

Highfields Church Policies

Position Statement - The role of women in the church

A. Three negatives:

- a) Although an important issue, the role of women in ministry in the local church is not a “gospel” issue. This means that it is not an issue over which we should divide as a church but rather over which, if we have to disagree, we do so with grace and respect while still maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.
- b) Having spent time in prayerful study of the Bible and of scholars who respect the authority of the Bible we recognize that the issue is one over which there is a variety of interpretations of the major Biblical texts. Thus in coming to a position statement ourselves we do so with humility, aware of our limitations of understanding and therefore of the provisional nature of the statement.
- c) In view of the fact that the main area of debate revolves around *one* text (1 Tim 2: 11-15) we seek to understand that “difficult” text in the light of the general, clear revelation of God’s will throughout the Bible as a whole. On the basis therefore of the clear revelation of God’s Word we affirm the following position.

B. Three positives:

a) Men and women are equal in creation

The Bible teaches that both man and woman were created in God's image and shared jointly the responsibilities of parenthood and having dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26-28).

Man and woman were created for full and equal partnership. The word "helper" used to designate woman in Genesis 2:18, refers to God in most instances of Old Testament usage (e.g. 1Sam 7:12; Ps 121:1-2). Consequently the word conveys no implication whatsoever of female subordination or inferiority. The forming of woman from man demonstrates the fundamental unity and equality of human beings (Gen 2:21-23).

b) Men and women are equal in redemption

The Bible teaches that man and woman were co-participants in the Fall; Adam was no less guilty than Eve (Gen 3:6; Rom 5:12-21; 1Cor 15:21-22). The resulting rulership of Adam over Eve was a consequence of sin and was therefore not part of the original created order. Genesis 3:16 is a description of the effects of the Fall rather than a prescription of God's ideal order.

Salvation through Jesus Christ works to reverse the effects of the Fall in the cosmos and in human relationships. Through faith in Christ men and women together become children of God, one in Christ, and heirs to the blessings of salvation without reference to racial, social, or gender distinctives (John 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; 2Cor 5:17; Gal 3:26-28).

c) Men and women are equal in service

The Bible teaches that through faith in Christ and by his grace alone a new community, the church, the body of Christ, has been formed with Christ as its head.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came on men and women alike. Without distinction, the Holy Spirit indwells women and men and sovereignly distributes gifts without reference to gender (Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor 12:7, 11, 14:31).

Both women and men are called to develop their spiritual gifts and to use them as stewards of the grace of God (1 Peter 4:10-11). Both men and women are divinely gifted and empowered to minister to the body of Christ, under His authority (Acts 1:14, Rom 16:1-7, Phil 4:2-3).

In the New Testament church, women as well as men exercise the prophetic, priestly and royal functions (Acts 2:17-18, 21:9; 1Cor 11:5; 1Peter 2:9-10; Rev 1:6, 5:10) as what was lost in Adam is restored in Christ.

However, at this time we are persuaded that the Bible teaches that headship, by which we understand ultimate authority, in marriage and church is to be exercised by men.

C. Three practical applications:

- a) In the light of the general revelation and clear teaching of Scripture those isolated texts which seem to exclude women from some forms of ministry must be interpreted with great care and should not be taken as normative lest Scripture is seen to contradict itself.
- b) In the church, public recognition is to be given to both women and men who exercise ministries of service and leadership. In so doing, the church will model the unity and harmony that should characterize the community of believers. In a world fractured by discrimination and segregation, the church will dissociate itself from attitudes or practices designed to make women feel inferior for being female.
- c) However, for the greater good of the unity of the body of Christ and because of our present understanding of the Biblical concept of headship, those who believe that *all* avenues of service are open to *all* suitably gifted believers are asked to respect the current practice that the office of ruling Elder will be filled by male members only.

Statement on Human Sexuality/Sexual Ethics

We believe that the Bible is normative for all Christians and as such it gives us positive models for our faith and conduct in issues of sexuality and gender.

The Bible teaches that God's glory and loving purposes have been revealed in the creation of mankind. Among the many gifts we enjoy is the gift of sexuality. Although this is fundamental to a person's experience of life we do not believe that sexuality or gender defines a person's identity. That is derived from the fact that both male and female are made in the image of God. Since the Fall creation has been impaired and God's purposes spoiled. Our fallen state has affected every sphere of our being, which includes our sexuality. Jesus' teaching about lust in the Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that sexual sin is a real temptation and danger to us all. It is, therefore, with an awareness of our own vulnerability to sexual sin that we express, nevertheless, what we consider to be the clear teaching of the Bible.

Sexual relations are to be enjoyed only within the context of a life long union between a man and a woman in marriage. All other expressions of sexual relations are a violation of God's will which in time lead to a breakdown of the health of human society.

All sexual promiscuity is displeasing to God and we are persuaded that this includes pre-marital sex, homosexual practices, adulterous sexual relationships and virtual sexual practices through internet and other media.

We find no conflict between clear biblical teaching and sensitive pastoral care. We encourage the Church to care for all those who are trapped in their sexual brokenness and to become the channel of Christ's compassion and love towards them. We wish to stand alongside and welcome them into a process of healing within our church community.

Repentance leading to forgiveness is a fundamental part of that healing process. We would also affirm and resource those who exercise a pastoral ministry in this area.

On our understanding of the teaching of the Bible we affirm the following position as a church on marriage, divorce and remarriage:

Marriage Policy

The practice position of Highfields Church is to be as follows:-

1. We marry Christians, previously unmarried.
2. We marry non-christians to non-christians, previously unmarried, but a special marriage format would be required to ensure that vows are not made hypocritically
3. We marry divorcees if we are satisfied that they were the "innocent party" in a legitimate divorce (see policy statement on Divorce).
4. We marry couples who have been cohabiting or sexually active prior to marriage, provided that there is evidence of repentance, forgiveness, and acceptance of a high view of marriage, as a solemn covenant and promise.

5. Christians should only marry Christians. (1Cor. 7 v. 39)

It was agreed that other cases (e.g. a new Christian who has been the adulterer but who after repentance and conversion can be forgiven the past and has the prospect of a new beginning) would be considered on their own individual merits.

Divorce/Remarriage

The doctrinal position of Highfields Church is to be as follows:-

1. Divorce is only to be considered legitimate in two cases:-

(a) in the case of adultery (Matt 5 v 32, 19 v. 9)

(b) in the case of wilful desertion by an unbelieving partner (1Cor 7 v. 15)

2. Note that 'wilful desertion' may mean leaving the Christian but could also involve desertion by violence, cruelty or total neglect. However, this is a situation specifically relating to 'mixed' marriage i.e. Christian/Non-Christian.

3. Legitimate divorce (i.e. upon the grounds of (1) above) recognises that the marriage bond has been radically disrupted, and the innocent party is left free to remarry.

4. In all other cases (e.g. divorce of Christians where adultery is not involved) the marriage bond is to be considered as still in existence, - the two are still in reality and before God bound to one another in matrimony. (1Cor. 7 v. 10,11).

5. Helpful references embodying the above principles are:-

- John Murray - Divorce (Presbyterian and Reformed 1961)
- Jay Adams - Marriage, Divorce and Re-marriage (P&R 1980)
- Neil Richards - Divorce (Family Christian Matters).

The pastoral position with regard to Christian marriages which are in difficulty or where there is separation/divorce is that we should always strive for reconciliation.

Even where the marriage bond is disrupted (adultery or wilful desertion by the unbeliever) divorce is not commanded and should only be resorted to when all else has failed.

Our aim should always be to preserve the testimony of the church.