

Women in Church Leadership: Our View
Preston Trail Elder Team
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Why this paper and why now?

This paper focuses on women in church leadership. It is not the first document our Elder Team has sent out on the subject, but it is lengthier and more detailed than previously. We are re-stating our beliefs about women in church leadership because we have recently announced that a woman, Alison Leamon, will be one of our two lead pastors when the founding pastors retire from that role. Everyone who calls Preston Trail “home” should know the biblical basis for this decision.

Here is the bottom line: we believe the Scriptures teach that when it comes to women leading in the church, they are free to serve in any role to which God calls them and which the church affirms. This view is called “complementarian without hierarchy.” It means men and women are created by God to be mutual partners in serving God together, according to their calling, character, and gifts.

Below you will read our understanding of God’s big story as it impacts the role of men and women in church leadership, as well as our interpretation of key Scripture verses that relate to gender roles in Kingdom ministry.

First, let’s remember what the Bible is ... and what it isn’t.

The Bible is God’s Big Story. He is the main character.

We would like the Bible to answer every question we ask, from why do good people suffer, to when and how was the world created, to when will Jesus return? And ... what is the role of women in the church?!

While the Bible *will* answer many of the most important questions you can ask, those answers require a careful reading of Scripture, an understanding of culture in Bible times, &and a sensitivity to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us today.

So ... what is the Bible? The Bible is God's Big Story. It centers on the Father's eternal plan to redeem the human race and to reverse the curse of sin; the sending of Jesus to earth to put this plan into action; and the sending of the Holy Spirit to apply Jesus's message in every culture and generation.

This Big Story contains *four* movements or chapters: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Renewal. These four movements provide the framework for understanding all issues important to Christ-followers, including God's design for women in church leadership.

Second, let's explore men and women in God's big story.

1. **Creation:** God's original intent and design was for men and women to be equally responsible before God and in the world. Equal does not mean identical or replaceable. (Genesis 1-2)

- In Genesis 1:26-28, God created man and woman in His image and gave them mutual authority to oversee all that was made. There is no hint of male hierarchy.
- In Genesis 2:18, God provided a woman to be with the man. She is described as "a helper suitable for him" (NIV) or "a helper who is just right for him" (NLT). In Hebrew, the phrase is *ezer kenegdo*. *Ezer* means "strength" and is found 21 times in the Old Testament, mostly referring to God rescuing Israel with His strength. *Kenegdo* means "corresponding to" or "opposite to" or "face-to-face." Together, the 2 words mean that the woman is a strong equal partner with the man, a perfect counterpart to him.

2. **Sin:** Sin ruptured God's intent as woman was placed below man. (Genesis 3)

- The couple refused to trust and obey God when they ate the fruit of the tree which had been forbidden.
- As a result, God told the woman that there would be drastic changes in the man-woman relationship because of sin, which would destroy His intent in creation: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (NIV) or "And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you" (NLT) or "And though you will have desire for your husband, he will rule over you" (NLT alternate reading). (Genesis 3:16)

- This new relationship was the sad fruit of sin and became the root of patriarchy.

3. **Redemption:** Jesus came to put right what was wrong, to save what was lost, to restore God's original intent. We see this clearly in the way he treated women and allowed them to be his followers and disciples. For example:

- Jesus had women disciples who traveled with him and the 12. (Luke 8:1-3)
- Jesus allowed women to learn from him as students learned from a rabbi. (Luke 10:38-42)
- Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene, a woman with a questionable reputation, as the first person to proclaim the greatest news in the history of the world: "He is risen!" (John 20:17-18; Luke 24:9-11)
- All three of these realities flew in the face of traditional Jewish patriarchal culture. Jesus was restoring God's original pattern of women and men serving God together, side by side.

4. **Renewal:** The Holy Spirit guided the early church to recover and live out God's original intent, and continues to guide us into all truth today. Consider the following:

- After Jesus returned to Heaven, He and the Father poured out the Holy Spirit on His disciples. But instead of the Spirit coming only upon men, He was poured out on both men and women, both old and young, even servants. God was revising and correcting the Old Testament pattern that the Spirit was given only to older men. This radically expanded the scope of who could be filled with the Spirit and who could speak for God. (Acts 2:17-18)
- In Corinth, a young and gifted preacher named Apollos showed up and was immediately effective in his work. But his theology was not yet mature, so Priscilla and Aquila taught him. The order is important: Priscilla, a woman, was the dominant teacher of this young theologian-preacher. (Acts 18:24-26)
- In his most important letter, to Christians living in Rome, Paul greeted several women who held leadership roles in the early church. (Romans 16:1-16)
 - Vv. 1-2: Phoebe was serving as a deacon in Cenchreae, a port city near Corinth. She delivered Paul's letter to the church at Rome. She would also be the one who read it to the congregation. She would also likely

explain it to the people and answer their questions. Amazing: a first-century Jewish Pharisee named Saul met Jesus, became an apostle, wrote thirteen letters to churches, and when it came to his signature letter, Romans, he sent a woman to deliver it, read it, and explain it. She was a teacher and theologian.

- Vv. 3-4: Priscilla and Aquila were effective leaders of the early church. Paul calls them both “co-workers” and lists her first, which was a sign of influence. She was a key church leader.
- V. 7: Junia was a female Christian described as “outstanding among the apostles.” She was a female apostle.
- Summary of Romans 16: Paul greets women who served as deacons, teachers, theologians, leaders, and apostles. In this one church, we see women practicing many of the spiritual gifts listed in Ephesians 4: “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.” (Ephesians 4:11)
- Paul wrote about and listed spiritual gifts that are given to members in the Body of Christ. He gave prominence to two gifts, usually considered the most important because of their placement at the top of the list: apostle (= church planter) and prophet (= preacher). He never mentioned that males alone could receive those two gifts or any other gifts, or that females couldn’t. He certainly could have made that distinction if he believed that only males received certain gifts. (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12, 14; Ephesians 4:11-13)
- Paul highlighted the broad scope of God’s blessing on all people in and through Jesus Christ, underscoring their essential equality before God and others. This shows that salvation in Jesus eclipses the old barrier that existed between male and female. (Galatians 3:28)

Third, let’s seek to understand the passages in Paul’s letters that limit the role of women leaders in the church.

1. There are four passages where Paul emphasized the role of men in church leadership and/or limited the role of women in church leadership. These passages are 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-35; 1 Timothy 2:9-15; and 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (= Titus 1:6-9).

2. Here is how we interpret these controversial passages.

1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

“... 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.” (1 Corinthians 11:5-6, NIV)

- Paul acknowledged the role of women prophesying in the church in Corinth. They could preach and pray in public worship services.
- But he placed some limits on what a woman could do. His comments concerned covering or uncovering her head—with a hat, a veil, or her hair. The implication is that women should not look unkempt or sensual when leading worship.
- If we take this literally, then today a woman can prophesy and pray as long as she wears a hat or a veil or has the right kind of hair style. However, virtually all New Testament scholars recognize that Paul’s limits on a woman’s head coverings referred to the culture found in first-century Corinth, and should not be interpreted or applied today in a literal way.
- The abiding principle is that women, as well as men (see v. 4), should dress modestly when they lead in worship, not in a way that calls attention to themselves.

2) 1 Corinthians 14:33-35

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people. 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.” (1 Corinthians 14:33-35, NIV)

- This passage is part of a longer passage on church order during worship. First, he told tongues-speakers to be silent unless there was an interpreter. “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet.” (v. 28) Then he told prophets to stop interrupting each other, but to be silent until it’s their turn. (vv. 29-31) Finally, he told women to be silent in church services, but to ask questions to their husbands at home.

- What was going on in the Corinthian culture that might lead Paul to set this limit in this church?
 - Remember: the primary Greek god worshiped in Corinth was Aphrodite, the sex goddess. Her temple was on a hill overlooking the city. Women prostitutes ran the temple services. Corinth was a promiscuous city, and religion and sex were interwoven.
 - So when Corinthian women spoke to men in public, they were liable to speak either disrespectfully or sexually.
 - Paul knew that women who turned to Jesus out of this culture would bring into their new faith this attitude toward men and sex. So he put limits on what women could say during worship services.
- Remember: any interpretation of 14:33-35 may not contradict what Paul already wrote in 11:5, where he acknowledge that a woman could prophesy or pray in public. Our conclusion: he allowed it in most circumstances, but placed limits on it when it got out of hand. And the eternal principle is: women should pray and prophesy with reverence.

3) 1 Timothy 2:11-15

“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.” (1 Timothy 2:11-12, NIV)

- Context: Paul wrote 1 Timothy to tell his son in the faith to stop false teachers from spreading their heretical ideas. He instructed Timothy to do this in chapters 1 and 3. His teaching on women in chapter 2 comes right in the middle of this discussion. We can assume that women were among the false teachers.
- What do we know about Ephesus that might shed light on what Paul meant here?
 - Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt and wild animals. She was fiercely independent. Her worshipers were women who lorded their authority over men. The Temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world.
 - This anti-male mindset was common among women in this city. When women followed Jesus, they often brought that mindset into their faith and into the worship services.

- We believe this is why Paul was so strict in placing limits on women in leadership there. He did not want women to be domineering in asserting their authority over men, nor to teach false doctrine. That is the eternal biblical principle that was true then, and now.

4) 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (= Titus 1:6-9)

“Now the overseer is to be ... faithful to his wife ...” (NIV) or “the husband of one wife” (NASB). (1 Timothy 3:2)

- In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul laid out the qualifications for an overseer, a word he used interchangeably with “pastor” and “elder.” (See Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2 where all three words are used in the same sentence to refer to the same role.)
- In both 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul assumed that elders in those congregations would be male. Why? We know the reason for that practice in Ephesus, where Timothy served as pastor, because of what we read above in the discussion of 1 Timothy 2:11-15.
- We can reason as to why Paul held the same expectation for Crete, where Titus led the church. Of all the Greek cities, Crete had the most masculine religious culture. Cretans believed most of the gods were born on their island, including the chief God, Zeus. Perhaps Paul knew that women church leaders would be unwelcome and ineffective among the Cretans.
- We don’t believe this passage intends to teach that only married men can be overseers, because that would rule out both Jesus and Paul.
- We believe Paul’s reference to male elders here is descriptive of what was appropriate at that time and in those places, not prescriptive for all times and places.

3. In summary, this is what we have come to believe about these “limiting” passages in Paul’s letters:

- They are among the most challenging passage in Paul’s letters. Regardless of the topic, they are difficult to interpret and apply.
- Any way you approach it, some of Paul’s teachings are a challenge. Regarding women as church leaders, you can line up verses that say, “A woman should be silent in church” AND “A woman should preach and lead

in the church.” At the end of the day, after all your studying and praying, you must decide. Is Paul’s overall message ...

- “Women, be silent in churches ... with a few exceptions”?

OR

- “Women, preach and lead in churches ... with a few limits”?

- We believe the second option accords best with Paul’s overall teaching, and reflects Jesus’ attitude toward and inclusion of women.
- We believe Paul’s limitations reflect situational and/or cultural realities. Meaning, there were cultural factors in Ephesus and Corinth that we don’t fully understand now, but that were obvious then, leading Paul to restrict what women could do in the church. We do not believe these are eternal principles to be practiced in every culture and every generation.
- We believe the Gospel principle that Paul followed was this: if the message of the Gospel is being muddied or muted by a temporary cultural practice or situational reality, then the church should use wisdom in applying appropriate limits so the Gospel can shine brightly. In the first century Greco-Roman-Jewish worlds, this meant limiting the speaking roles of women in certain settings. In the twenty-first century, we believe just the opposite is the case: the church must embrace the speaking and leadership roles of women, and let them complement the speaking and leadership roles of men, in order to reach more and more people with the Gospel.