

Male's and Female's Roles in the Agape Church of Christ

Agape Core Values and Roles

The Agape Church of Christ has three core values: Agape Love, Relationship, and Empowerment. When we began Agape in September 2006 we realized that empowerment involved training and developing all people for leadership. As the Spirit empowers us to be like Jesus (Romans 8:26) so we must empower all people to be what God has called them to be. Males and females must equally be empowered to reflect the honor of Jesus and become what God has called them to be (Galatians 3:26-29). While sometimes God has differing responsibilities for males and females (as God has differing responsibilities for people in the church) it is important that we at Agape help all people be what they can be in Christ.

Empowerment takes courage. It is important that we not refuse to empower people because we fear what other people, Christians, or churches might think. It is also important that we not refuse to empower people because we fear the "appearance" of something that is considered false teaching. Empowering people means that we boldly support them being what God has called them to be and support their fulfilling God's mission even if others feel this is risky.

History and Gender Roles

The churches of Christ believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In the churches of Christ we commit to practicing what the Bible teaches and make no test of fellowship anything not discussed in the scriptures. *Over the past few decades we have fought for the rights of African-Americans, children, those outside the church, and women. Our history has its injustices to people from the previous groups but at key points in our history the voices of men and women have risen to oppose these injustices and call us to change.* In most cases these voices have come from our educational institutions. While these voices created controversy, through time we have come to appreciate their courage and accept their wisdom.

Over the past few decades males and females have felt oppressed by our doctrines and traditions concerning the roles of men and women. Again, the educational institutions have called us to reflect on the scriptures, our practices, and our ministries. Because we in the churches of Christ practice our faith without any central organization and controlling congregations we have had the freedom to study "women's roles" and practice our beliefs without making it a test of fellowship. As with the issue of racism, each congregation has had the chance to explore the Bible and restudy our stance on various teachings.

As a minister working in the churches of Christ I have been part of these discussions. It has been frustrating at times. Frustrating—not because we didn't "get our way," but because we watched leaders operate out of fear.

- Fear, because we knew our stance was questionable and open to change, but we didn't want to get too close to the "slippery slope."
- Fear, because we were men and did not pay the cost of asking women to submit and not argue our decisions, even though we knew they could.
- Fear, because we would rather be safe and not take risks for the kingdom of God.
- Fear, because we secretly talked about churches that took these risks but would never take a stand and either embrace these churches or tell them to their face that we could not accept their stance.
- Fear, because we chose not to create safe environments for our churches to openly discuss these issues.
- Fear, because we called them liberal for holding these views.
- Fear, because we chose to hold to the older scholarship on women's issues as authentic but would not eagerly examine the research from our current scholars.
- Fear, because we chose not to allow females to enter the chambers where we had these discussions.

How does one repent of this fear? How do we become a people who operate out of courage? These questions have guided us as we try to develop a church that empowers all people—including females.

Women have felt oppressed by some of the traditional views of women's roles in the churches. First, in order to avoid the appearances of "giving women too much permission to lead" women in many churches have been expected to be silent in the worship service and have not been given positions in the church which involved the title "minister" or "leadership." Second, women have been relegated to the tasks of teaching children, until the boys reach 13 years of age or are baptized, serving children, preparing and serving food outside of the worship services, leading prayers only in the presence of women, supporting men as they pray, preach, teach, or speak, or administrative work within the church. Finally, women have had to sit in church between set hours of worship and listen while men and boys (with or without Godly moral characters) willingly or unwillingly take on the tasks of serving food, speaking, or praying during the designated "worship services."

Unfortunately most of these practices are not clearly taught or forbidden in the scriptures. However, churches have chosen to ask women to submit to these traditions because they want to avoid the appearances of "giving women leadership in the church."

Agape and Gender Roles

Agape will empower males and females rather than operate out of fear. The Apostle John states (1 John 4:18) "There is no fear in love (Agape)." Agape will not be led or driven by fear

but by courage. We will continue to follow our understanding of the Bible by not making an issue of “what the scriptures don’t teach” and by practicing what we see the Bible “stating and calling us to do.”

Freedom for Both

First, we believe that Galatians 3:26-29 states that males and females are free in Christ. In Genesis 1 males and females are both in the image of God. We are one, even though we are physically and anatomically different, and we must remove any form of disrespect, misogyny, or gender discrimination from Jesus’ kingdom.¹ Empowerment means that we teach males and females to be allies and partners in the work of the kingdom. It also means that we do not tolerate any disrespect of others and work to provide respect for males and females.

1 Corinthians 14

Second, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 states that women are to be silent in the assembly, not speak, and should ask their husbands questions at home.² While this has been interpreted to mean that women are not to make a sound in church various interpretations indicate that this is a problematic understanding of the passage. Paul allows the women to prophesy (preach) in the church with their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11). He also allows them to be present in the assembly (something frowned upon in Roman culture). In addition to this, most churches only understand this passage to refer to women teaching or speaking in the assembly. However, women are allowed to sing, speak to each other, laugh, and say amen. Finally, the previous statement “as in all the congregations of the saints...” is attached to the beginning of verse 33, “God is not a God of disorder but of peace...”

The text of 1 Corinthians 14 is a chapter discussing worship. Paul is calling the group to a sense of order in the worship. This involves speaking in languages, interpreting languages, and prophesying (preaching). These are preaching/speaking tasks that claim divine authority in the assembly. Paul is asking women not to partake in these gifts during worship. Since women being present in the assembly was a controversial issue (in the Roman empire) it seems likely that Paul is trying to prevent the church from being targeted by Roman officials. This may explain his prohibition in this context. However, this is limited to teaching that claims authority from God such as preaching or calling the church to a new vision. This does not apply to singing, translating or using sign language, announcing events, sharing beliefs, or praying.

¹For more on our stance on males, females, and misogyny see: Ron Clark, *Am I Sleeping With the Enemy: Males and Females in God’s Image* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

²For a deeper discussion on the interpretation of this passage, other commentators, and women’s issues see: Ron Clark, *The Church of Agape: Paul’s Letter to Emerging Corinth* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2010).

At Agape, we understand this worship text to suggest that at Corinth (specifically), women were encouraged to prophesy with their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11) but also charged to not preach or teach *at times* in the assembly. We limit this to the sermon but feel that the text says nothing concerning facilitating a communion discussion, entering into dialogue during the sermon or testimony time, singing, announcements, or sharing during worship.

One observation must be discussed. Few churches of Christ actually believe and practice that women be completely silent in their assemblies. The majority believe that women can talk but do not allow them to preach, pray, or give announcements. *They admit that Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 14 are limited to instructional roles. However, they choose to keep women in their seats during communion, announcements, and worship teams because they do not want to give the appearance of women "being in authority."* They see nothing wrong with having immature 13 year old boys, male children, or adult males (who struggle with pornography and other sins) perform these roles during worship. They admit that this is a grey area. However, at Agape we believe that this is a stance out of fear. It also slaps women in the face and tells them that they cannot do what scripture allows them to do (how sad it is that women for decades sit quietly in their seats because a male child or male in sin is given preference to them). If we are willing to bend scriptural practice to allow any male to serve, why can't we operate out of courage to explore an area not forbidden by the text? Is it right to reject a church that explores the freedoms of the text and empowering women yet clearly submits to the limits of the text? Is it right to "oppress" females because we, as males, feel that freedom is too costly?

1 Timothy 2

Third, in 1 Timothy 2 Paul asks for the men to raise holy hands in prayer and women to dress modestly, learn in quietness and silence, and not teach or have authority over a male. This is not a worship text but reflects Paul's earlier statement (1 Timothy 2:1-2) that the church live quiet lives. This is done by males being gentle, non-violent, and having pure prayers. Women, lead this live by dressing modestly, living peaceful (quiet is the Greek word) lives, and not discipling males.

In the ancient world teaching and authority were terms used for discipleship. Discipleship was a one to one relationship where a superior developed a relationship with an inferior. It was a relationship of power and authority. Ancient teaching was not limited to standing and speaking, conveying information, or saying a prayer before a group. Teaching involved discipleship which was relational and authoritarian. In the ancient world, a woman who disciple a group of men would have brought dishonor to a church and would have been inappropriate in their culture. This is also why Paul encouraged Titus (Titus 2:1-8) to have the women teach women and men teach men.

Application

Because of this, *we at Agape feel that women should be empowered to do ministry with women. To give women titles, financial compensation, and call them leaders in their ministries does not violate the scriptures, nor does it violate what God has for them to do.* Likewise, to hinder women from fulfilling these ministry positions because we fear what others will think, is a sign of an immature faith and a resistance to God's leading.

We also feel that the scriptures teach that women should not hold positions of leadership which express power over males such as discipling, mentoring, and shepherding. Due to this we choose to continue to appoint males as senior ministers, elders, and discipleship leaders.

Concerning women preaching, this should be under the support and decision of the senior minister, elders, or lead church planter. These leaders should be careful to follow Paul's teaching that men not be placed in a discipling relationship under female leaders. This may include preaching but should be considered if the leadership believes it is important for a female to present a spiritual message at any time.

It is also an important practice for wives of elders, ministers, and church planters to be considered co-leaders with their husbands.³ An elder couple, deacon couple, and church plant couple can effectively develop males and females by working as a team. The Bible does mention that elders, deacons, and ministers have wives who work with them and accompany them in ministry (1 Corinthians 9; 1 Timothy 3). Suggesting that these couples are leaders does not suggest that women can disciple males but that the couple works together. It should be stressed that males discipling females is also a risky situation and that males should focus on developing relationships and authority with other males.

Finally, at Agape we understand "leadership" as "facilitation." Too often churches believe that leadership is "authority over others." However, Jesus states that the greatest is the servant and that the disciples not "lord it over" others (Luke 22:25-30). Often we hear church leaders state that leadership is service or that they are servant leaders. Yet, when it comes to females, those who are the true servants in the church are barred from leadership because they are told they cannot have "authority over males." This is odd is leadership service, authority, or a mixture of both. Women are prevented from being leaders (who are servants) because as leaders they would be "over men." Yet these leaders continue to suggest that leaders are not over people, but are servants. Unfortunately this is a confusing stance and one that women have had to endure for centuries.

³For more on Agape's elders and ministers, as well as these positions in the churches of Christ see: Ron Clark, *Emerging Elders: Developing Shepherds in God's Image* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2008).

At Agape we believe that leadership is service and facilitation. The Greek word for deacon/minister is *diakonos*. While many suggest this means a “servant” the word has various meanings. “Servant” is one definition, however the word also means an “administrator,” “go between,” and “facilitator.” We have chosen to keep this meaning of ministry and leadership. Our home community leaders, communion group discussion leaders, finance team, worship setup leaders, and ministers are facilitators. They generate people to engage in ministry. They lead by example, service, and faith. Using the titles for leader and minister do not suggest that anyone expresses authority over another. However, the descriptions for elders, evangelists, and apostles are positions that express authority from God and the church. Due to Paul’s comments in 1 Timothy 2 we reserve these roles for couples where both work as a team and the husband reflects the qualities of Jesus as a man.

Conclusion

At Agape we believe that males and females are called by God. It is our responsibility to empower both to be what Jesus wants them to be. Sometimes they are called to similar responsibilities. Other times they have differing roles. There should be no cross-gender discipling, shepherding, or mentoring since this not only puts opposite sex people at risk, it may violate God’s will through scripture. In light of this males and females should only be discouraged from striving to take on responsibilities forbidden in the scriptures.

We plan to cultivate an environment and openness where this issue, along with many others, can be discussed safely and without judgment. We admit that we will learn more as time passes (as the church has learned much over the past millennia) and will always call Christians to study the Biblical texts and apply them in their contexts. We also know that each church Agape and our daughter churches plant will have to wrestle with the text and draw their own informed conclusions. A safe environment means that we walk beside our church family (locally and in other locations) and support each other in this study.

Likewise we believe that males and females should be empowered to do ministry and not be hindered from those ministries approved by God because of fear or concern for how others perceive us as a church. In addition to this we believe that discrimination, misogyny, and oppression of females due to their gender are a sin and one which we will not practice nor tolerate.

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