

Navigating the Topic of Women on AFLC boards.

By Pr. David Handsaker

The issue that is before the World Missions Corporation (WMC) this annual meeting is whether or not women should serve on the Corporation Board. Pr. Ballman and Pr. Johnson have both written letters to the corporation on the subject and I ask that you allow me to weigh in on the issue as well. Both of these men have taken up the task of establishing a biblical principal that we can use to navigate this issue. This is the way we must proceed because you will not find an office titled World Missions Corporation Board member within the pages of Scripture. The office and the principles it operates under certainly are biblical and so we must establish the principles first. Pr. Johnson was right in seeking to boil things down to a manageable statement of what the Bible teaches on the limitations put on women's service in the church. I would suggest that the definition of "a woman should not serve as pastor of a local congregation" is too limited in scope.

To demonstrate this let's examine the implications of this definition. If it is accepted, then there would be no theological limitations on any office within the AFLC that does not mandate the title of pastor. Consider for instance the coordinating committee. Our heritage and theological convictions have led to the requirement that a majority of the members of that board be laymen. There is no minimum number of pastors required to be on that board. If the above definition is accepted, then there is no theological reason why the entire coordinating committee could not be comprised of women. In addition to the coordinating committee, the school board, the president of the schools, the dean of the Bible College would all be positions that we would have no theological reason to restrict women from holding these positions. Other than ordination and the regular preaching that the president and special assistant to the president do we would have few theological reasons to deny women the opportunity to serve in these rolls as well.

The decision about women serving on the World Missions Board (WMB) has far reaching implications and the Scriptural interpretations that we use to come our decisions have even larger implications. What is decided in our corporation does not legally reach beyond the WMC but the theological implications will spill over everywhere. The principle that is established will not stay contained within the WMC and we must consider that as we navigate this issue.

Instead of the scriptural principle offered by Pr. Johnson of "a woman should not serve as pastor of a local congregation" I would like to propose a narrower definition and interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 and the other relevant biblical texts. To begin, I think it would be helpful to review the important points of the 1 Timothy 2:11-15 text.

"A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. But women will be preserved through the

bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint.”
(NASB)

There are several key points that should be made about the text. The first is the context. This section of the Paul’s letter is focused on congregational life and it within congregational life that the unique roles of men and women are being addressed.

Second that women are to receive instruction in that setting. They are prohibited from teaching and exercising authority over men. It is this section that causes my disagreement with the definition put forth by Pr. Johnson. Paul does not make this a both/and description. The connector is “oude” in Greek. It is a negative conjunction meaning that its sense is best carried in words like neither or nor. Women are not to teach, nor are they to exercise authority. It is the small words of scripture that often need our most careful attention. If this word was kai the normal conjunction in Greek, which is typically translated “and,” it would provide a stronger argument that Paul’s intention was to describe solely the office of pastor within a congregation. Yet even if it was kai/and, I would disagree that it’s scope is limited to office of pastor alone. The functions of teaching and exercising authority are not limited to the office of pastor within a congregation.

This principle is the bedrock of our understanding of the congregation. We understand that a congregation is best expressed when the laymen of the congregation engage in teaching and preaching and leading the congregation. To allow the description of teaching and exercising authority to be a description of only the office of pastor is to undermine the concept of free and living congregations. It is our conviction that authority rests with the congregation and that authority is directly exercised by the elected members of the overseeing board. Take my own position within the congregation I serve. I am an ex-officio member of my congregation’s Board of Elders. I am not allowed to make motions, nor can I vote on any of the business of the board. I do not deny that as pastor of my congregation that I exercise authority through the ministry of the Word but my authority is limited and I believe that this limitation is biblical.

Whatever might have been with kai/and is not what Paul wrote. The passage reads “oude”/neither. Therefore, the prohibition is that women are not to teach men within congregational life NOR are they to exercise authority over men within congregational life. The use of “oude” does not make sense if the prohibition is only on women serving as pastors because the teaching and authority are always combined within the role of pastor. The use of “oude”/neither does make sense if women are never to exercise either of these functions over men within congregational life no matter what office they hold within a congregation.

The third point that bears on this discussion is verses 13-14. These are especially important as we consider the text because Paul anchors his reasons for excluding women from exercising either of these functions in the creation order. In other words, before there was sin, this is how God wanted it. This was the way it was in the world that God declared very good. Therefore, these limitation on women’s roles are not a result of corruption and something that God is undoing through the new life from Jesus. Quite the opposite, it is the work of Christ to restore these roles to creation and believers. These roles have become confused due to the fall

just as God decreed that they would in Gen 3:16 "...yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." In this text in Genesis God makes it clear that one of the results of sin is that women will struggle with desire for their husband's roles in this world. There are long discussions we could get into expanding this passage and exploring gender roles but for the purposes of this discussion the implications are clear. The exclusion from either teaching or exercising authority are God's original plan and rather than being undone in Christ's redemption they are renewed as very good. This is the explanation of verse 15. It is in taking joy and finding life in the amazing roles that God has reserved for women that they will find their preservation and their glory in Christ. This is illustrated by Paul's use of childbearing as an example. It is the most unique and amazing of womanly roles and so Paul by referring to it means to capture the entire essence of godly women's roles by using childbearing as an example.

So where does this leave us regarding a biblical principle that we can use to navigate the issue of women serving on the WMB. It is my conviction that Scripture clearly provides the following definition. Women are not to teach nor exercise authority over men within congregational life. This simple definition passes every challenge of scriptural history that I have been able to throw at it. It allows for Philip's unmarried daughters (Acts 21:9) to prophecy because it is not described as within a congregation. It allows for the instruction by Priscilla and Aquila of Apollos because it was a private matter and not part of congregational life. It allows for Deborah to be a prophetess and leader of Israel because that was a nation not a congregation. It does go farther though than simply limiting women from being pastors.

If Pr. Johnson wants to use his definition and declare that the examples just listed are the reasons for them then there seems little theological justification to even limit women from preaching on Sunday if we call them lay preachers or guest speakers rather than pastors. This is a line of reasoning that several prominent women have been using to preach in Southern Baptist Convention churches for quite some time now. Pr. Johnson argues that definitions that go farther than scripture are contrary to the Lutheran understanding of Scripture, and he is absolutely right. This goes both ways though. Definitions that fail to go as far as Scripture are equally beyond the Lutheran tradition. Too small of a definition calls sinful behavior righteous, too large of a definition serves to puff up pride and ascribes to God the words of man. We are forced to seek the entirely correct answer on this subject because missing in either direction is wrong.

Having begun by examining the implications of Pr. Johnson's definition, I think it only fair to explain what I believe the implications of are if we accept the definition I believe Scripture gives us. **Women are not to teach nor exercise authority over men within congregational life.** I believe that this definition would restrict women from serving in all of the positions that the smaller definition left open to women as each of these positions exercise authority within a congregational context. The coordinating committee and president's office because they oversee the clergy and congregational rosters. The school board and school executive positions because they train the pastors of congregations. I believe that this also has implications for both the boards of the World and Home Missions corporations. Both boards exercise direct authority over congregations.

The WMB exercises spiritual authority over missionaries and congregations in the following ways. The WMB is the ones who decide on the terms of the letter of call that each AFLC missionary has to agree to in order to become an AFLC missionary. After accepting a letter of call the board must approve the location of the Missionaries work. Each AFLC mission field is approved through an Annual conference vote but which field a missionary serves on and their place within that field must also be approved by the WMB. Once that missionary is on the field they must keep in contact with the WMB and discuss what they are planning and how they spend their time. This is not simply a business issue of making sure your employee is working. As the missionary learns the culture and develops relationships the WMB relies on them to chart a path forward for their ministry on the field. The WMB is doing more than making sure they put in their hours, they are checking the missionaries plans and actions against the letter of call and against scripture. The missionary has agreed to the terms and goals in the letter of call when they received approval the WMB must use spiritual discernment to assess if they are pursuing these goals. Each mission field is different and the gospel delivery changes to suit the culture. It is the WMB who oversee adaptation to make sure it is according to scripture. This discernment and authority does not only effect the missionary. Most of our missionaries are involved in planting churches and that means that the teaching and action of that missionary within that congregation is subject to the authority of the WMB. For example, if an AFLC missionary began to teach their congregation that infant baptism was unbiblical. What action would you expect the WMB to take. If their authority is limited to secular business this pastor is preaching and teaching the same amount of time as all of our other AFLC missionaries. They are not conducting themselves in an illegal manner. They have simply decided to leave the teachings of the Lutheran church. The only authority that is valid here is spiritual authority so if you expect the WMB to address this issue then you must accept that they are to exercise spiritual authority.

This spiritual authority is not limited to the question “Are you Lutheran or not?” The WMB is called to make decisions about things like what constitutes a congregation in contexts where they may not look exactly like our American congregations and the Corporation entrusts this authority with them. These decisions that the WMB must constantly make are the very definition of spiritual authority and it is almost always within the context of our congregations on the field. The fact that you rarely see the WMB exercising this authority is because our missionaries are like minded believers which means that they tend to agree on the path forward. The WMB rarely has to publicly act on this authority, but it is exercised in every meeting with every missionary.

The WMB also has to exercise spiritual authority in determining what groups can be worked with and in what capacity. Local churches have to constantly decide these same issues and it is always a matter that is decided by the pastor and Elders. Decisions of who can be worked with are always contextual and conditional and require much spiritual discernment. The decision of the WMB to allow a missionary to partner with another ministry is always a exercise in spiritual discernment. This is most easily seen with our missionaries on loan. Application for this status is always a decision of the WMB and I don't believe they ever have day to day association with the missionary. The WMB approves applications based on the spiritual like-

mindedness of the organization and the work that is proposed. Exercising spiritual authority again.

It was my original intention to confine the subject of this letter to describing the work of the WMB that correlates to the function of a congregation's spiritual leadership positions and I hope I have done that above. This definition also has implications for the local congregations. I believe that women are biblically prohibited from teaching men within a congregation and that this means that expounding Scripture within a worship service or teaching adult Sunday school is prohibited. I also believe that this means that women should not serve as elders in churches that assign spiritual oversight to that office. There are other churches that use the title deacon for the office of spiritual congregational leadership and this would be barred from women's service. The book of Acts details the split of church leadership duties within a congregation between those entrusted with the spiritual leadership of the church and those entrusted with the temporal leadership of the church. I believe that 1 Timothy, specifically the "not exercising authority" section would not allow women in the spiritual authority role with a local congregation. In some congregations this role is given the title of elder and in other congregations it is given the title deacon. Other positions that exercise spiritual authority typically found on a church board are the President and the Vice President. The section of congregational leadership that deals with temporal issues sometimes called deacons and sometimes labeled trustees would be open to women because the authority is not spiritual authority. Other temporal authority positions typically found on a board are the treasurer and secretary.

Before I began my research into this issue within the AFLC my experience had led me to believe that this understanding of women's roles on congregational boards was by far the norm within the AFLC. After discussing it with President Hjermstead, I found out it was not as universally accepted as I believed. There are AFLC churches that differ on this issue. I do not believe that the Bible allows for this. But the practice of these congregations is not the issue here. This is a discussion of how we will function as an association. For any whose congregation has made the decision to allow women in some of these roles I would ask that you consider how those who have decided the opposite are to navigate this issue. My congregation wrote this conviction into its constitution. There is difference here that has either stood from the beginning or has developed since our beginning and we would do well to walk carefully with our brothers and sisters in Christ on this issue. Consider the impact on the congregations whose convictions run as mine do when they are asked to give to World Missions. It will place some in a position of having to choose between supporting something that they think is not biblical and failing to support the AFLC World Mission's efforts. This is an uncomfortable position to be in. Or those who have personal convictions similar to mine who will have to consider this when asked if they would be willing to serve as part of the WMC or WMB.

What about women on the World Missions Corporation?

There are several questions that should be addressed about my definition that I have not discussed yet. What about those women who serve on the corporation. Is it right that they participate in discussions and participate in votes that exercise authority over the WMB. This is a legitimate question, and I would ask that you allow me some space to answer it. To start with I

would like to again visit the point that I have made earlier, that we should not view pastors as entirely separate and distinct from the elders of the church. The biblical evidence that supports this is that we are never given a distinct list of pastor qualifications, instead the accepted understanding is that the elder qualifications found in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are to be applied to pastors as well. In addition, the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 was made up of Apostles and Elders with no special mention being made of pastors. If you intend to divide these categories, then why does scripture seem to lump them in under the title of elder. In Titus 1 Paul encourages Titus to find elders (note this is plural in the Greek) for every city. Once again, no distinct mention of pastors only mentioning elders. I cannot stress this enough, if we draw too much of a distinction between pastor and elders, we will undermine our very understanding of the congregation. If pastors are to be entirely distinct from the elders of a congregation, which I believe making only their office off limits for women would do, then they become special and distinct within congregational leadership. This makes the layman who preaches a lesser preacher because we have drawn too distinct a line. This makes the authority of the pastor an exclusive authority removed from the rest of the congregation. I do not see how our polity stands if we allow a strong distinction between the pastor and elders to be established.

In Acts 15 at the Jerusalem council, it was the elders and Apostles who decided the issue. Paul was a missionary at the time and the issue arose as a doctrinal dispute on the mission field. It seems clear to me that our WMB includes functions that are exactly the same as the Jerusalem council's purpose. They had direct decisions to make regarding Paul's missionary work and Paul recognized their authority over what he did and taught. It is this direct authority on spiritual issues that characterizes the role of elders. The role of Elder is also separated by scripture within a congregation. Having a list of qualifications such that those considered qualified for the office are more mature believers, distinct from the general congregation. It should also be noted that in both the qualifications lists for elder in Titus and 1 Timothy an elder is called to be "husband of one wife."

The definition of the job of WMB member is the job of a congregation elder. The authority elders exercise is direct authority over the business of the congregation or in this case direct authority over the affairs of the WMC.

In Acts 6 we find the electing of seven men to oversee the physical affairs of the congregation. In this action of the congregation, it is specifically mentioned that the whole congregation participated in the choosing of these seven men. The biblical witness is that in voting members into positions women are allowed to participate. We recognize the authority of the congregation over the elders in the sense that they elect them and have the right to remove them if they act in an unchristian manner. This authority is an indirect authority. If allow for our understanding of "exercise authority" in 1 Tim 2:12 to be cast as the direct authority exercised by both the pastor and the elders of a congregation, we will find no conflict with between it and Acts 6. It also means that women's service on the WMC is in line with scripture. It seems it would be wise of the WMC to recognize the limited roll that scripture places on women's service here and seek ways of ensuring that there are enough men to fill the rolls on the WMB that need to be filled.

What about other boards that allow women to serve on them?

The two boards that I know about that allow women to serve on them are the Youth board and the Parish Education Board. Women on these board exercise direct authority over the ministry but it is not in context of a congregation. These ministries seek to equip and serve our pastors, elders and congregation so that they can spread the gospel. Neither group holds any authority over a single congregation. I don't see this role as unbiblical.

Can the World Missions Board effectively lead women missionaries without a woman on the board?

The basis of this premise is not from the Bible it is from our culture. A man is to be the spiritual head of his household and he must lead a house that is sometimes entirely female. Scripture does not diminish his headship because the rest of his house is female. God establishes male headship in the created order not in the gender of the other members of the household. A pastor is still completely equipped to shepherd a congregation made up entirely of women because it is God who does the equipping not your gender. Even the single pastors, without a wife in their house, are not lacking in their ability to lead a congregation because they lack a wife. The idea that women need to participate in leadership because without them the leadership will be lacking is unbiblical. It is part of the ideas of intersectionality that are part of our culture.

Will we have enough people to staff the World Mission Board if we don't allow women to serve on it?

We have managed to fill all the seats on the WMB for every year of it's existence that I know of. It may be hard to find candidates but this is not an argument to change the requirements. It is God that provides for all the work that He calls us to do. One of the regularly recognized things within the AFLC at the national level is that God directs with our pocketbooks. Boards can decide to do something but if the money never come in to do it then it is accepted that God is leading in a different direction. The same is true of staffing the WMB. If God does not provide men for the WMB, even after diligent searching and prayer, then we must accept that God has closed a door. It is not grounds to change what Scripture requires of leaders.

Conclusion

I do not believe that it is biblical for us to place women on the WMB. When Pr. Johnson first raised his desire with me before we split the Missions Corporation, I was more neutral on the issue. I had not taken the time to consider Scripture nor work through the role of the WMB. Since last year's meeting I have taken time in study and prayer to consider the issue and the longer I look the more convinced I have become that this is a roll that exercises spiritual authority over men within congregations. As such, Paul directly addresses the issue with his prohibition on women serving in that role. As you consider your vote on this issue I would encourage you to consider Scripture and pray on the issue. Consider that whatever biblical principle you accept scripture teaches will have implication far beyond this one issue. If the desire is to consider a study on this issue I would endorse that idea.

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