

## Ministry Leadership, Gender, and the Role of Elders: A Position Paper Representing the Door of Hope NE Elder Team

It is our conviction<sup>1</sup> that the Holy Spirit has empowered both male and female disciples of Jesus with a great diversity of gifts, talents, and passions to lead and perform the ministries of the local church. We believe that all positions and offices in the ministry of a local church are open to qualified men and women, except the office of elder, which is by its nature a role carried out by an appointed group of men who serve as spiritual fathers for that specific church. This is connected to our conviction regarding the New Testament model for the leadership of a local church: namely, that all ministries are overseen by a group of men called “elders” (Greek *presbuteros*) or “overseers” (Grk. *episkopos*) who are themselves under the leadership of Jesus, and whose role is to guide, protect, teach, and oversee the ministries of that church. The following paper outlines the biblical-theological reasons for these convictions.

### 1. The New Testament describes only two official roles in the leadership of the church.

#### a. “Elders/Overseers”

- i. “Elder” (Grk. *presbuteros*) and “overseer/bishop” (Grk. *episkopos*) are synonyms that describe the core leadership team of a local church.<sup>2</sup> Whenever these are mentioned, it is always to a group of men (*Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-2; Hebrews 13:7, 17*).
- ii. The roles and activities of elders:
  1. They lead the church through guidance, oversight, and decision-making (*1 Timothy 3:4-5, 5:17; Titus 1:7*)
  2. Some elders have teaching and preaching as their main responsibility (*1 Timothy 5:17*), but all elders are to be biblically and theologically astute and able to teach (*1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17; Titus 1:9; see Galatians 6:6*)
  3. They represent the church to the outside community (*1 Timothy 3:7*)
  4. They “pastor/shepherd” the church, specifically protecting it from bad teachers/theology (*Acts 20:28*), paying attention to the lives of people (*1 Peter 5:2; Hebrews 13:17*), and serving the body (*1 Peter 5:3*).

#### b. “Ministers/Deacons” (Grk. *diakonos*)

- i. This is a group of men and women who work alongside the elders (*Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 11; Romans 16:1-2*) in leading and operating the various ministries and activities of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> This document was adopted January 2015, lightly revised for clarification February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The two terms are used interchangeably in a number of passages: Paul calls together the “elders” of Ephesus (*Acts 20:17*), but addresses them as “overseers” (*Acts 20:28*); Paul tells Titus to appoint “elders” (*Titus 1:5*), but then calls them “overseers” (*1:7*); the same goes for *1 Timothy 3:1* and *5:17*.

- ii. *1 Timothy 3:8-13* describes the character qualifications of these leaders, but not the ministries they lead. The only specific activity of deacons mentioned in the New Testament is keeping track of and caring for widows and the poor (*Acts 6:1-12; 1 Timothy 5:9, 11, 16*).
- iii. There are a number of female “leaders” in the New Testament (Grk. *prostatis*): these were wealthy or influential women in their communities who became Christians and then hosted church communities in their homes (Mary in *Acts 12:12*; Lydia in *Acts 16:40*; Priscilla and her husband Aquila in *Romans 16:3-5*; Chloe in *1 Corinthians 1:11*; Nympha in *Colossians 4:15*). Phoebe, a prominent lead deacon in Cenchrae (*Romans 16:1*), is given the highest praise by Paul (*Romans 16:2-3*), and was entrusted to carry the letter of Romans itself (!).
- iv. When Paul names or greets leaders in various churches as “co-workers” (Grk. *sunergos*) he names both women (Euodia and Syntyche, *Philippians 4:2*; Priscilla, *Romans 16:3*) and men (*Romans 16:3, 9, 21; 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Philemon 1, 24*).
  - 1. In *Romans 16*, Paul mentions many women as co-workers: Mary “who worked hard” (*16:6*), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, “who work hard in the Lord” (*16:12*).
  - 2. Paul even tells the Corinthian church (*1 Corinthians 16:15-16*) to “submit” to the leadership of “those of the household of Stephen” as well as to “all who join in the work [Grk. *sunergo*, same word as “co-worker” discussed above] and labor.” This designation clearly includes men and women in the term “household” and “all who are co-workers.” Thus men and women were called to submit to the leadership of other qualified men and women.

2. “Pastor” is only one among a larger group of leadership gifts given by the Spirit for the building up of the church.

a. Key Texts:

- i. *Ephesians 4:11-12*: “And He gave some as **apostles**, and some as **prophets**, and some as **evangelists**, and some as **pastors** and **teachers**, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”
- ii. *1 Corinthians 12:28*: “And God has placed in the church first of all **apostles**, second **prophets**, third **teachers**, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.”

b. Spiritual Gifts: These describe disciples of Jesus who have different gifts and passions that become empowered by the Spirit for the benefit of the church; none of these describe an “office” in a local church: *Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-31; 1 Peter 4:10-11*

c. Key Point: Paul is not describing “offices” in the church (as he does for “elder” and “deacon”), but is rather listing the spiritual gifts and callings of people in the church.

- i. Example: All elders should be able to teach (*1 Timothy 3:2*), but not all may have teaching as their main ministry, or as their Spirit-empowered gift (*1 Timothy 5:17*)
- ii. Example: All elders should be able to explain the gospel and defend it (*Titus 1:9*), but not all may have the gift of evangelism (as did Timothy, *2 Timothy 4:5*)

d. Implications:

- i. The main leadership gifts named in *Ephesians 4* and *1 Corinthians 12* are distributed among the “ministers/deacons” of the church, under the guidance of the elders, for the purpose of building up all people in the church.
- ii. There is no indication in the New Testament that these leadership or ministry gifts are limited or specific to either gender; they are given to both men and women in the church.
  1. **Apostle:** According to some scholars, there may be a female apostle (Junia in *Romans 16:7*) alongside the many male apostles named in the New Testament.
  2. **Prophet:** We know of many female prophets in the NT churches (the daughters of Philip, *Acts 21:8-9*; *1 Corinthians 11:5*), alongside male prophets. This fulfills the prophet Joel’s promise (*Joel 2:28-30*).
    - a. In *1 Corinthians 14:1*, Paul equates “prophecy” with “strengthening, encouraging, comforting” (*14:3*), as well as “instruction” (*14:19*; Grk. *katechesis*).
    - b. In *1 Corinthians 11*, Paul addresses women who prayed and prophesied in the Sunday gathering to critique how they’re dressing as they lead the church. He does not, significantly, critique their leadership role, but only the manner of their appearance.
  3. **Evangelist:** the term (Grk. *euangelistes*) is only used of Philip (*Acts 21:8*) and Timothy (*2 Timothy 4:5*), but Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche as “labored with Paul in the gospel” (Grk. *euangelion*).
  4. **Teacher:**
    - a. We know of at least Priscilla, who was revered as a leader and teacher along with her husband Aquila and Paul (she was qualified to correct and teach Apollos the evangelist! *Acts 18:26*).
    - b. Paul’s mention of Phoebe in *Romans 16:1-2* highlights her role as a deacon and leader in the church of Cenchreae (*Romans 16:1*), and Paul entrusted her with the delivery of the letter to the Romans (*Romans 16:2*), and possibly even its oral performance and interpretation.
    - c. In *1 Timothy 2:11-12*, Paul prohibits women from usurping authority and teaching in Ephesus. However, he makes it clear this prohibition is a response to some women’s misbehavior after being led astray by false teachers there (see *1 Timothy 1:3-7*, *4:1-2*, *6:2-5*, *2 Timothy 2:14-3:9*) who were targeting women (*2 Timothy 3:6*).
  5. **Pastor:**
    - a. The noun “pastor” (Grk. *poimenos*) is only used twice in the NT: to describe Jesus as “the senior/chief pastor” in *1 Peter 5:4*, and those who have the gift of pastoring in *Ephesians 4:11*.
    - b. The verb “to shepherd/pastor” (Grk. *poimein*) is used three times to describe what leaders in the church do (*John 21:16*; *Acts 20:28*; *1 Peter 5:2*).

### 3. Why men, but not women as elders?

- a. All of the times where elders are mentioned in the NT they are described as a group of men.<sup>3</sup> However, that only gives us a *description* of the gender of elders in these early churches, not *why*. It's important, then, to explore a handful of relevant passages in the NT that do offer guidance and a rationale for *why* the elder role in a local church is a male one.
- i. There are two places where Paul discusses the character qualifications for an elder (*1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9*), in which he makes clear that it should be a man who is faithful to his wife.<sup>4</sup> In Peter's description of elders (*1 Peter 5:1-4*), as well as that of the author of Hebrews (*Hebrews 13:7, 17*), the male gender of the elders is implicit in the gender of the Greek words used. This point, combined with the fact that Paul says he directed Titus to appoint such elders over each local church community (*Titus 1:5*), leads us to believe that Paul's category of male elder was not simply circumstantial, but inherently meaningful to this specific role.
  - ii. In *1 Timothy 3:5*, Paul says the roles of these men are parallel in the church and their home: "for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" The role of the elders in leading "God's gathered community" (Grk. *ekklesia*, translated as "church") is directly parallel to the role of a husband and father in a family "household" (Grk. *oikia*). In other words, Paul sees the church community as a large extended family - what was called in that day a "household" - where the elders played a role parallel to that of a husband or father. This is why he calls the elders "household overseers" (Grk. *oikonomos*, in *Titus 1:7*). This point is significant: the structure of the church is parallel to that of a Christian marriage and family, and so we must look to a biblical theology of marriage to discover the meaning of the male/husband role.
  - iii. Both Jesus (in *Matthew 19:1-12*) and Paul (in *Ephesians 5:21-33*) looked to *Genesis 1-2* as a foundation story for the divine purpose and ideal of marriage. Both see *Genesis* as depicting marriage as a life-long covenantal union between a man and a woman that "makes the two one" (*Genesis 2:24*). The logic is that two gendered "others" become one in both affection and legal commitment, resulting in the creation of a new family and of new life in procreation (*Genesis 1:26-28*). And in this manner, humanity fulfills its vocation of ruling and harnessing the potential of the earth to cultivate it and flourish. Thus, in the Scriptures, marriage is seen as a divinely instituted gift for the flourishing of human communities.
  - iv. Paul specifically builds on this portrayal from *Genesis*, and sees Christian marriage as a relationship where husband and wife are empowered by the Holy Spirit for a lifelong commitment to love and submit to each other (*Ephesians 5:21*). However, that mutual love and submission is expressed in distinct ways, based on gender. This distinction is expressed through a dense metaphor Paul uses, calling the Christian husband the "head" (*Ephesians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 11:3*) and the Christian wife the "body" (*Ephesians 5:28-29*). What does this metaphor mean?
    1. In *Ephesians 5:21-33*, Paul sees Christian marriage as a sacred-symbol that tells a story about the God revealed in Jesus. The husband as "head" symbolically depicts Jesus as "head of the church, which is his body" (*Ephesians 5:23*). Paul quickly defines what the role of head entails, as it is surely prone to misunderstanding: the Christian husband is "head" by reenacting Jesus' self-giving love in acts of sacrificial service and care (*Ephesians 5:25-29*). The Christian wife as "body" symbolizes the church family, who place themselves

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15:2, 22; 20:17; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; Titus 1:5-7; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

<sup>4</sup> Paul's phrase (lit. "a husband of one wife") is aimed specifically at excluding men who are in polygamous marriages.

under the care and guidance of Jesus (*Ephesians 5:22-24*). Paul makes clear that Christian marriage is a “mystery” (*Ephesians 5:32*), which means that marriage first and foremost functions as a symbolic pointer to the reality of Jesus and his covenantal bond with his people, the church.

2. In *1 Corinthians 11:1-16*, Paul employs this same metaphor again (*1 Corinthians 11:3*: “I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”) In this context, he is critiquing specific behaviors in which some men were dishonoring Jesus as their head (*1 Corinthians 11:4*), and some wives were dishonoring their husbands as their head (*1 Corinthians 11:4-6*): the men were leading prayer in church with long hair<sup>5</sup> and some wives were leading prayer with their hair uncovered.<sup>6</sup> Paul challenges both groups by showing that by such acts these men and wives were disgracing their respective “heads”. This example is important, because it shows that for Paul the essence of being a “head” of someone isn’t about power or the ability to tell someone what to do. Rather, in context, being someone’s head is about being a “responsible representative.” The men were dishonoring Jesus as their representative by associating worship of him with practices from pagan cults. The wives were dishonoring their husbands by adopting fashion styles that communicate sexual availability to other men.<sup>7</sup> What’s important in this context, is that Paul links this “headship” in a series of steps that leads into the very identity of God. The husband is the “head” of his wife, Christ is the “head” of that man, and God the father is the “head” of Christ. In other words, God the Father has a position of responsibility over the Son. Paul sees “headship” as part of God’s own inner-identity (Father-Son), and thus Christian marriage is a symbolic pointer to that reality. What is also significant is that here Paul is not using this “headship” idea to challenge the fact that these women have a leadership role in the church gathering, but rather how their physical appearance dishonors their husbands. This passage, in conclusion, gives us another layer of symbolism to Christian marriage: the relationship of the husband and wife mirrors a similar covenantal-union within God’s own being, where the Father has taken up a role of representative responsibility over the Son, which means that the Son does nothing that dishonors the Father, and so a husband and wife are also to honor their respective heads.

- v. **Conclusion:** Elders/overseers in a local church are (1) qualified men serving similarly as responsible representatives and (2) are called to act as spiritual fathers over the

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<sup>5</sup> In 1<sup>st</sup> century Greco-Roman culture, long hair on males had specific cultural connotations to either priestly roles in pagan temples or male prostitution in the temple precincts. See Bruce Winter.

<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps with short hair or shaved heads. The Greek words Paul uses are very obscure.

<sup>7</sup> “In Roman culture, respectable women did nothing to draw attention to themselves. A veil or hood constituted a warning: it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman and that no man dare approach without risking penalties. On the other hand, a woman who went out unveiled forfeited the protection of Roman law against possible attackers who were entitled to plead extenuating circumstances.... For women the veil was a badge of honor, communicating sexual reserve and a mastery of the self.” A. Rouselle, “Body Politics in Ancient Rome” in *A History of Women in the West*.

“household of faith,” and in so doing symbolically represent Jesus as “head” over the covenant community.

1. We believe the word “head” is defined by the story of the gospel and how Jesus exercised his role as head through self-giving acts of love and sacrificial care to seek the well-being of those who are part of his “body.” The gospel redefines the meaning of authority away from entitled power towards acts of sacrificial service.
2. We believe that this symbolic role of the husband/father/elder<sup>8</sup> is inherently a male one, built into the symbolic meaning of Christian marriage itself as a pointer to Jesus’ covenant relationship to the church and to the covenantal unity within God’s own Trinitarian identity.
3. This does not mean women are not capable or qualified to lead or serve in the ministries of the church. They are! And they should! But it does mean that the role of elder is uniquely to be filled by a circle of qualified men within the community, who will teach, protect, and guide the women and men of that church.

#### 4. Conclusions and convictions about ministry leadership at Door of Hope:

- a. The ministry giftings of *Ephesians 4:11*, along with the other spiritual gifts (serving, administration, teaching, see *1 Peter 4:10-11*; faith, healing, languages and interpretation, prophecy, *1 Corinthians 12:8-10*) are given to men and women. There is no indication in any of the spiritual gift passages that some gifts are specific to a certain gender.
- b. In the New Testament “pastor” is a word that describes someone’s function and Spirit-empowered gifting, not an office like elder or deacon. We should, therefore, use the term when it accurately describes what a pastorally gifted man or woman does in the church.
- c. One of the elders’ key roles is to identify, develop, and encourage these kinds of men and women to do the ministry of the church, and place them in staff roles as is necessary for the health of the church.
- d. The office of elder alone is reserved specifically for qualified men who sacrificially lead and serve the whole church.

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<sup>8</sup> Though there is some debate among Christians about whether or not elders should be literal husbands and fathers, it seems that the leadership examples of Jesus and Paul, in addition to Paul’s commendation of the advantages of singleness for ministry (*1 Corinthians 7:7, 7:32-35*), suggest the role should not be limited only to men who are married with children.