

“Women In Ministry: A Biblical Perspective”

INTRODUCTION

Within the last few decades there has developed a debate within the western Church regarding the nature and extent of the roles of women within the church in general, and concerning the office of overseer (otherwise known as pastor or elder) in particular. There is great value in having a robust conversation among believers on an important matter such as this. Vigorous discussion within the Church is an essential tool in refining and sharpening our theological understanding of an issue and the defense of a particular doctrinal position.

Currently the debate on the roles of women in the church has led to the development of two main positions on the issue: the complementarian position, and the egalitarian position.ⁱⁱ With the variety of backgrounds and experiences possessed by those who have become a part of Riverview Church, it is unsurprising that there exists among our members a spectrum of beliefs and convictions between these two positions on the issues pertaining to women in ministry.

Due to this diversity of convictions held by our members, the elders of Riverview Church recognize that a need exists among those who attend and serve at Riverview to understand what our official position on this issue is, and the reasons for adopting that position. Furthermore, the elders also recognize that, as part of their responsibilities as overseers, they are responsible to provide instruction and direction on this matter for those who consider Riverview their church, seeking guidance and understanding from the Scriptures while encouraging others to do the same.

One of our immediate concerns in dealing with this subject is that we have seen two unhealthy tendencies from both sides when this issue has been raised. The first is an uncharitable, even critical attitude towards those with whom one may disagree with. Rather than engaging in a meaningful and substantive dialogue with the opposing viewpoint, discussion can all too quickly degrade into a heated argument where all attempts to accurately understand the position and thinking of a fellow follower of Christ is lost. The second is a tendency for some to treat this matter as if it were a core doctrinal issue. In other words, the issue of ministry roles for women can become a test for whether or not one can continue being involved in a church in which they are a member.

It is our desire to avoid both these tendencies by approaching this subject with a commitment to the teachings of Scripture, humility towards godly believers who have arrived at a different conclusion from us, and sensitivity to the felt emotions that can accompany this understanding. We aspire to cultivate and nurture an environment where believers can discuss topics such as this, using such interactions with their fellow Christ-followers to develop their convictions and beliefs. Our appeal is for civility and the avoiding of divisiveness, instead fostering our unity in Christ, even as our members attempt to successfully navigate through the challenging aspects of this subject.

In view of the perceived need for clarity and understanding on this challenging issue, this paper is intended to provide a brief overview to our members of the position adopted by the elders of Riverview Church, and why we believe the biblical evidence overwhelmingly warrants our adoption of this view. A brief overview to the New Testament model of women in ministry, surveying both the practices and

instructions we find regarding this issue, will be offered followed by a description of the various ministries within Riverview that women either lead or play a critical role in. Next, the New Testament passages that describe the role, function and qualifications of elders/pastors will then be addressed, followed by a description of Riverview's position in light of these instructions. The paper will conclude with a summary of the evidence, as well as offer some final thoughts to consider on the subject.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY

In seeking instruction from the New Testament on this issue, it is vital that we not only evaluate the didactic passages on women's roles in ministry (which provide instruction on how women **should** function in the church according to the Apostle Paul and others), but to also examine how women actually **did** function among the various churches and ministered in accordance with the apostle's instructions. In order to do so, we must adopt an inductive approach towards those descriptive passages in order to arrive at a fair evaluation of the information provided by these texts.

When we evaluate New Testament writings such as the book of Acts, along with the Pauline epistles, we unfortunately discover that the information provided concerning women's roles in ministry is of a fragmentary and often inconclusive nature.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, the New Testament does provide a number of examples of how women in the early church served in a number of vitally important ministry roles that gave support to the apostolic mission. Notable women mentioned in the Acts narrative include Mary the mother of Jesus (1:14); Tabitha of Joppa (9:36-43); Mary, the mother of John Mark (12:12); Priscilla (18:1, 26); and the unmarried daughters of Phillip (21:9).

More details of how women served and functioned within the early church are found within the various letters the Apostle Paul wrote. The woman Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was among Paul's most important co-workers in his mission to the Gentiles (Romans 16:3-5), serving in an important capacity in such critical ministry centers as Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. Together they served the church by hosting house churches in their home wherever they journeyed, and even came to the aid of Apollos, a highly influential teacher/missionary in the early church, by laying out a more accurate understanding of the gospel for him (Acts 18:26). The woman Phoebe appears to have served as a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea,^{iv} and was likely a woman of high social status and considerable wealth who used her status, riches and resources to provide housing, financial assistance, and influence among the local authorities to traveling missionaries like Paul (Romans 16:2). Furthermore, it is very possible that it was Phoebe who was the bearer of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. The woman Junia, along with her husband Andronicus, was a missionary well known to the apostles (Romans 16:7).^v Nympha, a believer in Colossae, hosted the church at her house (Col 4:15). And Euodia and Syntyche, two prominent women in the city of Philippi, were viewed by Paul as believers who had borne courageous testimony to the cause of Christ and who had sacrificially shared their material resources to advance the gospel, and whose impact on the local community were such that their quarreling threatened the unity within the church there (Phil 4:2-3).

Turning to the explicit teachings regarding women in the New Testament churches, we discover that the apostolic teaching makes no distinction among the genders in regards to either salvation or spiritual gifts. Whether male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or freeman—all become heirs of salvation by virtue of their union with Jesus Christ through faith, and so possess a oneness in both their new relationship with God and in their common salvation in the Lord (Gal 3:26-29). In view of this, husbands are to recognize that their believing wives are “fellow heirs of the grace of life” (1 Pet 3:7).

To further emphasize this point of oneness and sense of belonging among believers as one family to the household of God, Paul makes no distinction between any of these groups when discussing the

matter of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-31). God did not restrict certain gifts to Jewish believers alone, nor did He exclude those who were slaves from receiving any gifts. Likewise, it seems that spiritual gifts were also given to both men and women equally.^{vi}

Concerning ministries specifically both to and for women, we are offered relatively little information. Older women offered wise instruction intended to equip younger women in matters concerning marriage and home life (Titus 2:3-5). And women who were widows were recognized as wonderful examples in their work and service as they “devoted themselves to every good work” (1 Tim 5:10).

In view of these observations, a general conclusion can be drawn. **Overall, the New Testament presents the picture that women were thoroughly integrated in various ministries within the early Church, and played a vital part in the mission and life of the early Christian communities.** Women served in significant roles, including missionary work with their husbands, carrying letters written by apostles, serving in charitable ministries as deaconesses, hosting house churches, and providing both financial assistance and shelter for traveling apostles and missionaries, not to mention playing a vital role within their own homes with their husbands and children. Older women were respected and valued for their counsel and insight, and encouraged to disciple younger women in their responsibilities to house and home. Though the New Testament presents the picture that men bore the primary responsibility for the ongoing mission of proclaiming the gospel and tending to the growth and health of the churches,^{vii} women believers played an important role in actively supporting and contributing to that mission.

WOMEN IN MINISTRY IN RIVERVIEW CHURCH

Having demonstrated the critical and important roles women played in the early Church, we now turn to the matter of women serving in ministry within Riverview Church. Since we consider the Scriptures to be our authority and the standard by which we must establish our doctrine and our practices, we desire to honor the Word by obeying its instructions and emulating the model we observe being practiced in the New Testament. This desire is all the more true when it comes to deeply valuing and appreciating the important role women play in the life and ministry of our church. **To put it simply, Riverview could not be or do what Jesus Christ has called us to, without the invaluable contributions of the women who have become a part of our church family.**

At Riverview women serve on staff in our operations and finance department. Our creative director is a woman, as are some of our administrative assistants. Women serve in full-time ministry in our ministry to college students at Michigan State. RivKids, one of our most important ministries, is led by a woman and staffed by both paid staff and unpaid volunteers—many of whom are women. The same is true with our RivBabies ministry. Our compassion ministry has women on the leadership team, as is our MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) ministry. And women serve on the leadership team of Stephen’s Ministry, a care-based ministry.

Furthermore, women lead and serve in the numerous ministries that are specifically designed to serve other women. Riverview has a Women’s Bible Study, a Girls Only ministry, and women-only small groups that are led by women. Women play vital roles in our Premarriage ministry, our couple-to-couple marriage mentoring program, and our Wedding Coordination Team. They serve in a crucial capacity in our mid-sized Merge ministry, not to mention our high school (Element) and middle school (Chaos) ministries. Finally, we have women faithfully serving as weekend facility managers, operating our RivWarehouse, and serving as greeters at our weekend services.

The examples above ought to serve to paint a picture that illustrates an important truth. **Riverview is committed to the honoring and the glorifying of our Lord Jesus Christ**, who is the Head of the Church, through our numerous ministries. Many of these ministries incorporate and are even led by women, who are fellow heirs in Christ and who are uniquely qualified to serve in various spheres of ministry—both to other women and to the Body of Christ as a whole.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL OF ELDERS/PASTORS ^{viii}

Like our earlier examination of how women functioned and ministered in the early church, in order to gain an understanding of how elders served during New Testament times it is necessary to examine passages that directly teach on the elders' roles, responsibilities, and qualifications, as well as the passages that describe how elders actually did function in the early churches in accordance with the apostle's instructions. Once again, we must adopt an inductive approach towards those descriptive passages in order to arrive at a fair evaluation of the information provided by these texts.

Upon evaluating several passages in the New Testament, we find that elders played the important role of shepherding the local church, providing protection, guidance, and nurturing the local community of believers. Elders were urged to be on guard against false teachers, and to protect the church by refuting erroneous doctrine (Acts 20:17-31; Titus 1:9). It was the responsibility of the elders in the local church to build up fellow believers through the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures (1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17; Titus 1:9). And as faithful servants of the Lord they were to lead or govern the local church, being men who were entrusted to exercise with humility oversight over the Church of God (1 Peter 5:2).

To be entrusted with such an important responsibility required an elder to be a trustworthy steward of the truths God had revealed (1 Cor 4:1-2). To be considered qualified to become an elder, a man had to demonstrate that he possessed godly character, effective ministry skills and was sound in his doctrine (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). A man had to have such character qualities as being gentle, self-controlled, and peaceful. He had to have demonstrated capable leadership in his own home, effectively managing his own household in such a way so as to show through his faithfulness in leading his own family that he could be entrusted with the greater responsibility of leading the household of God. And since teaching healthy doctrine was a core responsibility of one who was an elder, he had to accurately handle the Word of God, being grounded in the Scriptures and dedicated to the teachings found therein.

We also observe that an elder in the early church shared the responsibility of shepherding the local church with other elders. In other words, elders practiced **a plurality model of leadership**. They functioned as a collective leadership in which each elder equally shared the position, authority, and responsibility of the office. It is true that some elders demonstrated particular giftedness in their preaching and teaching responsibilities (1 Timothy 5:17), but it is clear that they possessed no official rank or title above their fellow elders. While such elders may have been considered "first among equals", their fellow elders were hardly their subordinates. Through the plurality model of leadership, functional, gift-based diversity existed and flourished within the eldership team without the need to create a hierarchy among the church leaders.

We must now make a number of observations that bear directly on the issue of women's roles in ministry. In surveying the entirety of the New Testament, we find that the pattern of leadership established by the apostles in the Church's foundational stage was, without exception, male in nature. There is simply no example of a woman being appointed as an elder during the era in which the apostles were laying the foundation upon which the Church was to function until the Lord's return. Furthermore, we also find that Paul's teaching concerning elders was an extension of the apostle's

understanding of marriage and family. Paul's instructions were based on his view that God had entrusted primary responsibility for his family to the man (cf. Eph 5:21-33; 1 Cor 11:3, 7-8). The man's role as 'head' was not as a result of the Fall, but was an integral element of the marital relationship between the man and the woman which God had declared to be "very good" in the creation account in Genesis. Paul extended this concept to the roles of men and women in the Church. The Church, as "the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15) and therefore a "family of families", should function according to the pattern established by God for the family from the beginning. Therefore, as in a marriage or family, men were to bear the primary responsibility of leading, guiding and nurturing the household of the faith.

Finally, we must observe that there are instructions given to women believers by the Apostle Paul that, while admittedly challenging to our cultural sensibilities, are unambiguous in their meaning. On the one hand, women were instructed to neither teach nor exercise authority over men when the local church gathered to worship, pray and be instructed in the Word—activities that were central to the responsibilities that elders were entrusted with (1 Tim 2:9-15). On the other hand, Paul contrasted these prohibitions with an emphatic exhortation to learn the sound doctrine which they were being instructed in with an attitude of humility and respect, and to yield to their spiritual leaders, who had been entrusted with the care of their souls (cf. Hebrews 13:17).^{ix} In this way, the apostle provided instructions for the women in the church on what activities to take great pains to avoid (teaching or exercising authority) as well as what activities to pursue with all diligence (learning wholesome doctrine while yielding to spiritual authority).

In view of the above evidence and observations, some general conclusions can be drawn. In the early church elders were appointed to the role of shepherding the local church, offering protection, guidance and nurturing to the community of faith. These elders were men who were chosen because they met the qualifications necessary to serve in this role—qualifications in the areas of doctrine, character, and ministry skills. The elders practiced a plurality model of leadership, functioning as a collective and sharing authority equally among themselves. Only men who met the qualifications could be appointed to the office of elder. This was due to the fact that, just as men were entrusted with the primary responsibility to lead their marriages and families, so men were to be entrusted with the primary responsibility to shepherd the household of God. While women played an important role in supporting and contributing to the mission of the church, they were not given the burden of responsibility of teaching or exercising authority over the church. Instead, they were encouraged to yield to and support, along with the men in the church, the spiritual leadership that God had established over His church, and embrace the sound biblical instruction that was being given for their edification.

ELDERS/PASTORS IN RIVERVIEW CHURCH

As stated earlier, we at Riverview consider the Scriptures to be our authority and the standard by which we must establish both our doctrine and our practices. Just as this is true in our approach to the various ministries in Riverview that women are engaged in, it is equally true (if not even more so) when it comes to the issue of church leadership. When it comes to the matter of appointing elders/pastors at Riverview, we desire to honor the Word by obeying its instructions and emulating the model we observe being practiced in the New Testament.

At Riverview Church we follow the early church's model of not distinguishing between pastors and the elders—our elders **are** our pastors. Our elders carry the burden of responsibility to shepherd and govern over our church, offering leadership in the life and mission of Riverview, and instruction in doctrinal matters. The basis of our appointing men to serve as elders are the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, which addresses godly attributes in the areas of character, doctrine and

ministry skills. Finally, our elders practice a plurality model of leadership. We do not have a “head” or “senior” pastor. Instead, all of our elders share their authority equally among their fellow pastors, while serving in areas suited for their particular giftedness.

Concerning the matter of women serving as elders/pastors, the elders at Riverview believe that there are compelling and persuasive reasons to believe that the New Testament teaches that the Lord has entrusted the care and responsibility of shepherding of the local church only to men. The complete absence of the practice of appointing women as elders; the modeling of church leadership upon the male leadership as practiced in the marriage and family; the basis of this male leadership being grounded in the creation order in Genesis instead of the cultural sensibilities of the time; and the instructions to women that were clearly intended to restrain them from engaging in activities essential to the elders’ role in the church—all these lines of evidence lead us to believe that the pastoral office, as the role where the primary responsibility for leading and guiding the church is located, is intended and reserved for men alone.

In view of the parameters given to us in the New Testament, Riverview Church does not appoint women as elders. Furthermore, we do not have women serving in positions where they would be required to either teach doctrine or exercise governing authority over men in our church.^x It is not always clear how to apply these boundaries to the innumerable ministries that exist within our church, and we recognize that there may often be a lack of clarity in the role or function of someone serving in a particular ministry. Both wisdom and humility are essential in helping us navigate through these gray areas. In such cases, the principles that guide us are: a) is such a role helping or hindering a woman in her pursuit of the things that the New Testament encourages her to embrace? And b) is such a role helping or hindering a woman in her avoidance of the things that the New Testament prohibits her from engaging in? However, outside of these two restrictions placed upon us by the Scriptures, we have no further limitations, and we encourage the women who call Riverview their church to take full advantage of the myriad opportunities to serve vital roles in the life of our church.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have attempted to explain in a clear and lucid manner our position on the issue of women in ministry, and how we have arrived at our conclusions. In our deliberations over this matter we have considered the merits of the various positions taken by fellow believers, and evaluated them carefully in the light of the New Testament teachings. We believe that the position that we have taken—the vital involvement of women in the life and ministry of the church, along with the recognition that women were not given the burden of responsibility of teaching or exercising authority over the church—best fits the biblical data. And as the Bible is our ultimate source of authority for our doctrine and our practice, we as a church must submit to its instructions regardless of the societal or cultural objections that might be raised to its message.

We recognize that, by taking the position of incorporating women into a vast multitude of ministry roles and services yet restricting the office of elder (or any other role where teaching and exercising authority over men is required) to men, there may be members of Riverview who will perhaps be dissatisfied with this position. We do not anticipate unanimity among all of our members on this matter. Again, we aspire to cultivate and nurture an environment where believers can discuss topics such as this with their fellow Christ-followers, using such discussions to develop their own convictions and beliefs. Again, our appeal is to avoid divisiveness and foster unity among those who are the members of God’s household.

The vigorous debate among Christians regarding the nature and extent of the roles of women within the church will doubtless continue into the foreseeable future. Both sides of the issue will continue to

advocate their position in the marketplace of ideas within the church. We strongly encourage our members to continue in their own studies of this issue, and to emulate the Bereans who were noted for “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Our earnest prayer and desire is that our members would commit themselves to the study and practice of the Word, that we might seek to abound in our edification of one another and our church regardless of our differences on issues such as these (Romans 15:2; 1 Cor 14:12). In doing so we will prove ourselves to be “blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15).

“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Timothy 1:17)



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ENDNOTES

ⁱ In the New Testament the terms *elder*, *pastor* and *overseer* are used interchangeably to refer to the same office (1 Peter 5:1-2). The elders were a group of men who met the qualifications laid out by the Apostle Paul (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9) who had been appointed by the Holy Spirit to be entrusted with the responsibility of shepherding and providing oversight to the local church.

ⁱⁱ The *egalitarian position* holds the view that God created men and women with both ontological equality (equal in nature) and functional equality (equal in roles and responsibilities). But the Fall resulted in the rulership of Adam over Eve, introducing a functional inequality that fell short of the ideal intended by God in His creation. Egalitarians believe that in Christ this inequality has been abolished, leading to the restoration of full male/female equality as God originally intended. As such, all roles of service within the church—including that of elder—should be equally available to both men and women. For an overview and defense of the egalitarian position, see Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) at <http://www.cbeinternational.org/>.

The *complementarian position* also holds the view that men and women were created by God as equal in dignity, value, and essence. However, they were also created with distinctive, complementary roles, with Eve functioning in a supportive role under the leadership and authority of Adam. Therefore, the Fall was not the cause of the man’s leadership over the woman, but rather introduced friction and disruption in the established role-relations between the sexes, leading to the practice of both abusive authoritarianism by men and the usurpation by women of the authority given to man. The New Testament teaches that the equality we share in Christ does not erase the distinctive roles and responsibilities that God has established for men and women, but instead affirms the practice of biblical male leadership within the home and church. For an overview and defense of the complementarian position, see The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) at <http://www.cbmw.org/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ An example of this is the fact that a total of only nineteen verses among Paul’s writings refer to merely seventeen women, with eleven of those verses occurring in Romans 16. References to women in Paul’s letters are, for the most part, either sporadic or entirely absent. The only women mentioned within the Pauline corpus outside of Romans 16 are Chloe and Priscilla (1 Corinthians), Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians), Nympha (Colossians), Apphia (Philemon), and Claudia and Priscilla (2 Timothy).

^{iv} Phoebe is referred to in the Greek in Romans 16:1 as a *diakonos*, which was often used as a generic term for “servant” (cf. 2 Cor 3:6; 11:23; Eph 6:21; Col 1:7; 4:7). But the official-sounding nature of the phrase which Paul uses for her (“a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea”) suggests that *diakonos* in this context ought to be understood as “deaconess” (cf. 1 Tim 3:11). Deacons and deaconesses were men and women of proven character who were set apart for serving the Christian community (most likely meeting material needs among groups in need such as widows, the sick, and the poor), but did not teach or participate in the governing of the

churches, like the elders did. It is quite possible that Phoebe was the bearer of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. This would explain why she is the first person mentioned in Paul's lengthy list of greetings in the last chapter of Romans.

^v There is some debate regarding the status of Junia, who along with Andronicus was "well known to (or outstanding among) the apostles" (Romans 16:7). For an excellent treatment of the issue, see Daniel B. Wallace & Michael H. Burer, "Was Junia Really an Apostle? A Reexamination of Romans 16:7" at http://www.cbmw.org/images/jbmw_pdf/6_2/junia.pdf.

^{vi} One clear example of this is that women could and did prophesy in the early church (Acts 29:9; 1 Cor 11:5). Prophecy in the New Testament, like prophecy in the Old Testament, involved the direct receiving and proclamation of divine revelation for the purpose of edification and building up of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 14:2). In order to maintain peace and order during a meeting, only two or three prophets were to speak when the local church gathered, even if more had received revelation from the Lord (1 Cor 14:29-33). During such gatherings prophetesses were not to offer prophetic utterances (1 Cor 14:34), in line with the apostle's instructions governing conduct at church meetings elsewhere (1 Tim 2:9-15).

^{vii} There are several lines of evidence that lead to this conclusion. One is the role and function the apostles, all of whom were male, played in the early Church. Another is the composition of the missionary teams (Paul, Barnabas and John Mark; Paul, Silas and Timothy) who represented the apostolic teaching as they planted churches throughout the Roman Empire. Finally, when one evaluates the people mentioned in relation to Paul's ministry in the Apostle's writings, one finds that over 80% of those mentioned are men. These facts reveal that, while women played important roles within the New Testament churches, the major weight of responsibility borne for the apostolic missions rested on male companions who the apostle considered fellow workers in the faith.

^{viii} For an in-depth study on the New Testament model of elders, see Alexander Strauch, "[Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership](#)", Lewis & Roth, 1995.

^{ix} Some have argued that these instructions were based upon Graeco-Roman and Jewish patriarchal sensibilities (and therefore no longer applicable to the question of church leadership in our time and culture). But Paul made it clear in his letter to Timothy that the basis for his instruction was not cultural, but rather was founded upon two important issues: the role given to the man in Genesis 1-2, and the way in which the established creation pattern was reversed in the Fall with the temptation of the woman. The creation of Adam before Eve and the deception of Eve before Adam's sin both have a direct bearing on Paul's instructions concerning women teaching or exercising authority over men. Paul does not refer at all to culture or the role of women in Roman society or their education. Instead, the apostle sees his instructions as being the proper application and outworking of both God's creative order and the details concerning the events of the Fall. For a careful analysis of this difficult passage, see Andreas Kostenberger, "[Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15](#) (2nd Ed.), Baker Academic, 2005.

^x Some have advocated the view that it is acceptable for a woman to teach or exercise ecclesiastical authority over men so long as she is under the authority of her husband and/or the pastoral leadership of the church. But we cannot adopt this position for the simple reason that it is in direct conflict with the apostolic teaching. Paul, in an exercise of his authority as an apostle, restricted women from either teaching or exercising authority over men in the churches he was responsible for (1 Tim 2:12). There is no suggestion that Paul thought these activities were acceptable as long as the elders of a church gave approval to them. In light of these facts, we believe that elders do not have the authority to give believers permission to engage in activities in the church that are expressly prohibited by the New Testament.