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Women in Ministry Statement

Introduction

When the FIEC came into being in 1922, the issue of women in ministry would not have been particularly contentious. The consensus within independent evangelical churches was that the role of pastor and elder was open only to suitably qualified men. Whilst mainline denominations and other Christian groupings have shifted from this position, it is our conviction that the traditional view is in line with Scripture. At the same time, we also want to affirm that women have a very significant place in the ministry of our churches – not only, as has always been the case, in such areas as care and hospitality, but also in terms of teaching.

Gender

God created us male and female, and calls us to live according to our gender. This is inseparable from our biological sex which is determined at conception and may not be changed or reassigned.

Joint heirs in salvation

Before examining the biblical data which address the issue of women in ministry it is essential that we reaffirm the equality men and women have in creation and redemption. Both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Both men and women receive the Holy Spirit and are heirs with Christ. We are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-29). Women as well as men belong to the body of Christ and their service and gifts are essential for the proper functioning of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7). It is within this context that discussion about the role of women in the church takes place.

Complementary in ministry

At the creation God stated that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Men and women are to work together in partnership both in the family and the church. There are, however, distinctions in the roles. The biblical texts which speak directly of the roles of men and women in Christian ministry have attracted much attention over the last few years. It is our conviction that, although some of the details may be debated, the essential thrust of these passages is clear:

1 Timothy 2 and 3

Timothy was charged with bringing order to the dysfunctional Ephesian church (1 Tim 3:14-15). There had been problems within the leadership of the church (e.g. 1 Tim 5:19-20), and a key aspect of Timothy's role was to make sure the church in Ephesus had suitably qualified elders (1 Tim 3:1-7). The qualifications assume that

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the elders will be men (1 Tim 3:2). This should not surprise us given that he makes it clear in the immediately preceding context that men, and not women, were to do the authoritative teaching (1 Tim 2:11-15).

1 Corinthians 11 and 14

At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which assumes that women will pray and prophesy, and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 which commands that women be silent in the church gathering. However one seeks to resolve this tension, it is clear that restrictions of some kind are being placed upon women.

In 1 Corinthians 11, whilst Paul reminds us of the interdependence of men and women, he also makes it clear that issues of authority are at stake: man is the head of woman. The section in 1 Corinthians 14 also indicates that the women do not have the same freedom to speak in the gathering as the gifted men.

Creation

Paul roots both the prohibition of 1 Timothy 2, and his comments in 1 Corinthians 11, in creation (1 Tim 2:13-14; 1 Cor 11:8-9). These commands are therefore driven neither by culture, nor by a particular crisis in the church; rather, they are deeply rooted in who we are as creatures.

Marriage

Paul's teaching on marriage also has some bearing on this discussion. There has been debate as to whether the term "head" implies authority, but the command for the wife to submit implies/suggests that it does. Husbands and fathers have responsibility for the welfare of their families and they should exercise authority in a loving way for the spiritual and physical welfare of their wives and children.

Role of women in the Old Testament

What we see in the New Testament is, as we would expect, a reflection of patterns laid down in the Old Testament. Leadership and teaching were reserved for men; priests, prophets and kings were men. There were exceptions with regard to prophecy, but these are few and far between. However, as in the New Covenant so under the Old, women are co-workers with the men. In the book of Proverbs, we note that both the mother and the father are to be involved in the teaching and training of the children, and the virtuous woman of the closing chapter has a wide remit in terms of service.

Role of women in the New Testament

Women, like men, receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit and are involved in the work of the gospel. Women are witnesses to the resurrected Christ (e.g. Matthew 28:1-10) and are to pass on this good news. Many of the gospel workers mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:1-23 are women. Women are included in the command for us all to teach one another in the body of Christ (Colossians 3:16).

Implications for church life

Reflecting upon the biblical data, we can see that the primary leaders and teachers of the church are to be suitably qualified men, which does not include those presenting as male by virtue of gender reassignment.

Teaching, though, is not to be restricted to pastor/teacher/elders. All Christians are to be involved in teaching and encouraging one another. This includes women who are to teach other women (Titus 2:4) and who may well be involved in teaching in other forums. How exactly this works out in practice may well vary from church to church.

Implications for FIEC

To ignore the prohibitions of Scripture is not something we can endorse, nor can we be silent on the issue. Healthy oversight is essential for the welfare of the churches, and we believe the word of God makes it clear that this must be done by suitably gifted and qualified men.

This will mean that churches belonging to the FIEC should not have a woman pastor-teacher or women elders.

This also has implications for individuals associated with the CIO in a manner and subject to any conditions determined by the board from time to time who would need to accept the position of the FIEC on this issue.