

# COLE COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER ON WOMEN IN MINISTRY

“Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help those women who have contended at my side for the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3).

In the spirit of the apostle Paul, we, the elders of Cole Community Church, affirm women in their role as our “fellow-workers.” They are not limited partners in this work, but colleagues who are fully engaged with us, contending at our side for the cause of the gospel. It is our hope that “the company of women who proclaim (the Word)” will become a great host (Psalm 68:11). Nothing less will satisfy us.

Our desire in this matter, as in all matters, is to be controlled by God’s Word: What our Lord prohibits is prohibited; what he permits is permitted. But we want to limit our understanding of right and wrong to what is explicitly and clearly forbidden or permitted. To bind what God has not bound is legalism

Some portions of his Word are difficult to interpret and are susceptible to various understandings. In such cases, where better students than we have admitted their uncertainty, we’re forced to be reverently agnostic. We “know in part,” as Paul said.

Furthermore, we’re inclined to interpret difficult texts with leniency and grace. We would never knowingly hinder one of God’s workers by forbidding him or her to do anything that is good (Mark 9:38-50). When we stand before the Lord may it be said that we permitted his people to minister too much rather than too little.

The question for us then is this: What does the Bible clearly teach about women in the Church? In what ways may they minister? The following facts seem reasonably unambiguous.

Both men and women are equal in their standing before God and in their capacity for mature discipleship. Women are not discipleettes or spiritual sub-sets of men, but have an immediate (in contrast to mediated) relationship to God. They can consecrate themselves fully and can grow up to full maturity in Christ.

We believe that women possess all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and must exercise those gifts within the Body of Christ for the common good (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11). Within our women’s ministries there are teachers, counselors, administrators as well as helpers and all must be encouraged to develop and use their gifts. (In contrast to those who would relegate women to the use of helping gifts only.) Examples of mature, ministering women abound in scripture: Phoebe, Miriam, Hulda, Deborah, Phillip’s daughters, Priscilla, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persus, Euodia, Syntyche and others are emblematic of the roles that women can and must play within this body. Scripture imposes no restrictions on the kind of ministries in which women can be engaged

We do believe, however, that there is one limitation: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 indicates that final authority in a local church is vested in the male eldership of that church. In this passage Paul instructs us that women should “learn in quietness (calmly) and full submission (in subjection to authority).” We assume that women in the city of Ephesus were challenging the legitimate authority of the church leadership there. Paul therefore states his policy as an inspired Apostle: “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man.”

It’s unlikely that Paul is insisting that it’s always inappropriate for a woman to instruct or edify a man. Scripture provides numerous examples of women who were commended for doing so. Furthermore, taking the text to that extreme forces us into numerous contradictions and inconsistencies. Should a man not listen to the counsel of his wife and other godly women? Should men not sing songs composed by women? Can men never read a book or commentary written by a woman? Will we discourage involvement in Precepts or Bible Study Fellowship because the study materials were written by women? Will we ask all adult males to leave the room when a woman teaches a children’s class? To say that women can never instruct a man would engage us in the rabbinic hair-splitting that characterized Judaism in Jesus’ day. Such decision-making results in endless preoccupation with trivial distinctions that would cut the heart out of the freedom with which we minister. What then does Paul mean?

The word that Paul uses for “teach” in this text was used of rabbinic utterances and suggests an activity much more authoritative than mere instruction. We take it that Paul is referring to the formulation of biblical doctrine and policy. Furthermore, the word for “have authority” is an unusual word which occurs only here in the New Testament but in extra-biblical contexts suggests “usurp authority.” Therefore, we have concluded that Paul only prohibits the infringement of male authority in the church.

We believe that God has placed the headship of the church in the hands of male elders who are called to formulate doctrine and policy and exercise authority over the body which they oversee. (The authority structure of the church reflects the authority structure of the Christian home.) We believe therefore it would be inappropriate for a woman to be an elder at Cole Community Church.

Furthermore, since our growth groups are churches within the church, we have applied this principle to the leadership of these house-churches. Women may serve on the ministry teams of growth groups and may share in teaching and leading these groups, but the primary leadership of each house-church will be vested in a senior shepherd—an elder or one who meets the requirements of an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9).

In summary, the only restriction placed on women in ministry at Cole is that they may not be elders of the church or a primary shepherd of one of the house-churches into which Cole Community Church is divided. “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden (women) with any other requirement” (Acts 15:28). They may serve on the ministry teams of house-churches; they may be heads of sub divisions and departments of the church and instruct in those departments; they may fully participate in the worship and instruction of the church when it gathers; they may engage in any ministry for which they are gifted and called by the Holy Spirit and for which they are authorized by the elders. There are no other limitations.

We want to be wise in the way in which we administer and apply this decision. As Paul says, though “all things are lawful, not all things are expedient.” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Some activities, by their nature, are not expedient, e.g., women counseling men. Furthermore, it is always unloving to run rough-shod over people’s sensitivities. However we believe that as the church grows in maturity and as women’s ministries are affirmed, fears will be alleviated and women will be increasingly acknowledged in their spheres of giftedness and ministry within this body of believers.

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