

Men, Women and Ministry at Hunter Bible Church

INTRODUCTION

In the very first chapter of the Bible we read that God created men and women to live and multiply on earth under his rule:

“God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” – Gen 1:27

The rest of the Bible not only describes the interactions between God and humanity, but also provides guidance on how men and women are to relate according to his will. This paper will look at the particular topic of how men and women are to relate in the church, especially in regard to leadership and teaching.

First, though, it is fair to say that there have been many times when Christian men have not honoured God in their conduct towards women in the church. There have been occasions throughout history of disrespect, oppression and abuse. Men have even used the Bible to justify things that are wrong. We grieve the harm that has been done and are committed to upholding justice for victims.

However, our response to these past sins should not be to disregard what God says, but to listen more carefully to his word. We trust that his guidance is not only right, but good.

THE BIBLE AND MEN AND WOMEN

Our ultimate authority for all matters of faith, conduct and experience is the Bible. It not only tells us what we need to know about God, it equips us as individuals and as a church to live godly lives pleasing to him. Our wider culture will help us question and challenge things we assume but Christian scripture will have the final word on how we live as a community of faith.

In regard to issues of gender this means we might come to different conclusions to others in our culture about the roles of men and women in the church and home.

Women and Men in Creation and Redemption

The Bible is clear that women and men are equal before God in value, status and dignity. Both sexes are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and both are redeemed by Jesus Christ when he died and rose again. In God's kingdom everyone who trusts in Jesus is adopted as a spiritual child of God. Therefore, "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). According to Romans 8:17 we are "co-heirs with Christ" (see also 1 Peter 3:7).

Men and Women in the Family

While men and women are fully equal, there are differences in role in certain spheres of life. Within marriages the Bible describes the husband as the head of the wife. This headship is meant to be expressed similarly to Christ' headship over the church (Eph 5:21-33). As such, the husband is commanded to care for his wife with sacrificial love and Christ-like gentleness. A husband's headship is never an excuse for abuse, domination or control; rather it is a responsibility to love and care for his wife and encourage her in godliness. The Bible calls on wives to respect and submit to their husbands provided this does not mean disobedience to God (Eph 5:22-33). Any harshness or abuse on the part of the husband is expressly forbidden (1 Pet 3:7).

As to how this relationship between equal and complementary partners plays out in real life, each couple will be different. As an example, often husbands will take responsibility to see that going to church and reading the Bible are priorities for the family, and the wife will support and encourage him and the family in that endeavour.

WOMEN AND MEN AND MINISTRY

The Bible teaches that everyone who has genuine faith in Jesus will bear fruit in the form of good works (Gal 5:22-26). These good works can be described as *ministry* (2 Cor 3:1-11) or *service* (1 Cor 12:5). They are the work of the Holy Spirit in us and include the use of various spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1-11).

There are many kinds of ministry opportunities within the church for both men and women. These include encouraging, evangelism, praying, welcoming, caring for people who are unwell, administration, hospitality, leading singing and music in church and children's ministry. Mothers have an important role (alongside fathers) in the raising of children (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21; 1 Tim 5:10). Another significant ministry is the teaching and training of other women (Tit 2:3-5). As a church, we are committed to equipping and encouraging women in all these ministries. For this reason we employ female pastoral staff, female ministry apprentices, and appoint females to all sorts of ministry roles within the church.

Some ministry, however, is only for certain men within the church. These are the ministries of Bible teaching to men, exercising significant pastoral authority over men (1 Tim 2:11-15), and exercising the main leadership over the church (Tit 1:5-9). It is important to note that these roles are not simply for any man, but only for those who are sound in character and equipped to teach.

We might wonder why such a limitation exists, especially in our culture when very few similar limitations exist. In one sense this way of managing church is up to God our creator and that is how he has made things according to his wisdom. However, we can also notice that the Bible sees the church as a family (Gal 6:10) and therefore the principles that govern roles in a marriage or family also apply to the larger gathering of believers. It is appropriate in God's good ordering of creation that men are to take loving responsibility for the community as a whole. This is why one qualification for an elder is that he manages his own family well (1 Tim 3:4).

PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE FOR MEN

As with many areas of church life, the Bible gives us great principles but not a command for every possible situation. Therefore, we have avoided setting up a long list of rules. Rather, we want to continually urge the men of our church to take responsibility for spiritual leadership in our church. This includes encouraging and enabling women to contribute their gifts and abilities in different areas. We acknowledge that this is something that churches have not always done well.

While the principles are most important, there are three ministries in church that we think are only for men because they involve significant teaching and authority over other men:

1. Preaching to mixed congregations

Good preaching clearly involves teaching the Bible. Moreover, the preacher is in a position of authority because he is bringing the congregation the authoritative message of the Bible. So preaching to men and mixed congregations will be something we should only invite men to do (usually one of the senior male pastors).

2. Serving as an elder

The formal committee of voting elders of HBC are in a position of authority over men and women at our church. They give attention to the values of the church (including the teaching ministry), consider areas of church integrity and conduct, and make significant decisions regarding the church and bear the responsibility for doing so. So eldership at HBC is a ministry only for men. This includes the role of senior pastor.

However, because many women are greatly gifted in these areas and we value their wisdom and contributions, our eldership team includes the role of *advisor* which is open to both women and men. This means women's voices are being heard in the process of clarifying values and decision making.

Our position regarding these first two ministries is consistent with the values statement of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) of which our church is a member:

“As a fellowship we value men and women. Because we believe the scriptures endorse men and women together as equal partners in gospel ministry, but with sometimes different roles, we are committed to: encouraging and fostering the ministry of women in and among our churches; having suitably qualified men lead our churches, and hold the main teaching and preaching roles within them.”

FIEC Values Statement: <https://www.fiec.org.au/>

3. Leading a mixed Growth Group

Our Growth Group leaders teach the Bible in a small group context and take significant pastoral responsibility for people in the group. Therefore, we have decided that our mixed groups be led by men. However, mixed groups will nearly always have a female co-leader who helps the leader and serves the women in the group through teaching, encouragement and pastoral care.

PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE FOR WOMEN

As men and women serve God in a complementary way, there are many opportunities for women. These include ministries to women such as leading small group studies, one-to-one Bible reading, and preaching at seminars and conferences for women. There are also opportunities to minister to children in various kids and youth ministries.

Other ways to serve include working alongside men in different roles such as hosting Sunday church, leading ministry teams of men and women, sharing testimonies at church and through video, and leading the church in prayer.

Our church also operates a mentoring program and a ministry apprentice program for men and women. These programs equip people for greater responsibilities, further theological education, and future paid ministry and overseas mission.

CONCLUSION

We humbly hold these convictions and practices knowing that they are not only consistent with God's will but they are also good. Men are challenged to take loving responsibility for the wellbeing of the church, and women are equipped and encouraged to express their gifts in the service of others. We continue to pray to God for wisdom and his blessing as we seek to please him as women and men in Christ.

The Pastors of Hunter Bible Church

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