

The role of women in the local church

by Carrie Sandom

Equal but different

The Bible teaches that both men and women are made in the image of God and as a result are equal before Him in terms of their status, dignity and humanity (Gen 1:27). They are also equal inheritors of the promises God made to Abraham (Gal 3:26-29), because there is now no distinction between Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female. There is also no distinction between men and women on how spiritual gifts are distributed (see 1 Cor 12:7) although, when it comes to teaching gifts, there are differences in how these gifts are to be used.

Jesus' revolutionary attitude

Jesus' attitude to women was revolutionary for His day and clearly upheld the equality of men and women. He spoke to women in public; He valued their companionship and their service; He taught them and commended Mary for making His teaching a priority when other responsibilities might have distracted her from listening to Him (Luke 10:41). In the Gospels, women are the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection and were told to tell others what they had seen (see Matthew 28:7, Mark 16:7 and John 20:17), even though a woman's testimony was not thought to be reliable in law courts at the time.

There is no doubt that Jesus highly valued the ministry of women and, like Paul, commended them for their service of the gospel. But Jesus did not appoint women as His apostles - a unique foundational role reserved for a select group of men (Acts 1:21-26) and Paul never appointed women to be overall leaders of the local church (see 1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). Women have a unique contribution to make to the life of the local church but it is not the same as the role of men.

Modelled by the Trinity

But why, when so much of His treatment of women was revolutionary for His day, did Jesus not introduce identical roles for men and women in the local church? In our day and age it seems almost incredible that equality of status doesn't also mean equality of function. The answer to this question lies at the very heart of the Godhead itself. In the Trinity we see a pattern of relationships that shows us how it's possible for equality of being to co-exist with diversity of function. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are equal in status but each has a different function. Moreover, there is a definite ordering of their relationships - so God the Son submits Himself to His Father's will (Mark 14:36, John 6:38) and God the Holy Spirit submits both to the Father's will and the Son's will (see John 14:16-17, John 14:26 and John 16:13-15).

Family life and church family life

It is this pattern of relationships that is to be modelled in family life and in church family life as God orders His creation to reflect the ordering of relationships within the Godhead itself (1 Cor 11:3). Because of the order and purpose of their creation, wives are to submit to their husbands in everything in recognition of the fact that husbands are head of the family as Christ is head of the church (Eph 5:22-24).

Similarly husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. This is the way God has ordered their relationships with each other and Christian marriage cannot function well without it. Yet this does not mean they are not equal - each of them needs the other to play their part if their marriage is to reflect the way the Lord Jesus Christ relates to His bride, the Church (Eph 5:25-33).

When it comes to roles within the church family, the same pattern of relationships applies. Because of the order and purpose of their creation, men are to have leadership responsibilities that women do not share. It is not appropriate for a woman to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim 2:11-13) although it is entirely appropriate for a woman to teach and train other women (Titus 2:3-5). In fact, there is a role here that is uniquely

theirs, as while men can teach the Bible to women, they cannot always model it in practice.

The areas needing to be modelled effectively constitute three different spheres of life - the first involves relationships within the family, the second involves purity and self-control and the third involves the whole area of work. Men are needed to model to other men what it means to be godly in these areas but only women can model to women what it means to be godly women. The complementarity of men and women in ministry is therefore as important as it is for husbands and wives in marriage, as each needs the other to do their part. Only then will the people of God be properly pastored by the Word of God.

It is encouraging to see how churches within the Reform network are recognising this and employing women to their staff teams who teach and train other women. All male church teams are in danger of limiting the effectiveness of their ministry because they cannot adequately model how to live in a godly way to women. In the same way that a family works well with both parents taking responsibility for the teaching and training of their children, it is important that the church family has men and women involved in the teaching and training of their congregations - within the parameters set out in Scripture.

More difficult passages to consider

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

While men and women can pray and prophesy in public it seems that the way in which they do so needs to reflect their gender differences and model male headship. Some would argue that women can therefore preach/prophesy from time to time although not all evangelicals are convinced that this is compatible with the prohibition in 1 Tim 2.

1 Corinthians 14:26-35

This cannot be a blanket prohibition on women speaking or Paul is contradicting what he has said in chapter 11. It would seem that women should remain silent in the public weighing of prophecy or if their questions could legitimately be answered by their husbands at home.

1 Timothy 2:14

Paul has just warned Timothy to avoid the false teaching of two men (1 Tim 1:19-20) so this cannot mean that women are more likely to lead the church into error - if that were so why would Paul encourage them to teach women? Verse 14 seems to follow straight on from the reasoning of v13 and serves as an example of the disorder that ensues when God's law is disobeyed.

1 Timothy 2:15

The "but" in v15 seems to set up a contrast here. Paul has just said it's inappropriate for women to have the role of teaching men but it is appropriate for women to have the role of bearing children and raising them. Paul is not saying that all women will have children anymore than he's saying that all men will be church leaders.

Further Reading

Women in the Church Derek Prime (Published by Kingsway)

Biblical Womanhood Sarah Young (Published by CBMW)

Women, Creation & the Fall Mary Kassian (Published by Crossway)

Biblical Manhood & Womanhood Piper & Grudem (Published by Crossway)