

A BRIEF STATEMENT ON
WOMEN'S
ROLES IN
MINISTRY



The following brief paper is just that: *brief*. The subject of women in ministry has been heavily debated by Christians all over the globe for 2,000 years. Our aim was simply to do what is sometimes called “task theology” and address this in our current moment. This is the fruit of that labor. We also want to extend an invitation to any of our members who would like to discuss anything further in person.

Last fall, through the feedback of former staff members and current church members, the elders of Redemption Church became aware that further clarity was needed regarding the role of women in our church’s ministry. We saw this as honoring and caring for the women of our church and being faithful to our calling as elders to *shepherd* the flock (1 Pet. 5:1). This wouldn’t be the first discussion among the elders on the topic. In fact, extensive discussions on the subject were held several years ago, but the elders did not arrive at a consensus. However, given the recent feedback, we felt it was imperative to engage with those questions again.

As such, the elders committed to a season of prayer, study, debate, and reflection. We wanted our position to be rooted in a deeper understanding of Scripture while also gaining a better understanding of the arguments surrounding the historical interpretations of the most relevant passages.

The following paper communicates where all four elders *unanimously* feel convicted on this subject. It outlines our process for arriving at that determination and the impact of that position on our church moving forward.

SUMMARY OF OUR CONCLUSIONS

1. **We recognize a distinction between the *office* of “Elder” and the *gift* of pastoring.** Therefore, qualified men and women can now carry the title of “Pastor” in our church, as we feel that it most clearly describes the task that they are undertaking.
2. **We recognize the distinct tasks of speaking as outlined by Paul in Romans 12 of prophesying [*propheteia*], teaching [*didaskalia*], and exhorting [*paraklesis*].** We believe that what we commonly practice as “giving a sermon” most closely reflects Paul’s usage of “exhortation” rather than his usage of “teaching.” Therefore, qualified men and women can participate in the task of preaching at Redemption, including on Sunday mornings before a mixed congregation.
3. **We believe that the church would be best served by better representing the body as a whole in decision-making.** Therefore, deacons, both men and women, will be assembled to provide insight and context to assist the elders in their task of steering the church.

IMPACT TO OUR BY-LAWS

The Elders are in the process of recommending changes to the language of our by-laws. Those forthcoming recommendations will be voted upon by the Members of the church later in May.

OUR PROCESS

Our goal was to arrive at a shared conviction rooted in a thorough understanding of Scripture and the widely held positions in the greater church today. The elders of Redemption (both past and present) have always attended male elder-led churches. As a result, our experience and most of our academic study have been grounded in the complementarian position of male-only leadership in both the church and home. The elders each began with a firm understanding of that position both in theory and practice.

On November 10th, Alex sent out an email letting our members know what books we would be reading and discussing. Those books included:

Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate by Michelle Lee-Barnwell (PhD, University of Notre Dame)

Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach by John Dickson (PhD, Macquarie University, Sydney)

The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth by Beth Allison Barr (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

We later added:

Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism by John Stackhouse, Jr.

It is worth noting that our choice to engage these books was not an endorsement of these books or their authors. Instead, we felt they collectively represented a deeper understanding of the egalitarian position.

FOUNDATION & REASONING FOR OUR POSITION

DISTINCTION BETWEEN ELDER AND PASTOR

The word *poimen* in Greek functions as both a noun “shepherd” and verb “to pastor.”

The **verb** *poimen* is found eleven times in the New Testament and refers to someone who cares for sheep. The verb is used once by Paul (Acts 20:28) and once by Peter (1 Peter 5:2) to refer to one of the functions that Elders are to be responsible for in the congregation.

Acts 20:28 says,

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care** for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

1 Peter 5:2 says,

“**Shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;”

The **noun** *poimen* is used fourteen times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus’ care for people, three times in reference to the shepherds who were keeping their flock at night at the birth of Christ, and then once in a list of gifts that Paul says God has given to the church;

Ephesians 4:11 says,

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the **shepherds** and teachers”

Dr. Sam Storms summarized his argument on this passage two years ago, and we found it helpful.

Some insist that the nouns “pastor” and “teacher” are one gift, and thus translate it “pastor-teacher.” The argument from the Greek text is that each of the first four nouns has the definite article (“the”) preceding it, but the definite article is absent from “teachers.” Some insist that when two plural nouns, connected by kai (“and”) have only one definite article, we are to understand them as closely related or in some sense overlapping in meaning. Other Greek scholars disagree. There appears to be no consensus. Some also take the kai as explicative or appositional and translate it to mean, “that is,” hence “pastors, that is, teachers” (in this way identifying the two).

Dan Wallace, the premier evangelical Greek grammarian, believes that in a construction of this sort the first noun is a subset of the second. In other words,

“all pastors are to be teachers, though not all teachers are to be pastors” (Greek Grammar, 284). That certainly makes sense, as it is difficult to see how a person can pastor or spiritually shepherd people if he/she cannot teach. But a teacher need not be someone who shepherds or pastors. But perhaps we’re drawing too fine of a distinction here between the two gifts. I suppose it is possible that someone might have the gift of pastoring and not be gifted to teach. Nothing in the NT precludes this possibility (unless Wallace’s suggestion above is unequivocal).

In any case, even if we take Paul as referring to only four gifts, “pastor-teacher” would still be a gift, not an office or position of governing authority. It is certainly the case that a “pastor” or “pastor-teacher” may also be appointed to the office of Elder or Overseer, but nothing requires us to believe that all “pastors” or all “pastor-teachers” are necessarily Elders.¹

Because of this distinction, we have zero reservations about calling qualified men and women who do the work of pastoring in our church a “pastor.” Using a different term like “shepherd” would only cause further confusion given our modern urban environment and the fact that people generally associate the title “pastor” with church leadership.

EXHORTATION VS. TEACHING

The classic text used by complementarian theologians to restrict the task of preaching to men comes from 1 Timothy 2:12, which reads, “I do not permit a woman to **teach** or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

While some would argue that this text might have only been prescribed for certain people in a certain place, the church has not historically handled the use of the same term only five verses later in the qualifications for elders.²

The question therefore becomes: “what did Paul mean by teaching?” In his writing, Paul uses several terms for speaking. Of these, he clearly states that teaching, prophesying and exhorting are each unique words.³ In his book, Dickson put it this way: “Paul nowhere forbids women to engage in preaching, admonishing, exhorting, evangelizing, reading, or prophesying. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 11, it is clear he expects women to be prophesying in church. ‘Teaching’ is the only restricted activity.”⁴

¹ <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/a-complementarian-case-for-women-as-pastors>, accessed Feb. 28, 2024

² See 1 Timothy 3:2

³ Romans 12:6-8

⁴ John Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach*, 81.

The standard biblical term for speech explaining an authoritative text was “exhortation.” The sermons delivered in our church accomplish exactly that. We don’t create new text but rather expound on what is already present. We further believe that Phoebe, a woman, was doing exactly this in her delivery of the letter to the Romans. She would have not only delivered the letter, but would have been prepared to further explain it and answer questions. ⁵

So, what is the “teaching” that Paul was referring to in 1 Timothy 2? Dickson argues that what Paul is addressing with Timothy is something that is contextual to the first-century church. Namely, in the oral tradition surrounding Jesus and the gospel was considered “the teaching” amongst the apostles.

“For Paul, ‘teaching’ (in the technical sense) involved carefully preserving and laying down for the congregation the traditions handed on by the apostles. In the period before the texts of the New Testament were readily available (before about AD 100), a church’s only access to the range of things the apostles had said about Jesus and his demands was through a teacher, the one entrusted with the ‘apostolic deposit’ . . .” ⁶

The “teaching” was limited to those whom the apostles authorized. They did not authorize women in the first-century church to do *this role* in particular.

⁵ Paul wrote, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 2 that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” It is worth quoting New Testament theologian Allan Chapple at length here. “The bearer of the letter was also its interpreter—when it was being read out for the first time, the letter was also receiving its first public interpretation. Such things as the reader’s intonation, facial expressions, and use of pauses and gestures were all vital ways of communicating the intended meaning of the words. So much so, that the hearers could safely assume that the reader, as bearer of the letter, had been coached by the sender in how to read it. With so much riding on the positive reception of Romans, there is thus little doubt that Paul would have gone through it carefully with Phoebe so that she was able to communicate its contents as he wanted. Her reading of the letter can thus be seen as an authorised interpretation of its contents.

Secondly, we know that letter-carriers were often entrusted with verbal messages for the addressees that amplified or added to the material contained in a letter. This is quite likely here: Paul might well have given Phoebe particular things to say in connection with the reading of the letter.⁷⁹ So, it is possible that she had been told how to introduce and conclude her readings of it. Also possible is that she had been given some idea of how to respond to questions and other immediate reactions the letter might provoke. In addition, it is quite likely that she has personal greetings and other messages from Paul for at least some of those named in 16:3-15.”

See Allan Chapple, *Getting Romans to the Right Romans: Phoebe and the Delivery of Paul’s Letter*, in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 62.2 (2011), pp. 213-214.

⁶ Dickson, 29.

Further, we see repeated examples in Scripture where God uses women, often in ways that are counter to the culture of the day.

In the Old Testament...

- **Miriam**, the prophet, is a woman who led Israel in a chorus, singing the prophetic message to the nation in Exodus 15:20-21 after the Hebrews were delivered out of Egypt through the Red Sea. Later, the prophet Micah even references her and says that she was “sent“ by God (Micah 6:4), highlighting the significance of her role as a leader in the nation.
- There is **Debra** in Judges chapters 4-5 as she is both a prophetess and a warrior.
- **Huldah** in 2 Kings 22:14-20 and second Chronicles 34:22-28, a particularly curious example of spiritual leadership. Not only did she deliver an authoritative message to King Josiah concerning all Judah, but she also validated the authority of the newly rediscovered “book of the law of the Lord” in 2 Chronicles 34:14. One contemporary scholar has remarked that Huldah’s endorsement of the document “stands as the first recognizable act in a long process of Canon formation.”⁷

In the New Testament...

- In perhaps one of the most shocking scenes in the entire Bible, we have the very gospel itself first proclaimed by **Mary Magdalene**, whom Jesus commissioned to “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord” – and that he had said these things to her” (John 20:17-18).
- This was shocking for the New Testament world, which did not consider a woman’s testimony valid. Why did the Evangelists keep that detail? They were more committed to the truth than preserving cultural norms.

Women found leading in theological and doxological formation at the Exodus for the congregation, addressing the king as one “sent” by God, and then aiding in the formation of the Biblical canon, and announcing the resurrection of Christ to the Apostles ought to give us reason to pause and rethink and make necessary revisions for how we view what God may call certain women to do in service of the body at Redemption.

⁷ John Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach*, 18. The scholar quoted here is Claudia V. Camp, “Huldah,” in *Women in Scripture* (ed. Carol Meyers; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 96.

INSIGHT FROM DEACONS

This was a more practical decision stemming from a desire for more voices to be represented as the Elders oversee and steer the church. There are some arguments that could reasonably be made for the office of elder to extend to women as well as men. However, in our study, discussions and prayer, we did not feel that we had sufficient biblical evidence for that position.

With that said, we do want to better represent the church as a whole as we weigh decisions and set the vision for the church. We believe that deacons would serve well in this capacity, and that efforts should be made to reflect the diversity of the church in age, gender and stage of life on this team.

Over the course of the next few months, we'll work to identify, test and install selected men and women whom the elders deem most helpful to our task. We will complete this task prior to July 1st.