

Does the Bible allow for women to be pastors & elders?

One of the biggest areas for disagreement between faithful Christians is whether or not the Bible allows for women to be pastors and elders. To illustrate: our church's official position has always been that the office of elder is open to men only; however, all three pastors have believed otherwise! Now more than ever, it is imperative to study this question and seek the Lord's will, because younger generations are used to a world of equal rights and access for all, and churches like ours can appear sexist and backwards. If we are to continue to keep the position that only men can be elders, we should be as sure as we can be that this is the correct interpretation of the relevant Biblical texts.

This document is an in-depth summary of my research on the question of gender roles in the church. For more details, please visit our website, www.newlife-glastonbury.org, and listen to any of the sermons between April 15th and May 13th, and read the May 1st, 8th, and 15th posts on our blog (which are also found in the Pulse of NewLife).

This summary is broken into five sections: **Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience, and a section called "But I could be wrong."** The first four categories are known as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" (see Pulse of NewLife or the blog post for May 1st), and are four voices that inform our understanding of an issue. As an evangelical church, we give Scripture primacy, with the other three as secondary informants.

Before we begin, here are the two terms given for how most people come down on this issue:

Egalitarian – All roles in the church are given based on the gifting of the Spirit and are open to both men and women.

Complementarian – Roles in the church are given based on the gifting of the Spirit, but teaching and authority roles are only open to men.

May God grant us wisdom as we seek His will in this matter.

Scripture: What do the relevant passages on gender tell us?

Genesis 1:26-31 Then God said, "**Let us make man in our image**, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.** ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." ²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-- everything that has the breath of life in it-- I give every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-- the sixth day

Both men and women are created in the image of God. You could even argue from the text that God's image is best represented when there is male and female together instead of solely men or solely women (see v. 27).

Genesis 2:18-25 ¹⁸ *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."* ¹⁹ *Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.* ²⁰ *So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.* ²¹ *So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh.* ²² *Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.* ²³ *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* ²⁴ *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* ²⁵ *The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

The first woman, Eve, was created to be an “ezer”, a helper suitable for Adam. The word “ezer” most commonly refers to God coming to the aid or rescue of Israel, so “ezer” can not be a derogatory or subordinate term, or else God would be below man. She is taken out of his side – not his head or foot, but side, perhaps to signify her equality with him. Man was created first – does this mean that men should lead and women follow? Doubtful, as this passage is not about leadership but about loneliness. Also, since in the creation account man, the last creation on the sixth day, is the pinnacle, it could just as easily be argued that woman, being the final creation, is the pinnacle of creation. Creation order is not a strong argument for leadership. Ultimately, this passage does not speak to the role of women in the church, but to the importance of companionship and the complementarity of men and women in life.

Genesis 3:16-19 ¹⁶ *To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."* ¹⁷ *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*

Men and women are created equal by God, but as a result of the fall, there is disharmony between the sexes. Women will want to control and dominate their husbands (the line about “your desire...” is parallel to Genesis 4, where God tells Cain that “sin’s desire is to master you”), and men will rule over women. This is not a prescription (what God wants) but a description (what will happen). The testimony of human history supports this curse, as men have traditionally ruled over women. Ultimately, the Genesis accounts do not answer the question of whether or not women can teach or have authority in the church.

Galatians 3:23-29 *Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. ²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ **There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

In Paul's day, Jewish men prayed a traditional morning prayer, "Blessed are thou King of the Universe who hast not made me a slave, a Gentile, or a woman," thanking God that because they are a Jewish free man, they have access to God that the others don't. Paul explodes that prayer with Galatians 3:28, declaring that ethnicity, social class, and gender aren't legitimate dividers in the church. Some argue that this passage declares men and women as equal before God but doesn't mean they have to be equal when it comes to roles in the church. There is an inconsistency with this view, however: if you told Paul, "Jews and Greeks are equal before God but only Jews can be elders", or "slaves and freemen are equal before God but slaves can not be pastors," Paul would say that you have missed the point of the gospel. Unless there is good reason given elsewhere in the New Testament to restrict the access of women to all roles in the church, this passage would indicate that gender should not be a determining factor in roles in God's new community, called the church. On the contrary, the New Testament teaches that spiritual gifting determines roles in church – those who are gifted teachers should teach, those who are gifted leaders should lead, etc (Ephesians 4:7-14, Romans 12:4-8)

1 Timothy 2:8-15 - *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 will be saved through childbearing-- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

Remember that this letter was written by Paul to Timothy in order to assist him with the church he was pastoring in Ephesus; it was not dropped out of the sky to 21st century America, so an understanding of context is necessary. A plain reading of this passage yields the interpretation that women should not teach or have authority over men, ruling out preaching, teaching Biblical truth, and eldership. Of course, a plain reading also tells men to pray with their hands raised, doesn't allow women to wear wedding bands, tells women to be silent, and that they will be saved through childbearing. So unless you're prepared to tell all women to be quiet in church and to preach that childless women are going to Hell, there must be some cultural context worth understanding.

Firstly, "I do not permit" is best translated "I am not permitting" since it is a present active indicative in Greek. Paul is banning women in Ephesus from teaching, but in the Greek there is no reference to when this ban is to end; he is simply currently not permitting them to teach or have

authority over men. The Greek word for “have authority” never shows up again in the whole Bible; best extra-Biblical guess is that it means to “usurp authority” or “domineer.” Reading the rest of 1 Timothy yields the following: Hymaneus and Alexander are teaching false doctrine (1:3-7, 18-20), causing people to wander away from the faith. Among these false doctrines are that marriage and sex and the eating of certain foods are sinful, a clue that this is an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught that full salvation came through special knowledge (gnosis, see 6:20-21), that Eve was created before Adam and was a mediator and redeemer (Paul contradicts this in 2:5-6). As the first to eat of the tree of knowledge, she possesses the gnosis that could give one salvation. For this reason, this form of Gnosticism preferred the leadership of women over men. This teaching is winning over many of the women in Ephesus, who are going around sharing this false teaching with others (5:13-15).

With this background in mind, here is the best way to understand this passage: *“I want men to use their hands for praying and not fighting. I want women to dress modestly, not flaunting their independence from their husbands, but focusing on good deeds instead. Because these women have been led astray so easily and are leading others astray, I want them to be quiet and learn the truth. I am not permitting the women in your midst to teach or have any authority over the men; they must be silent. Remember the truth – Adam was formed first, not Eve, and Eve was deceived first. In the same way that Eve was deceived and then deceived Adam, these women have been deceived and are trying to deceive you. And contrary to this teaching that things pertaining to marriage are bad, remember that women are saved through the birth of a child – Jesus Christ – and they will also be saved if they continue in faith, love, and propriety.”*

Some point to the use of Adam and Eve to declare that Paul is using them as precedent, that creation order and order of sin means that men should always teach and lead and women should not. However, I believe Paul is using Adam and Eve as example, to illustrate what is going on in Ephesus, and to combat the false teaching that Eve was created first and that by eating the fruit, she was enlightened. Remember that elsewhere (Romans 5:14, 1 Corinthians 15:22), Paul points to Adam as the responsible one, not Eve. In conclusion, I believe this passage limits unlearned, easily deceived people from teaching or having authority in church, not all women for all time.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 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.*** ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵ And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved. ⁶ If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. ⁷ A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. ¹¹ In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵ but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?

For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-- nor do the churches of God.

It is instructive to note again that few churches apply this passage literally today (by making women cover their heads and men to keep their hair short and not cover it). This is an incredibly difficult passage to understand, one reason being that scholars are not sure if Paul is referring to head coverings or hairstyles. What we do know is that Paul affirms that both men and women should be praying and prophesying in church (v. 4-5); his gripe is with the manner in which the women are prophesying in Corinth. Paul's key affirmation in this passage is the importance of a cultural dress code that respects gender differences. Whether it was head covering or hairstyle, it was important in the Corinthian culture to reflect the distinctions between genders, and Paul affirms that. Paul also affirms the interdependence of men and women (v. 8-9), that by creation and by birth you can't have one without the other. Since neither head coverings nor hairstyles communicate today what they did in Corinth, it would be wise not to take this passage literally today by forcing women to wear head coverings or men to keep their hair short. Instead, men and women in the church should be encouraged to dress culturally appropriate and modestly so as to not distract from that which deserves our focus.

As for the headship question, some argue that head=authority (the authority of the woman is man), while some say it means source [the source of the woman is man (Eve from Adam's rib)]. Others argue that it is simply a picture of the interconnectedness between the two parties. We can't be certain which answer is correct, but given the context (esp. v. 8-12), the order of v.3 (if it were authority, you'd expect the order to be woman-man-Christ-God) and the cultural meaning (head in Greek is metaphor for source and supply for all the body's systems), I would suggest that source makes the most sense.

*1 Corinthians 14:29-35 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. **As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ 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.***

Again, few read this passage literally; if they did, women would not be allowed to open their mouths in church, even to sing. When you read all of chapter 14, you find that the Corinthian worship service was full of disorder – many were speaking in tongues at the same time with no one interpreting, and many were prophesying without proper evaluation, leading to some strange teachings (see 15:12-14). The women were apparently asking questions (v.35) about what was being shared, adding more confusion to an already disruptive gathering. Add to this the cultural realities that for a person ignorant of a subject to ask questions in public was considered rude, as was a woman challenging a man in public. Therefore, Paul tells the women to be quiet, not to turn church into a Q&A time, and to ask their husbands at home instead of disgracing themselves in public. The women are allowed to pray and prophesy (11:5) but must be quiet during the evaluation of the prophecies. In conclusion, I do not see the Corinthian passages limiting the right of women

to pray or prophesy or speak in church, unless they do it in a culturally disgraceful manner or in a way that promotes disorder.

*1 Timothy 3:1-12 Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, **the husband of but one wife**, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷ He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. ⁸ **Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect**, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹ They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. ¹¹ In the same way, **their wives are to be women worthy of respect**, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. ¹² A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.*

Does this passage (and the Titus 1 passage) teach that only men can be overseers and deacons? Maybe. The problem with that conclusion is that the Bible always expresses norms from the male vantage point, either because it was simpler or because it was culturally typical for men to fulfill most roles. For example, the tenth commandment is “you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant...” (Exodus 20:17). God does not declare it wrong for a woman to covet her neighbor’s husband, but we would all agree that God’s intention was not to limit this commandment to men only. Furthermore, in the Old Testament, every “job description” is presented in male-only language, even when the office in question did permit women. For example, the office of prophet in Deuteronomy 18:14-22 and the office of judge/elder in Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13 are described in male-only language, even though Miriam and Huldah were prophets and Deborah was a judge. Of particular relevance is Numbers 12:6-8, where God says “When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself *to him* in visions, I speak *to him* in dreams,” even though the Lord is addressing the concerns of the prophetess Miriam (Exodus 15:20), who is mentioned in the immediate context! Therefore, we must be careful not to read too much into the use of male-only language in the Bible.

Tradition: What does Biblical and church history tell us?

In Jesus’ time, women were second class citizens. Jewish men prayed a traditional morning prayer, “Blessed are thou King of the Universe who hast not made me a slave, a Gentile, or a woman”. Holy men tried to avoid even looking at women other than their wives; one special class of Jewish men were called “the bruised and bleeding rabbis” because of their tendency to run into things in order to avoid looking at women. Their place was in the home, and there were not many opportunities for women to learn apart from their husband’s instruction. Even in the temple, they were confined to the court of the women. Even so, there were occasional women in leadership, like Deborah, who as a judge was the top person in all of Israel, and prophetesses like Miriam and Huldah.

Jesus regularly addressed women in public (John 4, John 8), even letting them touch him (Luke 8, Matthew 15), and was friends with women like Mary and Martha, to the embarrassment of his disciples (John 4, Matthew 15). He addressed women in a caring manner (Luke 13:16) but did not hesitate to confront their sin (John 8). He had women as his disciples (but not the inner 12), and in his encounter with Mary and Martha, affirmed Mary's decision to learn at his feet over Martha's insistence that she belonged in the kitchen. Jesus used women as examples in his teaching of true disciples (widow's mite, forgiven prostitute). In summary, it seems that Jesus reestablished the equality between the sexes that was intended at creation.

As a result of his teaching, women began to learn and worship alongside men in the early church. After Jesus' death, women functioned in more leadership roles. At Pentecost, Peter quotes Joel 2:28-29, which says that at the coming of the Spirit, both men and women will prophesy. Priscilla, in Acts 18, teaches a learned man named Apollos; Lydia (Acts 16:13-15) hosts the church at her house as the first convert, Phoebe is a deacon (Romans 16:1-2), and Junia is an apostle (Romans 16:7). However, because of the second class nature of women in this day, as well as the tendency for women not to have the theological education that men did, it would have been culturally rare for women (or slaves for that matter) to be elders in a first century church.

What about church history? I would argue that many evangelical Christians assume the following three things:

- 1) The church has traditionally held that only men can be pastors, teachers, and elders
- 2) The increase in women pastors, elders, and teachers is due more to the influence of secular feminism than it is to Biblical scholarship.
- 3) Therefore, a Biblical church will resist cultural influence and allow only men to be pastors, teachers, and elders

Assumption #1 is correct – for most of its history, the church has believed that God's will is for only men to be in positions of leadership and teaching in the church. As for assumption #2, it is true that the increase in women in church leadership has coincided with the women's movement of the past century, which fought for equal rights (like the right to vote and equal pay) and access to more opportunities for women. However, the problem with drawing conclusion #3 is that the majority of church leaders and theologians throughout history have believed and taught that women are inferior to men. As they read the Biblical texts on the roles of men and women, they found support for what their reason and experience told them, that women were inferior to men, that they were more gullible, more sensual, too emotional, and that their place was largely in the home with the children while the men did the leading and teaching. Therefore, I believe that the reality of misogynistic church teaching could just as easily lead me to argue the following in regards to church history and women in leadership:

- 1) The church has traditionally held that only men can be pastors, teachers, and elders
- 2) The lack of women pastors, elders, and teachers **was due more to the influence of the surrounding culture (which taught the inferiority of women)** than it was to Biblical scholarship
- 3) Therefore, a Biblical church will resist cultural influence and will recognize that leadership & teaching roles in the church should be distributed to those with spiritual gifts of leading and teaching, not by gender

Examples of theologians who taught the inferiority of women include: Tertullian, Ambrose, Irenaeus, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Knox, and John Calvin (read the May 15th Pulse or blog for more details). The fact is that women in church leadership is not the only recent development possibly affected by cultural views; the notion of the equality of women is also a recent development, in society and in the church. Therefore, neither side – complementarian or egalitarian – is really following church tradition, since both have rejected the premise that women are an inferior gender. For this reason, I do not believe we should take as authoritative on the gender issue the views of men who saw women as inferior, just as we should not let a racist inform our opinions on the superiority of the Caucasian race.

One trend in church history that is worth paying attention to is this, as outlined by theologians Stanley Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo in their 1995 book, *Women in the Church*:

- 1) **A renewal movement of the Holy Spirit causes people of all genders, races, and classes to be raised up for ministry and church leadership (a la Pentecost and Galatians 3:28)**
- 2) **The denomination, Bible school, or ministry associated with the movement becomes more institutionalized**
- 3) **As it institutionalizes, the denomination/Bible School/ministry begins to value theological training and cultural respectability more highly and begins to hire predominantly men**

It may be possible that when leadership involves the choice of God by the gifting of the Holy Spirit, women are included in ministry, but as factors such as education and respectability become more important, women are excluded. Examples cited in their book include the early church up until the church councils, the Wesleyan Revival, the Holiness Movement, Baptist churches, and Moody Bible Institute. If this pattern is true, it is worth considering our current attitudes towards cultural respectability vs. the leading of the Spirit.

In conclusion, the church has had an embarrassing and unbiblical history of teaching the inferiority of women. Now that the church no longer believes that this is what the Bible teaches, more churches and theologians are recognizing that equality before the Lord should translate into equality in the church, that roles in the church are given according to the gifting of the Spirit, not on the basis of race, class, or gender.

Reason: Which option seems most rational?

I believe that most rational thinkers in 21st century America would agree that men and women can complement each other well as leaders and teachers, having observed this in many secular professions. In fact, many who believe that women should not function as pastors, teachers, or elders struggle to understand why God would make it this way when there are many women who are gifted leaders and teachers.

Reason also tells me that if our church was in the first century, I would want to err on the side of allowing only men to be elders, since that was more culturally appropriate. But since we are in the 21st century, all things being equal, I would rather err on the side of opening up eldership to women as well as men. The gospel is offensive enough; there is no need to add more offense unless

we are absolutely sure it is God's revealed will. There are many who view the church as sexist (and many rightly so) and reject God accordingly, so we must be careful how we proceed on this issue.

Experience: Which option fits our personal experience?

My experience, and that of many today, is that we have a lot to learn from both godly men and women, and that to silence the voice of half of God's people in church or in leadership is to weaken the church. Some may argue that their experience is that allowing women to be in leadership will cause fewer men to participate in church or to step up to leadership roles. However, if men are insecure about sharing leadership with women or resort to passivity in the face of assertive women, that is hardly grounds for banning women from leadership.

But I could be wrong:

Although I have come down as an egalitarian (roles in the church are open to both men and women), I am only about 51% sure of my conclusion. Why so much doubt? Certainly disagreeing with 99% of church history should give pause, even if you disagree with the premises on which they have drawn their conclusion. And disagreeing with many evangelical churches today should also not be taken lightly.

Why else might I be wrong?

- 1) Jesus chose 12 men as his inner disciples. Perhaps by doing this he meant to set the pattern for all future church leaders. But then again, by choosing 12 Israelites, did he mean to set the pattern that only Israelites should be church leaders? Or is that an unfair argument? The reason this does not convince me is that some have argued that the 12 men were supposed to represent and replace the 12 patriarchs of the tribe of Israel as representing the new people of God (Matthew 19:28, Revelation 21:12-14), not to set the precedent for future church leadership.
- 2) Paul did say "husband of but one wife." Maybe he meant it.
- 3) My historical reconstruction of what was going on in Ephesus could be wrong. Some others draw the same conclusion I did but believe Paul was referencing the Ephesian worship of Artemis and the accompanying emphasis on women's primacy and independence, while others resist the notion of attempting a historical reconstruction.

While this is certainly not an issue that churches should divide over, it is an important issue, especially for any woman who feels called to teach or lead in the community of God. May God grant us wisdom and charity as we seek to follow His will on this issue.