

An Island ECC positional paper on:

Women and Ministry

At Island Evangelical Community Church, it is necessary for us to delineate and affirm what we believe regarding the role of women in ministry. It is no secret that in our day, the role of women in the church is a rather controversial and divisive issue. At Island ECC, questions have been raised about the proper role of women in our ministry. Can women be elders or deacons? Can women serve communion, read scripture during worship, lead liturgy (prayer, confession of sin, the word of absolution, etc.), teach classes or lead small groups? These are valid questions. And it is not possible to simply give a piecemeal answer to the question of what women can do in ministry. We must couch these answers in a biblical and theological framework which gives a vision of how the roles of men and women in leadership and ministry all fit together. This we will attempt to do.

Currently, churches tend to fall into one of two errors regarding the role of women in the church. On the one hand, many of the more liberal churches have uncritically adopted the principles of secular feminism, and have opened up all of the leadership offices to women, not on the basis of scriptural conviction but on the basis of cultural conformity. On the other hand, many orthodox, Bible believing churches have remained too restrictive on the role of women in the church – some out of male superiority, some out of tradition, some out of wooden interpretations of scriptural passages, and others out of fear that they will be labeled “liberal.” Unfortunately, for some in our circles, one’s position on the role of women in the church has become a litmus test for conservative orthodoxy. We reject both cultural conformism and uncritical traditionalism. We desire to have a thoroughly biblical theology and practice of the role of women in ministry.

Fortunately, we are not alone in thinking about these issues. Many churches with whom we have a particular affinity have grappled with these issues, and have written position papers on the subject of the role of women in ministry. Their theological vision is basically the same as our own at Island ECC, and so we can build upon their work. It is not necessary in this paper for us to redo the biblical exegesis that they have done so well. In this paper, we state our basic position in terms of affirmations of what we believe and practice at Island ECC.

The position of Island ECC regarding women in ministry is summarised by the following paragraph:

The elders of Island ECC affirm that all positions of leadership and service in the church are open to women, except for the authoritative teaching and disciplinary roles which the scriptures, in 1 Timothy 2:12-14, reserve for men. In our system of government, these roles are embodied solely in the offices of minister and elder. Aside from these functions, women are encouraged to seek out all avenues of leadership and service, including teaching the scriptures, co-leading small groups, serving in various church leadership groups, exercising appropriate leadership roles in public worship, and in other ways exercising their gifts for the greater benefit of the body of Christ.

The following resources more fully delineate our position on the role of women in ministry:

- *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, section two, “Exegetical and Theological Studies,” especially chapters eight and nine. Wayne Grudem and John Piper, eds.
- *Fifty Crucial Questions: An Overview of Central Concerns about Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem
- *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, James Hurley. Hurley, a professor of counselling at Reformed Theological Seminary, gives a full length treatment of the biblical role of women in ministry.
- *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, CBMW.org
- *Manhood, Womanhood, and the Freedom to Minister*, John Piper
- *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: The Sermon Series*, John Piper
- *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch
- *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, Edmund P. Clowney
- *Women and Ministry*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tim and Kathy Keller

The following are specific affirmations and applications of this statement.

1. We affirm that men and women equally bear the image of the Triune God. The fundamental equality of men and women, therefore, is intrinsic to the Christian faith.
2. We affirm that the gospel brings the equality of men and women as equal heirs of salvation – that through union with Christ, both men and women are children of God, equally sharing in the privileges and benefits of salvation in Christ (Galatians 3:26-29).
3. We also affirm that the scriptures teach a principle of male leadership in the home and in the church. The husband/father in the home, and the pastors and elders in the church, serve as *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”). These relationships are analogous to the relation that the Father has with the Son and the Holy Spirit in the mystery of the Holy Trinity – all equal in divinity, but a submission by the Son and Spirit to the Father.
4. Concurring with the vast majority of confessional Christians now and throughout history, we affirm the teaching of the scriptures that the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament (teaching elder) is open only to men. Likewise, we affirm that the office of ruling elder is also properly limited to men, for in our tradition the lay elders join with the clergy (teaching elders) in exercising the teaching and ruling authority that in the scriptures (specifically in 1 Timothy 2:12) is restricted to men. Together, the ministers and elders serve as the “fathers” over the “household of God” (1 Timothy 3:15.) We confess, therefore, that these offices – and those ecclesiastical functions properly limited to those bearing these offices – are limited to men.
5. We believe that the church’s authoritative teaching and ruling ministries (minister and elder) are to be carried out by men. All other ministries, however, are open to all believers, male and female. This is based upon the gospel promise that all believers are priests and prophets, filled with the Holy Spirit, able to serve and build up the body of Christ with the whole array of spiritual gifts available to the church of Jesus Christ (Joel 2:28-29, Ephesians 4:1-16).
6. It is incumbent on the elders of Island ECC to carefully and consistently apply principles number 4 and 5 above to situations which will arise in the church. In other words, in each situation, the elders should not first ask the question, can a woman do this? Rather, the elders should first ask the question, should a pastor or elder alone do this ministry, or can any person do this ministry?