

Women in the Church's Ministry

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE CHALLENGES

There is no doubt that the question of the role of women in the church's ministry is a tricky one. The arguments themselves are complex and easily misunderstood – with sincere Bible-believing Christians coming to opposite, or at least different, conclusions on the matter. The issue is also a very personal one – with many men and women feeling that the answers given to these questions speak to fundamental questions about worth and value. It is important we listen carefully to one another in this debate and make sure we treat different views from our own with gentleness and respect.

We should also bear in mind that we are all affected by sin – which affects not just our hearts but our minds – therefore none of us sees the truth of the Bible perfectly clearly and we all have blind spots in certain areas. Sin also means that we might hold a correct Biblical truth and yet act in ways which are not necessary in line with that truth. Historical or present abuses of certain Biblical teaching shouldn't be held to negate the truth of a teaching – but should rather be an opportunity to qualify and correct wrong applications of Biblical truth.

1.2 DEFINING SOME TERMS

There are two commonly held positions on this view with technical names:

Egalitarian – believes in the equality of men and women in every sense of the word and recognizes no difference in the roles open to them in the church.

Complementarian – believes in the equality of men and women but recognizes that God has given different and complementary roles to them and that therefore not all roles are open to both men and women.

It is worth saying that (like all labels) these are indicative and cover a broader range of views.

1.3 THE FUNDAMENTAL EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

The starting point for both positions is the fundamental equality of men and women in the sight of God, with Genesis 1:27 being the most fundamental text here:

*“So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”*

This verse speaks clearly of the equal *value* placed on men and women – God does not love or value one more than the other – each have a unique dignity since they have been made in the image of God. However, the verse also indicates that there are differences – male and female are distinct and different - and the implications of that are up for discussion.

The other important verse in this context is Galatians 3:28 which is discussed later (see 2.6.4).

1.4 THE RANGE OF ROLES FOR WOMEN'S MINISTRY

In our introductory section it is also worth mentioning that the Bible recognizes a wide range of roles for women in the church's ministry (the number of women mentioned in Paul's list of fellow workers in Romans 16 is one of many places which recognize this) – and both views would allow for women to be involved in different aspects of church life.

Complementarians in particular need to be careful that in not allowing certain roles to women they continue to recognize the other roles in which women may and should be encouraged to serve.

1.5 OUR METHOD

We will try to look at some of the key Biblical texts which speak to this question. For each one I will try to outline a few of the arguments on both sides with one or two personal comments added.¹ In preparing this paper I have engaged with writings of scholars of both perspectives and I will attempt to present both cases as fairly as I can.

2 THE KEY ARGUMENTS

2.1 SUBMISSION IN MARRIAGE – PARALLELED IN CHURCH?

One of the key arguments for the complementarians is that the ‘ordering’ of the marriage relationship is a parallel structure to the ordering of the church. Egalitarians tend to argue either that whenever you see that ‘ordering’ it is referring to marriage – and therefore is *not* relevant in ordering the church, or go further and argue that what you see in marriage is not in fact ordering but mutual submission with no implications for difference in role.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

“Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” (Ephesians 5:22-24)

See also Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Pet 3:1-7; Titus 2:5.

Complementarian:

The model of headship and submission in marriage here is based on the model of Christ and the church – and so is a timeless principle (not a culturally bound one). The model of headship (see further under section 2.2) is a loving sacrificial one as the husband is called (v25-29) to be prepared to give up his life for the sake of his wife. So the leadership in view is not a harsh authoritarian one, but a loving sacrificial one.²

In 31-33 the link is made to Genesis 2:24 – rooting this pattern of marriage in the (pre-fall) creation order of things – again suggesting this is a timeless principle.

The ESV translation of v21 is to be preferred to the NIV since it correctly recognizes the ‘submitting to one another’ principle as part of what it looks like to be filled with the spirit (v18) and to relate to one another as part of the church. V22-6:9 are then seen as examples of what this ‘submission’ looks like in specific relationships.

Egalitarian:

Rightly note that the ‘submission’ word is not the same as the ‘obey’ word (found in the later sections on children and slaves) and would understand v21 to be speaking of mutual submission in all contexts. They note, too, that since Christians seem to agree that slavery is wrong, therefore the examples here are culturally bound and not directly applicable in today’s society.³

They correctly note that the Ephesians passage is speaking about marriage and so does not (on its own) apply directly to leadership in the church.

¹ The exegetical arguments here are very detailed and a paper like this can only summarise them. If you would like to explore the arguments in more detail, see the Bibliography at the end. I will *try* to keep the number of footnotes to a minimum!

² Watch out in some of the literature for very emotive language here – the unhelpful language of ‘male dominion’ – which is not the picture in the text.

³ Although if that argument is pushed to its extreme one might actually be arguing against children obeying parents and the abolition of marriage too!

2.2 ISN'T IT CONTRADICTORY TO TALK OF ORDERING/SUBMISSION AND YET TO AFFIRM EQUALITY?

In a parallel passage – 1 Peter 3 – we see the same instruction for wives to submit to their husbands, followed (1 Peter 3:7) by the very positive description of wives as “heirs with you of the gracious gift of life” – suggesting that it is possible to affirm different roles whilst still placing equal value on both.

Also in 1 Corinthians 11 (on which more below) we see both an affirmation of headship (11:3) with an affirmation of the mutual dependence of man and woman (11:11-12) – again suggesting that whilst there is an ordering or difference in roles yet they have equality in the Lord.

The analogy of the Trinity is very helpful here. The Bible consistently implies an ‘ordering’ in the Trinity – so the Father is the one who sends the Son (John 5:36-7); the Son is obedient (submits) to the Father’s will (Matthew 26:39, 42; John 5:19); the Father and the Son send the Spirit (John 14:16, 26, 15:26); the Spirit’s role is to point to Christ (John 15:26, 16:14) and He can speak only what He hears from the Father (John 16:13); the Son’s role is to glorify the Father (John 14:13, 17:1). It is clear that in spite of having different roles the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are *equal in value*.

Scholar Tom Schreiner also makes the helpful comparison with OT priesthood – “God decreed that priests could come *only from the tribe of Levi*, but all Israelites had equal worth and dignity before God.”⁴

2.3 WHAT DOES ‘HEAD’ MEAN?

A significant area of difference between the complementarian and egalitarian arguments is the understanding of the Greek word ‘cephale’. The literal meaning of the word is (as the egalitarian R.T. France puts it): “that part of the body in which the brain, eyes etc are located”. The trouble is that it is being used metaphorically in the verses we are concerned with. What does Paul mean by the metaphor?

Complementarians understand it to carry the sense of ‘authority over’ and egalitarians the sense of ‘source’.⁵ The detailed textual arguments here are beyond the scope of this brief paper. We will simply quote the key verses below and make brief comments.

“Now 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.” 1 Corinthians 11:3

“And God placed all things under [Christ’s] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” Ephesians 1:22

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ephesians 4:15-16

“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.” Ephesians 5:23

And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. Colossians 1:18

It seems that the word can carry *both* senses – and in some of the verses above one or other might seem more appropriate. However even when ‘source’ might seem an appropriate reading – especially in relation to Christ who is both our creator/redeemer and Lord – there is still some idea of ‘authority over’.

⁴ *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 289.

⁵ In fact it is more complicated than this – since both views tend to recognise at least the possibility of both shades of meaning – but they tend to emphasize one over the other.

2.4 HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE 'PROHIBITION' VERSES

For many on the complementarian side of the debate Paul's apparent 'prohibitions' on some aspects of women's ministry are the important verses.

2.4.1 1 Corinthians 14:33-35

"For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 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."

These are difficult verses, not simply because of some linguistic ambiguities, but also because of the difficulty of understanding them in relation to Paul's earlier comments in 1 Corinthians 11 which seem to indicate that women can both pray and prophesy in church (11:5).

Complementarian

Argue that the phrase 'as in all the congregations of the saints' makes this a universal principle, as does the appeal to 'the Law' – which almost without exception in Paul's writing refers to the OT.

Some argue that the silence required here should be understood in relation to the authoritative weighing of prophetic utterances mentioned in the immediately prior verses (29-33).

It is certainly possible that there was a particular problem in Corinth which this is addressing, but in the background there seems to be a culture-transcending principle about authority/submission.

Egalitarian

Suggest that the word for 'women' here refers only to 'wives' (which is the same Greek word) – and therefore this teaching applies when a husband and wife are in a church it is the husband who should take a lead in asking questions during a meeting – this therefore has no application to whether or not women may teach in churches. This argument is strengthened by the reference to husbands in verse 35.

They also argue that the issue of disorder was a specifically Corinthian issue – and that this teaching is therefore in any case not binding on all people at all times but applies to a specific historical and cultural context.⁶ Putting this another way the teaching is *corrective* in the situation not *directive* for all time. The problem was not the asking/speaking but the *way* they were speaking.

Furthermore v26 ("What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.") could imply that both men and women bring contributions to the meeting.⁷

2.4.2 1 Timothy 2:8-15

⁸ I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. ⁹ I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. ¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women {Greek she} will be saved {Or restored} through childbearing-- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

⁶ Though when the same argument is made for the teaching in 1 Timothy 2 it begins to feel like 'special pleading'.

⁷ Though the word translated 'brothers and sisters' in the new NIV could equally be translated 'brothers' – and the context doesn't seem determinative.

These are some of the trickiest verses in the whole debate – with 15 in particular something of a mystery to commentators on both sides of the debate.

Verses 8-10 are relatively uncontroversial but highlight another aspect of the debate. Many on both sides would highlight the ‘underlying principle’ – which is to do with ‘good order in worship’ – and the cultural context i.e. braided hair may have had cultural connotations in the 1st century which are no longer relevant – so as we apply this to our own context we need to work out what the principle looks like in 21st century western life.

What then, is to stop us reading 11 and 12 in the same (culturally specific) way?

On either reading we should note that v11 does assume that it is appropriate for women to learn (and be taught) – which was itself a counter-cultural idea and highlights again the value Christian teaching places on women.

Complementarian

Verse 13 starts with the word ‘for’ suggesting an argument for what has gone before. This argument is rooted in creation (Genesis 1-3) – and is therefore a universally applicable principle – in the same way as the marriage principles we saw earlier. The argument seems to be from the temporal priority of Adam (he was formed first – note the way the firstborn son has priority in the Jewish culture) and on the basis of the woman being the first to be deceived. NB this does not mean that women are inherently more easily deceived than men – but the argument is rooted in the historical events of Genesis 3.

Verse 12 is understood to refer specifically to an authoritative type of teaching – which can be distinguished from the more ‘spontaneous’ utterances of prayer and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11.

A multitude of explanations are offered for verse 15. In the context of a letter which attacks false teaching about (amongst other things) whether to get married (cf. 4:3) this verse probably seeks to re-state the positive role of women in childbearing in a context where there may have been various pressures to avoid that. As one commentator puts it: “Paul urges these Christian wives to re-engage fully in the respectable role of the mother, in rejection of heretical and secular trends, through which she may ‘work out her salvation.’”⁸

It is also worth noting that different instructions are given for men and women in verses 8-9 – which suggests that there is *some* difference between men and women and the way they are to behave.

Egalitarian

Rely heavily on a reconstruction of the social context of the time and in particular the influence of the Artemis cult in Ephesus which exalted the female. Thus the (culturally specific) problem is of women demanding too prominent a role (and being overbearing in relation to the men) and the Genesis account reminds them that (contrary to the Artemis mythology) men have temporal priority in creation.

Highlight again the context of disorder in worship (hence the insistence for men to pray ‘without anger or disputing’ and for the women for ‘quietness and full submission’).

Understand the word translated here ‘have authority over’ (which is a rare word – this is its only occurrence in the NT) to refer to a particular, negative, domineering kind of authority.⁹

Suggest that the teaching which is forbidden is the false teaching which the letter deals with and that verse 11 therefore means they should learn (true teaching) before teaching.

2.5 WHAT DOES CREATION HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Much of the debate then hinges on how we are to read and understand the creation account in Genesis 1-3. On a ‘plain reading’ of these chapters it is perhaps difficult to see a hierarchical structure – but we do need to read scripture in the

⁸ Towner, NICNT Timothy and Titus, 235.

⁹ Since this is the only occurrence of the word in the NT the arguments around the precise meaning of this rely heavily on research in the word’s use in other contemporary literature – and numerous studies seem to have come to a variety of conclusions!

light of scripture and so the NT texts we have looked at which quote these Genesis texts need to be taken into account when understanding them.

Complementarian

Schreiner compiles a list of arguments which he sees as cumulatively significant – even if some bear less weight than others.

1. God created Adam first, and then he created Eve.
2. God gave Adam the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
3. God created Eve to be a helper for Adam.
4. Adam exercised his leadership by naming the creature God formed out of Adam's rib 'woman.'
5. The serpent subverted God's pattern of leadership by tempting Eve rather than Adam.
6. God approached Adam first after the couple had sinned, even though Eve sinned first.

Egalitarian

Highlight the fact that Male and Female are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and object that the term 'helper' is also used of the way God is Israel's helper – and therefore doesn't suggest any sense of 'inferiority.'¹⁰

Question whether 'naming' implies authority and whether the temporal order of creation implies hierarchy. Some argue that since the animals were created before humans this would give them priority!¹¹

Argue from 3:16 that the 'rule' of the husband is a post-fall penalty rather than a pre-fall condition.¹²

2.6 A SCRIPTURAL TRAJECTORY?

One main line of argument for the full involvement of women in each and every role in church, is the general direction of Scripture. We see women in some roles in the OT and more roles in the NT – surely the trajectory is towards all roles?

2.6.1 Women leaders in OT

Both sides of the debate recognize that women are given a prominence in many of the OT texts which would have been countercultural in their time. The most common role we see is that of prophet.

Miriam had some significance as a prophet (though Moses and Aaron were clearly the leaders); Deborah is also described as a prophet (Judges 4:4) who was 'judging' Israel at the time – though the context of the story seems to suggest that this was an unusual exception due to the weakness of the male leaders – and the textual formula used to introduce her is different from that used of the male judges¹³). There are a number of other women described as prophets.

2.6.2 Women leaders in NT

The range of ministries that women are involved in is much broader in the NT. Again we see prophets (Acts 21:9, 1 Cor 11:5), deacons (Rom 16:1, 1 Tim 3:11), public prayer leaders (1 Cor 11:5). Romans 16:7 mentions a Junia who is an apostle (complementarians would see this as a 'small a' apostle rather than 'one of the Twelve' – so there is some

¹⁰ Against this it needs to be pointed out that context is determinative of meaning. So similarly it is possible to find other uses of the word 'helper' where a weaker party is said to be the 'helper' of the stronger (e.g. 1 Kings 20:16, 1 Chron 12:1) – so the word itself is not determinative.

¹¹ Although the narrative itself clearly emphasizes humanity as the pinnacle of the creation account so this argument feels a little fatuous.

¹² This is a good argument – though it could similarly be argued that sin has affected the way male leadership is exercised (turning a responsibility into a privilege and becoming tyrannical) if you recognise a pre-fall leadership role which was exercised perfectly.

¹³ For all the other judges in the book, with the exception of Jephthah who is another ambiguous figure, God gives or raises up 'a deliverer' or else the judge is said to save – which are the same root verb (2:16, 18; 3:9, 15, 31 'saved'; 6:14ff; 10:1; 13:5 'begin to save').

debate about whether this is primarily an evangelistic role or, as with the Twelve, a leadership role)¹⁴. Some women have a teaching role (Acts 18:24-26; Titus 2:3-5) and a number of women owned houses where churches met (Acts 12:12; 16:14-15; Colossians 4:5).

This last example proves divisive since some egalitarians want to argue that in that context the home owner would have taken an overseer role in the church that met in the home. As far as the text is concerned this is an argument from silence so the argument necessarily relies upon comparison with the practice of contemporary 'secular' arrangements.

Certainly the apostle Paul mentions numerous women as co-workers in the gospel so there is every indication that women were involved in many aspects of evangelism and practical ministry.

2.6.3 What about elders and deacons?

The Biblical teaching on elders and deacons, then, becomes the next sticking point. Women are involved in many areas of ministry but should they take on these leadership roles in the church?¹⁵

Complementarian

1 Timothy 3:1-13 is the key passage here. The passage about deacons (8-13) splits into two parts and seems to envisage male and female deacons – which accords with the naming of Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1¹⁶. However the section on elders seems to only envisage male elders. The prominence given in both sections to 'managing his own family' is another indication of the way the model of family governance is to be the pattern of church governance – which is another indication of male headship in this leadership role.

Egalitarian

Some egalitarian writers take the 'widow's list' of 1 Timothy 5:9-10 to be describing a female eldership role,¹⁷ and also understand the 'older women' of Titus 2:3 in that way.¹⁸ Belleville writes "Beyond 'the husband of one wife,' there are no qualifications [in the requirements for elders] that are male-specific. Elderly widows and female deacons are called to exhibit the same character and lifestyle qualities as their male counterparts (1 Tim. 3:8-9, 11)."¹⁹

2.6.4 How do we understand Galatians 3:28?

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:28*

Complementarian

In the context, this verse is talking about access to God in Christ – now all *kinds* of people are saved in the same way – through faith in Christ. The verse says nothing about leadership or ministry in the church. The concern of the book is to counter teaching about 'works salvation' and to emphasize justification by faith – and this verse comes in the middle of a section all about that.

So the verse does teach equality of status, but says nothing about roles in the church.

¹⁴ Some complementarians have tried to argue that this verse actually refers to a man – but the argument is very weak. However 'apostle' can be used in a non-technical sense to mean simply messenger/missionary – see 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25.

¹⁵ Some have questioned whether these are actually leadership roles or whether they are simply administrative or teaching roles. 1 Tim 5:17 seems to suggest that the elders do direct the affairs of the church which sounds like leadership – and the requirement in chapter 3 of 'managing their households well' suggest the parallel role of managing i.e. leading the church.

¹⁶ It should be noted that not all complementarians would recognise the role of female deacon – however I am seeking to present the most moderate version of complementarianism in this paper!

¹⁷ I find it this a very weak argument. It seems unlikely that if there were a category of female elders that they would need to be widows in order to qualify.

¹⁸ Given the context which includes instruction for older men, older women, younger women, younger men in turn, it seems most likely age is in view here rather than any particular office/role.

¹⁹ *Two views*, 63.

Egalitarian

This verse marks the highpoint of Paul's teaching about the difference between men and women and so although it doesn't speak directly about leadership roles in the church, it should control how we understand verses about leadership.²⁰

3 TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The issue is not, I think, as clear cut and neat as some on both sides of the debate have tried to make it. As I have reviewed the arguments on both sides once again, I continue to find myself more persuaded by the complementarian view. Although I think a number of questions remain, it seems to fit the difficult texts most easily.

However, I believe the restrictions on the role of women in the church which follow from the complementarian view to be very small. They exclude women from the role of 'elder' and from the 'authoritative teaching'²¹ which goes with that role – and so I take it that the primary leadership of the church should be male. However it seems that all other roles are available to women – and we should be encouraging women to be involved in praying, prophesying,²² mercy ministries and teaching.

4 APPLICATION TO FBC

Although this is a 'secondary issue' not a Gospel issue – and faithful Bible-believing Christians come to different views on it – the nature of the issue as it relates to leadership structures requires that a local church has some kind of position on it. After prayerful study, our current leadership team [November 2015] are complementarian in our theology.

We need to work hard at ensuring that women are fully involved in the life and ministry of the church in every appropriate way. One of the challenges of a (currently) all male pastoral staff is that it can be difficult for us to disciple and train women – so I would encourage us to keep thinking about appointing a female member of staff who might be able to help in that area. And also to try to identify women in the church who might be able to carry out some of that discipling (as per Titus 2:3-4).

It is my prayer that we will continue to be able to discuss this potentially divisive issue in a way which models grace, love and respect.

Philip Sweeting, November 2015.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following books are helpful in presenting the different sides of the arguments in more detail.

Two views on women in ministry, James R Beck (ed), brings together two biblical scholars from each side of the argument. Each present their case and then the other authors respond in term. A very helpful overview but quite detailed.

Women in the church's ministry, R. T. France, makes the case for an egalitarian perspective arguing from Scriptural trajectories.

Different by design, Carrie Sandom, makes the case for a complementarian reading of the Scriptures.

²⁰ This argument is not as good as it initially appears – since Galatians is a very *early* letter and the most problematic verses on leadership roles come in 1 Timothy – a very *late* letter. If Paul had wanted this principle to take priority in every context, why didn't he mention it or at least clear up the confusion which his later teaching would appear to create if this view is correct?

²¹ It should go without saying that the authority of this teaching doesn't lie in the fact that the person giving it is male, but in the fact that it is God's Word being taught – that is always where the real authority lies. Any other authority is a derivative authority.

²² There's another debate for another time!