

Women in Ministry

By Elders of Immanuel Church (December, 2019)

Introduction

Various positions on the role of women in ministry exist throughout the Christian world, widely ranging from restrictive to permissive. While Christian brothers and sisters may have strong feelings and opinions on this subject, it does not fall within the core tenets/doctrines of Christian faith. Therefore a spectrum of belief on this subject is consistent with our Membership Covenant, which states “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, love.” In an attempt to revisit the doctrine of women’s role in ministry, we remain committed to a high view of the Bible—that it is God’s word to us and the basis for all truth and justice— and also to the liberation of all Christians to use their gifts in ministry.

This document represents the unified position of the Elder Board of Immanuel Church regarding the question of women’s roles in its church government and ministry. Our objective was to determine the fullest extent under Scripture to which women may serve in these four areas: Deacon, Elder, pastoral staff, and guest/occasional preacher.

At the outset this task was formidable due to the weight of numerous competing factors bearing on us. These factors include traditional social views and church history involving chauvinism, current social pressures of feminism, past hurts perpetrated by men against women inside and outside the church, doctrinal and denominational disagreement on the centrality of this question to practicing Christian faith, the present health of Immanuel Church’s congregation in light of recent tragedy and transition, and many others.

To arrive at a biblically sound decision the Elder Board established three primary rules for considering the question: 1) Set aside our preconceived notions of “truth” and approach Scripture from a fresh perspective, 2) Understand the original Greek (and Hebrew, as appropriate) to the extent possible, and 3) Allow the Holy Spirit to instruct and guide our understanding of Scripture.

To arrive at a comprehensive decision the Elder Board used a broad set of resources. We actively sought the Lord’s mind in this matter by praying with each other and our wives for several months, and some were moved to fast. We referenced multiple Bible translations, commentaries, Greek and Hebrew transliterations and historical accounts. Position papers from various denominations and independent scholars were considered in addition to books provided by members of Immanuel Church’s congregation.

After much prayer and study of Scripture the Elder Board is sufficiently convinced of the following conclusions.

Deacon

Qualified men and women may serve as Deacons and Deaconesses, respectively, in all ministries to which they are called and gifted by God. This includes teaching inside and outside of the congregation up to point of determining sound doctrine. Deacons and Deaconesses can operate in full authority over

their ministries under the oversight of Elders, not operating as Elder assistants. The office of Deacon/Deaconess grants rights to participate and vote equally as part of the Deacon Board.

Supporting verses: 1 Timothy 3:8-12, Romans 16, Exodus 15, Acts 1:14, Acts 9:36, Acts 18:26, 1 Corinthians 11:5, Philipians 4:2-3

Elder

The office of Elder is primarily a ministry of the Word and it has exclusive authority and accountability for guarding and promoting sound doctrine of the church (and using discipline to safeguard the congregation from unsound doctrine and divisiveness). This is the authority referred to by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12. As such, modeled from creation and the Trinity the office of Elder is limited to qualified, called men. While Elders ought to be apt to teach, teaching itself is not an *exclusive* function of Elders and therefore men. Women and non-Elder men alike may teach in all ministries as they are called and gifted by God, over both men and women.

Supporting verses: 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Corinthians 11:3,11-12, Titus 1:6-9, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, 1 Corinthians 14:35-36

Pastoral Staff

As all senior and associate pastors in recent years have also served in the office of Elder, this would preclude women from serving in such dual roles. In the case of youth pastor, for example, which until recently has not served as an Elder, this role could be staffed with a woman. Essentially, the heart of this question for any staff pastoral position is whether the staff position overlaps with eldership; if there is no overlap, then a qualified woman can serve as called and gifted by God, but otherwise the role would be limited to a man due to the overlap.

Guest / Occasional Preacher

Preaching before the congregation is primarily done by the senior pastor or Elders, but a man or woman may preach occasionally if they are vetted by the Elders. The Elders are also accountable for vetting the doctrine of the preacher's message before it is given to the congregation to protect it from harming the congregation through heresy or divisiveness.

In Closing

The Elders of Immanuel Church accept the challenge best described by Timothy Keller: we "will not...create a structure, but create a climate in which men and women truly work together as equal ministry partners in the church, still recognizing the principle of male headship in the eldership".