

Gender Roles: What about Parachurch Ministries?

Jeff Robinson

It is the typical response to the question of leadership among many parachurch organizations: “Gender roles do not matter here because we are not a church.”

But does that pat answer exonerate parachurch groups from insuring that leadership structures—regarding gender roles—adhere to Scripture?

Wayne Grudem, a board member of The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), argues that parachurch organizations are under the identical strictures set by Scripture. Grudem makes a comprehensive case for gender roles within parachurch groups in a book forthcoming from Multnomah Publishers entitled *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (due Nov 1).

To make the typical argument offered by many parachurch organizations—“we are not the church”—is to misapply the authority of Scripture, Grudem says.

“All of the New Testament epistles were written to churches (or to individuals such as Timothy and Titus and Philemon who were involved in local churches),” said Grudem, who also serves as professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary.

“Therefore the argument that ‘we are not a church, so we don’t need to follow the instructions written to churches,’ taken to its logical conclusion, would mean that parachurch organizations do not have to obey anything written in the entire New Testament. Surely that conclusion is wrong.”

If an individual serves in a supervisory role that is similar enough to the role of a pastor, then that responsibility should be restricted to men, Grudem said. Further, the commands in the New Testament do not say that Christians should follow the commandments of God only in church settings, he said.

“This (latter point) is a crucial point,” Grudem said. “Some New Testament commands do not apply to parachurch organizations not because they are not churches, but because they are not performing the activity mentioned in those commands.

The members of a parachurch ministry “may never observe the Lord’s Supper together, and therefore they will not have to follow the New Testament directions for the Lord’s Supper. But if they ever do observe the Lord’s Supper, then they will have to follow those commands. Whether [that ministry] is a church is not the crucial point. The crucial point is whether that organization is carrying out an activity for which the New Testament gives commands.

“We must continue to insist strongly that the New Testament applies to all Christians in all societies and all cultures and all situations. Its commands are valid whenever Christians carry out the activities included in those commands. I cannot imagine the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians, ‘Follow these instructions if you are doing this as part of the church in Corinth, but if you are doing this as part of a Christian organization outside the church, then you do not have to obey my commands.’”

CBMW council member Bruce Ware said Paul’s admonition to Timothy, forbidding a woman from ruling over or teaching a man, speaks to the way in which the woman is to function in every situation within ministry and cannot be limited to church offices.

“1 Timothy 2:12 does not say, ‘I don’t allow a woman to be an elder,’ as if Paul had in mind the church position itself, first and foremost,” Ware said. “Rather, he said, ‘I don’t allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.’”

“Therefore, it is the functions of teaching biblical and theological truth and of exercising spiritual direction and leadership that Paul specifies. And he clearly forbids women from functioning in these two ways over men.”

While parachurch organizations are a modern-day phenomenon, Paul's words to Timothy still apply to them, Ware said.

"Just because [parachurch organizations] did not exist when Paul wrote these inspired instructions, why are they excluded from the force of what he says? If it is the functions, not the office in itself, that are forbidden, then this instruction applies as broadly as wherever these functions are carried out—and this includes what are today parachurch ministries and organizations.

"Women teaching theology over men violates 1 Tim 2:12 whether done from a pulpit on Sunday morning or a Young Life Bible study on Thursday night in a college dorm."

In a paper written by Darrell W. Cox, "Why Parachurch Leaders Must Meet the Same Biblical Qualifications as Church Leaders," the author argues that authority for leadership arises from God through His Word. Therefore, parachurch leaders are bound by the same biblical authority as church leaders.

"...The issue of accountability within parachurch organizations is really no different in principle from that of the local church," Cox writes. "Since the commission and authority for Christian leadership in all its forms arises from God, the principles laid down in Scripture regarding delegated authority and corporate responsibility are applicable throughout the entire realm of God's reign.

"This means that parachurch leaders, as subjects in God's Kingdom (and hopefully members of a visible church), are under divine obligation to obey the principles of Scripture. Thus, there must be among leaders of parachurch organizations an attitude of submission to God's principles of authority (out of reverence for Christ; Eph 5:21), as well as a willingness to reprove others and themselves be reprov'd (Gal 2:11ff)."

While parachurch organizations are bound by the same gender roles as the church, there are scores of opportunities both within the church and in parachurch organizations open to women, Ware said.

"Yes, there are many ways women may use their gifts of teaching and leadership both in the church and parachurch ministries, as they direct these toward other women and children. And of course, there are a multitude of other ways that women and men both may minister, apart from being the Bible teacher or leader of the group.

"Rather than resist God's wise ways, we should rather pray for guidance from the Spirit to use the gifts God has given us in ways fitting to His revealed word. In this is our obedience to God's will and ways, and in this is our joy."