

The Role of Women in the Church
Oakwood Christian Church Position Paper
June 2019



The goal of Oakwood Christian Church is to base our position on women's role in the church – and all doctrinal matters – on our understanding of the Bible rather than popular opinion or contemporary culture. Therefore, the elders of Oakwood Christian Church have determined that the role of elder, preacher and other roles that could be construed as holding spiritual authority over both men and women, should be filled by qualified spiritual men. Because our position is somewhat counter-cultural and can be controversial, we will seek below to explain our position in greater detail and articulate the reasons for these conclusions.

Women have always played a valuable role in the church. The Bible says that the prophetess Anna identified Jesus as the Messiah and spoke about him to all who would listen (Lk. 2:36-38). Christ's ministry was financed in part by his female followers (Lk. 8:2-3), and Jesus often elevated the status of women, treating them with dignity and respect when the surrounding culture treated them as property. In the early church women prayed, prophesied, disciplined future leaders and hosted church services in their homes. The Bible says that men and women are equally important and loved by God. Each gender was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and there is no distinction in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

Nevertheless, among evangelical Christians (that is, Christians who consider the Bible to be God's Word and the determinant of our doctrines and practices), opinions vary widely as to what the Bible actually dictates regarding the eligibility of women for positions of authority in the church. Most of the controversy arises from efforts to determine when a biblical directive applies to all cultures and when it applies only to the culture for which it was originally written. For example, when Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11 that a woman should not pray or prophesy with her head uncovered, did he intend that to be a command for all women of all cultures to follow, or did it only apply to the women of his day? In some churches around the world, even to this day, women wear a head covering in worship, out of respect for this passage.

Determining when something is a permanent principle and when it is only a temporary cultural application to a larger principle is not always an easy assignment. A good dictum to follow is, "a permanent principle if possible, a temporary cultural application if obvious." For example, in the instance noted above, in Paul's day a woman who prayed with her head uncovered was considered immodest and unsubmitive to her husband's authority. Such is not the case in our culture today. If Paul had been addressing a culture where it was considered immodest for a woman to cover her head, he surely would have commanded the women *not* to cover their heads while praying or prophesying. The principle of modesty and purity is greater and more important than the legalistic adherence to the specific command. What is considered immodest will vary from culture to culture, so the principle of modesty should be applied wisely in every circumstance,

but the application will not always be the same. Therefore, women in our church are not required to cover their heads during the worship services, but they are encouraged to dress modestly.

A more difficult Scripture to interpret is Paul's directive in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." Was that a temporary command because of the cultural understanding about women of the day, or was there a timeless principle involved? And if there is a timeless principle, what exactly is it? Does this mean that no woman should ever have any authority of any type over a man and must never speak in a man's presence? That legalistic application doesn't seem likely to be God's intention in light of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians where women are praying and prophesying, and other New Testament Scriptures where women are serving, hosting churches in their homes, and even teaching (Ac. 16:15; 18:26; 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5; Rom. 16:1). However, Paul's explanation in 1 Timothy 2:13 and following goes beyond culture to the very makeup of males and females, and Paul hints that the marital relationship is a factor in his directive. So there seems to be more than just culture at stake. There is an overriding principle – primarily male headship in the home – that is driving Paul's specific directives.

Therefore, it is the stance of Oakwood Christian Church that though the cultural applications may change slightly, there is a principle in the New Testament that men are to be the leaders of the church. The role of elder or pastor is described as being a male role, and there is no example of a female pastor in Scripture. Though we may not fully understand why the Bible directs the leaders to be male, we can speculate: Imagine the confusion that could arise if a husband is called by Scripture to be the spiritual leader in his home (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18), but his wife is also his pastor. The lines of authority would be muddied, and disorder could result.

Hence, the leaders of Oakwood Christian Church have decided that the office of elder and the preaching staff and the primary teachers of our Sunday School classes (because those leaders play a significant pastoral role in our church) will be filled by adult males who have the spiritual qualifications necessary to lead the church. Roles like committee chairpersons, choir directors, directors of ministry teams, and others, are open to qualified men and women. In our worship services, women are encouraged to pray, sing, share testimonies and speak occasionally from the pulpit. It is our conviction that the overriding principle of 1 Timothy 2:12, one of male headship in positions of spiritual authority, is not violated by the testimony, prayer, song, speech, or encouragement from a female in our worship setting.

For reasons we may not fully comprehend, reasons that according to Scripture are rooted in our very "maleness" and "femaleness," the Bible commands wives to submit to their husbands, and therefore, directs that the elders be men. But it should be noted that the Bible does not command women to be submissive to men in general or prohibit them from holding government office or otherwise being in positions of authority. Asking wives to submit to their husbands should not insinuate that wives are less valued than their husbands or less capable of leadership. Jesus, who submitted himself to God

(Philippians 2:6-8), is not less important or less valued than the Father. In fact, we respect him all the more because of his willingness to submit for a time, to take on a role of a servant, out of love for us.

Because of the interpretive challenges inherent in this debate, we do not require our members to agree with the elders' conclusions regarding women's role in the church. However, we do ask that our members respect the elders' directives and submit to their conclusions without divisiveness, recognizing that these are difficult decisions to make. We will continue to seek God's guidance and grow in our understanding of God's Word in this and all doctrinal matters.

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