibitions against women in certain roles of leadership in the church. In fact, in most of the Bible it speaks of men being in charge. That cannot be denied. But is that evidence descriptive (which is a worthy consideration in light of the patriarchal culture of the day) only, or is it also prescriptive? To sort this out we need to carefully examine the **full** counsel and evidence of Scripture as well as the context of the limiting texts. It is true that Jesus himself did not have any women in his inner circle of 12, but we must try to understand what that evidence tells us, for we also see exceptions to the prohibitions evidenced in Scripture, exceptions that are ordained by God Himself. Thus we must ask: can those prohibitions be absolute if God himself ordains exceptions? Were those prohibitions permanent for everyone for all time, or only for a time and a situation? What do the exceptions mean? The jury of scholars is hung on the issue. We must therefore tread very humbly.

A further question to be asked goes beyond whether or not Scripture would allow women to serve as elders in the church to ask if that would be the best thing for us at Emmanuel for effective ministry, unity, and testimony to the world. This question must also be given appropriate consideration.

That being said, we desire a course of action that allows God's people to determine, through prayer and humble study of God's Word, a **decision on this in a spirit of peace**. Ministry Council has done so, agreeing that we should leave the option of women serving as elders open. We must also remember that the congregation is still the final authority and they will choose if, when, and whom to elect as members of Ministry Council.

### **Texts and implications related to this discussion:**

Following are some considerations that have implications in this discussion. Following that is a list of the specific texts that speak to the issues as well as a few comments/questions about those texts.

### **Foundational Truths:**

- The Bible teaches that God has revealed Himself in the totality of Scripture, the authoritative Word of God (Matt 5:18; John 10:35; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). We believe therefore that Scripture is to be interpreted holistically and thematically.

- The Bible teaches that both man and woman were created in God's image, had a direct relationship with God, and shared jointly the responsibilities of bearing and rearing children and having dominion over the created order. They were, in fact, together created in His image, and thus reflect the image of God together. (Gen 1:26-28).
- The Bible teaches the full equality of men and women in creation and in redemption (Gen 1:26-28, 2:23, 5:1-2; John 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; 1 Cor 11:11-12; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:13, 3:26-28, 5:1).
- The Bible teaches that the forming of woman from man demonstrates the fundamental unity and equality of human beings (Gen 2:21-23).
- The Bible teaches that husbands and wives are heirs together of the grace of life and that they are bound together in a relationship of mutual submission and responsibility (1 Cor 7:3-5; Eph 5:21; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Gen 21:12).
- The Bible teaches that man and woman were co-participants in the Fall: Adam was no less culpable than Eve (Gen 3:6; Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22).
- The Bible's expression of the rulership of Adam over Eve comes after the account of the fall and appears therefore to not be a part of the original created order. Genesis 3:16 may therefore be a prediction of the effects of the fall rather than a prescription of God's ideal order.
- The Bible teaches that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came on men and women alike. Without distinction, the Holy Spirit indwells women and men, and sovereignly distributes gifts without preference as to gender (Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor 12:7, 11, 14:31).
- The Bible teaches that both women and men are called to develop their spiritual gifts and to use them as stewards of the grace of God (1 Peter 4:10-11) within the context of the church.
- God uses the analogy of marriage to describe his relationship with Israel. It is worthy of note that this is not a marriage of equals. Further, women are not lesser if, and because, they submit. Jesus as God the Son submits to God the Father, but is no less in value. It is clear that we must be careful with overextending any analogy.
- To be truly biblical, Christians must continually examine their faith and practice under the searchlight of Scripture.

### **Specific Texts especially relevant to the issue of limiting women's role in the church:**

**Text #1 -- 1 Corinthians 11:3-16** <sup>3</sup> *But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man,<sup>1</sup> and the head of Christ is God.* <sup>4</sup> *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.* <sup>5</sup> *But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is the same as having her head shaved.* <sup>6</sup> *For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.* <sup>7</sup> *A man ought not to cover his head,<sup>1</sup> since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.* <sup>8</sup> *For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;* <sup>9</sup> *neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* <sup>10</sup> *It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own<sup>1</sup> head, because of the angels.* <sup>11</sup> *Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.* <sup>12</sup> *For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.* <sup>13</sup> *Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?* <sup>14</sup> *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,* <sup>15</sup> *but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.* <sup>16</sup> *If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-- nor do the churches of God*

### **Comments/Questions:**

- This text is fraught with textual difficulties and references to concepts foreign to us and very difficult to understand.
- The context of this passage is about worship, and propriety within worship. It is well accepted that there were issues of propriety within the church at Corinth. (see 1 Cor 8 & 9)

- It appears to support “differences” between men and women fundamentally and in practice.
- It seems to be clear in 1 Cor 11:5 that women were to be allowed to pray and prophecy within a certain expression of propriety within the church.
- Paul indicates that all churches practice headcovering (1 Cor 11:16), yet most evangelical churches including our own, do not do this. This indicates that we have already understood some measure of this passage to be contextual and therefore only applicable in certain circumstances. At the least it is not **entirely** a permanent mandate. When, and how, does it then apply today?
- Verse 10 seems to indicate that women need to take responsibility for their propriety. In that culture it was the “loose” women who would go out in public with an uncovered head. If there was the risk of women appearing to be “loose” by their expression of freedom through lack of headcovering they must be sure to take authority over their own head. This then would protect the integrity of propriety in worship, and protect their own propriety and honor.
- Paul says that woman was created from man and came from man (vs 8,9) but then reverses that to say that man is born from woman and that “in the Lord” there is an interdependence between them. It seems that “in the Lord” (v 11) there is some kind of shift toward interdependence.
- It is somewhat unclear what Paul means here by “head.” The word translated “head” could mean “source,” “authority head”, or even “prominent.” It is difficult to understand a single meaning that applies equally to the three pairings that Paul lists (God & Christ, Christ & man, man & woman) and any translation of the original Greek word becomes problematic with these three pairings if it is pushed too far. That makes it difficult for us to get the sense of Paul’s point, but it seems to be related somehow to maintaining an accepted sense of honor and propriety.
- It has been suggested that “men” and “women” in this text could equally be translated “husband” and “wife,” with the prohibition then applying to wives taking authority over their husbands.
- This text raises the important issue of glory. “Glory” usually refers to “reflection.” The woman’s life and actions do reflect upon the man, just as the man’s actions and life reflect on God. To reflect negatively on the man would dishonor him, thus also dishonor God. This expression of glory does not imply subordination, but the woman completes in man the image of God as together they form humanity. In the context of propriety within the culture, the appropriate reflection of honor must not be disgraced by a show of defiant independence.
- It is very possible that this text is addressing the blurring of the distinction between men and women, and it was this that Paul was referring to. Paul’s concern may not have been submission but gender distinction.
- Most commentators agree that, in some form, this is about sending misleading signals about sexual and religious infidelity.
- Paul’s use of the order of creation (vs 8,9) to limit the role of women might be the application of a principle rather than the principle itself. The principle may be about “offending,” and in this case the application of not offending is seen in women not usurping the authorities (head) that are in place. This then would beg the question of what might be an appropriate sign or expression of such authority or concern in our church today? What, if any, prohibitions should we hold to?

**Text #2 -- 1 Corinthians 14:33-35** <sup>33</sup> *For God is not a God of disorder but of peace-- as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.* <sup>34</sup> *Women<sup>1</sup> should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.* <sup>35</sup> *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.*

Comments/Questions:

- This particular text comes in the middle of a discourse on appropriate worship and disruption in worship.
- Again this text provides some instructions to women on their activity in the church.
- This is the only text in Scripture that directs women to be silent in the church (though other texts referring to being “quiet.”) Elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor 14:5, 26, 31, Acts 2:17, Ps 68:11) there are clear examples of, and mandates for, women speaking in the church. These statements must somehow be

reconciled with Paul's restrictions. It is obvious that Paul is doing something other than simply forbidding all women of all times to speak or teach in any way in the church. How then do we determine how far to extend this limitation?

- "Is it possible that the universal principle behind Paul's prohibition was not the permanent silencing and subordination of women in the church but rather the curtailing of practices that disrupt the flow and order of public assembly of believers?" (Douglas Groothuis)
- It appears that there is some measure of a spirit of defiance at issue here. This may not be about speech overall, but the abuse of right to speech.
- Neither here, nor in 1 Timothy, does it clarify to whom or what women are to be in submission to.

**Text #3 -- 1 Timothy 2:8-15** <sup>8</sup> *Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.* <sup>9</sup> *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,* <sup>10</sup> *but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.* <sup>11</sup> *A woman<sup>1</sup> should learn in quietness and full submission.* <sup>12</sup> ***I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man,<sup>1</sup> she must be quiet.*** <sup>13</sup> *For Adam was formed first, then Eve.* <sup>14</sup> *And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.* <sup>15</sup> *But women<sup>1</sup> will be saved through childbearing-- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

**Text #3a -- Genesis 2:21-24** <sup>21</sup> *So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs<sup>1</sup> and then closed up the place with flesh.* <sup>22</sup> *Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib<sup>1</sup> he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.* <sup>23</sup> *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* <sup>24</sup> *That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

**Text #3b -- Genesis 3:16-21** <sup>16</sup> *To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."* <sup>17</sup> *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.* <sup>18</sup> *It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.* <sup>19</sup> *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."* <sup>20</sup> *Adam<sup>1</sup> named his wife Eve,<sup>2</sup> because she would become the mother of all the living.* <sup>21</sup> *The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.*

Comments/Questions:

- In 1 Timothy to have "authority" (Greek – "authentein") can mean to dominate, to act independently, to exercise one's own judgment, or to influence and prevail upon someone to go a certain way or to domineer over. (cf 1 Cor 11:10) Again, the most commonly accepted (though not universally accepted) understanding of the word includes a sense of "grasping" for authority, or an abuse of authority.
- In 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 "quiet" can mean "not unruly" or "quietly, submissively." There is a different word that means "to say nothing." Many people on both sides of this issue believe that verses 11, 12 speaks to "orderliness."
- Paul's command is strong, and repeated for emphasis. Paul injunction of "I am not allowing..." is the subject of much analysis to determine its nature. The language itself is less than clear in terms of what kind of restriction this presents (Temporary or timeless? There or everywhere?)
- One scholar suggests that 1 Tim 2:12 prohibits *women without authority* from assuming authority to teach (Philip Payne).
- It is suggested by some that verse 13 is tied to the order of creation and therefore the exclusion of teaching and the provision of authority is doctrinal and absolute because that prohibition is rooted in something that superintends the time and circumstances of the church in that day.

- It is difficult to understand what Paul is primarily referring to by the “order of creation” in Genesis. There is nothing in the fact that man was created first that demands submission. How does one get male authority from the Genesis account of creation unless “primogeniture” (the idea that the firstborn in any family has leadership in that family for that generation) is an issue? Primogeniture, though practiced by the Jews, was regularly overwritten by God himself throughout Scripture, and thus may itself be more cultural than ordained.
- God made man first then woman as his helper, but that does not necessarily exclude women from any role. In Psalms God is said to be our “helper” (same word here as in Genesis). Further, although man was made from the ground, and after it, no one argues that he is subordinate to it. What comes after is not necessarily inferior or subordinate.
- Further if there was an ordained principle of male authority in creation, why would it apply only to the church? Was not “work” with, and on, the earth given even before the church itself? Would that order of authority not also then apply to work contexts?
- Nevertheless, it may be interpreted from Genesis that even before the fall there does seem to be a difference in roles between men and women, and we see just such a limitation expressed in these texts as well.
- It is possible that Paul is asserting the Genesis account of the fall in response to a misinterpretation of the Genesis account by some women in Ephesus. Or, the reference to Genesis could be making the point that women were not superior to men in response to inappropriate “grasping of authority.”
- Some suggest that the reference to Genesis is showing that women are more easily deceived, and it was possible that they were being deceived in Ephesus. This could be the cause of the prohibition to teaching. But if the women were deceived, uneducated, or somehow unfit for ministry, why were they not prohibited from teaching or having authority over anyone, not just men? It could be making the point that women too are not immune to deception.
- Whatever Paul means by silencing women, can it be a timeless absolute injunction since elsewhere he allows it? (In Acts 18:26 Priscilla taught Apollos (though in the home not the church). In Titus 2:3-4 older women are encouraged to “teach what is good.”) If it truly is intended to limit women’s involvement we must understand the context and limitations and how they apply today.
- Note that in 1 Timothy Paul only tells women to learn in submission, but not to submit to men. It could be that learning in submission meant to be in submission to sound teaching or to teachers who had the appropriate authority and training.
- Some scholars suggest that this is a prohibition of women teaching **men**, not a total prohibition of women teaching. That is possible, though it is hard to confirm that from the text. One must make some assumptions to arrive at that conclusion.
- If teaching is a spiritual gift, and there is no gender specific limitation on the gifting of the Holy Spirit, then how do we reconcile this? It is possible that in this case it is referring to “teaching” as in “preaching in an official manner,” not teaching in general. That would allow the gift of teaching to be expressed by women in other contexts.
- It should be noted that public prayer and prophecy, which Paul seems to openly invite women into, do not require the same level of formal education as teaching. That could factor into his prohibition. But we have no indication that teaching held more authority than prophecy, which women were openly invited to participate in.

**Text #4 -- 1 Timothy 3:1-11** *Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> 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<sup>1</sup> respect. <sup>5</sup> (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. <sup>7</sup> He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the*

devil's trap. <sup>8</sup> In the same way, deacons<sup>1</sup> are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. <sup>11</sup> In the same way, the women<sup>1</sup> are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

#### Comments/Questions:

- Paul refers only to men throughout this passage as he talks about leaders. Is that significant, and if so, how?
- Do the character traits listed here represent the timeless principles that we must apply to male or female, or does the gender expressed also indicate an absolute stricture to be held to for all time? Is it possible it refers only to men because of the nature of culture at the time? Does that make most sense of the various texts?
- We must be careful about which portions of this we take literally, for we do not apply it all literally. That means we cannot simply say “we must do what the bible says, it is clear.” For example, no one is saying that we should have only men who are the “husband of one wife,” as the literal translation would put it. That would mean we cannot have widowers or single men. We understand that the “simple plain” interpretation is not the point being made (the NIV assumes this in its translation). This is the hard work of exegesis and hermeneutics that we must do.
- To assert that Paul exhaustively restricts women from leadership roles seems to contradict the NT’s reports of the ministry of women. (Acts 2:17, 18:26, Romans 16:17, 1 Timothy 3:11) Of 29 people mentioned in Romans 16, possibly 10 of them are women, including Junia who was mentioned in a way that seems to include her as an apostle. While we are not certain exactly what Paul means here by “apostle,” it is clear that women served in roles of leadership in the church.
- This text really doesn’t speak about “elders,” as the term used here is properly translated as “overseer” (as the NIV, ESV, NASB, and other translations have translated it). There is a different word in the Greek that is translated as “elder.” Yet Paul does seem to equate “elder” with “overseer” in Titus 1:5-7. It is difficult for us to know exactly what is meant by these various titles and offices. Our experience and application of gifting, calling, practice, and office is not likely the same as in the first century church, and we don’t know how normative those offices/roles were intended to be.

#### Final Comments/Questions:

- These notes probably provide more questions than answers, but that reflects the nature of this issue. They may not convince someone to change their position, but hopefully will challenge us all and inform us on how to hold our position as we see that this truly is:
  - an interpretation of Scripture issue;
  - not an authority of Scripture issue;
  - difficult (maybe impossible) to fully reconcile;
  - not a salvific issue;
  - and therefore more appropriately a Romans 14 issue. There we are called to do what leads to “*peace and mutual edification*” and not “*destroy the work of God*” over such issues.
- As best we can we must first use Scripture to help us understand Scripture. Thus “methodologically, one should not treat Paul’s didactic [teaching] passages on gender roles in isolation from merely descriptive material.” (Craig Blomberg)
- There is no clear NT example of women in the position of ongoing authoritative teaching of God’s Word. (That **may** be explainable given that it was not the practice of the day.) Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss this without consideration. If that prohibition is timeless, then what does that exclude women from? What about teaching at Bible colleges and seminaries? What about teaching through writing?
- Paul does emphasize (and nowhere moderate through practice) male headship and authority (in some form) at least in marriage, as fitting in the Lord (Colossians 3:18).

- Some say that women in other contexts, where there are no men available, should be allowed to serve and lead. If that is the case, if exceptions are allowed, then even today exceptions can be allowed and the prohibitions cannot be held as a normative principle for all times. Our task is then to discover appropriate exceptions or applications.
- Some suggest that the bible's overall picture is one where the highest office within the church (whatever form that takes: e.g. elders, senior pastor, etc) is permanently restricted to the leadership/authority of men. It would then be the single office of elder/overseer that is limited to men. If that is the appropriate way of understanding all of this, then we must determine what that office is within our congregational church. It would appear to be the office of Senior Pastor, and yet the membership is the final authority in our church as a congregational church, a dilemma we must honestly address.
- If Scripture's limitation of women's role was indeed an accommodation to the culture of the day for the sake of the gospel, then we could expect exceptions to those instructions and practices. We do find such exceptions throughout Scripture.
- Finding women in God-ordained leadership over men throughout Scripture gives one pause as we recall that God would not break his own rules.
- Paul's teaching about giftedness is never divided into gender. If these rules were foundational and eternal why would he not have addressed them when talking about giftedness? Having acknowledged that, we can also recognize that gifting and use of gifting does not necessarily require a specific office, meaning there are many ways to use the gifts of teaching and leadership without filling specific offices within the church.
- Just because we can do something does not mean we should do it. (see Romans 14, 1 Cor 10:23-24)
- Love and unity must be paramount in this discussion and in decisions where there is no clarity. (cf Eph 4:3) The call to love and unity may become the final authoritative command for us in this discussion.
- Some things matter more than others. We must be sure that the work of the gospel takes its appropriate priority over other matters.
- We are called to freedom in Christ, but that freedom must never be taken at the expense of the Gospel. That is why probably we seemingly have support for both positions in the Bible. Is it possible that at times either may be right or wrong, depending on what would best serve the purposes of the gospel? Our task then would be to determine whether for today this position is wrong or counterproductive for the spread of the gospel and the building of God's kingdom. If this would upset the work of the gospel we should not move forward. If, though, it would assist in the advance of the gospel and it is not in contradiction to the full counsel of Scripture, it deserves fair consideration.
- While it is true that a low view of Scripture could be used to support a position open to women in all (or most) roles of leadership, it is not true that such an "egalitarian" position **requires, or leads to**, a low view of Scripture. This is not a slippery slope issue if one continues to place each and every issue under the authority of Scripture.

### **Conclusion:**

Clearly these comments will not resolve all the difficulties around this issue. But hopefully they will advance a healthy discussion and understanding, reveal some of the outstanding questions that we must wrestle with, and help move us forward in unity, if not uniformity.

Scripture reveals two tracks as we think about the role of women in leadership in the church, and those tracks do not converge. One track limits the role of women. This is the most dominant track in Scripture, and that is not surprising given the culture of the day. While patriarchy is not the message of the bible, it was certainly the backdrop of the bible. Accordingly this track receives the most clear direction in Scripture. That direction is found within the context of "occasional" letters which we all apply selectively as we attempt to understand the timeless principles underneath the directions, and determine if the applications of principles we see are, in and of themselves, also timeless. For example, the keeping of order and appropriate recognized authority within the church may be the principle, and the injunction for women to be silent was simply the appropriate application of

that principle within the setting of the churches Paul was writing to at the time. We must give appropriate consideration and study to the restrictions Scripture expresses.

The second track regarding the role of women is admittedly less directive and more descriptive. This track is seen in both Old and New Testaments with women in all kinds of roles of leadership. It is further expressed in the interdependence of men and women, the lack of limitations on giftedness, and the truth that the image of God is found in men and women together. What does it then mean that God ordains so many exceptions, while at times there are instructions that run counter to those exceptions?

It would seem that for God both tracks are permissible when applied for the right reasons at the right times. This may help us understand Paul's seeming double-mindedness on this issue.

The question then changes from "what is allowed?" (for it appears both approaches are allowed at certain times) to "what track is most effective?" That is where the question of culture comes into play, for culture must be considered for effectiveness. Culture cannot determine right or wrong, only effective or not effective. We must first answer the "permission" question (can we?) before we can even ask the effectiveness (should we?) question.

Seeing the Scriptural evidence as two tracks both ordained or allowed by God according to his wisdom allows the "permission" question to be answered positively, especially if an understanding of the circumstantial nature of the prohibition texts is correct. Thus we are left to ask the "effectiveness" question (should we?). That question would be answered by the membership with any election they make.

It must be stated though that neither track alone can resolve all the Scriptures on this topic. It is only when we see that God seems to allow (and even mandate) either, and we then allow them both to exist in tension, that we can come to a somewhat comfortable understanding of the whole counsel of Scripture on this topic, holding any position with an open hand of graciousness and generosity.

It is from that position that Ministry Council is recommending changes to our constitution to more clearly invite women into leadership on Ministry Council.