

The Role of Women at Northlake Church of Christ
Northlake Elders
February 13, 2010

Over the past five months we have led the congregation in study and conversation about the role of women in ministry and worship. It is time for us to provide a summary of what we are learning from Scripture and how we plan to move forward.

We acknowledge these truths:

1. We believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the timeless truth of God's word as revealed in the Bible. However, the unchanging truth of the gospel has to be applied in the ever-changing contexts of contemporary life.
2. In the few specific comments relating to the role of women, Paul was concerned that certain activities were creating a barrier to the gospel. For Paul, the life of the church should honor the gospel and create an environment conducive to the spread of the gospel. This concern is the context of the two prohibitive texts on gender (1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2). Men and women were acting in ways that hindered the gospel message. Following Paul's example, we believe that our practice of restricting women's roles creates a barrier for the gospel today.
3. We believe in God's call to unity for matters of faith and tolerance in other matters. Each of us has a sacred task to maintain the unity that God has created in the church (Eph 4:1-3). But we also know that in every generation, the journey of the church means that we must find our way into new circumstances and new situations. The way that we negotiate those new circumstances is by faithful reading of Scripture, prayer, discernment, conversation, and by the use of an important principle that became a core value for the Stone-Campbell movement. "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity." Thus in these matters of judgment and practice we are convicted by the importance of exercising love and restraint toward each other.
4. Although the gospel does not change, cultures do. Current American society allows women essentially the same rights and privileges as men—making discrimination on the basis of gender illegal. When we fail to reckon with such cultural realities, we hinder the spread of the gospel and bring reproach upon the church's witness. It took years to do so, but we have come to recognize this with regard to the institution of slavery, but still we linger over the matter of gender.
5. Over a century ago the Stone-Campbell churches wrestled with gender issues. The response was not uniform and different congregations took different routes. This historical backdrop reminds us of the particular task that falls to Northlake in Atlanta today—to constantly ask anew what it means for the church to faithfully demonstrate the gospel.

God's Sons and Daughters

God's promise through the ages came to fruition on the day of Pentecost not long after Jesus' resurrection. The promise was that God would send His Spirit upon all people, young and old, men and women (Acts 2:17ff.). God's gift was available to all—without distinction. This

release of God's Spirit in the preaching of Jesus Christ launched the beginnings of a new turn in history. The curse of the fall (Gen 3) finds reversal in Jesus Christ. The church is the new community, reflecting God's redemptive intention for the whole world.

We see how the gift of the Spirit upon God's people is worked out through the lens of Paul's letters. In Galatians 3:26ff., Paul makes the remarkable claim that in baptism the barriers of race, social status, and gender are altered. That is why Paul can argue so vigorously in 1 Corinthians that every Christian is a recipient of the Holy Spirit's gift and each person should be valued in the practice of that gift (1 Cor 12). To allow some to use their gifts and others to be restricted runs counter to the inclusive nature of the gospel message.

To be sure, there are two texts that set restrictions on women's participation in the church's life (1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2). However, when we work our way through the New Testament we also discover examples of women who are praying (1 Cor 11:5), prophesying (Acts 21:9), teaching (Acts 18:26), co-working, serving, and leading congregations (see Rom 16 and Phil 4). Since we believe that we must hear all of what Scripture has to say on a matter, our commitment is to hold the breadth of these wide claims together and seek for a "common sense" understanding. After much study and prayer, we have concluded that Paul made his restrictive statements to specific and limited circumstances.

The power of the gospel to transform hearts and lives launches a new creation, a new community. We are to share the good news of Jesus and the foundation of that sharing begins by the way in which we embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in our life together. That is why practices, such as the roles men and women play in our ministry and in our worship, matter.

Our vision for Northlake is for it to be a church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, so that people may be reconciled to God and their lives transformed. We long to see Northlake be a community where the sons and the daughters of God are free to exercise the gifts that God has given to them to build up the body and bear witness to the gospel in all aspects of our congregation's life. Thus, we encourage all—men and women alike—who have been blessed with talents to use them in full participation in Northlake's ministries and worship.

Thus, with confidence in God's leading, we affirm that both men and women who have the desire to serve should be permitted to fully participate in our assemblies, including activities such as reading Scripture, serving communion, teaching or offering prayers. Further, both men and women have served Northlake in the past as ministry leaders, and we re-affirm this practice. As a living community, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people", we can do no less as we embody the truth of the gospel (1 Pet 2:9).

Because we are a community bound together by the grace of God and nurtured by love and mutual respect, pursuing such a path means that we do so aware of a wide range of convictions. So our path forward is one characterized by sensitivity and appreciation for the many opinions that exist. We call upon the whole congregation to show forbearance and love to all, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ is honored by our words and our conduct.