

Women in Church Leadership

Scotty Williams

April 10, 2026

Women in church leadership is top amongst a list of historically debated topics that carry a wide span of implications and consequences. While there have been centuries long debates surrounding other topics, such as predestination, infant baptism, end times, and other theological grey areas, the debate against women in ministry has a direct and palpable effect on a majority of members within the body of Christ as a whole, in substantial ways. As a nineteenth century devout Christian and prominent abolitionist once said, “I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God designed us to occupy.”¹ To do service to such a contentious topic, this paper will provide an adequate summary of the three major positions held within Protestant orthodoxy, a prominent biblical passage that supports each position, as well as a chief critique of each position. I will then provide my personal conviction on the matter and my exegetical quest of arriving at said conviction. Here, I will provide a more robust analysis on each of the positions as they relate to, and oppose, one other. Lastly, and most importantly, I will offer practical applications to a wide range of audiences that should be considered as we live out our conviction on this topic in relationship with others.

Major Positions & Critiques

There are three major positions within the Protestant Christian faith when it comes to women in church leadership- Male Leader, Male Elder, and Egalitarian. While both Male Leader and Male Elder are complementarian positions, they differ greatly on their theological conclusions of what church offices women are barred from and deserve to be looked separately. In fact, Male Elder and the Egalitarian position are a lot more aligned than Male Leader and

¹ Grimké, Sarah Moore. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman*. (Boston, MA: I. Knapp, 1838) 10.

Male Elder. What follows is a summarization of the three stated positions, a lead proponent of said position, as well as one key supporting passage and one major critique.

Male Leader

Of the two complementarian positions, Male Leader is the most conservative. Those who hold this conviction believe that while women are encouraged to engage in different ministries such as ministering to children or other women, they are not allowed to exercise authority over men in the church, including teaching men or the corporate body. Thus, women are barred from any pastoral and eldership position (and in some denominations today, deacon). The Male Leader position holds that all spiritual gifts are given apart from gender distinctions, except the gifts presented in Ephesians 4:11, such as being an apostle, prophet, pastor, or (spiritual) teacher. Thomas Schriener is prominent theologian who faithfully represents the Male Leader position. Schriener wishes he could encourage women to move forward into pastoral ministry, reaffirming to them that that they have God's blessing, but says he "must resist temptation to please people and instead must be faithful to [his] understanding of Scripture...that forbids women from teaching and exercising authority of a man."²

Male Leader complementarians see the creation story of Genesis Two as foundational to their position. Like most all Christians, they identify that men and women are both created in the image of God and hold equal dignity and worth (Gen. 1:26-27). But they also believe men and women have distinct functions and roles within Church. In other words, men and women are to complement each other, not replicate one another.³ In the Genesis Two creation story, Male

² Linda L Belleville and James R Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich Zondervan, 2005), 265.

³ Gregory A Boyd and Paul R Eddy, *Across the Spectrum : Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 251.

Leader complementarians point out that Adam was given the mandate to take care of the garden before Eve was formed, and Eve was created to be Adam's helper (Gen. 2:18). Then, when Adam and Eve rebelled in the garden, it brought about a painful distortion of this creation order. God's cursed the women, declaring her desires to overthrow God's pattern of male headship (Gen. 3:16), and God cursed the man, declaring he would exercise his legitimate authority but in domineering ways (Gen. 3:17-19). For this reason, Paul writes to a beloved pastor, Timothy, saying that women are not to have authority over a man which he then illustrates with the Genesis Two Eden scene, proving God's order and design for man's headship over women (1 Tim. 2:12-15).

A leading critique of the Male Leader position is that it stands in direct contrast to biblical examples of women who were faithfully commissioned into the highest of spiritual offices, such as Deborah, Huldah, Junia, Priscilla (see *Biblical Figures* for a thorough analysis). The common Male Leader response is to say these particular women are "exceptions to the rule." The exception to the rule argument is very fragile when we apply it across Scripture. For example, if we believe Paul's healings, Stephen's bold witness, or Holy Spirit coming upon the people on the day of Pentecost (and Cornelious' house) were exceptions to the rule, then we would miss the purpose of these texts, which were meant to show us that the same Spirit that lives in them, is the same Spirit that lives in us (Rom. 8:11). Granted, just because there are plenty of examples where the exception to the rule argument does not fit, does not negate that there can be exceptions, with women in church leadership possibly being one. The only problem with this stance is that we have a healthy amount of other biblical and hermeneutical support that prove women in leadership is not an example of God running out of male leaders and choosing a women as an exception. Consequently, the Male Leader position remains defenseless against the

examples of women spiritually leading and having authority over Israel and New Testament churches observed throughout Scripture. As an interesting thought exercise, if you are convinced God did make an exception throughout the biblically recorded history, is there any reason to believe He will not make anymore? If the next “exception” happens to be in your church, do you want to be found guilty of intentionally disobeying God, because you placed Him in our theological box?

Male Elder

Those who hold a Male Elder position believe that qualified women are encouraged to minister at any level of church leadership, except the position of elder, which is reserved only for men. They contend that all spiritual gifts are given apart from gender distinctions, assuming they are used in biblically appropriate roles and offices, (e.g. everyone but eldership). Renowned New Testament Theologian, Craig Bloomberg, is a prominent proponent of the Male Elder position, and offers a brief, yet helpful statement of how to think of the Male Elder position. He states the Male Elder position is “about as close as you can get to being a full-fledged egalitarian without actually becoming one.” Furthermore, he adds that because the position recognizes cross cultural principles within the biblical texts, the Male Elder position “supports women’s preaching or pastoring under male [eldership], which can include exercising the gift of teaching men.”⁴

The Male Elder position bases their stance on the biblical qualification for eldership given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. In both passages, Paul is writing to newly appointed pastors, instructing them to set up church leadership. When it came to appointing elders, they must be “a husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:1, Tit. 1:6). Whatever way one tries to exegete the

⁴ Linda L Belleville and James R Beck, 125, 336.

Greek, Paul clearly spelt out, with detail, who was supposed to be in eldership positions in the church. While Male Elder complementarians see biblical examples of women filling many roles within the New Testament, they never see any women filling the role of an elder. Thus, they conclude their position is biblical concrete and in line with Paul's instruction.

While I applaud the desire to take clear, biblical examples of women in teaching roles within the New Testament church seriously, I believe the premise of seeing an elder, *presbuteros*, as authoritatively distinct from the other two leadership offices, *poimēn*, *episkopos*, is flawed. The three Greek words that give us our modern understanding of church leadership, not including deacon, are *poimēn*, *episkopo*, and *presbutero*. The first word is *poimēn* and means "shepherd." As a position of a church officer, it is only used once, in Ephesians 4:11. The Greek verb *poimainō*, meaning "to shepherd", "to feed", and "to tend", is used far more often than its noun counterpart in the New Testament. The second word used of a church officer is *presbuteros* and means someone who is relatively advanced in age, older. (1 Tim. 5:17). The third word used of a leadership office in the church is *episkopos*, a Greek word that means "overseer" or "bishop." When used as a noun, its basic definition is someone who exercises oversight and gives attention to, looks at, takes care of, and/or sees to it (Acts 20:28).

There are multiple examples of all three words being used synonymously. In Peter's first letter, he wrote, "to the *presbuteros* (elder) among you, I appeal as a fellow *presbuteros* (elder), a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be *poimainō* (shepherds) of God's flock that is under your care, serving *episkopeō* (overseers)— not because you must, but because you are willing...." (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Likewise, Paul wrote to the *presbuteros* (elders) of the church in Ephesus, calling them to "keep watch over [themselves] and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made [them] *episkopos* (overseers). Be *poimainō*

(shepherds) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:17, 28). The evidence of the New Testament, specifically for Paul and Peter who were ministering from 50 to 65 AD, points to the fact that *poimēn* (shepherd), *presbuteros* (elder), and *episkopeō* (overseer) were used to describe, authoritatively, the same leadership office (or at the very least, equal weight of authority). These passages reveal that the early church did not distinguish roles within top leadership offices like the Male Elder position does. In other words, the Male Elder position bars women from a position they were never meant to be barred from.

Egalitarian

The Egalitarian position defends that all ministries and offices of the church are equally open to all qualified men and women. Gender is not a relevant distinction for excluding a person from any church office. Egalitarians hold that spiritual gifts are given apart from one’s gender, which includes apostleship, pastoralship, and teaching the people of God. Egalitarians see men and women partnering together, starting in the garden on the first pages of Scripture all the way to the renewed heavens and earth. A prominent proponent of the egalitarian position is New Testament theologian, Linda Belleville. She states that Egalitarians “see male and female as equal yet complementary...when in relationship of mutual submission, [they] function as equal to the task of co-dominion over creation and coworkers in the church.”⁵

The most prominent biblical support of the Egalitarian position is not one passage in particular but a collogue of all the female characters throughout Scripture that have been in positions of leadership and have spiritual authority over men. For example, when the prophet Micah refers back to Isreal post slavery in Egypt, he refers to Moses, Aron, and Miriam as the

⁵ Ibid., 103.

leaders, both physically and spiritually (Mic. 6:4). Similarly, Anna is a prophetess in the early first century who spent her days speaking in the temple to everyone who was looking for the “redemption of Jerusalem”, whom she had found to be Jesus (Luke 2:36-38). Because men, numerically speaking, represented the majority of the population at the temple, it would be very reasonable to assume that Anna would have taught them. In the next section of this paper, my personal position, I will offer a much more detailed explanation and exegesis of female spiritually leaders and teachers represented throughout the Old Testament and New Testament. In fact, the very inspired words of Scripture we read were sung, taught, and passed down by a number of women. For example, the inspired and authoritative words of Proverbs 31, were from King Lamuel’s mother (Prov. 31:1). The logic flows like this: Because Scripture is authoritative, and authority comes from the author who received God’s words, and because parts of God’s Scripture were derived from women, women carry a sense of teaching authority. Pastor and theologian, Gregory Boyd, states, “In as much as the whole Word of God has authority over believers, these passages constitute examples of women having spiritual authority over all (including men) who read them.”⁶

The prominent critique of the Egalitarian position is that the position does not follow sound hermeneutics. Critics identify this issue specifically in the Egalitarians interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-13, where Paul declares that women are not to have authority over a man. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, Paul specifically states the qualifications for an elder, a top church office, as a “husband of one wife.” Anyone who has spent time interpreting Scripture knows that sound hermeneutics is first founded in the clear and then worked through the unclear. When people have to dive beyond the text, they end up doing biblical gymnastics

⁶ Gregory A Boyd and Paul R Eddy, 256.

which is always less than ideal, especially when one's entire conviction is based on it.

Consequently, Egalitarians, they say, carry the burden of proof, not the other way around. Again, this rest of this paper will interact more thoroughly with critiques of the Egalitarian position as specific passages arise.

Personal Position

When it comes to women serving in leadership positions in the church, I hold to an egalitarian position. I believe all ministries and offices of the church are equally open to all qualified men and women. What follows is my exegetical work on Scriptures surrounding the topic of women in leadership positions. When certain passages have also been used to support the complementarian position, I will be sure to interact between the two positions.

Genesis 2:18-25

In the opening pages of the Bible, God brought order from non-order and commissioned humans, as image bearers and vice-regents on His behalf, to advance His presence amongst all creation. Specifically, God brought Adam and Eve together, two gendered individuals who are real people but also, narratively, serve as an archetype for all humanity. First, God commissioned Adam to work (*ʿābād*) and keep (*šāmar*) the garden. The terms *ʿābād* and *šāmar* are chiefly used of Levitical priests who were tasked with preserving sacred space, the tabernacle and temple (Num. 3:7; Neh.13:22). Immediately, the creation story discloses that a pivotal role of humanity is to mediate God's presence, not just within the confines a building, but to all of creation. When forming Eve, Genesis says that she was taken out of Adam's side, *šēlā* (Gen. 2:22). While some translations translate *šēlā* as rib, it is important to note that out of the other thirty-eight uses of the Hebrew word, it is never used as an anatomical feature. Rather, it is in reference as the pair

to, or other side of, a building/structure, mainly the tabernacle (Ex. 25-27). Again, the biblical author evokes tabernacle language when describing Eve as a means to reinforces humanity's priestly purpose and function.

Additionally, the author of Genesis refers to Eve as a helper ('ēzer). This term does not annotate a subordinate position, nor part of God's designed order, as complementarians have concluded. Of the forty-four times 'ēzer is used in the Hebrew Bible, almost all of them are in reference to God as the helper of Israel (Ps. 115:11). Surely no one would claim God, an 'ēzer, is lesser than Israel. Instead, 'ēzer more appropriate is used to view women as an ally, a humanoid co-ruler. The hermetical climax of this section makes this case and point. In this section of Genesis Two, God is needing to create someone in contrast to the animals, being that the beasts of the land, air, and sea are not suitable for Adam to serve with as co-ruler (Gen. 1:26-27). Consequently, we cannot conclude that Adam is in need of a reproductive partner (Eve's role as subject), but rather, God is stating he needs an, 'ēzer, an ally, another half, to help and join him in working God's sacred space and accomplishing their shared, priestly tasks.⁷ From the very beginning of creation God chose both male and female to take up the mantel of spiritually leading and overseeing His work. This is why Peter, reflecting on what it means for men and women to live in God's inaugurated kingdom because of Jesus' completed work on the cross, says that all who put their faith and trust in Jesus are God's royal priests (1 Pet. 2:9). With this rendering, Genesis Two does not serve as viable biblical support in favor of an ordered hierarchical structure as the complementarian positions holds. Rather, it does support an egalitarian position of man and women spiritually leading and co-ruling together, as equals.

⁷ John H Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 81.

Ephesians 5

Ephesians Five gives a very helpful exposition of Genesis 2:18-25. Paul begins this section through the lens of mutual submission.⁸ He first directs his attention to all the Jesus followers in Ephesus, encouraging them to be a helper and submit to one another because of their relationship with God (Eph. 5:20). He then addresses each specific roles, wife and husband, slave, master. He calls wives to cultivate oneness with their husband through a servant posture just as the Church carries His presence and oneness into the world by taking on the posture of servants on mission. He then challenges the husbands to love their bride, the same way Christ humbled himself by becoming man and sacrificing His life to bring about oneness with humanity. Verses thirty-one and thirty-two bring this section to its climax. Paul says that the union between man and women, through becoming one flesh, is really about Jesus and His followers oneness. The design of God creating two people to become one is meant to remind us of the true story we belong to- God becoming one with His creation. Isaiah writes, “As a young man marries a young woman, so will your builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5). In other words, Paul is emphasizing that man and woman’s purpose of becoming one serves as a signpost that we belong to God, who created humanity to commune with as they serve as his vice-regents over creation. Many complementarians use this passage to prove that a women’s submission to a man is demonstrative of God’s created ordered design of man spiritually and in leadership over women. On the contrary, Paul’s reflection of Genesis and the roles of Adam and Eve in marriage ascertains the work of women and men as counterpart allies and priestly representatives on

⁸ Linda L Belleville and James R Beck, 94-95.

God's behalf, that when joined together, represent the covenant faithfulness and union of God and His people.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 reads, "The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church." At a first glance it seems that Paul is barring women from ever talking in church gatherings. At closer investigation it seems that 1 Corinthians Fourteen fits on the back end of a larger theme that Paul began chapters earlier. Specifically, Paul is reproofing the way that the Corinthians are gathering and worshipping.

In chapter eight, nine, and ten, Paul urges the church in Corinth, mainly talking to the men, to stop using their newly found "freedom" in Jesus if it becomes stumbling block to others, specifically, regards to food sacrificed to idols, feasting, and idly partaking in the Lord's Supper. Chapter eleven then focuses on head coverings. Though the action of wearing or not wearing a head covering has to do with gender differences between a married woman and her husband, it seems that whatever the reason for the lack of head coverings on the part of some women, Paul is urging them to curtail what may appear to be a "freedom" or a "right" in a similar way to that which he has described in chapter nine. They should all dress in a way that will "build up" and "benefit" others rather than drawing attention to themselves.

In chapter fourteen, our discussion text, Paul describes one of the ways that the Spirit builds up the congregation is through prophecy and tongues. He taught how a prophecy was always meant to point to Christ and, thus, would have been gospel focused and probably expository in nature. Here, Paul explains how women will participate in prophesy, tongues, and

church gatherings. At surface level, it seems he is making a contradiction. First, he says that women cannot talk in service, but then he also says they are expected to talk in service (through prophesy). In the context of 1 Corinthians, specifically eight to fourteen, Paul’s “silent” rhetoric is merely telling the wives not to judge or question publicly any prophecies from their own husbands. Such action might bring shame upon the marriage. Rather, if they have questions they should raise them at home. In this context, Paul is not oppressing women or viewing their gender as a less than. On the contrary, he has an expectation that women exposit and make more clear a revelation of Jesus to their fellow Christian brothers and sisters. There seems to be no restrictions on the gift of prophesy to females, a fitting place if Paul was wanting to bar women’s ability to teach men. This passage adds value to the conversation on the basis that women were expected to use their spiritual gifts in the community without any limitations (see *Spiritual Gifts*) and are not barred from speaking or teaching in church, as the Male Leader position states.

1 Timothy 2:11-13

In a personal letter to his protégé Timothy, a pastor to the churches in Ephesus, Paul instructs, “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression” (1 Tim. 2:11-13). As we have already identified, this is a primary supportive biblical passage for the Male Leader position. Conversely, I believe Paul barring women from “teaching or exercising authority” is in full accord with the “women leaning in quietness” analysis we just saw in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. It is most likely that Paul’s present limitation is to be taken with the same proviso and was designed to restrain the tendencies of newly emancipated Christian women to abuse their new-found freedom by indecorously lording

it over the men. Such excesses would bring disrepute on the whole community, as had probably happened at Corinth, and called for firm handling.⁹

Paul's prohibition also fits best in the historical and cultural context of Timothy's community, where contemporary women were falling under the influence of imposters. A primary reason of Paul's letter to Timothy was to warn him to watch out for false teachers and offer advice for what to do when they came. With the newly found freedom of Christians, and Christians women, in the first century, it seemed women were a viable avenue for the false teachers to influence and infiltrate the churches that Timothy was shepherding. Therefore, Paul instructs Timothy to not allow the women, the deceived voices of the false teachers, to teach (what was unbeknown to them, a false message). Paul adds an illustration from the Torah about Adam and Eve. It is fitting for a devote Israelite like Paul to draw an example from the Torah, the single most influential, life shaping and saturating document for the Jewish people. Paul says Adam was created first, and thus, heard the direct edict from God in the garden, but it was Eve who was deceived by the serpent. I believe the reader need not to import more into this illustration, except the point that Paul is clearly making: Just as Eve was deceived in the garden and the results were catastrophic, so too, some of the women in Timothy's churches are being deceived by false teachers (serpents), and if Timothy allow the women to teach heresy, the results, too, will be catastrophic.¹⁰ In many other places, Paul, and John in his first letter, make the same point regarding men who are acting as false teachers, perverting the truth of Jesus (Acts 20:28-29; 1 John 4:1-5). No one has presumed that because these false teachers were dissuading men, that all men should be barred from teaching. Similarly, one cannot conclude from this

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 14:89.

¹⁰ Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 267.

passage that all women should be barred from teaching. While Male Leader complementarians see this passage as barring women from leadership and authority over men, I believe this passage, when understood in its proper context, offers wisdom on guarding against false teachers and how to deal people who fall prey to “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Therefore, I do not conclude that this passage argues for withholding women from church leadership.

Spiritual Gifts

Ephesians 4:11-12, among other passages, give us some categories for Spiritual gifts. It reads, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." None of the spiritual gifts are limited to class, race, gender, or ethnicity. They are given by God freely, not dependent on humans abilities or positions. If we continue that logic, then an overweight white man from the America can have the same spiritual gifts as small, undersized women from India. Likewise, a black man from Africa who only speaks a local, tribal dialect, can have the same gifting as a women from Mexico who can only speak Spanish. These descriptions serve as an examples that Holy Spirit gifts people without limitations. If and when a woman has been gifted with teaching or shepherding His flock, not just one subset of his flock (specifically referencing the Male Leader position that believe women can only teach other women), then she must do it to the glory of God. Consequently, all Spiritual gifts are given at His discretion, and as we will see in the next section (*Biblical Figures*), there are many biblical examples of women throughout the Bible that spiritually hold the highest offices in church leadership.

Biblical Figures

In addition to the female characters identified earlier in this paper (*Egalitarian Position*), Deborah, Hulda, Junia, and Priscilla are great examples of women in the Bible that serve in spiritually authoritative positions. In the Old Testament, Deborah (Judges 4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22, 2 Chron. 34) are women represented in Scripture who spoke, taught, and led Israel on behalf God. In the time of the judges, pre-Israelite kings, judges led the people of God in all aspects of life, including governmentally and religiously. They carried the voice of God to the people of God. Deborah was one of these people. Although the book of Judges is a negative look on Israel's spiritual decline and rejection of God, Deborah is painted as one of the faithful judges recorded.

Similarly, the prophetess Huldah, serves as another great example of a women spiritually leading God's people. Huldah was a prophet, someone who represented God and carried His authority, voice, instructions, and teaching to His covenant people (2 Kings 22:14-20). A prophet's job was to instruct and hold Israel accountable, ensuring they were God's faithful covenant bride. Huldah was chosen by King Josiah to authoritatively instruct and spiritually lead him and the Israelite nation in right relationship with God, even when there were other well-known prophets he could have chosen from, such as Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum (2 Chron. 34:22-30). The prophet Huldah's example proves that women were included amongst those who had carried the responsibility of caring spiritual authority of Israel. She is amongst the other names of prophets, like Jeremiah, Ezekial, Isaiah, etc.

In the New Testament, Junia (Rom. 16) and Priscilla (Acts 18) are a great example of women leading New Covenant followers of Jesus. In the closing of his letter to the churches in Rome, Paul recognizes the great work of Junia, whom he calls an apostle (Rom. 16:7). In the early church, an apostle held equal leadership authority as elders did, most evident in Acts 15:2-

6, 22, where apostles and elders, together, were in charge of making key decisions for the early church. Priscilla is another example of a New Testament women who clearly held authority over a man (Acts 18:18-28) Additionally, she was identified as a leader of a church (Rom. 16:3-5). Some modern complementarians believe that being a home church leader, as Paul calls Priscilla, was just a secretary job, not a leadership job. On the contrary, the similarity to this job today would be that of a chair of a board; on who assumes leadership of an organization, in this case, spiritually leading a church. Similar to what New Testament scholars identify as *presbutero* (overseer/bishop). Belleville comments that, “The first century patron who opened his or home in the local church similarity assumed responsibility and oversight.”¹¹

In Acts 18:18-28 we are given a story of Priscilla teaching a follow of Jesus, Apollos. Complementarians hold that because Priscilla taught Apollos spontaneously and outside a “church” building, it did not count as a women having spiritual discernment and teaching weight over a man. Unfortunately, the America construct of church has hurt Priscilla’s example. Typically, many modern, westerners define church as a building solely dedicated to the ministering to people, rather than the people of God committed to meeting together as the bride of God. As a result of our modern understanding of church, if a gathering is done at homes or parks, outside the walls of a building, it is called something else, something less than church.

This formality driven, westernized understanding of church is far removed from the first century house church, and even far removed from modern churches who have to meet underground. Church, defined as followers of Jesus committed to gathering and living together doing the practices seen in Acts 2:36-47, is not something done only between walls, but something lived out in everyday life as well. There was never supposed to be a formal construct

¹¹ Linda L Belleville and James R Beck, 326.

on if someone taught in a building it was superior to if one taught outside the building. Paul did not hide that the fact that Priscilla was a church leader, which meant that her role as having spiritual, teaching authority over men applied in her house just as much as it did in the marketplace. Consequently, against the complementarian argument, Priscilla leading home church and instructing Apollos in the way of Jesus, as well as Junia being exhorted as a chief apostle, serve as credible and formative examples of women spiritually having teaching and leading authority over New Covenant followers of Jesus, including over men.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9

The Male Elder's primary critique against the Egalitarian position revolves around 1 Timothy 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9. As already identified, when it comes to interpreting these passages, complementarians argue that these verses clearly spell out, word for word, who is supposed to be in eldership positions, mainly, that an elder is "a husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:1, Tit. 1:6). They typically contend that because God's word says it plainly, it is so. Unfortunately, this is not a sound basis. Jesus Himself exemplified that the "plain reading of Scripture" argument is not a complete, sound hermeneutics. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, Jesus revealed that those who adhered exactly to what the Scriptures said, do not to murder and do not commit adultery, were actually missing the entire purpose and heart behind the words of Scripture. Even though they followed the plain reading of Scripture, Jesus rebuked them for not obeying the spirit of the words.

In fact, no person ever truly adheres to a plain reading of the text. For example, Jesus tells his followers to cut off their hand and gouge out their eye if it causes them to sin. In a text like this, people hermetically conclude that it should not be taken at face value, and to this, my arms and eyes are thankful. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul says exactly how, date and

manner, to specifically collect offerings, a Scripture that is generally not followed in local churches. Elsewhere, Paul tells women not to speak in church (*1 Tim. 2:11-13*, addressed above), not to wear their hair in a specific kind of ways nor specific kinds of jewelry (*1 Tim. 2:9-10*), and to wear head coverings (*1 Cor. 11:2-16*). Most Christians today do not take these verses at face value. Many believe that Paul was speaking into the culture of that time, and while we live in a different culture, we must take the heart of what he was said and live it out in our culture today, to which I fully agree. Therefore, I conclude that qualifications for elder, mainly being “husband of one wife”, as seen in *1 Timothy 3:1-7* and *Titus 1:5-9*, must be understood light of the context of Paul’s culture. This is the purpose of sound hermeneutics. Sometimes the reader is meant to take Scripture at it’s plain reading, and other times the biblical authors used poetry, metaphors, or were speaking into specific context that causes the reader to do a little more interpretative work to figure out the wisdom of what the author meant. I give a clear, practical example of a specific hermeneutic as it relates to our topic of women in leadership in the next section (*Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic*).

Another interpretation is that Paul’s eldership role stated in *First Timothy Three* resides in the literary context of the verses that immediately precede it. Paul offers critique to both men and women, telling the women they are not to wear “elaborate hair styles, gold, pearls, or expensive apparel” (*1 Tim. 2:9*). Many, including most Complementarians, believe Paul was speaking into Timothy’s specific context in Ephesus where women were dressing in elaborate ways in order to creat superiority or hierarchy amongst themselves, similar to what Paul was admonishing regarding head coverings in *First Corinthians*. Many conclude that the theological significance of this verse is that Christians must not see themselves as better than or above others, especially because of how they dress, but instead, they must live in humility, recognizing

and serving other above themselves in pursuit of their oneness in Christ. Paul says it this way to the churches in Philippi, "'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Additionally, how is one to interpret what "expensive apparel" is? Are we to live by what was expensive to Paul in the first century? If so, this would exclude most people from wearing hundred-dollar shoes, hundreds of dollars suits, and most wedding rings that cost in the thousands of dollars. This interpretative logic can turn legalistic very quickly. Most Christians, Complementarians and Egalitarians alike, hermeneutically conclude that Paul's critique of the women in 1 Timothy 2:9 is not to be taken literally, and therefore, do not have any qualm with women who wear gold bracelets, pearl necklaces, or "expensive" apparel, such as a wedding ring, in so far as they have the correct heart posture behind it. Which leads to my point that these verses lead directly into Paul's eldership statement. With both statements living in the same hermeneutical arena with no change in literary style or design, it is reasonable to apply the same interpretation to the phrase "husband of one wife" as we did to the forbidding of gold, pearls, and expensive apparel. This would mean that Paul is revealing that someone who is in an eldership/leadership position must live in covenant faithfulness of their spouse, not barring women from the church office. In fact, for a Complementarian to be hermeneutically consistent, something they critique Egalitarians on in regard to these verses, they should also hold that no single man, nor any man without children, can hold an eldership position. As it clearly states, an elder must be "husband of one wife" (i.e., must be married) and "have children under control" (i.e. must have children) (1 Tim. 3:1-4). I argue that if Complementarians do not hold firm to women wearing gold, pearl, or "expensive" apparel, and that elders can be unmarried and not

have children, then they are a lot more aligned with the Egalitarian interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9 than they may realize.

An observation worth noting is that the same qualification, “husband of one wife”, is also laid out for deacons in the same section of First Timothy Three. But, unlike serving in an eldership office, many Complementarians accept women to serve as a deacons. Mainly, because we have a biblical example of women a deaconess in Romans 16:1. In his valediction, Paul praises Pheobe, calling her a *diakonos* (deacon). As a result, many have concluded that “husband of one wife” is exclusive unless specific biblical examples prove contrary. While there is not a woman in Scripture called an elder, there is a women apostle, Junia. In the New Testament, while an apostle simply means “one who is sent,” the term is almost exclusively used as a leader of New Covenant people that the early churches seemed to treat parallel in leadership as an elder (see *Biblical Figures* above). Accordingly, a plausible conclusion would be that Junia is a specific biblical example, just like Pheobe, proves the qualification for elder is open to women just like the qualification for deacon is open to women.

Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

When it comes to interpreting Scripture, especially the New Testament letters, how do we know if specific contexts are deriving the biblical ethic or if we should follow the exact biblical example no matter what? In his book, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, Theologian Dr. William Webb provides a compelling hermeneutic to aid in one’s exegetical quest that touches on the theme that over time women and slaves are liberated in the progressive knowledge of God in a cultural context, while the issue of homosexuality does not have the same expanding trajectory through the biblical narrative. He calls it the “Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic.” Dr. Webb explains that in order for someone to live by a biblical ethic, they must know its

trajectory in relation to the entire biblical narrative. It works like this: One must identify how the original culture lived in relation to the ethic; what ethic the Bible presents; how our present culture lives in relation to the ethic; and how the ultimate ethic of new creation is in relation the given ethic. Following this hermeneutic will reveal if the Bible is providing a widening or constricting ethical ideal.¹²

Applying this hermeneutic to the role of women in church leadership, we observe that the original cultures of Timothy's churches in Ephesus, Titus' churches in Crete, and the churches in Corinth, were comprised of a diversifying Greco-Roman society. Aphrodite's, the Greek goddess of sex and fertility, as well as Demeter's temples were known for their women only cults that raised sexuality and promiscuity to a new level.¹³ It is from this women domineering cultural framework that we see Paul restricting the roles that women had in the newly founded church. But in other cultural contexts, mainly in a Jewish centered community, Paul is liberating women to a new level of significance they have not yet experienced. The ultimate ethic of new creation reveals men and women, allies and covenant partners in priestly functions, as a sacramental expression pointing to ultimate union with Jesus.

In conclusion, the ultimate trajectory is headed to a renewed heaven and earth, an awaited reality that was supposed to be from the beginning, but never fully realized due to the sin of mankind. Because I see no hierarchical system from the beginning (see *Gen. 2:18-25*), I do not believe there will be any in the end. So, the question that must be asked is what did Jesus' life, death, and resurrection accomplish? What aspects of the inaugurated kingdom of God can we experience now in relationship to women in church leadership? Many things, but not least of

¹² William J Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

¹³ Morales, Michael L. 2014. *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology*. Leuven ; Walpole, Ma: Peeters.

which, is the spiritual redemption of the *Imago Dei*. For His followers, Jesus' complete work on the cross now means we can start living as redeemed image bearers, His reinstated priests, and can walk in the renewed nature of what it means to radiate Him to the world, including women as co-rulers alongside men. Living in the reality of God's inaugurated kingdom, Paul concludes that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This means that women are liberated in the progressive knowledge and redemption of God through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and can, alongside men. Women are restored image bearing allies who can teach and exercise authority over His church and all creation in the anticipation of the fully renewed creation.

Ministry Application

On the topic of women in church leadership there is not only an importance in theology, but also how we live out this theology, ensuring it is rooted in a Godly heart posture. Many are so focused on upholding Scripture (really, their interpretation of Scripture) without any concern for how their interpretations affects those who are possibly marginalized by their theology. This does not mean one should not hold to a conviction if they are convinced Scripture reveals it to be true. Rather, it means how they live their conviction out in relationship with others, especially those who disagree, is extremely important to the heart of the Father.

For those upholding a complementarian view, it is pertinent to consider how you communicate your view to your congregation and to those you disagree with. Are you painting the opposing side, Egalitarians, as politically or socially charged, biblically illiterate, or as ones who simply came to a different conclusion of the Scriptures as you? It is astonishing how many people assume that Egalitarians ignore the plain reading of Scripture and hold on to the conviction out of personal gain or irrational feelings based off of cultural biases. I have often

been warned of going down a biblical slippery slope. Even being compared to those who are biblically supporting LGBTQ, an entirely unrelated theological debate. Similarly, I have also known egalitarians that have accused their Complementarian Christian brothers and sisters of ignoring Scripture in order to uphold their patriarchal standards, which is also an ungenerous assumption. This kind of attitude from both sides is wrong, uncharitable, and must be avoided. Complementarians must also thoughtfully be able to communicate value to women, more than being a wife or raising children, that allows them to feel purposeful in God's kingdom work. While being a wife and raising children are some of the most important roles in the world, a women must first and foremost get her identity and value in being a daughter of the King. It is important to remind the ladies in a complementarian led church that God values them and their role within the church, despite whatever it may be, because they are bearers of the Imago Dei. My last piece of advice would be for complementarians who attend an egalitarian church but do not align with the egalitarian position should seek unity over uniformity. But if, in their spirit, they believe it is a matter to divide for, they must do so peacefully and in a manner not to stir up or cause division in the church.

For my Egalitarians brothers and sisters, as the egalitarian position has been gaining more and more traction over the years, it is important to heed Paul's warning to the churches in Corinth- women should not use their freedom to bring attention to themselves. Instead, qualified women must use their gifts and freedom to serve the church, the same goes for men. It could be easy for Egalitarians to fall into the trap that women who hold a complementarian conviction or remain in complementarian churches "are less than" because they choose to not live into a bigger calling on their life. While this might be from a desire for others to experience a greater hope, categorizing people who are living in their convictions is not a charitable act. At the same time,

women should confidently teach the Word of God, prophesy to His people, go to seminary school, and ultimately, serve others through pastoral and eldership offices. Women should not be intimidated but be led by Holy Spirit in truth. When a women, or man, encounters a brother or sister in Christ who is unwilling to acknowledge a women's position or authority in a church office, they should not be dismayed, but rather, seek Holy Spirit of how to handle the situation. Holy Spirit might lead them to gently share their "not so heretical" egalitarian position portrayed in Scripture in order to enlighten that person in the truth (the Egalitarian interpretation of truth). Or Holy Spirit might lead them to humbly acknowledge his or her wishes and wish them well, realizing they does not have a voice in his life. Regardless, a qualified women in ministry who biblically believes she can and is led by Holy Spirit to a specific church office to serve the people should do so with a clean conscious.

Bibliography

- Bartlett, Andrew. *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts*. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019.
- Belleville, Linda L, and James R Beck. *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Grand Rapids, Mich Zondervan, 2005.
- Boyd, Gregory A, and Paul R Eddy. *Across the Spectrum : Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Grimké, Sarah Moore. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman*. Boston, MA: I. Knapp, 1838.
- Guthrie, Donald. *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.
- Morales, Michael L. 2014. *Cult and Cosmos : Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology*. Leuven ; Walpole, Ma: Peeters.
- Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Adam and Eve : Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. Downers: Intervarsity Press, 2015.
- Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals : Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003.