

Exploring Effective Advocacy Points for Removing Barriers for Women in Churches of Christ, With a Focus on Chapels of Churches of Christ Colleges

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I. Introduction

One of the more controversial topics within the Churches of Christ is whether it is appropriate for women to speak (preach, lead prayer, read scripture, lead singing, etc.) in the worship assembly. The vast majority of Church of Christ congregations prohibit women from doing so. A small-but-growing number of Church of Christ congregations have lifted such prohibitions, at least partially, after studying relevant scripture.¹

My view is that prohibiting women from speaking in the assembly is contrary to scripture. The few verses to which people point to argue that women should be barred from speaking, teaching, or fully serving in the assembly (preaching, reading scripture, leading

¹ Wiley Clarkson, "A Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage," [WhereTheSpiritLeads.org](http://www.wherethespiritleads.org),

http://www.wherethespiritleads.org/gender_inclusive_churches.htm (last visited March 27, 2019).

singing, leading prayer, etc.---which some refer to as having authority or leading) are generally misperceived within the Churches of Christ, in my view. A discussion of the relevant scripture is beyond the scope of this essay.

A common refrain among those opposed to women speaking in the assembly is that nothing but scripture should be considered when evaluating women's roles in the church. Mainly what they mean is that today's cultural norms ought not be given any weight when determining God's wishes.

Despite this emphasis on scripture, it can be a significant challenge to motivate people who view it as appropriate to exclude women from speaking in the assembly to study scripture on this issue. Many people within the Churches of Christ have become accustomed to the practice of prohibiting women from speaking and naturally assume that if it were wrong, people they love and trust in the church would not have followed such a practice all these years. There is also a concern within some congregations that studying scripture on this issue together will cause divisions. For these reasons and others, there is a general resistance to studying scripture on this issue. Only a tiny percentage (about 1%) of Churches of Christ have overcome this resistance and ask women to speak in the assembly.²

² See, e.g., Clarkson, "A Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage," *supra*; Steve Gardner, "Code Blue Church of Christ: 2018 Report Shows Accelerated Membership Decline," Authentic Theology, 14 November 2018, <https://authentictheology.com/2018/11/14/code-blue-church-of-christ-2018-report-shows-accelerated-membership-decline/>.

Thus, bringing relevant matters to the attention of people that will encourage them to study scripture on this issue, to consider such scripture in context, and to re-evaluate their and their congregation's practice in this regard based on scripture are needed. I refer to these matters that might encourage scripture study as effective advocacy points. To my knowledge, no in-depth study or discussion of such effective advocacy points, as a group, within the Churches of Christ context has been undertaken. Such a study and discussion are needed.

This essay describes nine such points briefly and one, that most national and regional colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ no longer completely prohibit women from speaking in their chapels, in more depth. Finally, as an example of an inspirational story related to the latter point, one from which encouragement can be drawn, this essay describes the history of women speaking in the chapel (convocation) of Pepperdine University and the decision to lift the prohibition on them doing so.

II. Nine Possible Effective Advocacy Points for Encouraging Bible Study on Excluding Women from Speaking in the Assembly

At this time, I have only anecdotal observations to offer on such points. Here are nine that I have observed cause people to express more interest in studying scripture on this issue:

1) The practice of prohibiting women from speaking in the assembly is textbook sex discrimination. That one thinks it is ordained by God does not make it any less so.³

³ See, e.g., Steve Gardner, "(Part 2) Church of Christ Practice Harms Girls Long-Term, Suggests 2018 Study," *Authentic Theology*, 30 January 2019, <https://authentictheology.com/2019/01/30/part-2-church-of-christ-practice-harms-girls-long-term-suggests-2018-study-negative-reactions/>.

2) Subjecting young girls to sex discrimination (and causing them to watch their mothers and friends being discriminated against) for a long time causes psychological, spiritual, and physical harm to them relative to those who are not.⁴ People who would not tolerate discrimination in their daughters' schools ignore it in the church because it is normalized there.⁵

3) The church engaging in constant sex discrimination teaches young men that sex discrimination is acceptable, making it more likely that girls in the church will be subjected to sex discrimination in settings outside the church, such as education and employment.⁶

4) The Churches of Christ is nearly alone among Christian denominations in wholly prohibiting women from speaking in the worship service.⁷

5) No church practices what the plain words of 1 Cor 14:34-35 or 1 Tim 2:12 state (e.g. women do not “remain silent” in the churches (they sing) and they “teach” men by their

⁴ See, e.g., Steve Gardner, “Church of Christ Practice Harms Girls Long-Term, Suggests 2018 Study,” Authentic Theology, <https://authentictheology.com/2018/11/28/church-of-christ-practice-harms-girls-long-term-suggests-2018-study/>.

⁵ Gardner, “(Part 2) Church of Christ Practice Harms Girls Long-Term, Suggests 2018 Study.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See, e.g., Steve Gardner, “What Do Churches of Christ Teach Teen Girls About Women’s Roles in the Church: CoC Teen Girl Bestseller *God’s Girls*,” Authentic Theology, 2018 May 2, <https://authentictheology.com/2018/05/02/what-do-churches-of-christ-teach-teen-girls-about-womens-roles-in-the-church-coc-teen-girl-bestseller-gods-girls/>.

actions, through singing, through hymns they write, with their questions in Sunday School, etc.).⁸

6) The Churches of Christ general interpretation of scripture on this issue has changed in the past 100 years---the general view used to be, for example, that women could not speak publicly or have authority over men anywhere, in the assembly, in the workplace, in government, or anywhere.⁹

7) There is little difference in a church engaging in sex discrimination against women now and engaging in racial discrimination against black persons in the past (or now).

8) The Churches of Christ shrunk by an average of over 930 adherents and about 5 congregations a month over the past 18 years, accelerating over the past 3 years with over 2000 people departing and over 9 congregations dissolving each month.¹⁰

9) What will girls who are taught in college that scripture does not require that she not speak in the assembly think of her home congregation who discriminated against her, her mom, and her friends her entire childhood?¹¹

⁸ See, e.g., “(Part 2) Most Church of Christ Colleges No Longer Exclude Women from Leading in Worship Services: Scripture? and a College Visit,” *Authentic Theology*, 16 May 2018, <https://authentictheology.com/2018/05/16/part-2-most-church-of-christ-colleges-no-longer-exclude-women-from-leading-in-worship-services-scriptural-and-a-college-visit/>.

⁹ See, e.g., Gardner, “(Part 2) Most Church of Christ Colleges No Longer Exclude.”

¹⁰ See, e.g., Gardner, “Code Blue Church of Christ: 2018 Report.”

¹¹ See, e.g., Gardner, “(Part 2) Most Church of Christ Colleges No Longer Exclude.”

It is not my purpose here to prove the truth of each of these points—any input on them is welcome, however¹²—but instead to note that these points or ones like them may be effective points for encouraging members and elders of the Church of Christ to study the Bible on the topic or to encourage one another to do so. Their effectiveness will certainly vary. Some include more-challenging language (*e.g.*, “discrimination”). Some are simply cold data related to an issue of concern (*e.g.*, number of member departures per month). Some might surprise a significant number of members. (*e.g.*, the Churches of Christ are nearly alone in U.S. Christianity in completely prohibiting women from speaking in the assembly). The questions I suggest for discussion, research, and analysis include which are particularly effective among Church of Christ members in encouraging interest in Bible study? Which are particularly effective among those who are under 50 and over 50 (or another relevant age range)? Which need further evidence and refinement?

¹² Suggested corrections, deletions, additions, and other input can be sent to

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III. A Tenth Point: Most Colleges Affiliated with the Churches of Christ No Longer Prohibit Women From Speaking in Their Chapel

An additional point is that that most national and regional colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ no longer prohibit women from speaking in their chapel worship service. In May 2018, I published an article on this development, “Most Church of Christ Colleges No Longer Exclude Women From Leading in Worship Service: A List of Schools and Their Approach to Chapel,” noting that seven of the 12 national and regional colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ no longer exclude women from actively serving in chapel worship-services when it includes men and women.¹³

The article received much attention among Church of Christ members. I believe it is because it caught people off guard that a group of people that one would expect to know the Bible very well (professors at Church of Christ schools) have departed from the traditional practice of having women not speak in worship assemblies.

Four of the schools—Abilene Christian University, Lipscomb University, Pepperdine University, and Rochester College—do not exclude women from any role in their chapel worship-services. Women preach, read scripture, lead prayer, and otherwise actively serve in chapel services that include men and women.

¹³ This section of this essay is excerpted from that article. Steve Gardner, “Most Church of Christ Colleges No Longer Exclude Women From Leading in Worship Services: A List of Schools and Their Approach to Chapel,” *Authentic Theology*, 9 May 2018, <https://authentictheology.com/2018/05/09/most-church-of-christ-colleges-no-longer-exclude-women-from-leading-in-worship-services-a-list-of-schools-and-their-approach-to-chapel/>.

Three other schools—Lubbock Christian University, Oklahoma Christian University (OCU), and York College—no longer generally exclude women from actively serving in mixed chapels, but some exclusivity remains. Women serve as the featured speaker and also actively serve in other roles in these three schools' main chapels, and women actively serve in all roles in some mixed chapels besides the main one at OCU, but some roles in the main chapel-services for all three are generally filled by men.

Five of the Church of Christ colleges—Faulkner University, Florida College, Freed-Hardeman University, Harding University, and Ohio Valley University—continue to wholly exclude women from actively serving in their mixed chapel worship-services. Harding has the oddest practice of the group. At Harding, women occasionally give personal testimony or speak on a special topic (*e.g.*, stress and anxiety) to the assembly as part of the main chapel program, though it is normally after a devotional period.

The mere fact that most Church of Christ colleges have made this change has some impact on people's thinking relative to scripture (*e.g.*, if the professors who really know the Bible have made this change, maybe we should reconsider). In analyzing the effectiveness of such points in encouraging people to study scripture, though, it is likely that mere data—mere statistics—alone is not as effective as the data combined with a meaningful story behind the event. Thus, the stories of the people behind the early days of women speaking in chapel at each of these colleges may be encouraging. This essay provides an example, a brief background relative to women first praying in chapel at Pepperdine University.

IV. At Pepperdine¹⁴

At least by the late 1970s, women would sometimes speak in chapel (aka convocation) at Pepperdine by introducing a speaker, for example, but they were prohibited from preaching, leading prayer, reading scripture, or otherwise actively serving in worship. They would make announcements or speak on a special topic, but not on “theological” or “Biblical” topics. If the organizers of the chapel thought the female speaker might stray into such topics, they would warn her not to appear as if she were preaching. For example, when D’Esta Love began working at Pepperdine as an adjunct professor of humanities in 1979, she was invited to speak in chapel. When she mentioned she was planning on speaking on John 4, she was cautioned not to appear as if she were preaching, so she did not take a Bible to the podium. Her discussion of John 4 was

¹⁴ Sources for this section include the following: Telephone Interview of Jennifer Hale Christy by Steve Gardner on November 27, 2018; E-mail Correspondence from D’Esta Love to Steve Gardner, January 6, 2019; E-mail Correspondence from D’Esta Love to Steve Gardner, February 6, 2019; E-mail Correspondence from Constance Fulmer to Steve Gardner, March 18, 2019; D’Esta Love, “Why Am I Afraid?,” *Leaven*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 1 January 1996, <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1889&context=leaven>; excerpt with photo from *The Graphic*, date unknown, provided to author by D’Esta Love on February 6, 2019 (all e-mails on file with the author). Other than quotes in this section in which I specifically quote someone, this summary should be attributable to me, the author, such that any errors should be attributed to me and not to any of the sources who were very kind to take their time to describe some of the history to me. E-mail any suggested additions, corrections, or deletions to me at Steve.Gardner@gmail.com.

one of the first times, if not the first time, a woman had spoken on a biblical topic in chapel. Some faculty members in the audience viewed her speaking on John 4 as a sermon and commented on her courage.

At the time, the university administration itself did not itself refer to chapel as a religious service, but there was usually a prayer, scripture was often read, and hymns and other worship-type songs were frequently sung. Preaching was an infrequent event in chapel, with a Church of Christ preacher invited to preach on occasion. Despite the university administration not officially viewing chapel as a religious service, women were prohibited from leading prayer, reading scripture, leading singing, speaking on a theological or biblical topic, or otherwise “leading.”

When Professor Love became the Dean of Students at Pepperdine in 1989, the only individuals who could preach or lead in chapel were Church of Christ males. That is, a man could preach or lead in chapel only if he were a member of a Church of Christ and women could not preach or lead, regardless. Even at that time, less than about half of Pepperdine’s faculty and students were members of the Churches of Christ. Dean Love and her husband, Stuart Love, a professor of religion at Pepperdine, were concerned about the situation and resolved to address it.

Professor Stuart Love met with some faculty members about the issue, formed an *ad hoc* committee of faculty to address the matter, and sought a meeting with Dr. David Davenport, who had been president of the university since 1985. Dr. Davenport told Professor Stuart Love that if he is coming to convince him, not to bother because he is already convinced, to which Professor Stuart Love responded, "No, we are coming to empower you." Afterwards, Professor Stuart Love organized a committee including representatives from every academic division, men and women, members of Churches of Christ and not.

The University Church of Christ, which met on campus, similarly did not then allow women to speak or lead in the assembly at the time. Dr. Davenport was hesitant to make a decision allowing women to speak and lead in chapel (and in relation to other university events) while the University Church prohibited it. The committee persuaded him, though, that the university should make its decision independent of the University Church.

Faculty members on the committee prepared a survey asking about a wide range of roles for women and settings for those roles. The response rate for faculty was nearly 100%. Approximately 95% of the faculty—and 100% of the full-time tenured faculty of the Religion Division—were in favor of full inclusion of women in all roles in all settings at Pepperdine. Members of the *ad hoc* committee had many meetings with university officials and members of the Board of Regents to discuss this topic and the survey.

In 1990, the Religious Standards Committee (RSC) of Pepperdine University began formally considering the topic of women's roles in chapel, graduation, and other public settings at Pepperdine. The RSC included every member of the Board of Regents who were members of Churches of Christ. The RSC had authority to make a decision regarding the university's policies in this area. Dr. David Davenport had been president of the university since 1985 and appointed D'Esta Love, the Dean of Students, as the administrative liaison to the committee. In this role, she joined in many of the RSC's discussions of the issue.

Members of the *ad hoc* committee—male and female, students, staff and faculty—concerned about women's roles met with the RSC and other university committees and administrative groups. Among faculty members meeting with the RSC was Dr. Constance Fulmer. The RSC itself met multiple times on this issue. Dean Love describes the process as “tedious and long.”

After about two years of examining the issue, the RSC met in the summer of 1992 to make a final decision on the topic. It held a retreat that the wives of the committee members were invited to attend. Dr. Davenport (then president of Pepperdine), Dean Love, Jack Scott, Bill Banowski (former president of Pepperdine), Jerry Hudson, Gail Hopkins, Tom and Sheila Bost, Helen Young, Joe Rokus, John Catch, and others were in attendance.

The RSC's major issue of concern relative to the women's roles issue at this point was Pepperdine's relationship with the Churches of Christ. The RSC was not particularly concerned about losing donors or students. The university had built stronger ties with the Churches of Christ over the years and the RSC was concerned about damaging that work and relationship. Several RSC members argued that the university is a university, not the church, and *all* of its students should have the opportunity to contribute to and enrich the spiritual life of the school.

After much discussion, Dr. Banowski stood and made a speech near the conclusion of the retreat, one that Dean Love calls "brilliant," that persuaded the Board to allow Dr. Davenport to make the final decision. The RSC unanimously agreed, but cautioned Dr. Davenport to move slowly and to be careful.

After the retreat ended and the attendees walked to their cars, Dr. Davenport said to Dean Love, "D'Esta, this is not something we can do slowly--we just have to do it. If the Dean of Students cannot lead the opening prayer at the beginning of the school year, I don't know who can." He asked her if she would lead that prayer at the opening chapel (convocation of the coming school year. She agreed.

There was no formal announcement about the matter. Those who had been involved with the *ad hoc* committee and others who had been involved in considering the issue were informed that Dean Love would be praying at opening chapel, but there was no public or formal

announcement. Dean Love explains that “Dr. Davenport felt it best to just do it and not give long explanations.” All prohibitions on women and non-Churches of Christ members speaking in chapel or other religious settings on campus were lifted then. There was very little objection from within the university.

Dean Love led the first prayer at the opening chapel in September 1992, the first prayer led by a woman in chapel at Pepperdine. That chapel was held in Firestone Fieldhouse, the campus gymnasium. Many people in attendance wept during and immediately after Dean Love’s prayer.

Dean Love relayed afterwards, in an article that appeared in *Leaven* (Vol. 4, Issue 2, Article 3, 1 January 2012) that she was afraid of the exposure, the questioning of her motives, labelling and judging, censure, disapproval of her parents (even though she was 52 at the time), the criticism that might be directed at her parents and her son, and other things. Nevertheless, she rose to pray.

The reaction from faculty, staff, and students was overwhelmingly positive. Students generally had not been involved in the RSC’s discussions regarding gender inclusion. At the time, students were primarily from conservative churches, and it did not seem to be a pressing issue for them then. It was a pressing issue among faculty and staff, though.

Pepperdine’s school newspaper, *The Graphic*, wrote about the prayer. Negative reactions were minor. One adjunct faculty member resigned over the issue and one administrator refused to participate in chapel if a woman was to be on stage with him. Encouragement and kind words from faculty, staff, and students about the development were prevalent.



Figure 1: Part of *The Graphic*, including a photograph of Dean Love giving the first prayer in chapel (convocation) at Pepperdine given by a woman (courtesy Dean Love).

Dean Love's prayer received a great deal of attention outside the university, too. Word spread, and the *Christian Chronicle* published a short article on her prayer. She received letters, emails and phone calls from all over the country, most of which were supportive and some of which recounted struggles with the exclusion of women from worship roles. One woman wrote of her regret of never hearing her mother pray. Donor and student losses were either non-existent or minor.

Dean Love received much criticism and condemnation, as well as some ostracization. She received letters telling her she should be ashamed. Some church bulletins warned she would be speaking at the Pepperdine lectures and the audience should "beware of wolves in sheep's clothing." One bulletin article on her prayer concluded, "Depart from me. I NEVER knew you." For years before praying in chapel, Dean Love received more invitations to speak at women's retreats and Ladies' Day events than she could accept and had an extremely active speaking schedule. Shortly after word of her chapel prayer spread, those invitations halted. Women who had previously invited her told her that their elders had forbidden them to invite her again. A Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas, that sponsored a retreat for female missionaries in East Africa and that had committed to pay for the team's expenses refused to pay Dean Love's expenses when it discovered she had been invited by the mission team in Mwanza, Tanzania, as the guest speaker, giving as a reason that she had led prayer at Pepperdine. The mothers of some of the team members from the northwest United States raised money from their ladies' Bible classes to pay Dean Love's expenses.

Dean Love's parents, on the other hand, to her surprise, were "encouraging and supportive." Dean Love said she "regretted I had not discussed these matters with them before, but I had been afraid."

All roles in chapel and other university services were open to women after that prayer. Around 1995, approximately mid-way through Dean Love's tenure as dean, in light of the diversity and varying needs of the student body, her office gave students options relative to chapel (convocation), creating multiple programs in a variety of venues, all with a spiritual emphasis. Students were typically required to attend at least 14 sessions each semester then.

When a Friday night praise service was created, male and female students participated in the same manner, including making short devotional presentations. When Seaver College began Thanksgiving and Easter services for the university community, men and women led. Baccalaureate services near graduation began around 1995 and Dean Love preached in that service in 2007 and Amy Bost Henegar did so in 2010.¹⁵

V. Conclusion

Church of Christ members are often busy people with many pressing matters on their minds. Motivating them to engage in an in-depth study of scripture or to ask their elders to do so relative to a practice (excluding women from speaking in the assembly) that has likely been a part of every Church of Christ they have ever attended—and that they do not consider to be a problem—is challenging even when the issue involves their own daughters and the daughters of their friends. The advocacy points described in this essay might help encourage them to so engage and ask. That most Church of Christ colleges have changed their practice to no longer completely exclude women from speaking during their chapel service is likely one of the more effective advocacy points for encouraging scripture study on the issue. Personal stories of

¹⁵ I have researched the history of women speaking in chapel at several of the colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ and there are many similarly inspiring stories within those histories.

people like D'Esta Love and David Davenport can be very encouraging towards scripture study regarding this issue or towards asking one's elders to engage in scripture study on it.

Consideration of such points and further research and analysis of their effectiveness can aid in encouraging Church of Christ members and elders to study scripture regarding women speaking in the assembly when men are present.