

The Role of Women at Plainfield Christian Church

Our deep desire is to equip the women and men of Plainfield Christian Church to be actively engaged in our mission to help Hendricks County become fully alive in Jesus.

There is no such thing as a healthy church where one gender flourishes while the other languishes. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). The need for kingdom workers is so great that the church needs all hands on deck, eager to serve. We want all our sisters and brothers at Plainfield Christian Church to thrive in their giftedness as we partner together with the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's mission.

So, what role do women play in the mission of Plainfield Christian Church?

Here's a quick summary:

- We believe that the Bible teaches a complementarian view of gender. This means that both men and women are equal in value, though not identical in role.
- We equip both men and women to serve in ministry and leadership. We believe that women can and should participate in every ministry of the church and can function in any leadership role except that of eldership or "the preacher." Those lead shepherding roles are reserved in Scripture for men. This means:
 - We gladly ordain women into vocational ministry.
 - We eagerly desire to equip women to teach in a variety of contexts.
 - The "weekend sermon" is a moment of authoritative teaching for the whole gathered body of PCC, and the most visible expression of the elders' authority. Thus, that moment is reserved for men who have been approved by the elders.
- We champion the goodness of God's vision for womanhood and manhood.
 - In our cultural moment of gender confusion, we seek to model clarity and love, because God's design for masculinity and femininity ultimately leads to flourishing for all people.

We follow Jesus who loved protecting women, healing women, befriending women, being supported by women, instructing women, and sending women. Jesus came through a woman, attacked the lust that objectifies women, healed women, condemned divorces that dispose of women, and ministered to women that nobody else cared for. Jesus chose women to be the first witnesses of the resurrection and proclaimers of the gospel. Women were the first at the manger and the last at the cross.

In all these discussions, we desire to model His heart.

If you want to understand our convictions in more detail and learn how God's Word forms the foundation for our beliefs and practices, keep reading...

How did we come to our convictions on the role of women at PCC?

All discussions of theology and the practical outworking of those convictions in the life of the church begin and end with God's Word as our first and final authority. This simple but formative conviction is evident in Scripture itself (Psalm 19:7-11; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). As we operate from that conviction, born of a desire to faithfully understand and wisely apply God's Word, we follow three basic hermeneutical principles:

First, we adhere to the principle of Scriptural Harmony. We do not interpret any single text in isolation. Rather, we seek to understand each individual Scripture in light of all of Scripture. God's Word does not contradict itself, so the teachings of Scripture will speak in harmony with one another.

Second, we adhere to the principle of Interpretive History. God's eternal commands were written to specific historical contexts. We seek to understand Scripture in the same way that the original audience would've, thereby principalizing the text to wisely apply it in our unique context. We also value the various interpretations and applications of a particular text throughout church as helpful, though not authoritative.

Third, we adhere to the principle of Applicational Humility. As we apply the principles of Scripture to our specific context, we will do so humbly. While God's word is infallible and authoritative, our particular interpretation of it is not. We are fallible human beings, and desire to humbly entertain the possibility that our understanding and application of God's Word might be misguided. With open minds and open Bibles, we will give charity to our brothers and sisters who think differently and ask that they give the same to us.

So, letting these three principles frame our discussion, let's ask again:

What role do women play in the mission of Plainfield Christian Church?

The Principle of Scriptural Harmony

In accordance with our statement of faith, we want to faithfully understand the broad sweep of the Scriptural metanarrative to rightly interpret God's design for biblical manhood and womanhood in the church. This falls into the category of theological anthropology. Anthropology is the study of mankind. It answers the question, "Who are we?" Theological anthropology goes a step further. It answers the question, "Who has God made us to be?" Here are the three main tenets of theological anthropology:

First, we are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27, *"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."* This means that since we are created, we do not belong to ourselves. God made us, so He defines who we are. To truly know ourselves, we must first know Him. We are created *in His image*.

Second, we are corrupted by sin. The image of God is blurred and distorted in each of us, male or female, because of our rebellion against Him. We still reflect God's nature, but while we are sinful on this side of eternity, those reflections will always be warped.

Third, we are redeemed in Christ. Colossians 1:15, "*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*" Jesus is God's image. From the very beginning, when God made us in His image, He intended us to be like Jesus. As we experience union with Christ, he takes our sinful distortions of God's image and restores Himself in us to make us who we were always meant to be...fully male and fully female in the image of our Creator.

So, what does this have to do with the role of women in the church? Let's apply the three tenets of theological anthropology to this question:

We are created in the image of God.

God intends for men and women to share in reflecting His image to the world while using their gifts in complementary ways. These distinctions do not stem from cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, but from God's created order as revealed in Scripture. Scripture clearly teaches that God created both genders as complementary bearers of his image, equal in dignity in worth, but not interchangeable in role (Genesis 1:27-28; Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6). Specifically, Genesis 2:18 describes the woman as a "helper suitable" (*ezer kenegdo*) to the man. This is not a derogatory term; in fact it is most often used referring to God himself. This term means that the woman is equal in value but not identical in function to the man. They are complimentary partners.

Throughout the Old Testament, the consistent pattern is that the primary leadership of God's people was entrusted to men. Every published prophet was a man, and all priests were men. However, women did have occasional prominent leadership roles among God's people. Women like Miriam (Exodus 15:20, 21) and other musically gifted women (1 Chronicles 25:5, 6; Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67) led God's people in worship. Deborah served as an admirable judge (Judges 4:4). She, along with Miriam, Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3) were also called prophetesses.

This pattern of leadership continues in the New Testament. All 12 apostles were men, and the stipulations for eldership in the early church assume that men will be the ones filling those leadership roles. Again, in 1 Timothy 2:12, 13, Paul grounds this pattern not in cultural particularities, but in God's created order. This complementarian conviction, rightly practiced, should always lead to the beneficial flourishing of both men and women. However, we know that the roles of men and women in the church have not always been either rightly understood or rightly practiced. This brings us to our second tenet:

We are corrupted by sin.

To our great shame and the pain of countless people, the roles of men and women have often been misunderstood, unintentionally misapplied, and intentionally abused not just in the world, but in God's church. God himself said that because of sin, conflict around gender roles would be a part of the curse that creation is under (Genesis 3:16). We reject any interpretation of a complementarian view of gender that leads to the abuse, marginalization, or discrimination of women. This leads to our third tenet:

We are redeemed in Christ.

The New Testament clearly articulates that both men and women have an equal share in Christ and the benefits of salvation in Him (Galatians 3:28). Flowing from this union with Christ, both men and women are now members of God's household, the family of God. The primary relationship then, between all Christian men and women is that of sibling love. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, partnering with one another in the mission of Christ while serving and sacrificing for one another in love.

God created and redeemed men and women to reflect his image together, which means that the church of Jesus Christ can never fully reflect His beauty to the world unless both genders are fully activated in the life of the church. Women have received no less of God's Spirit than their brothers and are recipients of the Spirit's gifting in the same way that men are. Peter clearly quotes the prophet Joel on Pentecost, preaching that both women and men will prophesy as the Spirit empowers them (Acts 2:17). For this reason, each believer needs the gifting of her or his fellow believers (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

The New Testament regularly portrays women using their gifts in non-leadership acts of service. We see Martha feeding Jesus and his disciples (Luke 10:40), Tabitha making clothing for widows (Acts 9:39), Nympha hosting a church in her home (Colossians 4:15), and Mary working very hard to help Paul and the church behind the scenes (Romans 16:6).

However, we also see women using their gifts in leadership and teaching roles within the church as well. Jesus chose women to be the first witnesses and proclaimers of his resurrection (Matthew 28:1, 7). We see instructions for women to teach other women (Titus 2:3-5) and even equip male leaders of the church to become better teachers, as Priscilla and Aquila do in Acts 18:26. We see Anna called a prophetess (Luke 2:36) along with the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8, 9). Phoebe was a deacon (Romans 16:1) and Junia (Romans 16:7) seems to be called an apostle (lower-case "a"), meaning "one who was sent" in the same way that Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25) were. Paul describes Euodia and Synteché as his partners in ministry, contending for the gospel in Philippians 4:2, 3.

So, the harmony of Scripture throughout the Old and New Testaments seems to indicate a consistent pattern of regular, ongoing male leadership of God's people, along with occasional moments of female leadership. How, then, does that play itself out in the daily function of the local church? From here, we must move to the principle of Interpretive History.

The Principle of Interpretive History

As we move from our complementarian understanding of gender to how those convictions play themselves out in the local church, we must look at how the original readers of Scripture understood God's Word, and how it has historically been applied.

For example, the most influential single text related to women's roles in the church is 1 Timothy 2:12. Someone might read it and think, "Doesn't 1 Timothy 2:12 clearly state that a woman is not allowed to teach a man?" But we must remember the principle of Scriptural Harmony. Priscilla and Aquila clearly taught Apollos. So then, 1 Timothy 2:12 must simply mean that a woman can simply not teach a man publicly in a church worship service, correct?

It is true that 1 Timothy 2 is about the public assembly of the church. However, the principle of Scriptural Harmony combined with the principle of Interpretive History leads us to believe that 1 Timothy 2 can be more fully understood in light of 1 Corinthians 11:5. 1 Corinthians 11 is, admittedly, one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament to interpret. However, in verse 5, Paul clearly informs us that women prophesied in the early church's worship gatherings. We know that prophesy is more proclamation than prediction, akin to much of what we know as "preaching" today.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that a woman who prophesies in the church's worship assembly should keep her head covered, which would culturally indicate submission to the church's male leaders. The principle here is clear: A woman is allowed to prophesy while the church is gathered to worship, even when men are present, so long as she does so in humble submission to the God-appointed male leaders of the church. Therefore, whatever Paul is saying in 1 Timothy 2, he must not be implying that women can never teach men or on any occasion proclaim the gospel truth to the gathered church.

So what, then, was Paul prohibiting in 1 Timothy 2:12?

The principle of Interpretive History reminds us that the original, Greek-speaking hearers of 1 Timothy, would recognize that Paul uses a nuanced grammatical construction in this verse. The phrase “to teach” (*didaskein*) is a present-tense infinitive, rather than an aorist-tense infinitive. “To teach” (aorist) implies teaching on a given occasion, a snapshot of one particular occurrence. “To teach” (present) implies an ongoing state of being a teacher.

Thus, when Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12 that he does not permit a woman “to teach” (present-tense infinitive), we do not believe that he is restricting women from ever teaching on any occasion in the church. Rather, we believe the original hearers would’ve understood this to mean that a woman should not be the ongoing, regular teacher of the church.

This, then, begs the question: Who should the ongoing, regular teachers of the church be?

The answer comes in the context of 1 Timothy 2:12. Just a few verses later, Paul reminds us that the elders are to be “able to teach” the church (1 Timothy 3:2). These God-ordained, male leaders are to be the ongoing, regular teachers of the church. Therefore, in 1 Timothy 2:12, the principle of Interpretive History leads us to believe that Paul is saying that he does not permit women to be elders.

In Scripture, the elders (also called pastors or overseers) are called to lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2), teach and preach God’s Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9), defend the church from false teaching both inside and out (Acts 20:17, 28-31; Titus 1:9), pray for the sick and the weak (James 5:14), equip God’s people for good works (Ephesians 4:11-12), and practice sound scriptural wisdom in judging theological issues (Acts 15).

Elders are not the only people expected to engage in those tasks. Each member of the body of Christ is called to care about theological purity, learn and teach God’s Word, pray for others, and equip their fellow saints for good works. However, elders perform these tasks with a unique level of spiritual authority, and only they bear the full weight of holding the church accountable to God’s Word. If a non-elder church member, male or female, were to have a concern about false doctrine within the church, their duty would be to bring that concern to the attention of the elders, a body of chosen men, who alone have the authority to exercise appropriate church discipline when needed.

The qualifications for eldership are primarily listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. These qualifications assume that those who hold the office of elder will be male. This complementarian interpretation aligns with common practice throughout church history. It also harmonizes with our understanding of the principle of Scriptural Harmony, which reveals the biblical pattern of ongoing male leadership of God’s people sprinkled with occasional moments of female leadership.

So, then, how does this complementarian conviction influence the role of women at Plainfield Christian Church? This leads to our third principle:

The Principle of Applicational Humility

This is the most difficult, visible, and controversial aspect of our theological journey, which is why we call this the principle of Applicational Humility. We acknowledge that many God-honoring, Bible-believing, well-intentioned churches and believers will come to different conclusions as to how these theological convictions are applied. Our desire is to hold our conclusions humbly, thereby to recognize our own penchant for error, while also extending the hand of fellowship to those who think differently than we do.

To some, our application of these complementarian convictions will sound oppressive and restrictive. At worst, our beliefs could be perceived as patriarchy and misogyny. We admit that tragically, throughout history, Scripture has been used to repress women's rights. But the Bible, rightly interpreted, always leads to flourishing for all people, male and female alike. At Plainfield Christian Church, the application of our complementarian convictions can be split into five categories:

Eldership

As previously established, the clear teaching of Scripture is that the ongoing, regular leaders of the church are to be men who meet the requirements set forth in Scripture. This also includes the role of "the preacher" in the church. Therefore, only men will serve as elders and "the preacher" at Plainfield Christian Church.

The role of "deacon," though not currently used at Plainfield Christian Church, is open to both men and women, as clearly attested to in the New Testament.

Public Worship Leadership

Plainfield Christian Church will continue to have women teach and exhort the congregation during our weekend worship experience through songs, prayers, leading communion, baptizing, testimonies, hosting, giving Scriptural insights, storytelling, interviews, and other mediums that are deemed effective while also operating under the authority of the elders.

Teaching and Preaching

We offer myriad opportunities for women to teach. As established, there is clear Scriptural precedent for women teaching in the church under the authority of the elders. We affirm that the Holy Spirit has gifted many women in teaching, and desire to equip these sisters and give them opportunities to use those and grow in those gifts. We are eager to provide gifted women and men with opportunities to teach

God's Word in various contexts (including, but not limited to: student services, kids' worship, classes, seminars, forums, retreats, conferences, chapel, groups, etc.).

The only type of teaching not available to women is the "sermon" portion of the weekly worship experience for the whole gathered body of the church. The conviction of the elders at Plainfield Christian Church is that, while the "weekend sermon" is not a category expressly found in Scripture, it is the most visible modern expression of the elders' authority. Thus, those who preach the weekend sermon do so with the implied authority of an elder. Wisdom demands, then, that the "preaching moment" in the weekend worship experience be reserved for men who have been approved by the elders.

Staff Roles

Women are allowed and encouraged to hold positions of leadership and authority in the life of Plainfield Christian Church, both in volunteer and paid-staff capacities. At the time of this writing, the only staff position that may not be held by a woman is that of Senior Minister. Since all of PCC's staff works under the authority of the elders, it is also acceptable for a woman to serve in a position that makes her the "boss" or "supervisor" of men who serve alongside her. We eagerly desire more women to step up into visible and influential leadership roles at Plainfield Christian Church, to better serve and equip God's people.

Ordination

In Scripture, there is a clear precedent for "commissioning" and the "laying on of hands" for specific ministry tasks (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:22). Though the practice of ordination varies greatly throughout church history and from denomination to denomination, we desire to embrace a form of ordination that elevates the sacred calling of ministry while also allowing the ministers commissioned, both male and female, to function more closely under the headship of the elders.

For these reasons, we affirm that women are called to serve in vocational Christian ministry, and that the elders of Plainfield Christian Church are willing to ordain and oversee women into the specific ministerial roles to which they have been called. As part of their commitment to oversight, the elders reserve the right to rescind or revisit this ordination if an individual's role or calling changes.

As ordained ministers, both men and women are permitted and expected to engage in the general ministerial duties of pastoral counseling, crafting specialized biblical teaching, leading discipleship initiatives, officiating weddings and funerals, etc.

Conclusion

God's roles for men and women are designed to be complementary, not competitive. We know that some will read these conclusions and perceive them as too conservative, while others will see them as too progressive. Jesus said that above all, the world will know we are his followers not by our theological convictions, but by the way we love one another (John 13:35). By prayerfully applying the principles of Scriptural Harmony, Interpretive History, and Applicational Humility, we pray that God's people, both male and female, at Plainfield Christian Church will be effectively equipped to love God, love others, and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

– *The elders of Plainfield Christian Church*