

Women in Leadership
By Ian Lawson
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Preamble

Until now I've not shared my perspective on the matter of women in church leadership. For some people, this is a difficult conversation; while for others, it's a non-issue. There are some for whom this is a critical matter resulting in conflict with potentially divisive consequences. I use the word "potentially divisive" because it does not need to be. This conversation can (and should) be an opportunity for the meaningful exchange of ideas and an occasion to disagree honorably with brothers and sisters of differing points of view. Much of church history is marked with acrimonious debate on a number of topics, often because Christians have not learned how to disagree with each other in a mature and biblical manner.

Disputable Matters

I've come to see this debate as a "disputable matter" for which the Scripture offers us principles to follow. In the early days of the church, there were matters of profound disagreement between Christians. Speaking to such matters, the New Testament offers guidelines on how to work through deeply held differences of opinion. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 address one such disputable matter. While it's difficult for us to imagine today, tensions ran deep over the question of whether Christians should purchase, and eat, meat that had previously been offered to idols. That was a common practice for pagan idol worshipers in the first century. Many Christians who had been delivered from the worship of idols believed that to eat such meat was a serious compromise and undermined their gospel witness.

Here is Paul's conclusion: "The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them both" (Romans 14:3). Then a few verses later, Paul offers a summary statement about matters of conscience: "One person considers one day more sacred than another, another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:5-6). He's saying that it is possible that, within the fellowship, devoted brothers and sisters in Christ can have honest differences of belief and practice. And there is room for both.

Through the centuries, various matters of dispute have divided Christians. Some disputes have been so severe that churches, and entire denominations, have been formed out of the conflicts: mode of baptism; music in the church; days of creation; playing cards and dancing; return of Christ; use of alcohol and attending the theatre; eternal security. And the list goes on. The biblical mandate for us on disputable matters is Romans 14:19 – "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." While engaging in honest debate, let's do so maturely in a manner that results in peace and edification.

My Experience

I was reared in a home and in a church that was functionally “complementarian”. That view holds the position that while men and women are both created equally in the image of God they have complementary differences in role and function. These work themselves out in society, in church, and in the home, with distinct differences. My mother worked outside of the home and she was a strong leader in the home. However, the societal norm in my upbringing was at the very least a soft complementarian position. When I married Connie, it seemed natural that we would take on complementary roles and as our family grew, that became our norm. Such was our heritage and so became our tradition.

Over the years, I’ve also witnessed capable, godly women serving in prominent places of leadership. Through my experiences, from sitting under women professors at seminary to serving on charitable boards with women, I’ve come to value the contribution that capable women make to the broader Church. While I don’t care for the term, “egalitarianism” is commonly used. That position holds the view that all people, without regard to gender, ethnicity or class, must exercise their God-given gifts with equal authority and equal responsibility in church, home, and the world.

My Position

I have read supporters and detractors on each side of the issue. Over the years I’ve vacillated between these positions. I’ve had conversations with, and have friends who, land on both sides of the question. Here’s what I have observed:

There are godly men and women holding to the traditional stance who have written thoughtful arguments in support of their position, based on a solid commitment to the Scriptures AND there are godly men and women holding to the more contemporary stance who have written thoughtful arguments in support of their position, based on a solid commitment to the Scriptures. Please do not pass quickly over this observation. This, to me, is a very important consideration and is at the crux of my position. It is for this reason that I consider this a “disputable matter”.

Each side has their Scripture texts and favorite writers who defend their position with cogent arguments. Here are some I know and respect on each side:

Traditional Writers:

Mary Kassian, “The Feminist Mistake”

Kathy Keller, “Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles”

Andreas Kostenberger, “God’s Design for Man and Woman”

John Piper & Wayne Grudem, “Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood”

Contemporary Writers:

Gilbert Bilezikian, “Beyond Sex Roles – what the Bible says about a Woman’s Place”

Stanley Grenz, “Women in the Church – a biblical theology of women in ministry”

Alan Johnson (editor), “How I Changed my Mind about Women in Leadership”

John Stackhouse, “Finally Feminist: a Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender”

Another title has helped me immensely: Women in Ministry – Four Views (Intervarsity Press, 1989 by Bonnidell Clouse & Robert G. Clouse). This book presents four views, each described and promoted by a committed evangelical. Robert Culver presents a traditional view that women should not exercise authority over men. Susan Foh presents a modified view allowing women to teach but not to hold positions of authority. Walter Liefeld presents a case for plural ministry of men and women together and he challenges the very idea of ordination. Alvera Michelsen presents the full equality of men and women in the church, without any restriction. The genius of the book is that after presenting their position, with biblical support, each of the other three writers offers a rebuttal. An honest reader will see and appreciate that a compelling case can be made for each of the positions.

I've come to the considered conclusion that any of these positions can be defended, and with full confidence in the authority of the Scripture. Some will ask, "But how can that be? The Bible is so clear!" I believe that the matter of women in leadership is not a theological question. Rather it's a hermeneutical question – one of interpretation. My conviction is that while this question is not theological per se, it is a hermeneutical question with vital implications for mission fulfillment.

Missiologists observe that the Church of Christ fits into any cultural context anywhere in the world. I've witnessed it and it's beautiful to behold. The expression of church in Thailand is different than in Ethiopia, is different than in Peru. I've witnessed women capably pastoring churches in Asia, while in Africa or the Middle East only men are deemed qualified to lead. In Canada, the culture has shifted markedly in my lifetime. Today women can fill any role in the Canadian landscape, from public office to the corporate boardroom. Therefore I believe that for the sake of our gospel witness, and for the sake of our daughters, the church must embrace a fuller expression of women in leadership. Paul, the traveling missionary, suggests that there is a place for cultural nuance when he writes: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having law I became like one not having the law, so as to win those not having the law . . . I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). For the sake of the gospel, we must remove all the barriers holding people back from coming to Christ and remove all possible sources of cynicism among a younger generation of Christians.

Values of our Church

There are two deeply held values important to me and to our church. I've heard our leaders, formal and informal, express concern to retain these cherished values:

1. Commitment to Scripture – We believe that God speaks through the Scriptures, His holy Word. It is the verbally inspired Word of God, without error in its original writings and the complete revelation of His will for salvation. Scripture is our ultimate authority and is to be believed in all that it teaches and obeyed in all that it requires. We are people of "the book" and respect its authority. Scripture must always trump tradition.

2. Unity of the Church – Our unity, which has marked our church since her beginning, is a sacred trust. We do not take our unity for granted and we cherish it deeply. Our church has been a haven for many who have been hurt by previous church conflicts and come seeking peace. Our church culture is summed up in the famous motto of Rupertus Meldenius: “In essentials unity; in non-essentials charity; and in all things Jesus Christ”.

Ironic Anecdote

I found it mildly humorous in a recent conversation with my son-in-law, who is serving on the board of his church. He had been asking me for advice on an issue that was threatening their unity. Some in their leadership want to permit those not baptized by immersion to become members. Being a Baptist church, there were others in the congregation who had strong feelings to the contrary, believing that baptism by immersion is a necessary condition for membership. During the conversation with my son-in-law, I innocently asked who made up their board. I smiled when he told me of the men and the women sitting on their church board.

This truly is ironic. Do you see it? They were debating an issue that we resolved at the beginning of the Free Church movement. We promote baptism as a marker of discipleship but refuse to link it with membership. We have members who’ve been baptized as infants and a few who’ve yet to be baptized. Theirs is a non-issue for us. Ours is a non-issue for them. In eternity we will no doubt laugh at some of our deeply held traditions. Should we not at least take a deep breath and smile while we engage this truly disputable matter?

Conclusion

Since 2013 our board has engaged this conversation but has been careful not to push it. Positions of individuals on the board vary but (I believe) there is an emerging consensus. Until now I have not declared my position publically, largely because I’ve not wanted to create controversy. This issue is not central to our mission. Making disciples of Christ is why we exist. The gospel is at the heart of our ministry and must remain so. However, for the sake of our gospel witness and for those young women and men coming behind us, I’m convicted that we must consider this change. I believe it’s time to at least have the conversation. This is the starting point of a process that may take time. While some people hold firmly to deeply held traditions, I trust we can have a mature conversation marked with maturity and Christ likeness on this “disputable matter”.