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The Inclusion of Women in Worship: The Highland Church of Christ, Abilene, Texas

JOHN T. WILLIS

From the 1950s or earlier, the Highland Church committed herself to be willing to study any and every subject pertaining to God and his ways. We have tried to submit ourselves to the word of God in dealing with each issue. Among the problems we have addressed are: the role and work of the Holy Spirit, ethnic and racial relationships, divorce and remarriage, the function of shepherds (elders) and deacons (ministers), prayer, interdenominational worship and unity, grace and works, ministry models in the United States and abroad, support of agencies such as the Herald of Truth, Christian Homes, Faith Works and numerous others, salvation and so-called social movements, hierarchical and egalitarian views of Christian belief and life, and several others. This is a report of how Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, addressed the issue of women playing a role in worship practices.

Several of our members were very concerned about expanding the function of women and children in every aspect of the church, including public worship. I emphasized the importance of the function of women in the Bible as early as the 1970s at Abilene Christian University (ACU). In 1990, Jeanenne Nichols wrote two articles on this issue in the *Restoration Review*. In 1993 and 1995, Carroll D. Osburn, Marcia Moore, Fred Aquino, Jeff Childers and I, who were at that time members of Highland Church, contributed articles on the function of women in the two-volume work *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, edited by Carroll D. Osburn, Joplin, Missouri: College Press.

In 1999, Clois Fowler, chairman of the Highland elders, sent a first draft of a proposed charge to the Women's Role Task Group, initiated by Vince Swinney and Don Jackson, and submitted to David Wray and myself. The members of this task group were Angi Brenton, Kathy Merrill, Jerry Strader, Kelli McKnight, Kathryn Witherspoon, Tim Sensing, Jack Griggs and Dickie Porche, chair. On September 9, 2000, I chaired the Highland elders retreat. After much prayer, study and discussion, the eldership drafted twenty-two questions, asking each elder to answer the following questions: "Is this biblical, yes or no?" and "Should this be considered by the Women's Role Task Group, yes or no?" The questions were:

- Can a woman make the family concern announcements?
- Can a woman lead worship (singing)?
- Can a woman lead prayer from the pulpit?
- Can a woman share communion thoughts in the pulpit?
- Can a woman pass the communion trays to the congregation?
- Can a woman read scripture to the congregation?
- Can a woman introduce graduating seniors?
- Can a woman ministry leader report on ministry activities?
- Can a woman baptize someone?
- Can a woman read or pray a baby blessing?
- Can a woman introduce parents of a newborn baby?
- Can a woman make a public confession?
- Can a woman collect items passed to the ends of the rows?
- Can a woman give testimony of God's work in her life?
- Can a woman lead a singing group in a special song?

- Can a woman be in a Christian drama?
- Can a woman be interviewed by a male leader?
- Can a woman give a charge during Parent Affirmation Sunday?
- Can a woman speak to the church via videotape?
- Can a woman sing with the praise team at the front?
- Can a woman read scripture in a responsive reading?
- Can a female graduating senior give a parent/church tribute?

Thirty-eight elders were present for this retreat. Don Jackson and Joey Cope co-coordinated discussions on scriptural references, historical considerations and implications for the church, to name a few. The scriptural texts which we discussed are: Genesis 1.26–27; 2.18–24; Exodus 15.20–21; Judges 4.4–10; 5.1, 7, 12, 15; Ruth; 1 Samuel 2.1–10; 2 Kings 22.14–20; Esther; Proverbs 31.10–31; Luke 2.36–38; John 4.7–42; Acts 1.13–14; 2.1–4, 16–19; 18.2–3, 24–26; 21.9; Romans 16.3–5; 1 Corinthians 11.2–16; 14.26–36; Galatians 3.28; Philippians 4.2–3; 1 Timothy 2.8–15; Romans 12.6–8 with Ephesians 4.11–13. The elders responded with an overwhelming yes to issues of biblical authority and whether to consider that in the process of deciding women's roles. However, the only two restrictions were that women could not serve as elders or conduct public preaching.

From 2000 to 2002, the shepherds (elders) organized many meetings of all kinds involving the entire church in various ways. We had numerous meetings in groups of approximately 150–200 people at a time to discuss the function of women in public worship. In time, we invited every member of the church to attend and most members accepted these invitations. In addition, we invited speakers to Highland who had various types of expertise in dealing with the function of women in public worship. Speakers included James Thompson, Jeff Childers, Ken Cukrowski and Carroll D. Osburn. We also secured and studied articles on this topic by Everett Ferguson, Gordon Fee, Jack P. Lewis, Neil Lightfoot, Bill Love, Kathy J. Pulley, Mac Dauphin and Emily Jones Rushing. We encouraged every member at Highland to study these articles, and to do their own research using additional books and articles on this topic. We also had a series of sermons and classes on the function of women in public worship. In the classes, each member was encouraged to share his/her thoughts, insights and concerns.

Following the ideas presented in scripture is important to us and there were many passages that were consulted. First, 1 Corinthians 11.4–5 states that both men and women prayed and prophesied in public assemblies as long as the men did not cover their heads and the women did cover their heads. 1 Corinthians 14.34–35 says women are to be silent in the churches in the larger context that *men* are to be silent if more than two or three men speak in tongues, or if there is no interpreter when someone speaks in tongues in the verses just before in 1 Corinthians 14.26–33. These practices are cultural, occasional and isolated, not universal Christian truths.

Second, Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2.8–15 are:

- Men lift up holy hands when they pray
- Women dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing
- Women not have their hair braided
- Women not to wear gold, pearls, or expensive clothes
- Women to do good works
- Women learn in silence
- Women not to teach or have authority over a man
- Women will be saved through childbearing, providing they continue in faith and holiness, with modesty

The following types of questions began to be raised: Must we insist that all men lift up holy hands when they pray? Must women dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing only in public assemblies? Must women not have their hair braided? Must women not wear gold, pearls, or expensive clothes? Must women do good works, but not men? When and where must women learn in silence—at home, at meals, visiting with friends, studying in classes, in Bible classes, in public assemblies, etc.? Must women never teach or have authority over a man—like Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Philip's four daughters, the Samaritan woman, Mary, etc.? If women do not have children, will they be lost? Upon raising such questions, we have concluded that the instructions in 1 Timothy 2.8–15 are cultural and situational, not eternal truths.

Third, in Galatians 3.28, Paul states that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” God has broken down the walls or barriers between different races, slave and free, rich and poor, old and young, male and female, etc.

Fourth, Paul names numerous Christians at Rome in Romans 16 with approximately half of these people being women. 16.1 says Phoebe is a deacon; 16.3–5 says Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila worked with Paul in Christ Jesus and hosted a local church; 16.7 says Junia is prominent among the apostles; 16.13 says the mother of Rufus was a mother to Paul also. Paul worked hand in hand with women and men in Christ.

Fifth, Luke specifically names Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Suzanna and many others who traveled with the twelve apostles and provided for them out of their resources in Luke 8.1–4. Jesus worked equally with men and women to carry out his mission.

Finally, in Philippians 4.2–3, Paul calls two women—Euodia and Syntyche—his fellow workers and significant figures in the church, commending them to the community of faith at Philippi.

Our experiences over these several years led to certain results, which proved to be very important. At every step of this study, we bathed our study, our discussions, our daily life in prayer before God. We came to understand the various backgrounds, insights and inner feelings of a wide diversity of people in race, age and gender. We slowly grew in love closer to God and to one another as we tried to understand many issues in life, not just the function of women in public worship. We received improved perceptions of the meaning and application of scripture and of contemporary thought and life. This has confirmed our former studies about the religious issues mentioned above, and inspires us to approach new issues for the church in the future.

The Highland Church in the early 2000s had approximately two thousand members. During the years of this experience, we may have lost one hundred people at most. Most of those who left Highland refused to discuss this issue from the start. After much study and discussion, at least 95 percent of the members not only remained at Highland, but also enthusiastically supported the decisions the entire church decided upon.

Of the twenty-two issues discussed, the elders introduced approximately six issues at a time, not all at once. We gave several months to make sure everyone was comfortable with what we were doing and how we needed to improve on each issue. It took approximately two years to get through all twenty-two matters of discussion. Since approximately 2005, most members seem happy about the diverse use of women in public worship in many ways, and look forward to both men and women functioning in public worship.

After 2005, several events occurred which have put off a further study of the function of women as elders or shepherds and the function of women as public preachers. We have been involved in a study of “missional” living and worship over the past three to four years. We have been involved in reorganizing the eldership and staff into three fundamental teams: administration, pastoral work for the community of faith, and vision of the future. This has led to several changes with the elders and staff. After losing our pulpit minister of eighteen years, we had a long search, and now our new minister is Jonathan Storment, who has been preaching at Highland for approximately one year and a half. He is doing a great job. We spent a year to cast a new vision at Highland. Now we are involved in Restoration: Restoration of the Highland Church, Restoration of Abilene and Restoration of the World. In addition to Jonathan (and his wife Leslie), we have added two more staff members: Brandon Scott Thomas (and his wife Cheryl) as praise coordinator (founder and ongoing coordinator of The Zoe Group); and Ben Siburt (and his wife Emma) as staff coordinator. This year we surpassed our foreign missionary goal. We are in the process of securing additional missionaries in the United States and abroad. Also, we are attempting to expand our national and international mission works. Every year we take five hundred or more people from Highland to various sites to work with our missionaries and churches. After all this comes into focus, we plan to return to further discussions about the role of women as elders and as pulpit preachers.

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