

# Defining a Biblical Position on Women and Eldership



## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the Jesus movement, God’s people have searched the Scriptures to understand God’s wisdom about the relationship between men and women. However, the Christian Bible wasn’t written as a handbook on that topic, nor is it designed to answer all of our questions about how to organize and structure a local church. The Christian Bible was written as a unified story that leads to Jesus Messiah. It invites us to learn God’s wisdom so that we can be led by the Spirit of God to discern and follow God’s will into an unknown future. This requires each generation of God’s people to return to the Scriptures again, to become aware of our own cultural blindspots, and engage in careful reading and thoughtful scholarship.

The questions of how men and women relate to each other and how they engage in church leadership roles (particularly the roles of pastor and elder) have been the subject of significant debate at various points in church history and they remain so today. The Bible contains a wide diversity of texts that are relevant to these questions and fitting them together into a coherent whole requires an enormous amount of interpretive labor. This has led to a wide spectrum of views throughout church history and in modern church practice. The general range of views can be summarized as follows:

<b>Extreme Mutualist</b>	<b>Moderate Mutualist</b>	<b>Soft Complementarian</b>	<b>Hard Complementarian</b>
No distinction between gender and no gender limitation of ecclesial roles or offices.	Some distinction between genders. No gender limitation of ecclesial roles or office.	Definite distinction between genders. Some limitation of ecclesial roles or offices for women.	Definite distinction between genders. Significant limitations of ecclesial roles or offices for women.

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology used to categorize various interpretations on women in leadership is not universal. In this table, we have chosen to use the terminology of “Mutualist” and “Complementarian.” The latter term appears only here in the statement by design, as explained in the following. While we do not believe this to be the best title for those holding this interpretation, it does seem to be the preferred title. In defining the beliefs and perspectives of others, particularly those we disagree with, it is our desire to honor the preferred terminology of those holding the views.

In the remainder of this written statement, we have chosen to use the terms “Mutualist” and “Hierarchicalist” because we humbly submit that these titles best describe each interpretation. While the terms “Egalitarian” and “Complementarian” are also common, our view is that they do not accurately describe each view.

The fundamental belief of the “Complementarian” view is that men and women, while equal in value before God, have different roles within a God-ordained hierarchy of authority when it comes to leadership in the church, family, and community, hence our choice of “Hierarchicalist.” “Egalitarian,” on the other hand, is a term with origins in the political and philosophical sphere, not theology. The fundamental belief within this interpretation is that men and women stand mutually side by side before God in both value and potential for leadership and authority in the church, family, and community, hence the choice of “Mutualist.”

The wide variety of views on this topic says something important about the Bible. It was designed as an epic story that leads us to Jesus and offers us God's wisdom on what it means to be human (see Paul's summary of the biblical story in 2 Timothy 3:14–17). But the Bible wasn't designed as a treatise on the question of men and women and the leadership structure of the local church. The project of piecing together all the biblical passages on this question is a complex challenge, and it requires patience and humility. It should also lead us to recognize that there can be sincere differences of interpretation and practice between followers of Jesus who earnestly desire to do God's will. For the sake of clarity and health in our church body, we have put together this resource in order to lay out how we, at Ethos Church, have come to the position we currently hold and its relation to our practice.

This document is broken into three primary parts. Part 1: "Elders" briefly covers the role of eldership in the New Testament and at Ethos Church, with a particular focus on the question of female elders. Part 2: "Belief" is the most thorough section, outlining the four major pillars of our belief about women and eldership at Ethos Church. Part 3: "Practice" briefly and practically explains how we express our belief within our church body.

## **ELDERS**

### **Eldership in the Early Church**

Elders are overseers for a local church body, entrusted with both spiritual authority and executive leadership, exercised through wisdom, discernment, vision, accountability, shepherding, and teaching. Within the New Testament, it is clear that many local churches had elder/overseer roles within their leadership.<sup>2</sup> However, while it is very clear that they played a key role in the early Church, the exact function of these leadership roles and how they related to other leadership roles (e.g. pastors, prophets, teachers), is not spelled out in detail in any part of the New Testament. This is why the history of the church shows such a wide variety of organizational structures that all use the same words (like elder, bishop, or pastor) to mean very different things.

### **Eldership at Ethos**

Elders at Ethos play a vital role in the leadership and care of the church. Our elders serve together as the highest level of spiritual authority in our church, taking ultimate responsibility for Ethos and pastoral ministry. Additionally, in partnership with our pastoral staff, our elders help make up a holistic leadership across our spheres of care and ensure our church is living united to Jesus and fully engaged in the mission we are called to together—practicing the way of Jesus together in central Ohio.

At Ethos, our Elders also serve alongside our Overseers and staff, who maintain responsibility for and authority on daily organizational leadership (i.e. finances, HR, liability, etc).

### **Who are our elders?**

At Ethos, all of our elders serve on a team together and share leadership and authority. The team consists of people who are employed by the church (vocational elders) and people who are not (lay elders). All lay elders have gone through a development and discernment process, they're unanimously affirmed by the existing Elder Board.

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<sup>2</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9, Acts 20:28–31

## **Men and Women Serving Together at Ethos**

As mentioned above, there are a wide variety of views on the topic of men and women and church leadership in the Bible. Here is a summary of core principles we see taught throughout Scripture that directly bear on our church's position and practice:

- We believe that women and men are created equal in the image of God.
- We believe that full equality between women and men does not mean women and men are completely the same. There is a unique goodness and beauty represented in each gender that reflects the infinite wisdom and glory of God.
- We believe that God raises up leaders for the church on the basis of grace, calling, spiritual gifts, obedience, and character.
- We believe both women and men can and should lead, preach, pastor, and minister within the church.
- We believe that when men and women lead together, there is a ministry of love and grace that is more robust than can be sustained by one gender alone.
- We believe women and men can and should serve in pastoral leadership in the local church.

Ethos Church believes that men and women are equally gifted and qualified to lead and serve as co-laborers in the church. We do not just permit, but we emphatically value the presence of both men and women at every level of church leadership—including the office of elder. We see this as both being in line with the teaching of the Scriptures as well as being practically helpful and wise.

## **OUR BELIEF**

### **Introduction**

The starting point on a biblical topic as complex as this one should be humility and love. There are highly respected biblical scholars who view Scripture as an authoritative word from God's Spirit and who also hold totally opposite views on this topic. This shows us the complexity of the biblical texts that we need to consider and should compel us to be humble and open minded. While there is a central core to the Christian confession of faith throughout history (e.g. the deity of Christ, the Triune identity of God, and the divine authority of Scripture), there have been many other important theological topics not part of that core that have been sources of debate and division. These topics are sometimes called "non-essential," not because they are unimportant—they are!—but because they have never been considered part of the core defining Christian beliefs throughout history. This all means that biblical interpretation done with integrity for the building up of the church is not a simple task. All those who consider Ethos their home should endeavor to approach biblical interpretation by the sentiment attributed to St. Augustine, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In everything, love."

We believe the Bible (comprised of Protestant Old and New Testaments) to be both trustworthy and authoritative, and that God guided these authors by the Spirit so that what they wrote was what God wanted his people to hear (2 Timothy 3:15-17 and 2 Peter 1:21). For that reason, at Ethos Church, any question of belief and practice begins with the authority of Scripture: What does Scripture teach? How do we practice that biblical teaching in our time and place?

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In other words, when defining our position on the role of women in the office of elder, we are not asking, “What seems right to us?” or even “What makes the most sense in our context?”. The question we are asking is, “What does the Bible teach and not teach about eldership in the church and the qualifications for holding that office?”.

## **The Four Pillars**

In sitting with this question, we have come to believe that men and women can and should serve together at every level of church leadership, including the office of elder. This conviction is built on four pillars: Biblical Narrative, Biblical Trajectory, Biblical Leadership, and Biblical Exegesis.

### **1 | Biblical Narrative**

Whenever working with a biblical interpretation, it is always wise to begin by establishing what is clear in Scripture before moving to the more complex and less clear. When it comes to women and leadership, there is no denying that there is a wide diversity of Scriptural passages that seem to say very different, even opposing, things. Regardless of one’s position, everyone has to deal with that complexity. Therefore, we begin with what is clear in the biblical story by tracing the theme of women and leadership through the biblical drama in four stages: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Renewal.

#### **Creation**

##### ***What was God's creation mandate for man and woman in Eden?***

The story of God’s creation of humanity in Genesis is absolutely essential for understanding biblical anthropology (what does it mean to be human?), the meaning of gender (what does it mean to be man and woman?), and vocation (what should men and women do in God’s world—and God’s church?). The Bible’s first two narratives (Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–3:24) offer important perspectives on these questions, from two very different points of view.

Genesis chapter one, describing the creation of man and woman, reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground’” (Gen. 1:26). The English word “mankind” is the Hebrew word “adam,” which is a collective term for the human species (male and/or female) unless it is restricted by context, which, in this case, it is not. The narrative continues, describing both male and female created in God’s image. Scholar Mary L. Conway concludes, “There is nothing in the first creation narrative to indicate that the subordination of women, whether in regard to their nature or function, was part of Yahweh’s original intention for humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

Summarizing Genesis 1, biblical scholar Nijay Gupta writes, “Here [men and women] are not related as differentiated beings in terms of status or function. Both are fashioned in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27); not Adam, then Eve, but both together reflect God. Both are blessed and are given the responsibility of ruling the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). Both are given the fruit of the earth for food and enjoyment (Gen. 1:29–30). While they are distinguished according to two types, male and female, nothing in Genesis 1 distinguishes the two in their God-given identity, calling, and relationship to other parts of creation. If all we knew of creation came from this chapter, we would conceive of man and woman as equals, partners,

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<sup>4</sup> Mary L. Conway, “2 - Gender Creation and Fall, Genesis 1–3,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce; Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 35.

and co-rulers on earth as the image of God. There is no statement of first-made privilege, headship, or gender roles.”<sup>5</sup>

The following narrative in Genesis chapter two complements the opening chapter by representing the creation of humanity, but from a different point of view. God creates and then appoints “the human” (in Hebrew, *ha’adam*, no longer humanity but a singular figure) to oversee a divinely planted garden that is marked out as a heaven-on-earth spot. But there is something “not good” in paradise, because a lone-human cannot accomplish the calling placed upon him, namely, to be fruitful and multiply and take responsibility for the land. Or, in God’s words, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an *ezer kenegdo* for him.” (Gen. 2:18) That Hebrew phrase, *ezer kenegdo*, is often translated “a helper suitable for him,” but for many reasons, this is a very inadequate translation.

The term “helper” may be used in a derogatory or subordinate sense in English, and that is not what *ezer* means in Hebrew. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, *ezer* refers to a delivering ally, an essential other, who comes to solve an otherwise unsolvable problem. The word *ezer* in the Bible most often refers to God himself when he comes to save his people (i.e. Genesis 49:25, Ex. 18:4, Deut. 33:7, Ps. 20:3, 21:1–2, 115:9–11, 146:5). The second Hebrew word *kenegdo* (often translated as “suitable”) is a compound word made up of “*ke*,” meaning “as or like” and “*neged*,” meaning “opposite, against, or in front of.” This word most literally means something like “as opposite him” or “like against him.” It is a word holding together both similarity and difference. Eve is like Adam because she’s a human, not an animal, but Eve is “opposite from” or “different from” Adam because she’s a woman, not a man. So then, a more accurate interpretation of God’s words in creating the woman would be: “It is not good for the human to be alone, I will make an essential ally who is both like and unlike him.”

There is nothing in either of these creation narratives to indicate that woman is subordinate to man or carries a lesser or more particular leadership role in God’s creation mandate. In fact, scholar R. David Freedman writes, “(*Ezer kenegdo*) should be translated to mean approximately ‘a power equal to man.’ That is, when God concluded that he would create another creature so that man would not be alone, he decided to make ‘a power equal to him,’ someone whose strength was equal to man’s. Woman was not intended to be merely man’s helper. She was instead his partner.”<sup>6</sup>

While Genesis 2:18 is not specific on what exactly was “not good” about Adam’s isolation, it is plainly true that apart from a suitable helper, Adam was unable to accomplish God’s creation mandate to “be fruitful and multiply.” God creates a partner, a counterpart for man, as He did with other aspects of created order (i.e. light and dark, land and sea, man and woman). Putting the two creation accounts together, one could fairly summarize: Humanity was created as one who becomes two who reunites as one.

## **Fall**

After corruption interrupts God’s paradise, through sin for which the man and woman are equally culpable and held equally accountable by God, the consequences of sin are telling. They are, at least in

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<sup>5</sup> Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (InterVarsity Press, 2023), 22.

<sup>6</sup> R. David Freedman, “Woman, a Power Equal to Man: Translation of Woman as a ‘Fit Helpmate’ for Man Is Questioned,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9, no. 1 (1983): 56. Note that there are some problems with the way this idea is expressed in the article; however, the basic argument is valid.

part, a destruction of the harmonious union of the man and woman depicted in Gen. 1–2. “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

The interpersonal consequence applied to the woman, “he will *rule* over you,” is a Hebrew verb about absolute authority over someone (c.f. Gen. 4:7 and 37:8 for example). The man is never called to rule over the woman in the creation account. In fact, he lacks the capacity to fulfill his creation mandate apart from her, so she partners with him to “rule and reign” over God’s creation together (Gen. 1:28). One human ruling over another is not God’s design but a distortion of it.

The interpersonal consequence applied to the man, “Your *desire* will be for your husband,” is a bit more complex. The Hebrew word used is *teshuqah*, meaning “passions” or “longings.” Desire in itself is not negative, so this could be a good desire rooted in God’s image, or a deceived desire rooted in sin. We are instructed by the way this same word is used in the Genesis narrative that follows. In the very next chapter, the Lord warns Cain, “...sin is crouching at your door; it *desires* (*teshuqah*) to have you, but you must rule over it” (Gen. 4:7).

Linguistically, the consequences of sin in Genesis 3 are connected to sin’s ongoing destruction in Genesis 4, meaning that both the man and woman have had their God-ordained partnership corrupted and distorted by sin.

It is important to note that these are corruptions of the ideal partnership that God created for man and woman. The distortions came *after* sin, not before. The elevation of men and the subordination of women, in its most vile and most subtle forms, is a deception of the Fall, not a part of God’s good created order.

In his commentary on Genesis, the scholar Victor Hamilton summarizes God’s lament in Genesis 3:16 as follows: “[The woman will] desire to break the relationship of equality and turn it into a relationship of servitude and domination, (and the) sinful husband will try to be a tyrant over his wife.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, biblical scholar Richard Hess writes, “The emphasis here is on the terrible effects of sin, and the destruction of a harmonious relationship that once existed. In its place comes a harmful struggle of wills.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Redemption**

God’s redemption of sin’s corruption focuses on an elderly, barren couple, Abram and Sarai, whom God promises to grow into a nation (Israel) through whom He will bless the world. God’s redemption plan is personally and directly aimed at the repair of sin’s consequences—the union of man and woman and the creation mandate for fruitful multiplication.

The redemption story reaches its crescendo in Jesus, who embodied the Kingdom of God—the overlap of heaven and earth. God Himself willingly chose to enter the human story through the womb of a woman, making the climactic act of redemption as personal and pointed at sin’s consequences as the original act of redemption.

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 201.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hess, “Evidence for Equality in Genesis 1–3,” *E-Quality* 7, no. 3 (2008): 8–11, <http://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/Hess.pdf>.

For our particular purposes, we must look at the life of Jesus holding the question, “How did Jesus relate to women?” or, to aim the question even more specifically, “Did Jesus espouse any hierarchy between the leadership roles of men and women based purely on the criteria of their respective genders?”

In short, Jesus was revolutionary in his empowerment of women. Scholars across the spectrum of interpretations agree that Jesus included women among his disciples, a revolutionary act for a Jewish rabbi at the time.

- Luke's Gospel is the most demonstrative on this theme, naming three specific women "and many others" who traveled with Jesus alongside the Twelve.<sup>9</sup>
- On one occasion, Jesus is told his family is outside and wants to speak with him. In response, we read, “Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'”<sup>10</sup> In his ancient context, to name women (sister and mother) among his disciples was revolutionary.
- Additionally, Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said,”<sup>11</sup> which was the posture of a disciple before a rabbi, as noted by the Apostle Paul in Acts.<sup>12</sup>
- One day as Jesus was teaching, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.”<sup>13</sup> This was meant as a compliment. In the ancient world, it was thought that a woman’s highest calling was to bear children. Instead of receiving the compliment, Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”<sup>14</sup> For Jesus, motherhood and fatherhood are honored, but a woman’s highest calling is not to bear children. Instead, a woman’s highest calling is identical to the highest calling of a man: salvation and discipleship.
- The longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another individual occurred with the Samaritan woman by the well, who was so shocked by Jesus’ willingness to address her directly, she questioned his knowledge of the social customs.<sup>15</sup>
- The vast majority of scholars maintain that there were women in the 72 sent ahead of Jesus to the towns where he would go and that both men and women were present at the Great Commission, sent out with authority to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 8:1–3

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 12:49–50

<sup>11</sup> Luke 10:39

<sup>12</sup> Acts 22:3

<sup>13</sup> Luke 11:27

<sup>14</sup> Luke 11:28

<sup>15</sup> John 4

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 28:19–20

The role of women only increases as Jesus' ministry nears its end:

- Mary anoints Jesus with oil, an act Jesus charges with prophetic and eternal significance.<sup>17</sup>
- All four Gospels identify women as the first witnesses to the resurrection, an unthinkable choice in an era when a woman's testimony was considered suspect and often excluded from the Law Court, altogether. In fact, the Greek philosopher Celsus uses these first female witnesses as grounds for dismissing the resurrection, "But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some one other of those who were deluded by this same sorcery?"<sup>18</sup>
- Not long after this, keeping with the form Jesus established in his earthly ministry, the word "disciple" is used in a feminine form (*mathetria*) to describe either Tabitha or Dorcas.<sup>19</sup>

The overwhelming biblical evidence is that Jesus did not draw a distinction between his male and female disciples when it comes to value or qualifications for discipleship or even leadership. In fact, he was subversive, even revolutionary, in his inclusion of women among his disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarizes, "Jesus gave women human dignity...Prior to Jesus, women were regarded as inferior beings, religiously speaking."<sup>20</sup>

Still, some may point out that Jesus *did not* include women among the Twelve. So the question must be asked, "Was the rationale for calling Twelve male disciples (and later in Acts Twelve male apostles) due to a leadership distinction purely based on the criteria of gender?"

Immediately, it is worth pointing out that not only did Jesus call twelve male disciples but twelve *Jewish* male disciples (and later in Acts, Twelve *Jewish* male apostles). One way of reading this is the symbolic significance of the twelve tribes of Israel, which grew from the womb of Abraham and Sarah, whose offspring grew through three generations to twelve sons, the seed of Israel's twelve tribes, a biblical theme for the blessing of the world that carries all the way to the closing pages of Revelation.<sup>21</sup> Theologian William Witt notes, "Jesus chose *male* apostles for the same reason he chose *twelve* apostles and *Jewish* apostles. Insofar as Jesus' followers represent the new Israel, Jesus' twelve apostles typologically represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and, specifically, the twelve patriarchs (sons of Jacob/Israel) from whom the nation of Israel was descended... The twelve had to be free Jewish males, and not slaves, women, or Gentiles in order to fulfill the symbolic function of their typological role."<sup>22</sup>

It would be absurd to argue that certain church leadership roles are restricted to only Jewish or non-enslaved individuals based on the criteria of Jesus' twelve disciples. If church leadership breaks the ethnic and class bounds of Jesus' typological Twelve, why wouldn't it equally break the gender bounds?

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<sup>17</sup> Matt. 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:36–50, John 12:1–8; Some argue that this act by Mary is the prophetic fulfillment of Psalm 45:8.

<sup>18</sup> Celsus: Quoted in Robert Wilkins, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 9:36

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Quoted in Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 727n104.

<sup>21</sup> Gen. 35:23–26, Matt. 19:28, Luke 22:30, Rev. 21:12, 14

<sup>22</sup> William G. Witt, "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument from Symbolism Part 1 (God, Christ, Apostles)," *William G. Witt* (blog), July 8, 2016, <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-1>.



The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus points forward to the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church, which Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, interprets as the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel, “‘In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy’” (Acts 2:17–18). The power and presence of God made available to all people is a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that is profoundly and equally inclusive of both men and women.

In the era of the early church that follows Pentecost, women took on unique prominence in comparison to the surrounding culture. Describing the way God has equipped the church for leadership and ministry, the Apostle Paul writes, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11–13). Here we have five distinct leadership roles that make up the church’s holistic leadership.

On the pages of the New Testament, we have clear evidence that women served alongside men as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. There are no clear indicators that these roles were restricted on the basis of gender.

#### *Prophets*

- Philip’s four daughters are named *prophets* and minister to the Apostle Paul, himself (Acts 21:8–9).
- Later, Paul offers instructions to women actively prophesying in the church (1 Cor. 11:5).

#### *Evangelists*

- Euodia and Syntyche were leaders in the Philippian church and described as “contenders for the gospel” who worked alongside Paul (Phil. 4:3).
- Additionally, there are a number of women (Nympha, Chloe, and Lydia) sent out by the Apostle Paul to various Greco-Roman cities to plant churches, an obviously evangelistic endeavor.

#### *Pastors and Teachers*

- Priscilla and Aquila are a couple whose names occur in the book of Acts as well as the letters of Romans and 2 Timothy. Interestingly, when the New Testament writers refer to their occupation as tentmakers and to their home, the order of their names is “Aquila and Priscilla.” This is in line with the common form of the day, when the male name always came first. However, whenever their teaching and leadership ministry is in view, the order of their names is always “Priscilla and Aquila.” This is such a break from the form of ancient culture and the form represented elsewhere in the biblical narrative that it must be intentional, suggesting that Priscilla possessed the dominant ministry role of the two. Early theologian John Chrysostom concludes that Paul named Priscilla first in this context, “in recognition of the fact that her piety was superior to her husband’s.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, author and priest Jerome Murphy-O’Connor writes, “The public acknowledgment of Prisca’s prominent role in the

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *John Chrysostom on Paul: Praises and Problem Passages* (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming); see also Mikael C. Parsons, *Acts, Paideia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 250-51.

Church, implicit in the reversal of the secular form of naming the husband before his wife, underlines how radically egalitarian the Pauline communities were.”<sup>24</sup>

- Most notably, Priscilla’s name is listed first in the account where she and Aquila instructed Apollos (Acts 18:26), further educating and sharpening the biblical exposition of a fellow teacher. The term used by Luke for Priscilla and Aquila’s instruction of Apollos is *ektithemi*, meaning “to convey information by careful elaboration, explain, expound.” Some make the case that this sort of explanation was less formal or authoritative than what is referred to as the spiritual gift of “teaching.” However, it is the same Greek verb used by Luke for Peter’s explanation to the Jewish Christians of his eye-opening encounter with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 11:4). Luke uses this term again for Paul’s response to the Jews in Rome, when asked to explain the beliefs and structures of the church, “He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus” (Acts 28:23). It is very hard to conclude (1) that Priscilla was not primary in the instruction of Apollos, (2) that her instruction was something less than teaching, and (3) that therefore, we see clear no evidence of women authoritatively teaching Scripture to men in the New Testament.
- Additionally, Phoebe is enlisted as the letter carrier for Paul’s letter to the church at Rome (Rom. 16:1–2), a role commended to Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25–30, 4:18) and Tychicus (Col. 4:7–8) in other Pauline letters. Paul lauds the character of the letter carriers because this role implied explaining the letter’s contents and the intent of its author to the recipients, meaning letter carrying often involved teaching. In his commendation of Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2), Paul refers to her as a *diakonos*, a term frequently employed by Paul, particularly in Romans, where it is translated as “deacon,” “servant,” and “minister,” by the NIV. Elsewhere in Romans, Paul refers to himself (Rom. 11:13–14, 15:25–26) and Jesus (Rom. 15:7–9) by the title *diakonos*, clearly conveying honor. *Diakonos* is even sometimes associated with “authority” (Rom. 13:3–4).
- When one surveys this wide range of biblical and historical evidence, it is unavoidably clear that women did teach and offer instruction from the Scriptures to other women and men in the earliest church.

### *Apostles*

- The letter to the Romans stands out particularly because, in it, Paul personally greets almost as many women as men, and the majority of those women (five of the nine that he names) he greets as ministry colleagues (“coworkers”; Rom. 16:3, 6–7, 12). Most notable among these women is Junia because she receives the highest marks, “outstanding among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7).
- That women served in the early church in the roles of prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher is widely accepted by scholars across a range of views. However, the status of Junia’s apostleship has been sadly contentious in the history of recent biblical scholarship.
- Some biblical scholars attempt to circumvent Junia’s apostleship by asserting that she was not a woman but a man by the name of Junias. However, this male name does not occur in any ancient writing of any variety from the same time period, while the female name Junia appears widely and frequently.
- More recently, other biblical scholars have attempted to circumvent Junia’s apostleship by translating the Greek phrase in Romans 16:7 *episemoi en tois apostolois* not as “outstanding among the apostles” (as the NIV does) but instead as “esteemed by the apostles” or “in the sight of the apostles.” However, this translation simply does not reflect what Paul is trying to say in context,

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<sup>24</sup> Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Prisca and Aquila: Traveling Tentmakers and Church Builders,” *Bible Review* 8, no. 6 (1992): 42.

which is to commend this woman and her husband Adronicus, as eminent leaders among the apostles.

In addition to the empowerment of women in church leadership roles, we find the apostles consistently working to counter-culturally empower women in the home as well. The biblical household code passages (Col. 3:18–25, Eph. 5:22–6:9, 1 Pet. 3:1–7) might seem restrictive toward women when read from our modern individualist assumptions. But within the ancient culture of the first century Roman world when these letters were written, these passages communicated exactly the opposite message.

Household codes were common within the the early Greco-Roman world and in wide circulation. An existing paradigm of household codes originated with Aristotle and was in widespread circulation and cultural acceptance. In his highly influential *Politics*, Aristotle writes, “Of household management we have seen that there are three parts: one is the rule of a master over slaves,...another of a father, and a third of a husband.”<sup>25</sup> This framework for household codes was not unique to Aristotle but common in Greek, Roman, and Jewish homes. It is the framework for household codes that appear in the writings of Plutarch, Philo and Josephus.

In contrast to the biblical household codes, Aristotle writes, “...the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”<sup>26</sup> These existing and widely accepted household codes counsel wives to “obey” their husbands as a master and lord over them. It is crucially important, then, when the apostles adopt the ancient literary form of the household code, to see how they both adopt *and adapt* the ideas to a Christian view of men and women.

The apostle Paul uses the phrase “submit to each other” when addressing men and women in the house churches of Ephesus (Eph. 5:21). While he does go on to attribute “submission” to wives exclusively in the passage that follows, it should be pointed out that submission is a Christian virtue founded in the character of Jesus (Phil. 2) and attributed to both men and women elsewhere in the biblical narrative. The New Testament household codes can easily be misinterpreted when stripped from their original culture and context (a risk for any ancient literature), but read within that culture, the resounding message is one of the empowerment of women, not their subordination. Commenting on Paul’s writings to husbands and wives in 1 Corinthians 7, New Testament scholar Richard Hays writes, “In contrast to a patriarchal culture that would assume a one-way hierarchal ordering of the husband’s authority over the wife, Paul carefully prescribes *mutual submission*.”<sup>27</sup>

## Renewal

The biblical story is one of the recovery of all that was lost in the fall, the restoration of Eden, and the renewal of all things (Col. 1:15–23). The close of the biblical narrative is the restoration of God’s created order; what was present in the first two chapters of Genesis is restored in the final two chapters of Revelation. There was no hierarchy in the roles of male and female in Eden and neither is there one in

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<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1258a37–b17; translation from Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook in Translation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 64–65.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a24.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), loc. 1479–91, Kindle.

Revelation's garden city. The aim of the biblical narrative, of which the church is a living preview, is one of partnership—men and women co-laboring as God's equally empowered image bearers.

Nijay Gupta summarizes, “The ultimate redemptive hopes of Scripture and the gospel are not that man will find his rightful place as head over woman. It is the good news that man and woman can be restored to a healthy partnership where each one is given dignity and respect, and where each brings their gifts and wisdom toward a cooperative tending of God’s world.”

To borrow the language of scholars Ronald Pierce, Cynthia Westfall, and Christa McKirland: “Maleness and femaleness, in and of themselves, neither privilege nor curtail one’s ability to be used to advance the kingdom, or to glorify God in any dimension of ministry... The sexual differences that exist between men and women do not justify granting men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority that are not shared by women. Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy based solely on sexual difference.”

## **2 | Biblical Trajectory**

The biblical narrative is one with an arc bending toward redemption. It is a story that builds and builds until all that was lost in the Fall has been restored through Christ, in the re-unification of heaven and earth. In short, the biblical narrative has a trajectory.

The church is meant to be a preview community, giving glimpses of God’s promised future to the world here and now. The church is formed and held together by the Holy Spirit, given on the Day of Pentecost. On the very day the Holy Spirit was given and the church was formed, Peter preached in Jerusalem quoting the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.  
Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.”<sup>28</sup>

The future promised on the Day of Pentecost that formed the church’s mission included an equal distribution of spiritual gifts to both men and women, sons and daughters. The full restoration of God’s created order has been made possible through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Son and the giving of the Holy Spirit. The church is meant to live that restoration here and now, as an outpost of heaven on earth. The restoration and the call of the church includes equal relationship and leadership between men and women.

Christ is moving his people from the ravages of the Fall to life in his Kingdom. This process is progressive, not instant. “Progressive” not because God changes his mind, but because we can’t receive (individually or culturally) all of the redemption God has for us at once. Dr. William Webb, in his important

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<sup>28</sup> Joel 2:28–29, Acts 2:17–18

book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* terms this the “redemptive movement hermeneutic” and explains it by the X - Y - Z principle:

**X** = The original cultural context

**Y** = The words of Scripture

**Our Culture** = The place we are in the process right now

**Z** = The ultimate ethic, where we are being led by Christ

X ———> Y ———> Our Culture ———> Z<sup>29</sup>

Take Slavery<sup>30</sup> for example:

X	Y	Our Culture	Z
Original Culture: Slavery with it's many abuses	Bible: Slavery with better conditions and fewer abuses	Our Culture: Slavery eliminated. Working on equity in civil rights and true reconciliation	Ultimate Ethic: Harmony, Equality, Respect

The same biblical arc can be observed in the case of women:

X	Y	Our Culture	Z
Original Culture: Strong patriarchy with many abuses	Bible: Moderated patriarchy with fewer abuses and new freedoms for women	Our Culture: Improved status for women, increasing secular opportunity	Ultimate Ethic: Mutuality, Partnership, Servanthood

As we read the Bible, we see redemptive *movement* away from the relational manifestations of original sin. We see *movement* toward freedom for the enslaved. Likewise, we see *movement* from beginning to end toward mutuality between men and women.

This can be illustrated through the analogy of American football, where the line of scrimmage moves incrementally down the field in pursuit of a touchdown. For some ethical themes, Scripture moves like a line of scrimmage across eras and generations. The question for the interpreter is, “Does the movement point to more movement and an inevitable ‘touchdown,’ or is the movement complete as it stands?” In the case of the role of women, as with slaves, our conclusion is that there is a redemptive movement across the biblical narrative, whose end was depicted in Eden, prophesied by Joel, and entrusted to the Church.

Some may feel suspicious that we can responsibly discern a redemptive ethic for any biblical teaching that continues on trajectory beyond the New Testament era. An example from the ministry of Jesus will

<sup>29</sup> Both of the following tables are taken from *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* by Dr. William Webb.

<sup>30</sup> I assume that Webb was referring to legalized slavery when speaking about our culture in this table, as some may rightly point out that slavery in every variety has not been eliminated.

be helpful. In Matthew 19, Jesus interacts with the Pharisees on the matter of marriage and divorce.<sup>31</sup> Jesus claims redemptive movement on this topic, citing Moses' instruction on divorce certificates as a step toward full redemption but not full redemption itself. According to Jesus, full redemption was not immediately possible because of the peoples' hardness of heart. Moses' divorce certificate ethic<sup>32</sup> was redemptive in his time and culture, but it was still short of God's design and redemption for the union of man and woman.

Others may assume redemptive movement far too simplistically, importing cultural ethics onto Scripture, rather than the other way around. Webb argues that the biblical story shows redemptive movement for enslaved persons and women through the narrative arc, but that the biblical teaching on human sexual ethics is static, with no movement.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, while Webb argues that the biblical ethic for women more closely mirrors issues of slavery than sexuality, he equally cautions against equating the two. The "last thing to go" on the way to redemption for the enslaved is ownership. The "last thing to go" on the way to redemption for women is leadership hierarchy with relational equality, dignity, and respect. One is not the same as the other, and it is detrimental to equate the two.

### **3 | Biblical Leadership**

#### *Old Testament*

In the Old Testament, women function as both prophets and leading judges (a role that involved both spiritual and governmental leadership for Israel). Deborah stands out particularly as one who carried both roles (Judges 4:4–7). In the era of judges, a bridge between Israel's enslavement and established monarchy, Deborah is the most esteemed of the Israelite judges given extensive biblical narration. She functions in a very similar role to Joshua, leading Israel nationally as a governor while also leading Israel spiritually as a prophet (Judges 4–5). In any discussion on women's leadership, Deborah is an extremely important biblical figure. "Can a woman...?" or "Is a woman allowed to...?" Deborah could. Deborah was. And most importantly, God was behind it all.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the prophet Huldah was a notable prophet and leader during the era of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk (2 Kings 22–23), and both Miriam (Ex. 15:20) and Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3) held active and visible prophetic roles.

Some holding to a hierarchical view assume that women served as leaders in the Old Testament during tragic periods when Israel lacked male leadership, as if God were making a reluctant concession. However, Deborah, Huldah, and Miriam all led alongside renowned male leaders (Moses, Barak, Josiah, Jeremiah, etc.), which serves to demonstrate the opposite, pointing more to the male-female partnership we see in the Genesis creation narrative than to a divine concession.

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 19:1–12

<sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1–4

<sup>33</sup> While this portion of the statement addresses the biblical trajectory hermeneutic applied to enslaved peoples and women, the implications of this hermeneutic on sexuality are unnamed for the sake of a concise, focused statement. This is a topic of interest to many and is viewed as related to the subject of this statement for some, however, and is thus addressed in Appendix I.

<sup>34</sup> See Nijay Gupta's *Tell Her Story* for a fuller treatment on Deborah's role as Israel's Judge.

## *New Testament*

Roughly half of the household churches that Paul mentions in the New Testament Church were headed by women. Theologian Gordon Fee argues persuasively that these women played a very comparable role to that of a modern day Senior Pastor or Church Planter, “The householder would naturally serve as the leader of the house church. That is, by the very sociology of things, it would never have occurred to them that a person from outside the household would come in and lead what was understood as simply an extension of the household. To put it plainly, the church is not likely to gather in a person’s house unless the householder functioned also as its natural leader.”<sup>35</sup> Within the book of Acts and in Paul’s letters, Nympha, Chloe, and Lydia are specifically named as having churches in their homes. In the churches of the ancient Greco-Roman era, this indicates a central leadership responsibility extending beyond hospitality. Homeowners hosting churches functioned less like hosts opening their doors and much more like pastors in the modern church, overseeing the finances, logistics, and pastoral matters of the community.

Additionally, a number of other women are commended for their leadership roles in various biblical letters, most interesting because of the order of the names as they appear in Scripture. “In Paul’s time, it would have been natural, respected even, for him to list the most important people first, especially those with the highest social status,” observes Nijay Gupta. “If Paul were playing that game, lower-class women would be included last (or not at all). But because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we don’t see *those* kinds of lists in the New Testament. What we see is a diverse network of leaders throughout the Roman Empire serving as missionaries, local house-church leaders, and interchurch liaisons.”

As previously noted, the letter to the Romans is perhaps the most outstanding example of women's leadership in the New Testament church. In Romans 16, counter-culturally, Paul personally greets a number of women. In fact, the number of women greeted by Paul outnumbers the men he greets in the same letter. That said, the greatest commendation of a woman in Romans remains not in Paul’s greeting but in the form trusting Phoebe as his letter carrier.

In summation, the following is a list of all the women referred to in Acts and the New Testament letters, revealing the prevalence of women throughout the early church:

- Tabitha (Acts 9:36–42)
- Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40)
- Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus’s mother, Julia, the sister of Nereus (Romans 16)
- Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11)
- Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2–3)
- Nympha (Colossians 4:15)
- Lois and Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5)
- Claudia (2 Timothy 4:21)
- Apphia (Philemon 1:2)
- Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19)
- The mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12) the “elect lady” (2 John 1:1)
- Philip’s four prophet daughters (Acts 21:9)
- The women who are encouraged to prophesy in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:2–16)

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit of the Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 73.

While it is important to consider the biblical passages that speak directly to the question of women in offices of church leadership, it is equally important to take into account how women practically led within the church at various points in biblical history.

It is a wise practice, particularly with grappling with biblical passages that present difficulties in translation and interpretation, to let what is clear aid in interpreting what is unclear. Taking into account the role of women in biblical leadership, it would seem that women are being counter-culturally empowered at every era of biblical history. Additionally, given the role of women leaders in the Greco-Roman church, it would seem that the Apostle Paul, who authored the most consequential, debated passages on the role of women in church leadership, was counter-culturally empowering to women. We must look not only to what the apostle Paul said, but at what he did in relationship to female leaders, and interpret his words accordingly. This is important because, depending on what translation of his letters we read, it might appear that actions contradict his words. But maybe something more complex is going on? And so before we look at a number of key passages about women and church leadership in Paul's letters, it's important that we have digested the historical data that shows Paul elevating women as leaders in the churches he planted. It is vital that we take this into account as we form a theological position for our church.

#### **4 | Biblical Exegesis**

Of course, one could stand in full agreement with every syllable of this document to this point but still hold the office of elder (and elder exclusively) as an office reserved for males. Those who make this argument typically point to four key passages in Paul's letters—1 Timothy 3:1–7 & Titus 1:5–9 (treated as one passage because of the overlap of their content), 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, and 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Each of these four will be treated independently below.

Additionally, it should be generally noted that while all Scripture is applicable in the same way to God's people today, every book of the Bible was written within a particular culture and context. That means the passages we are working with below have much divine wisdom to teach us today, and that applying this wisdom requires translation of culture-specific and context-specific language.

##### **1 Timothy 3:1–7 & Titus 1:6–9**

*Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

*-1 Tim 3:1–7*

*An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled,*



*upright, holy and disciplined. <sup>9</sup> He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

*-Titus 1:6–9*

These are the two passages in Scripture that lay out clear and straightforward qualifications for serving in the role of elder (also called “overseer”)—1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. Though Paul was writing to different people leading in very different contexts, the qualifications contain a remarkable amount of overlap. This helps us in discerning the clear and universal wisdom that we need to pay attention to as we consider the qualifications for elders in our church today.

For our purposes, the question asked of these passages is, “Are women disqualified from serving as elders based purely on gender?”

Immediately, this question can narrow our focus. Despite the prevalence of male pronouns in our English translations, the original Greek texts contain no male pronouns. William Witt writes, “With the single exception of the three-word expression ‘one woman man’...nothing in the passage would indicate that the person being discussed for the office of (elder) would be either a man or a woman.”

The key phrase, and the only phrase relevant to the question of women and eldership, in these passages is “faithful to his wife” (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6). We would argue that this phrase does not prohibit women from eldership. Instead, it contextually assumes that men will comprise most eldership offices in Ephesus and Crete, the places to which these letters are directed. But the fact that Paul assumes that most elders in these communities will be male does not mean he prohibited women from this role. There were good reasons for assuming that most elders would be male, given the inequalities in access to education and any formal leadership opportunities outside of the home. In his book *Tell Her Story*, New Testament scholar Nijay Gupta offers this illustration, “Imagine this: a golf club with a sign by the course that says ‘Golfers must have their facial hair properly groomed.’ This statement presumes relevance for the vast majority of golfers (who are men), but by itself it does not prohibit women from golfing.”<sup>36</sup> Paul’s “faithful to his wife” phrase in these two letters is reflective of the majority group to whom he’s writing, not exclusive of the minority.

If Paul wanted to clearly restrict women from the office of elder, these two qualification passages would’ve been the obvious place to do so, where many other exclusions are listed. As written, Paul does not clearly forbid women from this role on the sole basis on gender.

### **1 Corinthians 14:34–35**

*Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.<sup>35</sup> If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

Before tackling the obviously difficult portion of this passage, two things need to be said. First, this single paragraph means something drastically different when it is read within the context of the entire chapter, where Paul tells multiple groups of people to be “silent” in the church gathering (like someone speaking in tongues without an interpreter, or someone interrupting a prophet; see 1 Cor. 14:26–40 as a whole). His

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<sup>36</sup> Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story*

target is not women but anyone compromising the internal edification and external witness of the gathered church. Second, we need to notice the elements in this text that are counter-culturally empowering, not restrictive, to women. Paul affirms the right of women to ask questions, which was tragically outside of the normal cultural expectation.

Two final facts of framing are important to note. First, in ancient Greco-Roman culture, particularly within the less formal setting of a Corinthian house church, questions were a part of the teaching portion of a worship gathering. These were smaller groups, gathered in homes, and that meant the entire experience was more like an interactive dialogue. Second, women were encouraged to speak in the worship gathering, even given instructions related to public prayer and prophecy earlier in this very letter (1 Cor. 11:5). So, if Paul explicitly told men *and women* to “speak” and “pray” in the church gathering just three chapters earlier, why in this chapter would he restrict not just questions in general, but questions about prophecy coming from married women?

Two possibilities emerge: (1) Perhaps ancient Mediterranean protocol would disapprove of a woman addressing men unrelated to her, hindering the church's external witness about which Paul is concerned. (2) A second possibility is that some kind of questions were inappropriate or unhelpful to the whole community because the questioner lacked a fundamental knowledge of the subject matter being taught, hindering the church's internal edification about which Paul is concerned.

There is historical evidence related to the culture of first century Corinth indicating that it would have been culturally scandalous and offensive for a woman to address an unrelated man directly. This makes option (1) above a very realistic possibility. According to this interpretation, the “law” Paul refers to (1 Cor. 11:34) is not the biblical laws found in the Torah, but rather the cultural customs of the broader Greco-Roman world.

Option (2) above equally holds evidential weight. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, women were far less likely to be educated than men. Particularly, among the “Jews and God-fearers” who constituted the core of the Corinthian congregation (see Acts 18:4–5, “God-fearers” means non-Jewish Christians), women would have had even less access to education. In contrast, Jewish males of the same group would have grown up reciting Torah (which nowhere commands women's silence or submission) and thus were more formally synagogue-educated. Also in favor of this interpretation is the fact that Paul addresses married women specifically, particularly if he's addressing women beyond those of Jewish culture. As noted by biblical scholar Linda Belleville, “Formal education stopped for most girls at the marriageable age of fourteen (Greek) or sixteen to eighteen (Roman). Greek boys, by contrast, continued their education well into their twenties and did not typically marry until their thirties.”<sup>37</sup>

It is most likely that Paul's prohibition against women asking public questions has in mind the concerns of the broader passage—internal edification and external witness. Paul is silencing disruptive questions which hinder the witness of the Corinthian church within the broader context, and/or silencing questions which hinder the group in the church's formal worship gathering. Instead, Paul compassionately instructs the generally (and tragically) less-educated women to ask their husbands in a more personal, private setting, enabling both the questioner and the broader community equal access to the internal edification

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<sup>37</sup> *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Linda Belleville

Paul is contending for. While this text may sound repressive in the modern world, in the ancient context it carried the opposite sentiment.

### **1 Corinthians 11:2–16**

*I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.*

*A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.*

*Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.*

Without question, this is one of the most complex and difficult passages to translate and interpret in the entire New Testament. There are two keys to its interpretation: Deciphering the dialogue and the meaning of *kephale*.

#### *Deciphering the Dialogue*

Proper interpretation of the letter we know as 1 Corinthians begins with the acknowledgment that it is technically 2 Corinthians. We know that there was an existing letter correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian Church (as noted in 1 Cor. 7:1). Because of this, we know that Paul is responding to questions from the Corinthians found in an earlier letter and in this letter Paul is responding to and correcting misconceptions of the Corinthians.

There are occasions when Paul is quoting from their earlier letter to identify a false belief or misconception of the Corinthian Christians, so that he can respond with clarification and correct teaching. At times this is plain, as in 1 Cor. 1:12 and 3:4, where Paul leads into a quotation by identifying it explicitly: “One of you says...” and “For when one says...” There are other occasions, however, where Paul did not explicitly mark his quotation from their letter, because he didn’t need to. The Corinthians would have immediately known he was quoting their words, because they wrote them! A good example is in 1 Cor. 6:12, where translators are united that Paul quotes the Corinthians, saying, “All things are lawful for me,” and then responds, “but not all things are profitable.” And in the following statement, Paul again speaks in a quotation as if in a dialogue, “All things are lawful for me,” before responding, “but I will not be mastered by anything.” The interesting aspect of this example is that translators are fully united that Paul is speaking in a rhetorical dialogue with the Corinthians here, but nowhere in the original Greek does Paul clearly indicate this. Biblical Greek does not use quotation marks or any other lexical cue for dialogue. This form of rhetorical dialogue was very common in Paul’s time, meaning that later translators

are left with the difficulty of interpreting whose words belong to whom. Such decisions are made based on the context and logical flow of the argument. This is common practice elsewhere in the very same letter, as noted in 6:12. Here translations like the NIV, ESV, and others add quotations and English phrases like, “you say,” though these words are not present in the original Greek, to make Paul’s rhetorical flow easier to follow for English readers.

The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 put forward by the theologian Lucy Peppiatt, and adopted by scholars like Scot McKnight and Brad Vaughn, argues that this same rhetorical dialogue approach makes most sense of this difficult passage.<sup>38</sup> When we use the logical flow of the main ideas as our guide and assign speaking voices accordingly, we can discern Paul’s voice and the quotations from the Corinthian letter as distinct from one another:

**Paul**

*<sup>2</sup>I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. <sup>3</sup>But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*

**Corinthians**

*<sup>4</sup>Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. <sup>5</sup>But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.*

**Paul**

*<sup>6</sup>For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.*

**Corinthians**

*<sup>7</sup>A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. <sup>8</sup>For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; <sup>9</sup>neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. <sup>10</sup>It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.*

**Paul**

*<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. <sup>12</sup>For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. <sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

*<sup>14</sup>Does not...*

**Corinthians**

*...the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,*

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<sup>38</sup> For those interested in further exploration, see the following publications: *Women and Worship at Corinth*, Lucy Peppiatt; *The Second Testament: A New Translation*, Scot McKnight. Additionally, Scot McKnight’s article, (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/06/12/rethinking-one-of-pauls-passages-about-women/>); or Brad Vaughn’s article (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2022/05/24/paul-defends-the-status-of-women-in-1-corinthians-11/>)

## **Paul**

*<sup>15</sup>But if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. <sup>16</sup>If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.*

This rhetorical dialogue interpretation follows the logic of the passage (as in ch. 6), and solves a number of incoherencies in the passage which must be otherwise addressed, regardless of one's view on women and eldership.

For example, if it is not the Corinthians speaking in vv. 7–10, but Paul, the interpreter must explain why Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, plainly misinterprets Genesis 1–2, which says both man and woman are made in the image of God. Additionally, if it is not the Corinthians speaking about men's long hair in v. 14, but Paul, the interpreter is left to explain how Paul plainly contradicts the Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6), which included men growing long hair for the sake of holiness. This is a vow which Paul himself took while in Corinth, growing his own hair long (Acts 18:18)! With this rhetorical flow interpretation in mind, we stand alongside the literal translation of the passage's final verse (v. 16), where Paul writes, "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no (such) practice—nor do the churches of God." In other words, in this passage Paul is confronting the men of Corinth for forcing women to cover their heads in worship, based on a faulty interpretation of Genesis 1. Rather, Paul makes clear in vv. 7–11 that Genesis 1 and 2 show that the relationship between man and woman is mutually interdependent, not hierarchical. Paul concludes by claiming that no other churches force women to cover their heads, and so neither should they.

## *Kephale*

Finally, there is the interpretation of the dense Greek word *kephale* in 1 Cor. 11:3, interpreted above by the NIV as "head." This word can equally be translated as "source" and is elsewhere used by Paul this way in his letters (see the use of "head" as "source" in Ephesians 4:15–16, where Jesus is the head of the church, that is "the source from which the whole body grows"). If this word is interpreted to mean "head-authority" in 1 Cor. 11:3, it presents God the Father as the hierarchical authority who subordinates God the Son underneath himself. This understanding of the Trinity was condemned as a heresy in later church history, and it cannot be what Paul means here. However, if we understand the word "head" to mean "source" in 1 Cor. 11:3, this passage both aligns with historic Christian orthodoxy and it fits with the logical flow of the argument: in the second creation narrative of Genesis 2, the woman is created "from one of the sides" of the man (see Gen. 2:21), that is, the man is the "source" of the woman. Paul's comment, far from subordinating all women to men, is a simple observation about the narrative in Genesis chapter 2.

## **1 Timothy 2:9–15**

*Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

Regardless of one's position across the hierarchicalist-mutualist spectrum, this passage presents a number of difficulties in both translation and interpretation. We will focus on three core questions: What is the broader concern of the passage? False teaching. What sort of teaching is forbidden? Domineering. What makes women susceptible to forbidden teaching? Artemis.

#### *What is the broader concern of the passage?*

1 Timothy is a letter from the Apostle Paul to his trusted protégé, instructing him to stay put in the city of Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) because of the prevalence of false teaching, which is the primary concern, not only of the passage but the letter as a whole. Importantly, at the beginning of the letter, Paul identifies that untrustworthy teachers have come to Ephesus who are developing distorted theology from the earliest chapters of Genesis (see 1 Tim. 1:3–8), and who are targeting wealthy single women in the community for financial gain (see his descriptions of them in 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 5:11–15; 6:3–5). It is these wealthy women whom Paul identifies as the source of the teaching problem in 1 Tim. 2:9–10. This is why he mentions their ostentatious dress in the worship gathering, a kind of style that would have been unaffordable to most of the other women in the community.

#### *What sort of teaching is forbidden?*

Paul's direct command in the passage is interesting: “I do not permit a woman to teach (*didasko*) or to assume authority (*authentein*) over a man; she must be quiet.” The word *authentein*, translated as “assume authority” is incredibly rare. It hardly appears anywhere in ancient literature and occurs only here in the New Testament. If Paul were speaking of a general sort of exercising authority (such as the authority of exegetically teaching the Bible), he had plenty of more common words to choose from. There is a wealth of linguistic evidence (29 respected dictionaries or biblical translations) that translate the word *authentein* as “dominate” or “domineer,” making this a manipulative, power-hungry, and dysfunctional form of teaching, rather than edification.

#### *What makes women susceptible to forbidden teaching?*

Women certainly seem to be specifically involved in the false teaching Paul is addressing in this letter holistically. There is no other New Testament letter in which women figure so prominently. Given the context of Ephesus, this is not surprising. Ephesus was home to the Artemis cult (Acts 19), a female goddess whose female adherents were superior to men. Artemis was viewed as the protector to women and a guardian of their virginity. Given the pervasive influence of the Artemis cult throughout the city of Ephesus, the biblically-documented backlash from the Artemis cult to the presence of the newfound Christian church, and the potential that former cult-members were converting to follow Jesus, it is quite likely that Paul was addressing the influence of this cult in his thematic address of both “false teaching” and “women” in 1 Timothy. If that is the object of this passage, it makes sense of much of the complexities:

- why “false teaching” would be prevalent in general and a “domineering” form of teaching, particularly.
- why women would be more susceptible to this teaching than men.
- even the passage's arguably most confusing turn of phrase “women will be saved through childbearing” makes more sense held against the backdrop of a cult guarding women's virginity.

“A reasonable reconstruction of 1 Timothy 2:11-15,” writes Linda Belleville, “would read as follows: ‘The women at Ephesus (perhaps encouraged by the false teachers) were trying to gain an advantage over the men in the congregation by teaching in a domineering fashion. The men in response became angry and

disputed what the women were doing.” This interpretation fits the broader context and grammatical flow. Paul is forbidding a domineering form of teaching aimed at superiority, not the teaching of women in general.

One might still ask, however, why Paul brings up Adam and Eve from Genesis chapter two. If we don't assume that Paul prohibited women from teaching (and there is no evidence from his other letters that he did, just the opposite), then we will not be predisposed to think that Paul is here depicting women as more gullible or than men. In 2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul uses Eve's deception as analogy for how both men and women can be deceived by untrustworthy teachers (see all of 2 Cor. 11–13 for context), so we know Paul didn't think women were more easily deceived than men.

Here in 1 Tim. 2:13–15 Paul brings up Adam and Eve because they provide a precise analogy to the crisis he's addressing in the Ephesian churches. In Genesis 2:15–17, when God gave a command not to eat from the tree of knowing good and bad, it was *before* the woman had been created. She was not present for God's instruction and if she were to know what God had said, it could only have been from the man passing on God's words. When we hear the woman quoting God's command in her conversation with the snake in Genesis 3:1–3, she incorrectly reports God's words by adding words that God never said. This leads to the natural inference that the man did not adequately teach her the words of God. This is precisely what Paul draws attention to: Adam was created first and thus heard the command from God, but the woman, who could have only received God's words from the man, was deceived. Paul's words about the order of Adam and Eve's creation are not a claim that men have a God-ordained teaching authority that women do not. He is simply making an observation about the Genesis story that explains why the woman was deceived and not the man.

Paul brings up the Adam and Eve story because it's similar to what the untrustworthy teachers have done to a circle of wealthy widows in Ephesus. These women have been targeted for their wealth and given distorted theological instruction. And now they are using their high social position in the church to domineer the teaching and ruin the church's witness in Ephesus. But notice that Paul does not excommunicate these women. Rather, he thinks they should stop teaching and “receive instruction,” that is, get a proper theological education.

When we read this passage in its cultural and literary context, and if we do not import into it our (incorrect) assumptions that Paul prohibited women from leading or teaching in the church, then a very different interpretation results. We see Paul acting as a protector of the Ephesian church. Nothing in the context indicates that these women couldn't become leaders in the church one day in the future, but for the time being, they need to step down. Paul actually acts as an advocate for these Ephesian women, encouraging them to get an education that will prepare them for the future.

### **Conclusion to Biblical Exegesis**

This part of the statement has been quite detailed and long, but necessarily so. The leadership at Ethos Church holds a high view of Scripture, and we want to make sure that we base our theology and practice on an informed, thoughtful, and accurate understanding of the Bible. Because the biblical passages discussed above have been central to establishing a hierarchical view of men and women and leadership, we devoted plenty of space to their interpretation. Our goal has been to show that not only do these passages not clearly prohibit women from teaching or exercising the role of elder in the local church, but they actually point in the opposite direction. We respect that other followers of Jesus may

hold to a different view, but we are moving forward with conviction that a mutualist view best interprets the overall biblical evidence.

## HOW WE PRACTICE OUR BELIEF

At Ethos, it is a value to have men and women serving alongside one another as distinct but equal individuals, modeling the original created order God is restoring across the arc of cosmic history. Our belief about the biblical teaching on women in leadership is about value, not simply permission.

It is our commitment and sincere intention to practice that belief across every level of church leadership—including lay leadership roles and committees as well as pastoral offices and both Elder and staff.

Because the biblical interpretation of this issue is so complex, we sincerely hope Ethos to be a church that makes room for thoughtful disagreement and loving acceptance when it comes to women and leadership. We do not require that all who call Ethos "home" agree entirely with our belief.

- Instead, we maintain that all Ethos staff and elders **subscribe** to this belief, sharing our conviction on the biblical teaching related to women and eldership.
- For all other lay leadership positions, we ask that you **affirm** this belief by (1) shared conviction regarding the authority of Scripture on which this belief is built and (2) honor for the leaders in this church tasked with defining and maintaining our belief.
- Finally, for all who call Ethos “home,” we ask that you **respect** this belief by humbly submitting to the beliefs of this church body in which you are voluntarily attending and serving, making it your ambition to maintain the unity of the body by (1) honoring all those serving as leaders at Ethos, both men and women, (2) never actively teaching a contrary position within a formal church context, and (3) resisting gossip, bitterness, and the temptation to sow distrust. For the sake of clarity, we are not asking that all Ethos attendees subscribe or even affirm our belief, only that all respect this clearly articulated and practiced belief.<sup>39</sup>

By laying out the commitment to **subscribe, affirm, or respect**, based on your level of engagement at Ethos Church, we hope to be a unified church, leading with loving clarity while also making room for those who may disagree to be full participants in our church life.

Finally, all of this theological work is not merely for the purpose of defining positions but making disciples! As a part of Ethos Church, wherever you land on the subscribe-affirm-respect spectrum, you—both men and women—are commissioned by Jesus, the head of the Church, to, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). Every syllable in this statement is aimed at the fulfillment of Jesus’ Great Commission: to go and make disciples. May we follow our rabbi and Savior with ever-greater resolve in the days ahead.

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<sup>39</sup> A recommended reading list is provided to encourage further study for those wrestling with this belief as articulated or simply seeking to learn more.



## Additional Thought:

### Slippery Slope?

It is possible that some may not take issue with the interpretive methods and biblical conclusions offered in this statement regarding women and eldership, and yet still relate to this topic with fear or anxiety because a deviation from the practice of many recent Western Church traditions may be viewed as a “slippery slope” to rethinking other historically held ethics, most namely those related to sexuality, marriage, and gender. This train of thought is frequently motivated by fear, but it is also relatively popular and not entirely unfounded. Thus, while not the subject of this statement, it will be addressed briefly and succinctly.

In short, the “slippery slope” argument does not work with *any* of the four pillars outlined in this statement that guide our hermeneutical method: Biblical Narrative, Biblical Trajectory, Biblical Leadership, and Biblical Exegesis.

Within the biblical narrative, there is an unchanging sexual ethic—marriage is defined as a lifelong one-flesh covenant union between two sexually different persons (male and female) from different families and all sexual relationships and expressions outside of marriage are defined as sin. That is the clear ethic given at creation, upheld throughout the Old Testament, reinforced by Jesus (i.e. Matthew 5:27–30, 19:1–12), and consistently taught and practiced throughout the New Testament (i.e. 1 Corinthians 6:12–20).

While the biblical trajectory is one of redemptive movement for both women and the enslaved, that is not the case for sexual expression outside of a one man-one woman marriage covenant.

Following the same grid adapted previously to display the biblical redemptive movement related to enslaved peoples and women, Dr. William Webb displays the biblical consistency when it comes to human sexuality:

<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Our Culture</b>	<b>Z</b>
Original Culture: Mixed acceptance and no restrictions of same sex sexual expression	Bible: Restriction of same sex sexual expression (and any other sexual expression outside of a biblically-defined marriage covenant)	Our Culture: Almost complete acceptance, no restrictions of consensual sexual expression between any two adults, condemnation or resistance to those with a differing sexual ethic	Ultimate Ethic: Marriage and/or Celibacy as a sacramental expression pointing to ultimate union with Jesus

While there is a redemptive movement trajectory for the enslaved and women, the biblical sexual ethic is consistent from beginning to end. In fact, Jesus and the subsequent New Testament authors articulate a narrowing trajectory, if any, ending polygamy, counseling against divorce, and even renouncing sexual lust.

Next, while there are examples of increasing and counter-cultural biblical leadership for women at each stage in the biblical narrative, there are no such examples of spiritual leadership being entrusted to those willfully living outside the bounds of biblical sexual ethics.

Finally, while some make exegetical arguments for broadening traditionally held views on biblical sexuality and marriage, these arguments are weak and always reliant on ignoring the clear and majoring on the unclear, which is the opposite of the “4 Pillar” hermeneutical approach guiding our exegesis on this topic.

In summary, Ethos Church is not re-examining our held position on marriage and sexuality. On the contrary, it is the shared conviction of the elders and pastors of Ethos Church to increasingly become a prophetic witness to the good news of Jesus when it comes to the body and sexuality.

### **Recommended Reading**

For those wishing to explore this topic biblically to learn more, for defining a Biblical Position on Women & Eldership, we recommend the following resources as most reliable, informative, and helpful:

- *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirkland
- *Tell Her Story*, Nijay K. Gupta
- *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, William J. Webb
- *Women and Worship at Corinth*, Lucy Peppiatt