

“In essentials Unity, in non-essentials Liberty, in all things Charity.”
- Augustine

Women’s Leadership in The Local Church

A Personal and Professional Reflection

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Parkview Community Church, 2017

Over the forty years of being a Jesus-follower, my interpretation of certain Scripture texts and positions on certain points of Christian theology have changed. While early in my spiritual journey I adopted a rather sophomoric “I’ve got this all figured out” attitude, over time, the more I’ve learned the more I realize what little I truly know. How can the finite fully grasp the infinite? I think we’d agree – it’s impossible. So why do I sometimes behave as if it is?

But taking the posture of humility and accepting the fact my entire life has been, is and will be a learning experience has freed me from a once sarcastic and dismissive dogmatism. Believing I had the answers to all things biblical kept me from honestly listening to and respecting the theology of fellow Christians from other traditions and viewpoints. It kept me from being open to the possibility I was mistaken or, at the very least, missing something important.

The issue of women in leadership is essentially a non-issue for me and, dare I even say, for our church. At Parkview we have women pastors, speakers, directors, teachers, deacons, life group leaders, ministry leaders, etc. In many respects, we have answered the question of “can women serve in positions of vital leadership in the local church?” It seems our position is obvious; we welcome, invite, value, accept and affirm women in a variety of leadership capacities. One might then ask, since we have women serving in every other leadership position, why the exception of one – eldership? Is it a matter of accepted tradition? Genuine biblical conviction? Or could it simply be a lack of serious evaluation of the issue viewing other “church business” as more critical? For a long time, I must confess, for me it was the last. In recent years, I’ve engaged with the question of women in leadership in a serious manner. After considerable study, research, reading and prayer, I have again realized how much more I have to learn. Thankfully, God is in the business of teaching those willing to listen.

Since we know, without question, Jesus broke from his patriarchal culture in regard to the treatment of women as did the early Church, the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul, and with our treatment of women at Parkview reflecting the same respect and value, our reason then for not allowing women elders must be based on the two primary New Testament texts that address elders and their qualifications. In those texts, women are not mentioned but neither are they explicitly prohibited from serving as elders.

Over the next few pages, I offer some thoughts, observations, analysis and conclusions not just on the idea of women elders but on the overall view of women from an *anno domini* post-Pentecost perspective.

Key Considerations

The Image of God

In the beginning, “God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that *they* may rule. . .’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to *them*, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over (it) . . .’” (Genesis 1:26-28) According to the creation narrative, both man and woman were created in the image of God. What is essential to this idea of “image bearing” is that, according to the Genesis 1 mandate, both man *and* woman were given dominion over the earth and everything in it [1:28]; co-rulers, if you will, with shared leadership. There is nothing in the text to suggest anything other than man and woman equally created to reflect the image of God and equally called to cooperatively serve their Creator.

Understanding this “image bearing” equality, one might wonder, *Why would the Creator then want women to be subordinate to men? What possible reason could he have?* It’s true, Eve was created second, but Scripture records all kinds of stories in which God elevates the younger over the older. And yes, Eve sinned first, but why would a gracious God keep reminding good women of this unpleasant fact by subordinating them to men for the rest of human history? It is difficult to imagine this subordination as God’s original intent. Man and woman were created sequentially to demonstrate the need they have for each other, not to justify an implicit hierarchy.

It is after the fall from grace God declares to the woman, “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.” A more literal translation is, “You will want to dominate your husband but your husband will rule over you.” This statement is best understood as God’s prophetic description of the new broken order of things, of how life would be experienced as a result of sin rather than how it was originally intended to be experienced. In short, because of sin, there will be an ongoing struggle of wills between the sexes.

The New Covenant, however, restores God’s creational intent for men and women to relate and operate collaboratively in life and ministry (Genesis 1: 28, Joel 2:28-29). He originally commissioned them to do so (Genesis 2:18). While this partnership was impaired by the fall, leaving men and women in a struggle for power (Genesis 3:15-16), Jesus came to reverse the relational impacts of sin and restore our intimate relationship and communion with our Creator and with each other. This means the New Covenant relationship is one whereby men and women rule side by side in shared obedience to Christ.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell upon the small band of believers (men and women) gathered in Jerusalem. In the streets of the city they spoke openly and boldly of the wonders of God. Peter’s explanation for this came from the Old Testament prophet Joel: “This was the last-days work of God himself who declared, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. . . . 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; Joel 2:28)

According to Peter, in dramatic fashion, two divine gifts came together: the *work* of the Spirit in giving gifts to God’s people, and the *word* of the Spirit in prophetic utterances. Peter quoted Joel as twice explaining how God graciously gives this gift to *both* men and women. From the

Church's beginning, as equally gifted and empowered servants of God, "both men and women" would share in the prophetic ministry.

According to the New Testament, God has given every believer spiritual gifts that are to be used for the building up of the Church (1 Peter 4:10, Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11-12). Since every believer has a stewardship responsibility to use his or her spiritual gifts for the good of the body of Christ, it seems counter-productive and detrimental to the church to prevent a person from applying these gifts based on gender.

As Paul explains, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) While this statement is not primarily about ministry, the context is about being "the children of God." The question Paul is answering is who belongs to Christ and what it means for our relationships with one another. He declares, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...there is no longer Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28) Put another way, unity in Christ transcends all ethnic, social, and gender barriers! The order of creation has been renewed, and is being renewed, in Jesus (Romans 8:18-30; Galatians 4:1-7; Ephesians 1:3-10).

Jesus' View of Women

At nearly every point in his life, teaching and ministry, Jesus called people to think new thoughts in new ways. This is certainly true in regard to his teaching and attitudes concerning women. In the Judaism of his day, women were excluded from worship and religion. Jesus' male contemporaries considered women unfit to learn, and it was considered most inappropriate and unacceptable for them to teach. Traditionally, the first thing Jewish men would do upon awaking each morning was to first thank God they were Jews, and secondly thank God they were not a woman. Such was the attitude and cultural climate of Jesus' time. Clearly his teaching represented a radical break from patriarchal Judaism. In his teaching of and the presentation of the kingdom of God, Jesus established new roles for women in the life and worship of God's people. His teaching reflected God's creational intention. Here are some important observations to keep in mind when considering Jesus' view of women:

He viewed women as valuable people (Matthew 12:29-50). The most striking thing about the role of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is the simple fact they were there. Women were present and included. In Matthew 12:49 women are included and identified as disciples in the more general sense of the word. Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of my father is my disciple." Jesus respected women as intelligent and productive individuals in the kingdom of God. He didn't perceive them primarily in terms of their sex, age or marital status but rather in terms of their relationship (or lack of one) to God. Women, just as men, could be an equal part of his family and kingdom.

Jesus had personal and public contact with and taught women. The fact Jesus would spend time with a woman is extremely significant. That, along with his serious teaching of them, constituted an intentional and unprecedented break with 1st century Jewish rabbinic tradition. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4), Jesus' disciples were appalled at his interaction with her, because she was not only a Samaritan but a woman as well. Yet Jesus' conversation

reveals his desire to communicate about himself and the kingdom of God to anyone who would listen. The woman emerges as an extremely sharp and responsive person. If you consider the subject matter of the conversation (spiritual worship, sin, forgiveness, etc.), it was theologically profound. There is no suggestion this person's gender affected the manner in which Jesus dealt with, loved and accepted her.

Other examples of Jesus interacting with women include his encounter with and teaching of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:22-28) who asked for her dying daughter to be healed. Jesus declared, "Woman (title of respect), you have great faith; your request is granted." In Luke 7, there is the account of one woman who kisses Jesus' feet and in Matthew 9 another who was convinced even his touch would heal her. Both are supreme examples of his willingness to teach and have personal contact with women.

Jesus used women as examples in parables and teaching. In rabbinic teaching, women were used only as negative examples or illustrations. But with Jesus, they illustrate both faith and unbelief. They receive his chiding and his blessing. In The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10), the woman in the story represents God. In The Parable of The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), five are represented as foolish and five as discerningly wise.

Jesus allowed and accepted women as part of his ministry. Women were not only part of Jesus' hearers, but they were also his followers. A group of them traveled with him and the twelve disciples. They were welcomed members of Jesus' support group.

Jesus welcomed and accepted the financial support of women. The following account is recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

"After this, Jesus traveled from one city and village to another. He spread the Good News about God's kingdom. The twelve apostles were with him. Also, some women were with him. They had been cured from evil spirits and various illnesses. These women were Mary, also called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, whose husband Chusa was Herod's administrator; Susanna; and many other women. They provided financial support for Jesus and his disciples." [Luke 8:1-2]

Jesus allowed women to have prominent roles as witnesses to his crucifixion, burial and resurrection. We are told in Luke 24 it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other women who were given the honor of first viewing the empty grave and carrying the news of the risen Lord to the rest of his disciples.

Jesus commanded his followers to "do to others as you would have them to do you." Obeying Jesus in this would seem to make subordinating women an act of defiance. I would not want to be subordinated for no discernible reason. So why should I be willing to subordinate women? And what about Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself? Doesn't that command lead in the same direction as the Golden Rule?

In all of his attitudes, teachings and actions, Jesus set himself apart from the Judaism of his day by demonstrating profound respect for women and for their role in the kingdom of God. It is no exaggeration to say Jesus turned patriarchy upside down.

Women In the Early Church

In the historical account of the early Church we read the following:

Then they (the disciples) returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

The above text is pertinent to our discussion. It was not as if at the moment of Jesus' ascension into heaven the men turned and kicked the women out of the group. The women did not nor were they ever expected to sink back into the obscurity of Judaism. It is critical to note how in the first accounts of this new spiritual community called the Church, we find women continuing to play a crucial role as members of the inner circle. Just as the men went to Jerusalem to pray and await the coming of the Holy Spirit, so the women accompanied them and were included.

Throughout the NT, women are described as serving in various leadership roles in the early Church such as apostles (Romans 16:7), prophets (Acts 21:9), deacons (Romans 16:11), teachers and disciplers (Acts 18:26). For women to hold such roles was unheard of at the time. It seems the creational idea and intent of shared leadership was making a come back in the new community known as the Church.

Peter's View of Women

When the group of Jesus' followers was assembled together in one place ...

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:2)

As Peter explains this event to a skeptical temple crowd in Jerusalem, he acknowledges women were part of the miraculous experience, which according to the prophet Joel, was God's intention. Peter quotes Joel declaring,

“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.’” (Joel 2:28)

In a letter to the early Church, Peter affirms the ongoing involvement of women in ministry when he refers to all believers (men and women) as “a holy priesthood, offering sacrifices acceptable

to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5) No priest (male or female) in this holy priesthood is superior to or more important than any of the others.

Later in the same letter, Peter instructs Christian husbands to honor their wives “as the weaker partner.” (1 Peter 3:7) Throughout history, some have used his comment to support a patriarchal treatment of women. A closer examination reveals that Peter was not affirming a male hierarchy in marriage but was calling for mutual respect and shared partnership. His use of the phrase “weaker partner” is not denoting an intellectual or emotional weakness, as has been often argued, but speaks to the woman’s weakened position in first century Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures. The term used for “weaker” is translated from a cognate form of the Greek term *asthenei*, which means to be powerless and without strength. It’s not limited to someone who is of a weaker stature or frame, but can refer to someone, such as a prisoner, whom society has deprived of freedom and opportunity.

Peter is thus referring to a cultural weakness wherein the wife (and women in general) was marginalized and not given the opportunities to fully and freely express her gifts and abilities. In fact, in first century Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, women were often treated like slaves - the property and possession of their husbands. In his writing, Peter instructs men in the church to oppose the cultural norm and treat their wives with honor and respect “as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life.” (1 Peter 3:7)

As Peter himself witnessed, from its very inception, women played a significant and vocal role in the Church. As the Church expanded, Luke reports (Acts 5:14) how more and more men and women were added to the group’s number. Both men and women were baptized. Throughout the book of Acts, women participate along with men in local church after local church; in Philippi (Acts 16), Thessalonica (Acts 17), Berea (Acts 17), Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18). All include women as noteworthy persons. In Acts 2:42, it’s recorded how women in the new community were included in teaching, fellowship, worship, communion, and prayer. In Acts 21, women also exercised a variety of spiritual gifts. One such gift was prophesying or speaking the Word of God in a public gathering. All the daughters of Philip the evangelist were prophetesses. (Acts 21:8)

There are more examples, however, the point seems made. Peter and the apostolic Church manifestly continued the practice of Jesus in the inclusion of women in life and ministry. From its earliest days, women played a prominent role in the extension and strengthening of the young Christian Church.

Paul’s View of Women

Paul is often accused of being a misogynist or, at the very least, a male chauvinist whose thoughts and attitudes were dominated by his surrounding culture. This is far from accurate. Paul had a deep respect and appreciation for women, not only as fellow Christians but also as partners in ministry, i.e., “fellow workers.”

Paul acknowledged the spiritual giftedness of women. He recognized women in the Church are equally as gifted as men. Not only did he recognize this, he expressed it in his writings.

In 1 Corinthians 11:4, as Paul writes about the gift of prophecy/preaching, the issue is not whether women are gifted. In fact, the implication is they are gifted and will preach. The issue is in what manner and to what extent will that gift be exercised.

In Roman 12:6, Paul writes concerning the gift of faith. Time and again, he commends women like Eunice and Lois (2 Timothy 1:5) for their gift of faith.

In Romans 12:7, Paul writes about the gift of teaching. There is no woman mentioned more often or with more respect by Paul than Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. In Acts 18 we read how both of them instructed and disciplined Apollos (who was already very knowledgeable in the Scriptures). Without question, Paul recognized and affirmed the giftedness of women throughout his writings.

Paul praised the work of many women in the Church. We've already identified a few of them, but here are more examples.

Phoebe (Romans 16:1) is commended as a deacon, a great servant of the Church and a help to Paul. He valued and esteemed her as a leader. He trusted her to carry his letter to Rome. In it he writes, "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me."

Priscilla (Romans 16:3) was considered an equal partner of a husband and wife discipling team.

Mary of Rome (Romans 16:6) was commended for her hard work.

Tryphena and **Tryphosa** (Romans 16:12) are commended for their hard work.

Persis (Romans 16:12) was Paul's personal friend and also commended for her hard work.

Mother of Rufus (Romans 16:13) is referred to by Paul as being like "a mother to me."

Nympha (Colossians 4:15) generously hosted a local church in her home.

Paul deeply respected and publicly praised these and other women for their active roles in ministry and for the outstanding contributions and sacrifices they were making for the Church at large.

Paul's personal ministry involved a significant number of women. Many times Paul refers to specific women as "fellow workers." He uses the same term to describe men like Timothy and Titus. The point is women were intricately involved in Paul's life and ministry. He mentions Euodia and Synctyche (Philippians 4:2) as women who "contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel." These two women were prominent members of the Philippian church, which is why when Paul hears of their disagreement, he asked them to quickly resolve the problem.

Again, Pricilla, who along with her husband Aquila, played a key role in Paul's life and ministry. They are listed six times in Scripture. Here are some Pauline descriptions of how they contributed both to the Church and especially to Paul himself: they housed Paul in Corinth (Acts 18); they accompanied Paul to Syria (Acts 18); they disciplined Apollos who went on to be a leader in the Church (perhaps as some believe, the writer of Hebrews). Paul says in Romans 16:5 that Pricilla and Aquila risked their lives for him. They also hosted a local church in their home (2 Timothy 4:19).

Apparently, Paul had no problem involving women in his ministry. In fact, they often times played critical leadership roles.

Paul encouraged believers to follow his example as he followed Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, prior to discussing the topic of women in the Corinthian church, Paul says, "Follow my example as I follow Christ." He wrote the same to both Philippian and Thessalonian believers. Is it possible Paul would declare his followership of Jesus while at the same time disregard Christ's teaching and attitude toward women? It seems unlikely. Paul followed Jesus' example in all things. His view of women was the same as Christ's view. With Jesus as his model, Paul believed and taught that women were and are equally loved by God, equally respected partners in the Kingdom, fellow workers, equally as capable, intelligent, creative and gifted as men.

To the Colossian church, Paul speaks of the freedom of all "God's chosen people" (men and women) to "teach and admonish one another." (Colossians 3:12-16) To Galatian believers he writes, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:28] These statements, with others already cited along with Paul's overall view of and treatment of women, must serve as the foundational principles of his teaching in the light of which confusing passages on female subordination must be evaluated and understood.

Famed author, theologian and expert in Pauline theology, Dr. F.F. Bruce states it this way, "In general, where there are divided opinions about the interpretation of a Pauline passage, that interpretation which runs along the line of liberty is much more likely to be true to Paul's intention than one which smacks of bondage or legalism."

When taken as a whole, it seems reasonable to conclude from New Testament Scriptures, Jesus, the early Church, the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul that women play an equally decisive role in the extension and strengthening of the Kingdom of God. It is important to keep this in mind when examining other specific passages that address and further define those roles. It is imperative one resist laying hold of only those things which are comfortable. One must also avoid trying to mold the teaching of Scripture to conform to his or her preferred version of male or female roles. Instead, we must come prepared to hear God's teaching and pray we might more fully understand his comprehensive intentions in regard to the roles of women and men as we all seek to relate to one another in the world, in our families and in the church.

Scriptural Terms and Texts

With any simple reading of the New Testament comes the clear indication that, as an organization, the Church of Jesus Christ has human leaders. They are to be mature, godly and proven

followers of Christ who care for the spiritual welfare of his people. In Hebrews 13:17, Christians in the church are commanded to “have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Obey them that their work will be a joy not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

In the early church (as recorded in Scripture), there were several terms associated with local church leadership.

Defining Terms

ELDER [presbuteros]: a term used in two distinct ways. Literally, it is a man or woman older in age (see reference to men in 1 Timothy 5:1; women in 1 Timothy 5:2). It is also used figuratively of recognized leaders (Jewish leaders in Acts 4:5; Christian leaders in Acts 14:23; 15:2,4,6). In reference to official leadership, the Greek term stresses the dignity and maturity of the person in office.

OVERSEER [episkopos, rendered Bishop in early translations]: The term refers to one who literally “watches over” the Church as a shepherd “oversees” their flock. This Greek term stresses the practical functions of the office.

PASTOR [poimane]: The Greek term literally means, “shepherd” (Matthew 9:36; 26:31; Luke 2:8; John 10:2; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25). The term is translated “pastor” in Ephesians 4:11. Although the concept of “pastor” as an office or position in the church is limited in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11), Paul exhorts Elders/Overseers to “be shepherds of the Church of God” (Act 20:17, 27-28).

All the above terms are used of the same office of leadership. They are interchangeable in describing the dignity, maturity, and function of the position. In Acts 20:17 & 28, the *Elders* of the church at Ephesus are said to have been made *Overseers* of the flock and called to be *Shepherds* of the Church of God. In one context, all three terms refer to the same individuals. Similarly, in 1 Peter 5:2, the three terms are applied to the same leaders in the Church. The terms *Elder* and *Overseer* are used interchangeably in Titus 1:5-7ff.

The New Testament uses these terms as denoting one and the same office in the church. The nuance of each term stresses a particular aspect of the nature, role and function of the position. The New Testament points to a plurality of elders in each local church (Acts 14:24; 20:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). It seems, however, Paul’s separate reference to “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11 allows for a person to serve as a “pastor” in the church without necessarily being an elder.

SEMINAL TEXTS

1 Timothy 3:1-7

“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.”

Titus 1:5-9

“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.”

Argument From Silence

With these two texts which qualify and describe eldership, it’s important to acknowledge there is no explicit command in the New Testament Scripture that prohibits a woman from serving as an elder in a local church. When Paul, for example, qualifies an elder as one who is “faithful to his wife,” does that then preclude single men from serving as elders since they are not mentioned? Or what about a divorced man or widower? To argue the case for exclusive male eldership when there is no biblical prohibition against women, for this author has grown increasingly fallacious. Arguments from silence never stand up under the scrutiny of reason.

Patriarchal Societies of the First Century

In many respects, it is difficult for us to comprehend the nature of society in the first century. In the Israel/Palestine of Jesus’ day, women existed for the pleasure of men. If a woman did not bear a male child or didn’t please her husband in some way, he could divorce her with ease (even for something as simple as burning his dinner). Keep in mind, Jesus denounced these practices (Matthew 19:3-12). At the time, only a man could enact a divorce, but this did not mean women could not get a divorce. If they could prove to a court of rabbis they had sufficient grounds for a divorce, the court could persuade her husband to divorce her. The opinion that only a man could enact divorce was based on the law that said a man should write out the divorce certificate (Deuteronomy 24:1). Therefore a man had to enter into divorce voluntarily but a woman could be divorced against her will. Sadly, in Israel/Palestine at the time of Jesus, women’s legal witness was virtually non-existent.

Women were not to speak in public with men (men were not even to give a greeting to a woman in public), women were not to testify in court, they were not supposed to read the Torah (Law), nor were they to be taught. As a rabbinic teaching advised (Sotah 3.4), “Let the words of the Law be burned rather than committed to a woman If a man teaches his daughter the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery.” Women were also set apart from men in synagogue worship, either by a partition or by being in separate rooms.

There was also the issue of polygyny (a man having more than one wife). Polygyny, though rare, was permitted in 1st century Israel/Palestine mostly among governmental aristocratic leaders (Herod the Great, 37-4 B.C., had ten wives). It was relatively common elsewhere in the Ancient Near East. In the Greco-Roman world, polygyny was not allowed. A man had one wife with whom he cohabitated; however, most had legal mistresses. Cohabitation with more than one woman was seen as inappropriate. That said, married men’s sexual congress with their own slave women or with prostitutes was free of social and legal sanction. Moreover, ease of divorce underwrote a degree of effective polygyny: while men were unable to have more than one wife at a time they could marry several in a row. God never approved polygyny, though there are a number of instances of it recorded in Scripture. The New Testament clearly reiterates God’s will

that one man be married to one woman; neither polygyny nor polygamy (more than one spouse) is allowed by historical biblical Christian ethics.

Within the Jewish family system of the first century, there was complete control of the wife and children by the father or husband. In Rome, fathers had total control over family members, and a husband had absolute power over his wife; he could sell a daughter to her future husband. All these powers were made illegal some years after Christianity became the official religion of Rome. Women were also granted the right to own property and have guardianship of their own children. In Greece, wives had segregated quarters and could not visit male guests of her husband's in her own home. As in ancient Israel, women in Greece were not to speak in public. Women were held in a very low status in both Greece and ancient Israel. In Israel, at the time of Jesus, women's legal witness was virtually non-existent.

Understanding the moral ethics and common cultural practices of first century societies sets in juxtaposition our contemporary western view of male and female, husband and wife relationships. Ours is a very different world. As argued by many biblical historical scholars, in the patriarchal societies of the first century, it is plausible the early Christian Church avoided social scandal by accommodating its leadership structure to reflect the patriarchy of the time. The ruling of women might have been detrimental to the preaching of the gospel.

In today's modern western society, which is officially egalitarian, for the Church not to reflect the cultural norm (and biblical concept) of gender equality now creates the scandal. Even more so, holding firmly to a patriarchal approach to leadership is becoming a significant barrier to the Gospel in our cultural context. In terms of cultural adaptation, Paul stated his practice this way, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel." (1 Corinthians 9:22)

Inviting women into all aspects of church leadership is not, as some might suggest, caving into cultural pressure. While culture requires us to have new conversations, it does not define our positions or policy. God defines them. In the 18th and 19th centuries, one could attend a meeting of a church and hear arguments in favor of slavery based on Scriptural texts. In the 1960s, one might of have heard a biblical rationale for apartheid. To be honest, we must admit sometimes the Church gets things wrong. Sometimes culture has to change to get the Church to ask questions it should have been asking all along. The Church should have led the way on both slavery and racial reconciliation, yet we lagged behind culture. For centuries women have been considered and treated as second-class citizens in nearly every society on earth. Women are still oppressed in many parts of the world, and the Church is too often complicit in this oppression. It seems time for the Church to ask new questions and lead in new ways by standing up for and freeing the marginalized.

It is essential to affirm all Church authority, male or female, is under Christ, informed by Scripture and lead by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of authority is to glorify God and facilitate his mission in the world. Elders are meant to be leaders, and biblical leadership is a form of servanthood. In obsessing on the question, "Who gets to be in charge?" we may lose sight of the more important question, "Who is a true servant?"

Confusing Texts

With a few of the complex cultural situations addressed by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, the related Scriptures are debated in terms of precise meaning. Keeping in mind hard cases make for bad law, these texts are worthy of examination. Take for example the following text:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”
(1 Timothy 2:11-12)

Keep in mind, Paul’s comment must be viewed and interpreted in light of overall biblical teaching, language use, and Pauline theology along with historical, cultural and contextual considerations.

Context of the Letter

Paul’s first letter to Timothy was a personal correspondence written to his co-worker in Ephesus. The letter was intended to address specific problems Timothy was encountering in the church at Ephesus, namely false teachers (likely both male and female). False teaching was clearly Paul’s primary concern in writing, evidenced by him immediately addressing the matter in the opening of the document instead of giving his normal greeting, and it remains his main concern throughout the entirety of the letter. Unlike many of Paul’s polemics, this letter was addressed specifically to Timothy, rather than to the Church at large, implying the seriousness of the particular problem facing the church at Ephesus.

It is likely false teachers had arisen from within the church and some may have been elders (1 Timothy 1:3-11; 4:1-5; cf. Acts 20:17-28). These false teachers also seemed to prey on women (1 Timothy 5:3-16; 2 Timothy 3:6-9). In light of the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, it is also possible some of the false teachers were women. The nature of the false teaching seems to be an over-realized eschatology where some taught the resurrection had already arrived (2 Timothy 2:18) and thus marriage and the eating of certain foods is superfluous (1 Timothy 4:1-5). In light of the situation, Paul instructed Timothy to refute the false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3-11; 6:3-10), teach the truth of the apostolic tradition (1 Timothy 4:6, 13-16; 6:2, 17-18), promote proper conduct in the church and the assembly (1 Timothy 2:1-15; 3:1-13), select qualified church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1-13), and ensure godly conduct among the leaders as well as the rest of the church (1 Timothy 5:16; 2 Timothy 2:17-19).

Paul also mentions women who had “turned away to follow Satan” (1 Timothy 5:15) and later addresses “gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:6-7) It’s important to know, the ancient city of Ephesus was the home to the temple cult of Artemis in which the female was exalted and considered superior to the male. The citizens of Ephesus were greatly influenced by the teachings of this cult as evidenced in the riot Paul experienced while in Ephesus where people in the streets “were furious and began shouting: ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.’” (Acts 19:18) Cult practices revolved around female virgins who oversaw thousands of female priestesses who led in the worship of Artemis. In this particular context, male leadership was non-existent. Thus, Paul was writing his protégé Timothy, who was attempting to minister in a context where women came from a pagan background and sought to exercise

complete dominating authority over men.

Language

The translation of the text, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” is more accurately nuanced as the following, “I do not permit a woman to teach, that is to (or namely), have authority over a man; she must be quiet (i.e. peaceful, subdued – the Greek term used does not mean completely silent).

Even though two prohibitions are given, the second seems to be the basis for the first, and perhaps the second infinitive elaborates on the aspect of teaching that is at the heart of the prohibition.

Again, the Ephesian church was experiencing tension and/or conflict during corporate worship (1 Timothy 2:8), and some women [see **note** above] likely contributed to the disruption (1 Timothy 2:12), which is why Paul would call for them to be quiet, peaceful, and subdued.

The Greek term used in verse 12 is *authentēs* frequently translated “to have authority.” The term is found only this one time in the New Testament making the meaning unclear. Other Greek terms were more typically used to indicate having authority, such as *exousia*; therefore, it is likely that *authentēs* has a different connotation than merely “having authority.” In other early Greek sources, this term is associated with violence. According to lexicographers, *authentēs* is synonymous with “to dominate someone.” Again, Paul is prohibiting women from teaching men in a manner that is aggressively domineering.

The Artemis influence in Ephesus explains Paul’s correctives in his writing to Timothy. While some may have believed the cult teaching that Artemis [female deity] appeared first and then her male consort, the true story of creation was just the opposite. It’s likely Paul had this in mind when he writes, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” (1 Timothy 2:13) And Eve was deceived to boot (1 Timothy 2:14) – hardly a basis upon which to claim female superiority and authority. (1 Timothy 2:15)

Given Artemis was deemed to have the power to deliver a first-century woman through the most dangerous of passages, childbirth, women of Ephesus looked to the goddess as their protector during labor; but Paul asserts, “women will be saved (i.e., kept safe) through childbearing – if they continue in faith,” presumably faith in Christ.

Unless Paul is contradicting his own teaching, attitudes and conduct toward women elsewhere recorded in Scripture, one must conclude in his letter to Timothy, he was addressing a particular culturally bound problem specific to the church at Ephesus in which false teaching was resulting in inappropriate behavior by both men and women. Paul was not giving a universal order to women all time everywhere in all churches not to teach and/or to be silent in worship, but instructing women in Ephesus not to assume superiority over men, disrupt worship, aggressively usurp designated authority or promote false cultic teachings.

What about Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians?

Context

It's important to keep in mind Paul's letter to the Corinthian church was one of correction. He writes to instruct believers regarding a number of theological matters as well as appropriate personal and corporate behavior. From chapter 11 through 14 he specifically addresses conduct during worship services. For example, in chapter 11 Paul instructs men to pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered and women to pray or prophesy with their heads covered. But covered with what?

A familiar interpretation of Paul's instruction is that women were to cover their heads with veils during worship or else remain silent. However, there is not only a textual problem with that interpretation (the term for veil or shawl is used only once in v.16 where Paul indicates God has given women long hair "instead of a covering/veil"), but there is an even more serious historical problem. Namely, women didn't wear veils in that culture. In the Greco-Roman world there were no mandatory veiling customs of any kind. Veiling of women simply wasn't practiced. Even for Jews, there were no Old Testament requirements for veiling the face or head of a woman. Historically, you don't see that kind of practice among Jews until late in the 4th century AD. In the Corinthian culture of Paul's day, women did not cover their heads with clothing. Veiling was not practiced. So why would Paul write about a custom that did not exist? The only logical explanation is that Paul was talking about something else – another type of head covering (the term Paul uses literally means "to have flowing down over"). He explains as much with these words, "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?"

Hairstyling customs among the Jews, Greeks and Romans were important both for men and women. Apparently, certain women were wearing their hair in such a way to reveal rebellious attitudes. Within that culture, the way a woman publicly wore her hair communicated something about her. Hair hanging long and loose down from the head was a sign of mourning both for the Greeks, Romans and Jews. Such loose flowing hair for the Jews was also a sign of being unclean or leprous (Leviticus 13:45) or could identify someone as a suspected adulteress (Numbers 5:18).

While in the Old Testament a convicted adulteress was executed, in Paul's day Jews weren't allowed to carry out execution so a convicted adulteress had her hair cut short or shaved off. In Corinthian culture, short hair or a shaved head on a woman was a sign of impurity or public disgrace.

As with his letter to Timothy, Paul is speaking to a specific cultural situation. His instruction is corrective not absolute. Paul's intent, therefore, was not to put women in their place, as it were. What lies behind his instructions was the desire to address the subversive behavior causing disruption in worship by some women intentionally disregarding accepted societal norms. We should be very dubious of attempts to interpret his remarks here in a prescriptive way absolutizing what was never intended for all times and places.

For those who argue that this text does in fact support veiling and/or the silencing of women in worship, the only appropriate and practical application would be for women to veil themselves in worship today or remain quiet. Yet very few churches and/or women follow such practices.

An additional discussion on women is found in the later part of Paul's letter (14:26-35, specifically vv.33b-35). He writes, "Women should remain silent in the church. They are not allowed to speak." However, previously in chapter 11, Paul says, "Every women who prays or prophesies" (v.5) assuming women will pray, will prophesy and should do so as long as they do so appropriately. If it's true, and Paul does assume (chapter 11) women will actively and verbally participate in worship, then why would he say three chapters later they should remain silent in the church? There are 4 possible explanations:

Option 1. These verses were not part of the original text but added later—called an interpolation. There is a possibility of this. These verses are commonly found at the end of the chapter in various manuscripts and seem to have been added by scribes early on (but later than Paul). However, since no early manuscripts have been found that do not entirely omit the verses, the interpolation explanation remains a mere hypothesis.

Option 2. Paul was inconsistent in his application of truth. Very simply, he contradicted himself. From a scholarly point of view, to conclude a man such as Paul could be so grossly inconsistent on such a practical a matter, and who would in a short space of three chapters blatantly contradict himself, is inconceivable. From the point of view of anyone committed to the inspiration of Scripture, such a conclusion would be self-destructive. To suggest Paul was inconsistent in the application of divine truth to practical life is a denial of biblical inspiration. Therefore, this explanation must be rejected on two counts.

Option 3. There is no contradiction because Paul was speaking about informal worship (chapter 11) and formal worship (chapter 14). In other words, in chapter 11 Paul was talking about women participating in informal meetings, such as mid-week studies or weekly ministries, whereas in chapter 14 he has the more formal Sunday worship experience in view. The problem with this explanation is it differentiates between worship services. Such a differentiation is impossible to demonstrate from the New Testament. In fact, to say chapter 11 refers to informal meetings makes no sense since Paul ends the chapter with directives concerning the Lord's Table. Therefore, this possible explanation must also be rejected.

Option 4. Paul was not contradicting his own teaching. His statement is made in the context of instructing believers concerning orderly worship services. The entire chapter assumes men and women (i.e., "the whole church speaks....everyone." 14:23-24) would verbally participate in worship.

A study of the language used by Paul reveals that *some* women were being referred to, not all women; that the "silence" was that of voluntary restraint; and the word "speak" (and there are 30 different Greek terms for "speak") carries the meaning of "talk" or "chatter." In short, Paul wasn't saying women could not speak, pray or prophesy but only that women who were talking and being disruptive during services needed to be silent.

Paul affirms the need for order stating, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

Option 5. It's possible and believed by many that Paul is quoting from a letter (or stating an argument) from the Judaizers. Judaizers wanted traditional oral law enforced in other ways and places as well (for example, they wanted males to be circumcised), and these verses are very similar to the actual Jewish oral law prohibiting women to speak during services. Considering how the law is cited in this passage, which would be highly out of character for Paul, the explanation that those verses are a quote is quite plausible. Also, the verse immediately following is a rebuke: "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (14:36). Is Paul rebuking the Judaizers for trying to silence women, when he already acknowledged that women can speak and prophesy in the church (11:5), and when Paul so often commended the women co-workers, deacons, and even ministers or apostles that he knew and worked with? It seems so.

Consequently, Paul's comments are most viably (culturally, contextually, linguistically) explained by way of option 4 and/or in combination with option 5.

As stated earlier, over several chapters (11-14) Paul speaks to the Corinthians about conduct during worship services. In chapter 14, he calls out three groups of people who were causing disruptions and offers three consecutive injunctions. First, to those randomly speaking out in "tongues" (or languages) without an interpreter present, Paul says they were to sit down and be quiet (14:28). The second group were the prophets, those who were standing up speaking and teaching in the language everyone understood. To this group Paul says if someone is speaking and someone else has something they are inspired to say, "the first speaker should stop" and be quiet. In other words, they were to be orderly, letting one person talk at a time. Again, he explains, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord's people." (14:29-33) The third injunction was directed not to all women but to married women whom Paul instructs not to ask their husbands questions during worship – it was disruptive. He tells them to "ask their own husbands at home." (14:34)

Therefore, when Paul says these women should remain silent and are not allowed to speak, what does he mean? Elsewhere in this letter and in other writings Paul affirms women can speak and will participate. The answer, therefore, rests in the phrase "to remain silent." It's important to realize that context limits and defines what this "silence" means. Always silent? Temporarily silent? Consider the two previous uses of the term in context (v.28, 30). In v.28 when Paul says the person should keep silent in the church, does he mean that person (man or woman) is never allowed to speak out loud? Pray or sing? No. Paul was simply referring to a particular situation where, if there no interpreter was present, the person should keep silent in the church.

In the same sense, Paul says (v.30) when revelation comes to someone the first person speaking should be silent. Does he mean forever silent? No. There is no indication the first person should never speak again. In both cases, the context defines the application of the term. The same is true in vv.33-35; not all women should remain forever silent in all contexts within the church. Women are allowed to speak, pray, teach, prophesy, sing, and lead. However, in the Corinthian church, anyone being disruptive to the worship environment was instructed to be silent.

In summary, these particular New Testament texts are complicated by cultural, linguistic and situational variables not easily recognized by a cursory reading. To suggest Paul's comments in 1

Timothy and 1 Corinthians disqualify women for church leadership all time everywhere goes against Paul's overall respect for and treatment of women in his life and ministry and means he was notably inconsistent in his teaching and application of truth. With such a vast body of contrary evidence, it seems unwise to make these few verses the foundation blocks for a case against godly and gifted women serving and leading in the home, Church, and society.

The Matter of Grace

When it comes to the role of women in leadership, one must pose this question: *Will men, by respecting, pursuing and inviting gifted women into roles of local church participation and leadership including eldership, be held morally culpable by God for some gross sin against divine ecclesiastical decrees?* I do not believe this to be the case. Even if men were in error by welcoming women into all aspects of church leadership, erring on the side of grace seems more inline with the Gospel and teaching of Jesus who called us to "do to others as you would have them to do you." He also said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Following the lead of Jesus, and welcoming women into all aspects of ministry seems the true and right thing to do.

Conclusion

This paper does not represent a comprehensive treatment of the topic of women in leadership. It is, however, intended to demonstrate the strong biblical basis for gender equality among human beings who are all created in the image of God. Gender, in and of itself, neither privileges nor restricts one's ability to be used in advancing the kingdom of God or glorifying our Creator in any dimension of ministry, mission, society or family. Biblical equality means there is no created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy based solely on gender. In Paul's words, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

As redeemed men and women, we are "co-heirs" with Christ and acknowledging such leads us to embrace a shared leadership. Shared leadership means we believe all Christ-followers are equipped with spiritual gifts given by God for the express purpose of building up his Church. These gifts are graciously bestowed irrespective of age, race or gender. It's our conviction these gifts be fully leveraged in ministry and leadership for the sake of the Gospel. In Christ, our goal, as both male and female, is not to compete or to struggle with each other over gender roles. Our goal is to advance the kingdom of God as "co-heirs" of his grace. For me this is so basic a truth, I'm grateful God has opened my eyes to it.

In the opinion of this author, affirming biblical equality and shared leadership means women should serve in the local church in any role or capacity which is inline with their spiritual giftedness and calling, including eldership. Although a limited number of texts appear to restrict the role of women, after careful evaluation these texts addressing leadership, prayer, teaching, worship, eldership, etc., are interpreted most accurately when the historical context (including the original language, culture, and specific situations) is sensibly examined. All biblical principles and directives must take into account their immediate contexts and then, after in-depth study of those contexts, must also be evaluated against the whole witness of Scripture and especially the teaching of Jesus. Only then can biblical principles and directives be developed into application points for our day and time.

I acknowledge much of the background behind differing opinions on the role of women in church leadership comes from a genuine desire to be faithful students of Scripture and to accurately apply its teachings in life and practice. Other reasons, including varied theological traditions and family histories, as well as our personal and emotional lives, may factor into our opinions.

I also recognize these issues are often complex and potentially divisive. May we always remember our greater goal of Christian unity without uniformity. It's important to acknowledge how serious students of God's Word can reach different conclusions on any number of theological and ecclesiastical matters. If that is the case here, my hope is you, the reader, will still respectfully love and serve your church even if, on this issue of biblical equality and shared leadership, you agree to disagree.

May we all submit to one another and continue to love and treat one another with the dignity, respect and grace all men and women deserve.

For Further Reference and Study

Partners in Christ: A Conservative Case for Egalitarianism, John G. Stackhouse.

Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy, Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, General Editors.

How I Changed My Mind About Women In Leadership: Compelling Stories from Prominent Evangelicals