

The "Gender-Inclusive" Movement

Among Churches of Christ

By
Kyle Pope



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Guardian of Truth Foundation • CEI Bookstore
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Preface



The topic of this study is not one that is well-known to many of our brethren. Among those who have insisted upon biblical authority for all doctrine and practice, gender issues have not been prominent causes of discussion or conflict. Students of translation may hear the term “gender-inclusive” and think we are considering whether to translate masculine terms like “mankind” with more generic terms like “humanity.” In this application of the term, “gender-inclusive” advocates in the religious world have moved biblical translators to reject male pronouns applied to God and other indications of male leadership in the home and church in their paraphrases of Scripture. This is not the focus of this study. Instead we are considering a growing movement among mainstream churches of Christ to *include* women in roles of leadership and public teaching. Its advocates identify themselves as “gender-inclusive,” because of their view that women have been *excluded* from these roles. Although I use this term in the title of this study I take exception to it, and reject the premise that underlies its use. Simply because God has assigned different roles to different genders does not infer that any gender has been *excluded*. I offer this study in the hopes that it may help us guard against the rise of this heresy. If history is any indication what begins in the mainstream doesn’t take long to creep in even among those who were once the most conservative. May we prepare ourselves to face this emotional and culturally explosive issue with love, courage, and a fervent love for God and His word.

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Introduction



A quiet but volatile movement is starting to brew within congregations that still identify themselves as “churches of Christ.” Historically, in America those who have called themselves “churches of Christ” have sought to reject denominational practices, teachings, and organization not found within God’s word. In the mid-twentieth century many churches began to abandon this objective when they accepted social practices, evangelistic schemes, and church support of human institutions with no scriptural authority. This same spirit is now manifesting itself in yet another move towards ideas long ago adopted by the religious world. A website known as *Where the Spirit Leads*, maintained by a man named Wi-

**Listings are now being
compiled of congregations
identified as “gender-inclusive.”**

ley Clarkson, articulates the objectives of this movement. Advocating what he calls “Gender Equality and Inclusivity in the Churches of Christ,” Clarkson maintains a listing of congregations he identifies as “Gender Inclusive Churches of Christ.” In order to be included on his list, five criteria must be met:

1. Does this church use women in the worship to help lead worship by leading prayer, giving communion talks, leading singing, etc.?

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2. Are women used to their fullest capabilities to teach all age groups regardless of gender in Bible classes?
3. Do women serve in leadership positions such as pulpit minister, worship leader, deacon, and elder?
4. Does the church publish a clear statement of purpose to be an egalitarian church or gender inclusive church on their web site?
5. Is a woman serving only in the position of Children’s Minister or Women’s Minister and none of the above apply?¹

Clarkson posts articles and links advocating this position, some of which are drawn from CBE International (“Christians for Biblical Equality”) a non-profit organization among denominational churches listing criteria similar to Clarkson’s. While his listing as of January 2012 had only 26 congregations, by June it had grown to 41 in the US and 2 in Canada!² Clarkson himself predicts, “the issue of women’s roles in the teaching, worship, ministry, and leadership of the Churches of Christ...will be the single most discussed and divisive issue in the first few years of the 21st century.”³ I fear his prediction may have more validity than many of us have previously recognized. In this study we will survey some of the basic objectives of this movement and analyze the biblical teachings that address these issues.



¹ January 11, 2012 update, http://www.clarksons.org/spiritleads/gender_inclusive_churches.htm.

² June 25, 2012 update, http://www.wherethespiritleads.org/gender_inclusive_churches.htm.

³ “Focusing on the Questions – Finding the Answers!” <http://www.clarksons.org/spiritleads/spiritleads.htm>.

What Is The Issue?



A fundamental premise advanced by advocates of this movement is that women within churches of Christ have been neglected and discriminated against by a male dominated leadership unwilling to allow their sisters in Christ to use the gifts that God has given them. Floyd E. Rose, in an e-book that Clarkson posts on his website entitled *An Idea Whose Time Has Come*, repeatedly compares the treatment of women within the church to slavery or racism. He claims, “to deny women, because of their gender, the right to do whatever God has given them the ability and desire to do is wrong, just as it was wrong to deny African-Americans the right to do what God had given them the ability and desire to do based on race” (16). The primary biblical text that is offered in defense of their position is Galatians 3:28, where Paul through the Holy Spirit asserts boldly that in Christ, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (NKJV). If “all are one,” and race, gender, and servitude are nothing, it is argued that all roles of leadership, service, and teaching must be shared.

If “all are one in Christ”
must gender roles be
abandoned?

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What Must Determine Our Practice?

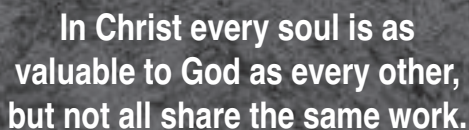
Any student of religious history must recognize that to defend or reject a doctrine on the basis of what has been done in the past is a dangerous practice. Human beings have often done the right thing in an improper way, or accepted sinful innovations in an attempt to advance a legitimate concern. It is not about what mankind has done in the past but what God has authorized through His word. If, as the Holy Spirit asserts, Scripture provides to us what is needed, **“that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (2 Tim. 3:16-17), we must be willing to follow its dictates in the confidence that it is God’s will regarding our behavior. When Scripture limits our behavior, we must resist the impulse to choose *what feels right to us*—**“It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps”** (Jer. 10:23). The drunkard may wish that God had not commanded him to **“be sober”** (1 Pet. 5:8), but he must not argue that God’s command is no longer applicable today. The homosexual may feel strongly that what he feels inclined to do, must be acceptable before God, but he must not rationalize away God’s prohibition of this behavior by claiming *it’s been mistranslated* (1 Cor. 6:9). There may have been ways in which the authorized liberties of Christian women have been unduly limited in the past. However, to resolve this error we must not ignore or rationalize away the clear teaching of Scripture in order to correct a perceived injustice.

Equality in Christ

Under Christ there has always been *equality* in terms of the value, worth, importance, love, concern, and relationship that God has with His children. Galatians 3:28 follows the powerful asser-

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tion of how this relationship comes about. **“Through faith”** we may become **“sons of God”** (Gal. 3:26) when we **“put on Christ”** by being **“baptized into Christ”** (Gal. 3:27). Having done so, we are considered **“Abraham’s seed”** and **“heirs according to the promise”** (Gal. 3:29). Equality of relationship, however, does not mean that we all have the same responsibilities or roles. As a Christian, I am just as valuable before God as any one of the twelve apostles, but I absolutely have not been entrusted with the unique responsibility and role these men held. They were promised that God would directly give them words to say (Matt. 13:11), guide them into the complete revelation of God’s word establishing the New Covenant (John 16:13). This granted to them the special role of acting as a **“foundation”** of the church of which Jesus Christ is the **“Chief cornerstone”** (Eph. 2:20). Was that partiality on the part of God? Have I been excluded or discriminated against in this? No! Just as in the Parable of the



In Christ every soul is as
valuable to God as every other,
but not all share the same work.

Talents, God has the right to assign different works to His servants as He sees fit (cf. Matt. 25:14-30). In the church, every soul is just as valuable to God in Christ as every other soul, however, not every Christian is to be considered one of the group of leaders over a local congregation known as “elders.” There are specific qualifications that the Holy Spirit has set down which such leaders must meet (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). If I do not possess some of these qualifications am I a *second-class citizen* before God? No. Am I of less value before God? No. I simply have other responsibilities that I must meet in humility and submission.

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In the next chapter we will note that some of the areas in which the Lord has set limitations on women’s responsibilities and roles have nothing to do with discrimination, inequality, or value, but as in the above examples are simply a reflection of God’s distribution of different assignments to different servants of equal value before Him.



Study Questions

- 1. What positions of leadership in the local church do advocates of the “Gender-Inclusive” Movement seek to attain for women?**
- 2. What is CBE International?**
- 3. How do advocates of this movement argue that Galatians 3:28 should be applied?**
- 4. What are some problems with appealing to the past in order to determine practice in the church?**
- 5. What should determine practice in the church?**
- 6. What are some ways that equality in Christ does not mean that all responsibilities must be shared?**