

Brookhaven Presbyterian Church Position Statement Concerning Women in Ministry

Dear Brookhaven Presbyterian Church,

The following is a document articulating the position of our church with respect to women in ministry. As this is a complex topic, we are presenting our opinions in numerous areas.

We are convinced that in Scripture there are sometimes truths and practices that may seem to be in tension with one another on the surface. We believe that these are tensions God calls us to manage, not necessarily to solve.

This conviction is reflected in our church's vision, specifically in two areas. First, we believe we are called to be both confessional and ecumenical: fully committed to the theological convictions of historic Presbyterianism, especially as expressed in the Westminster Standards, and also committed to unity within a church where members disagree significantly on both primary and secondary issues as well as what constitutes a primary or secondary issue. Second, we believe we are to be a church of both word and deed: we are fully committed to both theological depth and systemic ministry to the poor and our neighbors in need.

Our approach to women in ministry derives from the same principle. We believe Scripture teaches that men and women are equal in value in the eyes of God and also distinct in the nature of their reflection of the image of God. Holding these two truths in tension and love is a difficult task that eludes humanity.

In light of the current circumstances within our denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America), we hope to use the following position statement to guide our practice and approach.

Signed,
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Preliminary Principles

1. In our grass-roots tradition, the foundational body is the local church and the foundational court is the local session. Additionally, the primary setting to practice our faith is the local church.
2. Therefore, the most important metric of faithfulness to God for the leaders of Brookhaven Presbyterian Church is the unity, peace, and purity of Brookhaven Presbyterian Church.
3. We also have an obligation of relationship and submission to our denomination. For the reasons listed above, this obligation is secondary to the obligation to our local church.
4. It is necessary for all parties to strive to spend an appropriate amount of time on this issue: not too much, not too little. We do not wish to take any significant issue lightly, nor is it good stewardship to spend too much time on this issue.
5. We do not know the future, nor how it will come about. The call on us is to be faithful in the moment.
6. It is important for every congregant to remember that there are people in our congregation who hold an opposing opinion for any variety of reasons. Thus, the posture of every heart must be one of love toward those who differ.

Women in the Church and Complementarian and Egalitarian Ecclesial Structures

1. Since the Fall, women have been mistreated by men, both individually and institutionally (on a scale ranging from abuse down to micro aggression). This is sin, and it happens in religious and secular structures alike.
2. Complementarian ecclesial structures in practice, have the potential to enable this mistreatment of women.
3. There are many potential reasons for this, but one might be that complementarian ideals sometimes exist in tension with complementarian practice. That is, the best articulations of complementarianism affirm that men and women are alike created in the image of God; that men reflect aspects of God's character that women may not reflect, likewise women reflect aspects of God's character that men may not reflect; and together men and women reflect God's character more fully than either or men or women do alone.
4. Thus, the best complementarian ideals affirm equal value to men and women with complementary roles. However, most complementarian churches do not in practice create complementary ecclesial structures for men and women.
5. On the extreme end, complementarian ecclesial structures can tend toward chauvinism.

6. Egalitarian ecclesial structures attempt to structurally address the mistreatment and marginalization of women in ministry by addressing the lack of female representation in leadership.
7. Egalitarian ecclesial structures, as a construct, do not inherently fix the problem articulated above. Rather, the problem egalitarian ecclesial structures fix is the lack of access to all levels of leadership.
8. Egalitarian churches have governing structures that attempt to facilitate women's voices from leadership positions. This may provide a structural check on chauvinistic sin, though the structures do not themselves provide accountability for that sin, which requires introspection, repentance, and deep conversation. With respect to the male/female dynamic, until these things happen, there will continue to be power differentials between men and women, even while men presume equality.
9. Because of this, on the extreme end, egalitarian constructs can tend toward ignorance of gender differences and power dynamics.
10. In addition, churches with egalitarian ecclesial structures are not intrinsically immune to sinful mistreatment and marginalization of women.
11. Churches and denominations with egalitarian ecclesial structures must still do work to root out this sin and alleviate its effects.
12. Any individual church, egalitarian or complementarian, may be relatively better or worse in rooting out gender-related sinful tendencies. In any particular church there will always remain work to be done toward sanctification (WCF VI:5).
13. These are two different issues: 1) the sinful tendency to mistreat women; 2) whether or not women can be ordained, though the issues are related.
14. We believe failing to love and affirm women is a greater threat to the PCA than liberal drift.

Biblical and Theological Considerations

1. Though at one time, this issue served as a proxy for embracing faithfulness to God's word, we believe today difference of opinion of women's ordination may fall within boundaries of orthodoxy.
2. In the early-mid 20th century, Christian arguments for ordaining women in Protestant denominations were most often made on cultural bases as opposed to scriptural ones, e.g. "the culture has moved past patriarchal norms; so should the church." This was in part because modernist churches and Christians had adopted a lower view of scriptural authority in general. Such cultural arguments, broadly speaking, are *sui generis* not based on Scripture and can tend to stem from and lead to moral relativism. Thus, we do not place a high value on the cultural arguments for women's ordination.
3. In recent decades, Christian arguments for ordaining women in theologically conservative circles have been made on the basis of Scripture, from Christians

who hold a high view of the authority of Scripture. We would do well to listen, learn, and test the scriptures as it relates to any and all positions addressed by faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

4. It must be recognized that there are faithful Christians on each side of this issue that also see the other side not merely as an issue of conscience or culture, but one of sin.
5. We are collectively very informed of the biblical arguments for and against the ordination of women to office. We do not find any arguments one way or another 100% convincing.
6. To some extent, opinions about the issue of women's ordination shake out along cultural lines. People from traditional cultures, or with culturally traditional tendencies, tend to appreciate complementarian ideals more, and people from non-traditional cultures, or with culturally non-traditional tendencies, tend to appreciate egalitarian ideals more. In evangelical (in the classical sense of the word—here emphasizing those with a high view of Scripture) circles, both complementarian and egalitarian groups find justification for their view from well-reasoned biblical arguments.
7. The issue of ordination of women cannot be considered a theological issue that is essential for salvation, nor is it necessarily a fundamental principle of the theology conservative and reformed tradition.
8. In such situations, the biblical principle of Romans 14 and the strong bearing with the weak must be brought into focus. Each Christian must think of his or her position as the strong one, and what it looks like to bear with the weaker position.

Churches and Denominations

1. It is imperative for a particular church to be a submitting member of a denomination.
2. Denominations have pros and cons, and there are myriad reasons why a church would align with one denomination over another.
3. Once a church is in a denomination, it is not a small thing to leave the denomination. It is also not such a large thing that issues of conscience or pastoral care should preclude a particular church from leaving.
4. Maintaining the peace and purity of Brookhaven Presbyterian Church is our primary task. Here again, the principles of Romans 14 are paramount.
5. Every denomination inhabits its own merits and demerits.
6. It is incumbent on any church, when it faces a challenging issue and/or matter of conscience with respect to its denomination, to make a good faith effort to remain in its denomination.
7. Since our denomination is complementarian, and given the challenges regarding gender articulated above, it is incumbent on our particular church to address

these to the best of our ability so as to glorify God by recognizing and repenting of sin regarding gender and power differentials, and to recognize and validate women as created of equal value and worth in the eyes of God.

8. If our church were or ever is in an egalitarian denomination, we would need to create structures to ensure checks against other sins in the same spectrum of gender and power structures.

Offices and Tradition

1. Our denomination, the PCA, subscribes to a 2-office vision of church authority (elder and deacon).
2. The number and nature of offices that are appropriate for the church is a question with no majority decision within Christianity.
3. It is also an issue of ongoing debate in Presbyterianism. Different Presbyterians argue for 2, 2.5, 3, and 4 offices in the church.
4. There is a lack of agreement both in principle and practice on what the office of deacon is and ought to entail. For instance, the BCO seems to intend that deacons are to collectively function as a finance committee. However, this does not seem to be the majority practice in the PCA.
5. Whatever Phoebe is in Romans 16:1, she is not a generic servant. The vocation she takes on as Paul's benefactor and emissary may not be an official office at the time of the writing of Romans, but it is evidently more important and/or authoritative than lay leadership.
6. The women mentioned in 2 Timothy 2 may be considered in a similar manner. In the context of Paul speaking of offices, it is difficult to understand these women as being the same in vocation as unordained men.
7. In any event, Paul call (refers to) Phoebe as a deacon or deaconess.
8. Thus, there is more biblical support for referring to women as deacons than for prohibiting referring to women as deacons.
9. Therefore, although BCO 7-3 is theologically consistent and coherent with respect to polity, we believe it goes beyond scripture.
10. Even if it is derived from tradition rather than from clear and unanimous exegesis, it is incoherent to subscribe to Presbyterianism and resist the tradition behind historic offices, regardless of how many offices one believes there ought to be.
11. Therefore, the practice of withholding ordination to the office of deacon is incoherent from a polity perspective.

Brookhaven Presbyterian Church

1. Many people in our congregation are deeply connected to our current denomination. To not be a part of our denomination for some would cause significant grief and unease.

2. Many people in our congregation and denomination are extremely concerned about our denomination's history with respect to women. It is a topic that causes them significant grief and unease.
3. Many people can be described as both of the above.
4. One of the major questions in our late modern age, no less so than in any denomination or individual institution, and most importantly for us at BPC, is this: can two people with widely different convictions exist together in a relationship of fellowship?
5. It is much easier to answer this question in the affirmative when one finds oneself in a position of relatively greater power. People in that position must figure out how to love those in positions of lesser power better and understand their situations, feelings, and arguments better. For people in this position, a high level of deference is Christ-like. Here the principles of Romans 14 are relevant.
6. It is easier to answer this question in the affirmative when the topic is subjectively less important. It is more difficult to answer it affirmatively when the topic is subjectively more important.
7. Our church has people who are egalitarian, complementarian, and unsure in their biblical and theological conviction. Opinions become more complex when taking into account differences in opinion about ordination of elders vs. ordination of deacons, and about how important of an issue this is for each individual person. These opinions all exist in a spherical spectrum, not on a linear one.
8. Because our church is in a complementarian denomination, many people are actively submitting their egalitarian views to the church for the sake of unity.
9. We believe that the issue of whether women can serve as deacons is adiaphorous (neither commanded nor forbidden in the Bible). Many in our church believe the same is true of women's ordination. The issue of unity in our church is not an adiaphorous issue; rather, it is of primary importance.
10. For issues such as these, it is vital that we maintain a posture of mutual submission (Rom. 14).
11. To put a fine point on it, leaders have a higher calling to pursue unity in our local body than to hold to adiaphorous positions and structures.
12. It is the nature of fallen humans to grasp for power. This is true both for men and women. The message that Almighty God emptied himself of power in the person of Jesus to bring us to salvation, and that we are called to be imitators of Christ is infinitely applicable, and especially in this situation.