



Elder's Message to the Congregation

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:20-21 NIV

Purpose

Jesus prayed for His followers to have oneness in Him and the Father. We, the elders of North Atlanta Church of Christ, also pray for that unity within our body, and that we continually grow closer to the perfect example of Jesus Christ in all we do. We pray for this mature and ever growing level of unity so that we might be credible witnesses to the world that Jesus was sent by God and that the world knows that God loves them, as well. We also pray that we honor Him with worship in Spirit and in truth.

In 2003-2004 the elders and ministers studied the roles of women in the church. Prompted again by the Holy Spirit in 2017, the elders felt called to study Scripture to determine if our practices at North Atlanta regarding the roles of women in the life, leadership and ministry of the church are appropriate. Some of the questions we sought to answer during our study were:

1. What do we understand Scripture to teach on the topic of women's roles in the body of Christ?
2. Can we arrive at differing conclusions on this topic and still be united around the gospel and the mission of God?
3. Who are we – the body of Christ at North Atlanta, and how do we – the North Atlanta elders, allow the Holy Spirit to guide our study on this topic and inform our leadership of this church in the mission and ministry of God in the 21st century?
4. How might our current practices hinder our ability to join with the Spirit in calling others into relationship with Jesus?
5. Are we standing between our sisters and the Holy Spirit in their usage of their gifts?
6. How can we best please God in our worship and service to Him?

Process

As with the earlier study, our study has taken nearly two years and a number of different formats. It began with the elders asking our preaching minister, Don McLaughlin to conduct a series of classes for the elders, ministers and their spouses on the topic. That was followed by



Elder's Message to the Congregation

an extended period of group and individual study by the elders.

In 2018, a diverse group of eleven women from the church was asked by the elders to study and provide their understanding of God's will specific to this topic. One clear message that resulted from this effort was that while they did not all start from nor finish in the same place, the *process itself* served to bring them closer together as a group and to allow them to appreciate and respect how each one came to her own belief. They recommended to the elders that the whole congregation have the opportunity to do the same type of study in order to experience the same personal growth in love, respect and unity.

So, in March 2019, we announced to the entire congregation that small study groups would be formed for this purpose, and approximately 15 such groups began to meet. Using a study guide developed jointly by Sandra Mackey and Don McLaughlin, these groups met weekly for three months to explore the Scriptures and learn from each other. It is important to note that while these resources were provided, the groups were encouraged to supplement their studies with other resources as well.

Additionally, in June 2019, we invited Dr. Ken Cukrowski, Interim Dean for the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University, to lead a weekend seminar on this topic in which he showed how serious study of the relevant Scriptures could lead one to several different stances on the subject. Also, we asked Don McLaughlin to conduct a Sunday morning class during June and July on the same material used by the small study groups. We then held a series of three Listening Sessions to hear about individual journeys through the topic. All of this was done in an effort to allow the entire body to study together and to grow in knowledge, unity and mutual love while respecting the beliefs of all.

Links to the small group study guide and to the material from the Ken Cukrowski seminar can be found at www.nacofc.org/gender.

Conclusions

It is our belief and experience that faithful students of Scripture can reach reasonably different conclusions or interpretations, so we ask for your extension of mercy and grace and a spirit of unity as we move in the direction we believe the Holy Spirit would have us go.

We believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and as such, is consistent and true. We firmly believe that the Holy Spirit has led the body at North Atlanta through this study and will continue to lead us. We strongly believe that studying this subject together as a body has



Elder's Message to the Congregation

enabled us to grow closer to one another and to grow more in oneness with God and Christ. As we studied individually and collectively, some studied this topic through the lens of understanding individual passages or chapters within the context of the letter to the church or individual. Others studied through the lens of understanding the whole story of God and His creation. Both approaches are valued and enabled all to reach a deeper understanding of Scripture. We urge each of you to respect your brothers and sisters who reach conclusions different from your own. We encourage you to try to better understand the experiences and emotions your brothers and sisters in Christ have around this topic.

We believe that the church should reflect God's original creation where man and woman were both created in God's image to jointly rule over His creation as described in Genesis 1:27-28. We believe that Jesus began the restoration of His creation from its fallen state when He came to earth and was sacrificed on the cross to reconcile sinful mankind to God and to make us a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:14-19). We repent for having ignored this issue for too long and thus having played a role in suppressing the full use of the God-given gifts and potential of many women in fully answering God's call on their lives, particularly in public contexts of worship, discipleship, and other leadership roles. For our oversight and exclusion, we humbly ask for your forgiveness.

We have reached this point knowing that ours is a life-long journey to grow into the likeness of Jesus. And we recognize that women have always played a significant role in the growth and health of the church and have served the needs of our church in many varied, valuable, and often unnoticed ways. However, with a better understanding of how we should value and use our God-given gifts to glorify God, and in the process draw others to Him, we believe that our sisters in Christ have been denied the opportunity for full participation in many public settings, to the detriment of us all.

Accordingly, the elders of North Atlanta are unified in their belief that women should serve in all worship service roles, such as leading communion thoughts, serving communion, reading Scripture, leading prayers and preaching. Preaching, in our present day, has much in common with Biblical prophesying (edifying, instructing, exhorting and comforting; 1 Cor 14:1-5, 19, 28-33). We believe that Acts 2:17-18 actually calls women to preach.

Regarding the role of teaching, we believe that women can and should serve as teachers for our Bible classes, regardless of the audience.

We do believe that the voices of our sisters in Christ should speak clearly into the leadership,



Elder's Message to the Congregation

ministry planning and decision-making at North Atlanta. However, after much study, discussion, deliberation and prayer, we did not reach a consensus on the question of women serving as elders. Some elders believe that the restoration of God's creation extends to all aspects of the church, including the eldership. Other elders believe that the language of 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9 provides clear guidance for our present time. Because of this, we will not be making a change in the eldership at this time. This does not mean that other changes are planned for the future. But, this eldership and any future eldership may review any practice in light of the Bible, Biblical principle and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Implementation

A planning and implementation team has been formed to take on the work of implementing these decisions in a prayerful and thoughtful way over the coming weeks and months. This team is made up of women and men representing a cross-section of our congregation, who are faithful members of this church family, with a demonstrated love for this body.

While we have not changed the qualifications for being an elder at North Atlanta, we do believe that our sisters in Christ should have a more formalized voice in the body at North Atlanta. To accomplish this, we will be including women on the Operations Council (OC).

The OC was formed to allow greater focus on spiritual shepherding. The role of the OC is to manage the business and operational affairs of the congregation, operating under the direction of the full eldership. It is currently composed of four elders, the executive minister and preaching minister. We believe it is essential that women's voices speak into the plans and decisions of the OC.

And finally, while adapting to change can be challenging, we firmly believe that these changes will be used by God to reach more people for His glory, and that the body at North Atlanta will become more credible witnesses as we reflect complete unity in the midst of our diverse perspectives on this issue.