

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

I. Purpose Statement

A position paper of the elders of Hockinson Community Church, presented August, 2010. This is in response to a member's proposed amendment to the church bylaws. The existing bylaws limit elders and deacons to being male voting members of the church. The proposal would amend the bylaws to include female voting members as elders and deacons.

We acknowledge that this is an important issue and deserves a diligent search of the Scriptures. It is not an essential doctrine of faith (i.e. the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His redemptive atoning sacrifice on the cross) but it is an important one that is very relevant for today. Traditionally, the Catholic Church and most evangelical protestant churches alike have restricted the roles that women could hold in the church, basing that position on what they believed to be "biblical truths." For the most part, it has only been in the last 50 years (of the 2000 years of church history) that some Christian groups, churches, and denominations have re-examined these formerly held "biblical truths" and have come to a different conclusion.

We believe that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Isaiah 55:10-11) We also understand that people, committed to the inerrant Word of God, diligently searching out Scripture, can come to different conclusions about what the Bible says on this matter (as well as many others). We acknowledge that in areas of biblical understanding which are not essential to our faith and our core beliefs, that members in our church can, and occasionally, will disagree. We are a community church whose membership comes from many different church backgrounds and traditions. These differences strengthen us as a body of believers.

We are also aware that it is possible to approach Scripture with a preconceived agenda and seek out "proof texts" to legitimize a position. As Patrick Morley expressed in his book, *The Man in the Mirror*,

"By winking at Scriptures we don't like, and cherry-picking Scriptures we do like, we tend to create our own tidy little theology about God...The result is a personal perspective... that often suits the desire of our private wish-world, not one carefully chiseled by a search for truth." (page 164). "Most of us decide what we want to do, and then look for evidence to support the decision we have already made. That isn't very objective! We call that 'cherry-picking' the Bible – looking for verses we like and ignoring verses we would rather not be there. We also kid, trick, and fool ourselves when we 'wink' at Scripture. In other words, we see and we understand, but our powerful self-will persuades us to simply ignore the truth. To arrive at God's perspective, a man must look at the whole counsel of God – the whole Bible – and be willing to set aside his preconceived ideas." (page 170)

As elders, we sought to understand this subject with "fresh" eyes, putting aside our own preconceived ideas and traditions, to determine what the Bible truly does say about women in church leadership. This position paper expresses what we have learned. Our approach included the study of the Scriptures themselves, as well as reading contemporary authors, who (not surprisingly) use the same passages of Scripture to draw distinctively opposite conclusions. In Section II of this paper we provide "Background Information," laying some

basic principles that we employed during our study. Sections III and IV include our discussions on “Women as Elders” and “Women as Deacons.” These are treated separately because the offices of elder and deacon are different. And finally, Section V comprises our “Conclusion.”

II. Background Information

A. Thoughts on Biblical Interpretation

As stated above, we believe “all Scripture is God breathed, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16). And, that it is important for all believers to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15). God’s Word should only have one interpretation. It can have many applications, but just one interpretation. But not all passages of Scripture are easy to understand. Even Peter makes the following statement about Paul’s writings, “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:15-16). Note that Peter states that Paul’s letters are the “wisdom of God”; that Peter refers to them as “Scriptures” when he puts them on par with “other Scriptures”; and that Peter states that some of them “are hard to understand” (not “may be” hard, but “are” hard to understand).

Context and Culture: To diligently interpret Scripture correctly it is essential to analyze it in the context of the larger passage in which it is found; in the context of the book or letter it is written; and, in context of the Bible as a whole. It is also important to understand the culture of the writer and the original readers to whom it was written. Proper interpretation must take into consideration the context of those original readers’ understanding and culture. However, in stating that, it would be an error in logic to conclude that certain passages only applied to “a culture long passed” and are not relevant to our day, such as saying, “Let’s just choose to discount those and not consider them at all.” That is the proverbial “slippery slope” that would lead to wrongly handling the word of truth, and ultimately to our destruction. “All Scripture is God breathed and profitable...” Better to seek understanding of the readers’ culture, interpret the biblical truth (principle), and apply that principle to our lives.

Narrative Verses Declarative Passages of Scripture: When establishing a doctrinal position we believe one must be cautious about basing that doctrine from a “narrative” passage verses a “declarative” passage. For example, Jesus declared that the greatest law was to love the Lord your God with all your heart. And the second was like unto it, to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole law and prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40). We are therefore on pretty safe ground to make a doctrinal statement that our purpose is to love the Lord and to love our neighbors. However, when the disciples selected a replacement apostle for Judas by praying and casting lots (which fell on Matthias, Acts 1:23-26) we would be on much shakier ground to set a doctrine that praying and casting of lots is the biblical method of decision making. The problem with narrative passages is that even though they are accurately presented in the Bible (the inerrant Word of God), the Bible does not always inform us whether God approved of that action.

B. Equality of All Believers: All believers are equal in God's eyes. "There is no partiality with Him." (Ephesians 6:9). "So God created man in His image. In the image of God He created him. Male and female, He created them." (Genesis 1:27). "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28). The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to both men and women (1 Corinthians 12:1-31; Ephesians 4:1-16), but not all the same gift. "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men." (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each man, just as he determines." (1 Corinthians 12:11). On the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the followers of Christ, Peter interpreted this event as "what was spoken by the prophet Joel, 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.'" (Acts 2:16-18).

C. Submission: The Greek word that is translated as "submit" or "subject" means "to voluntarily put yourself under the authority of someone else." Although we are all equal in God's eyes, He has established (ordained) His order of authority that includes all of His creation. And it is God's clear command that we are to submit ourselves to that order of authority.

Submission of Jesus: Even Jesus, the Son of God, the second part of the triune God is subject to the Father. Attempting to explain the trinity is not part of this paper, but Scripture is clear that Jesus the Son is submissive to God the Father.

"[Jesus] Who is at the right hand of God [the Father], having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him [Jesus]." (1 Peter 3:22)

"For He [the Father] has put everything under His [the Son's] feet. Now when it says, everything has been put under Him, it is clear that this does not include God Himself, who put everything under Christ. When He has done this, then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Corinthians 15:27-28)

Submission of God's people:

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." (Romans 13:1, but also read 2-7)

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governments as sent by him for the punishment of evil doers and praise of those who do right

"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." (1 Corinthians 11:3)

"You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:5)

"Be subject one to another in the fear of Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)

Submission of Wives to Their Husbands: There are three extended passages where we, as believers, are instructed to practice “holy living,” to “let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts,” and, to “be wise in the way we conduct ourselves.” (1 Peter 2:9 – 3:12; Ephesians 5:15 – 6:9; and, Colossians 3:1 – 4:6). Within this context of holy living and letting the peace of Christ rule, we are exhorted to be in submission to those in authority over us – all believers being subject to governments; slaves obeying their masters; masters being aware that they also have a Master in heaven; children obeying their parents; and, wives submitting to their husbands. It should be noted that slaves are to obey their masters and children are to obey their parents. But wives are to submit to (to voluntarily place themselves under the authority of) their husbands. Those specific sections in Scripture include:

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” (Colossians 3:18-19)

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5:22-25)

“Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ... Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” (1 Peter 3:1-7) Note to us husbands: If we truly loved our wives as Christ loved the church and gave ourselves up to our wives, it would be so much easier for our wives to voluntarily place themselves under our authority. Paul takes one verse (Ephesians 5:22) to instruct wives to submit to husbands; and eleven verses (Ephesians 5:23-33) to explain to us thick-headed husbands what it means to love our wives as Christ loved the church.

Note: This is not a paper on our understanding of the breadth and depth and height and width on the biblical doctrine of submission to authority, but rather an acknowledgement that God has clearly ordained an order of authority.

III. Women as Elders (Overseers, Bishops, Pastors)

The role of elder (also referred in Scripture as overseer, bishop, or pastor) constitutes those who are in authority over the local church. Peter expresses this authority well in his first letter, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:1-4). Any discussion we have about elders must address this issue of authority, of shepherding God’s flock under the elders’ care.

The apostles were the original authority in the church, and all the apostles were men. As the church grew beyond Jerusalem and Judea (due to both the ongoing persecution and the missionary efforts of Paul and others) it became necessary for these new churches to have local leadership. As Paul and Barnabas were on their missionary trip, they “appointed elders for

them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.” (Acts 14:23). Paul left Titus in Crete so that he might “appoint elders in every town.” (Titus 1:5). There is no conclusive Scriptural evidence that any women were ever selected as elders. Some proponents of women elders point to the “chosen lady,” to whom 2 John was written, that she was the elder of the church that met in her house; and, that her “children” were the members of her church. Others interpret the meaning of “lady” to be a literal woman to whom John was writing. But none of these perspectives presents a strong enough case on which to develop a doctrinal position.

Another reference of a church that met in a woman’s house is in Colossians 4:15, “the church in Nypha’s house.” Additionally, there was a church that met in Priscilla’s and Aquila’s house (Romans 16:3-4). But there is no mention that any of these people ever held the role of elder.

Elder/Overseer Qualifications: (1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9)

These two passages are instructions to Timothy and Titus for how to appoint elders. Both of these passages assume that elders are men. All the pronouns are male, and both state that elders should be “husbands of but one wife.” A better translation would be “a one woman man.” The inferred conclusion then is that elders must be males. Although this argument is compelling, it is not conclusive. Just because these instructions assume a male gender does not in itself necessitate the exclusion of females. Also, the requirement that an elder must be “a one woman man” speaks to the fact some men had multiple wives and were thus excluded; whereas, it is silent on the concept of “a one man woman” because a woman with multiple husbands was unheard of. Since the “elder qualification” passages are not themselves conclusive we needed to examine additional Scriptures to help in our analysis.

Instructions on Church Life: Paul wrote extensively on how the church should behave when it assembles together. The first passage is 1 Timothy, chapters 2 and 3 (though one could argue that the entire book is Paul giving instruction to Timothy on church life). 1 Timothy 3:14-15 states, “Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.” The second passage is 1 Corinthians, chapters 11-14. To get a complete picture of what Paul is saying we suggest you read the entire chapters referenced, but we will be limiting our comments to the passages quoted below. As we explore these passages we are reminded of Peter’s words that some of Paul’s writings are hard to understand, but we have approached these prayerfully, seeking clarification and understanding (but have refrained from casting lots).

1 Timothy 2:8-15

⁸I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. ⁹I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. ¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

1 Corinthians 14:26-35

²⁶What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. ²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. ²⁹Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³²The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

¹Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. ²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. ³Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. ⁶If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. ⁷A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. ¹¹In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

Comments: In studying these passages we have asked ourselves two questions:

- a. What role(s) of authority can women hold in a church?
- b. What does it mean for women to be silent in church assemblies?

a. Women in authority in the church: There are two statements by Paul that we have determined to be declarative in nature. Remember, that these statements from Paul are imbedded in his instructions on how church life should be conducted when they assemble together.

(1) The first one is, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12). Some have chosen to discount this verse because it begins, “I do not permit...” The argument they make is that Paul is qualifying his own statement, making it his personal judgment instead of declaring, “God does not permit...” However, throughout Paul’s letters to the churches rarely does he declare, “Thus sayeth the Lord,” and yet Peter declares his words are “the wisdom from God” and that his letters are on par with “other Scriptures.” A second argument that some make is that this restriction was cultural in

nature, based on the period in history when women generally did not have the training or skills to teach and lead, and thus is not germane for today. However, Paul based his statement not on the culture of his day (or the shortcomings of training of women in his day), but rather on the original sin of Adam and Eve, thus making this argument timeless, and separating it from any particular time or culture. Therefore, we conclude that Paul's statement is neither "suggestive" nor "cultural", but rather declarative, and therefore instructional for us today. We believe that Paul is referring to the authoritative pastor/teacher role, the one who articulates the word of God. This is the God-called, God-ordained recognized pastor/teacher who has the authority in the church in matters of doctrine and interpretation. For a woman to try to take that role is to usurp authority over a man. Paul has stated that this is not permitted. This role of pastor/teacher should only be filled by a man.

(2) The second statement, like the first, was written by Paul on how the church should conduct itself when it assembles together, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3). We believe this passage is also neither "suggestive" nor "cultural," that is, that the same God who has ordained an authoritative order for governments, masters/slaves, parents/children, and husbands/wives, has also ordained an authoritative order for His church. That authoritative order is: God the Father, then Jesus Christ in Son, then man, then woman. As stated in the Background Information section. The issue is not equality of believers, but rather submitting to God's order of authority within the church.

Paul is specifically addressing the issue of women in the position of authority over the church, that is, the role of elder (pastor/teacher, overseer). He is not addressing any other positions in the church that women may hold that may involve leadership responsibilities, or even that could include instruction of men. Priscilla and Aquila are both credited in instructing Apollos "explaining to him the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:24-28).

Neither is Paul speaking of other venues (outside of church) where women may be in position of leadership. Deborah was both a prophet and a judge – "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at the time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided." (Judges 4:4-5). Esther became Queen in Persia and was greatly used by God, acting together with Mordecai, in saving the Jews from annihilation. But in the church, God's ordained authority is to be through men.

b. Women being silent when the church assembles together?: An initial reading of Paul's words could easily reach that conclusion. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 reads, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission."¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." And 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 states, "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." As with our answer in a. above, we believe the issue to be one of submission. Jack Hayford, in an article titled, *God Has a Plan for Women to Share in Christian Leadership*, expresses well our understanding of this issue of women being silent in churches.

“These passages clearly teach that women need to be submissive and possess a quiet and restful spirit. To what extent is that submission required in terms of her potential for serving the body of Christ? First, the adjective translated “silent” in 1 Timothy 2:11 (*hesuchos*) is the same one used in nine verses earlier (2:2), where believers are urged to intercessory prayer, “that we may live peaceful and *quiet* lives.” Since the life-style hoped for as a result of such intercession clearly wasn’t to be deprived of speech, the idea inherent in the word is not *speechlessness*. Rather, the command is that women manifest a contented stillness of spirit, a manner not characterized by self-assertiveness and not manifesting strife or discord.”

When Paul states in 1 Corinthians that “a woman should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak;” and, “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church,” is he talking about speechlessness? We think not. Earlier in Paul’s discourse about assembling together, he writes, “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). Clearly, Paul is instructing both men and women how they should conduct themselves in public worship regarding prayer and prophesying, which to our thinking cannot be done in a speechless manner. We do not believe that Paul would tell women how to speak properly in church in chapter 11 and then tell them not to speak in chapter 14. Note: The chapter delineations are obviously not of Paul’s making. He began this discourse on public worship and the assembling together in chapter 11 and concluded it at the end of chapter 14. So, if the issue is not speechlessness, what is it? It is our understanding that the true issue is submission. In both 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians submission (or the lack thereof) is the common denominator. “A woman should learn in quietness *and full submission*. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, *but must be in submission...*” (1 Corinthians 14:34). This issue is not speechlessness but rather whether or not the woman is in submission to authority – submission to her husband and submission to her male leadership at church. Interestingly, when Paul instructs women to wear a covering on her head when she prays or prophesies, he makes the following statement, “For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.” (1 Corinthians 11:10). We believe the idea of a “head covering” to be a cultural thing, but the biblical truth that Paul is teaching is “a sign of authority.” Our conclusion is that women can speak, but only when under authority.

There are many other examples in Scripture of women having a voice in a public forum. As mentioned previously, Deborah was a prophetess (Judges 4:4). Miriam, Moses’ sister, (Exodus 15:20-21) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20) are also referred to as prophetesses in the Old Testament. We also have the story of Anna, though recorded in the New Testament she would be viewed as a prophetess in the Old Testament order (Luke 2:36-38). As mentioned previously, Peter on the Day of Pentecost declared “That this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel... ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’ ” (Acts 2:16-18). In Acts 21:8-9, we are told that the evangelist Philip had “four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.” Prophecy is one of the gifts from the Holy Spirit of which Paul wrote in Ephesians (4:11), and extensively in 1 Corinthians (11:5, 12:10, 14:1-40). Women, as well as men, were expected to minister to the church

through this gift of prophecy given to them by the Holy Spirit. But being a prophetess does not make one an elder or overseer. Having the gift of prophecy does not give someone authority over the church.

It is perfectly appropriate and right to have women pray in church, or to give testimony to what God has done in and through their lives. To read Scripture and to express what God has taught them through His word. To dance, and sing, and play instruments in worship before our God. But it would be inappropriate for a woman to assume the authority of pastor and to teach before the assembly in that authoritative role as pastor/elder. This would be outside God's ordained order of authority and leadership for the local church.

IV. Women as Deacons (Deaconesses)

The Greek word "deacon" (diakonia) comes from "diakoneo," meaning to serve, render assistance. "Diakonia," which can be translated either "servant" or "deacon," appears numerous in the NT, leaving translators the responsibility of viewing the word in the context of the passage to determine which concept the original writer was using. It is the word used by Jesus with James and John, "that to be great in the Kingdom of God you need to be a servant (diakonia) to all" (Matthew 20:26).

Deacons, as the name implies, have a "service" role in the church. Though it can come with authority and responsibility, it is not a position of being in overall authority over the church (unlike the role of elder).

The first deacons were selected by the early church, when certain widows were being overlooked in the daily service of food. The twelve apostles summoned the congregation and stated, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4) So the first deacons had the administrative responsibility for food to be distributed evenly among those in the congregation. And the qualifications for that position was to be "full of the Spirit and wisdom."

The qualifications of deacon from 1 Timothy 3:8-13. As with the qualifications of elder, they include the statement that a deacon must be a "one woman man". But unlike the elder qualifications, not all the instructions are male specific. With deacon qualifications, Paul includes an instruction to women, "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." This word translated as "women" in the NASB, is translated "wives" in the NIV. The Greek word (gune) could be translated either way depending on the context. So, what is the context here? If it is "women" then it is referring to female deacons, or deaconesses. If it is wives, then it is referring to the wives of the deacons. Arguments are made on both sides. But the compelling argument for us is that if it is about wives, why didn't Paul also mention it about the wives of elders? Surely the wives of elders would also need to be dignified and not malicious gossips. For this reason we believe the correct translation to be "women" (rather than "wives").

Phoebe. Paul commends Phoebe who is a “diakonos” of the church in Cenchrea. “Diakonos” is the female form of “diakonia”. It can be translated either as “servant” or “deaconess.” Here is the whole text -- Paul is writing to the Romans and Phoebe is on her way to Rome. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a “diakonos” of the church which is at Cenchrea, that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and myself as well.” (Romans 16:1-2). It is our view, based on the context that Phoebe was on an official mission for her church, that she was filling the office of a deaconess, “a diakonos” of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

Summary: There are just a few New Testament references about the office of deacon; and two of those references are likely referring to women. In addition, unlike the role of elder, there is no prohibition in the New Testament against women in these roles. We have also learned from our study that records from the early Roman church endorsed an “ordained diaconate of women” and the Orthodox Church has a long history of deaconesses. Therefore, we conclude that it is quite likely that the New Testament church recognized deaconesses as church officials.

V. Conclusion

It is our conclusion that Scripture is clear regarding God’s ordained order, that is, that women are to be submissive to men regarding the authoritative order of the church. For this reason, it is our understanding that the office of elder can only be filled by men. On the other hand we find no such prohibitions regarding the office of deacon. Therefore, the elders will be putting forward a revision to the bylaws that will change the wording of the deacon requirements to read, “male and female voting members...” There will be no changes to the requirements for elder.