

Authority and Teachers in the Congregations

I am writing to object to the apparent [GROUP] decision to permit women to lead congregations as well as women teaching above men in the congregational setting. The prohibitions against these things are part of clear scriptural instructions and we ignore these clear instructions when we permit this change in authority and teachers. As a member of the [GROUP] community, I am deeply distressed and even ashamed by these decisions, and petition [GROUP] leadership to reconsider this subject.

While I realize that [GROUP] leadership is not currently calling women leaders “pastors”, they are accepted as congregational heads so I presume they are doing much or all of the usual work of running the congregation, but without the official title and perhaps some of the upper voting power it may include. It's furthermore plain that [GROUP] has no problem allowing women to teach over men in the congregation, which is also contrary to a plain reading of the New Testament. If these practices continue, they will not only alienate me from participating in many congregations, but also present serious difficulties for anyone who wishes to defend against further doctrinal changes.

God's instructions in scripture:

Although I'm certain everyone knows the most relevant scriptures about this subject, I care to point them out just to review what they tell us:

1 Timothy 2:11-14: *Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. (NKJV)*

I don't think there's any controversy that an ordinary reading of this text does not permit women to teach or to have authority over men. If this is the case, then the [GROUP] is ignoring important instructions in the word of God about how the congregation is run. It is especially surprising that a movement which models itself after first century worship should be ignoring the doctrines of the first century itself. In fact, in every single New Testament example of someone teaching in the sacred assembly, the person who is teaching is a man.

It is worth examining the other main scripture on the subject, and we'll have a look at it here:

1 Corinthians 14:33-35: *For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church. (NKJV)*

While it is true there is a general concern in this scripture for order in the congregation, we cannot, as some suggest, write it entirely off for that reason. The broad principle of the woman's role in the congregation is clearly there, and that role is a submissive one. Not only that, but like the passage from 1 Timothy, it backs up the principle of submission with a reference to the law. Again we see the woman's submissive role in the congregation, and again it is backed up not with culture, but with the word of the living God. That should be a strong statement to us in taking it seriously. We furthermore have its importance hammered in just two verses later when the Spirit of God tells us “*the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.*” If this is the case, then we know we ought to delightfully follow them.

To add one more point, I would also mention that the normal reading of these texts is in good harmony with other scriptures about the man and woman's role, from Genesis, to 1 Timothy 3:1-13 – which gives qualifications for male leadership as elders and deacons – to the many scriptures about man and woman's position in marriage. They hold together harmoniously in relying on similar principles. However, if we choose to ignore these scriptures and change the instructions, we make our God look arbitrary. He is a God who makes inscrutable and arbitrary decisions about administrators and functions, the reasoning of which we can never hope to imagine. Just as we find that God's moral commandments are in harmony with reason and the rest of scripture, I say we find the same thing here – a great and beautiful harmony with reason and the word of God. However, this is only true if we accept the plain reading. Let us do so with joy.

Dangers in Ignoring the Plain Meaning

Obviously, the major reason to hold to the plain instructions regarding leaders and teachers in the Body is simply to be obedient to God. In that, it comes down to obeying His commandments. However, there are other good reasons to stay with the instructions.

Firstly, staying with the plain reading aligns us against acts of compromise and caving in, which can cause significant damage. For example, we have witnessed the virtual collapse of mainline Protestantism and portions of the Evangelical movement over the past nearly one hundred years. On one issue after another they have caved in or compromised, and has it been any less than a disaster? From contraception, to divorce, and now sodomy, the mainline churches have mostly chosen to cave. Based on what thinking did they cave? Based on the same thinking we discuss here – ignoring the plain meaning of God's word or ignoring the good interpretation of it which had stood for nearly two thousand years. From a historical perspective mainline Protestantism collapsed faster than a village under attack by the Huns. When we also choose to ignore the plain reading of scripture for the sake of what is unproven speculation, our fortifications look equally as weak. When we toss the plain reading for the sake of popularity, it is little different.

Not only do we align ourselves with a pattern of caving in on the natural reading of scripture, but in this issue, we align ourselves with a caving in on the value of men and the roles of men. In an age which commonly denies male headship in the home, we do it no help to start denying it in the Body of Messiah as well. In contrast, we ought to stand strong as far as male leadership, which we must uphold in the home and the congregation. We also exist in a time and country when roles are as blurred as to completely ignore the women's role in the home and in raising children. Many women today have had the professional life glorified as the only way for them, and their role in the home denigrated as beneath them. When we practice blurring of roles or denial of roles in our congregations, are we not cheerleaders for the blurring of roles in general? Do we not stand up for the same general principle? It seems that we do.

In a similar vein, many of us complain about the over-feminization that we observe in the Body of Messiah itself. Yet this feminization did not happen in a vacuum and it does not continue in a vacuum. There were real methods of making this happen and perpetuating it, and those methods include ignoring thousands of years of doctrine and bringing women into official teaching and headship roles. Does this not provide even more reason for standing behind the instructions in 1 Timothy which I bring up here?

Another kind of damage we do when we disregard biblical teaching about male leadership and teaching is to bring in the principle of disregarding scripture itself for dubious reasons. For example, if we are willing here to rubbish the plain reading for the sake of speculative arguments, do we not justify that principle being used in other areas? When mainline churches use such speculation to rubbish biblical morality, we would be outraged. We would say you can't ignore what God plainly teaches for some speculative reading of His word. And we would be right. However when we use speculation and faulty argument to toss men out of their rightful roles in the church, we justify the same practice being done elsewhere. This we should never do.

The overall structure of the Body is another reason to stay away from the change of scriptural doctrine [GROUP] leadership has made on male authority. This is because once you have compromised on this, the rest of the congregational structure would logically unravel should we desire it. For example, if we toss the teachings because we are speculatively saying they are cultural, why not do the same for giving formal titles such as pastor or elder to men? If we toss the teachings for the sake of popularity or because we think they are only of minor importance, why not do the same thing? In fact, if congregational structure is so unimportant, why not drop having pastors and elders entirely? We could just give out tracts, and have everyone worship at home. I know it's hard to see that happening, but logically, if we uplift speculation and downgrade everything but a few central doctrines, what I have just described is logically possible to do. In contrast, if we hold strong to the truth, and obey the plain meaning about male leadership and teaching, never compromising for popularity or peace, we could never think to do such a thing. Let us stay with the truth then. Let us stay with how scripture plainly reads.

Conclusion

In summary, I cannot stress more that the plain instructions in the New Testament prohibit women from having authority or teaching over men, and that this reflects the literal reading of the text in its natural context. It is furthermore supported by every scriptural example. Therefore this is what our congregations ought to practice.

I don't believe that even one of our [GROUP] leaders take the matters that I've brought up lightly. Therefore I ask you to consider each point which I have made above and consider reversing your past decision.

I welcome a response to these concerns, and even a dialogue, and pray that your Steering Committee will review their policies in light of these concerns.

Sincerely in Messiah,

Tom Ackerman