

GENDER IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

On June 14, 2023, after years of debate, the Southern Baptist Convention messengers voted overwhelmingly in favor of upholding the removal of two congregations who were not “in friendly cooperation with the SBC”—Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, California, and Fern Creek Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. (The Baptist Press, June 14, 2023, online) It marked the first time that the SBC had removed congregations over the ordination and leadership of female pastors. Rick Warren, the founder of Saddleback, was disappointed by the decision because he sees the issue as a minor difference, but the official statement of faith of the SBC states, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” (“Baptist Faith and Message 2000,” Article V)

The Conundrum

We must begin by acknowledging the difficult reality that there is no statement in Scripture that *explicitly and absolutely* limits female participation in church leadership. That is not to say that the Scriptures do not speak to gender roles overall or offer some insight into the issue, but there is no single, unequivocal statement such as “women cannot be pastors.” This is therefore an issue of interpretation. Those on both sides of the question tend to emphasize certain Scriptures over others and frame the narrative to their own benefit. The polarization of the issue is easy to understand. The purpose of this document is not to cater to any one side or movement, but rather to develop a biblical theology of the matter at hand. The conundrum should be stated plainly: *are women able to serve as pastors/elders in the local church?*

Gender Roles in the Created Order

“For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” (1 Tim 2:13–14)

In discussing gender roles in the church with his acolyte Timothy, the apostle Paul referred back to the creation of human beings in Genesis as the basis for his position. Paul’s arguments and the way they are sometimes misinterpreted will be addressed below, but any discussion of gender roles should follow his example and begin with creation.

Genesis 1:26–30

When reporting the creation of man (Heb. *’adam*), both genders are included, and plural pronouns are used throughout the passage. The genders are distinguished as male (Heb. *zeqar*) and female (Heb. *nakebah*), terms which identify the sexual organs quite explicitly in the Hebrew. The distinctions are physical, but both genders are part of a single identity as man, and as such are equally recipients of the blessings and commands. Thus, it is not the

male who is told to “have dominion” over all of creation, but rather mankind as a whole, including both genders, who are given dominion.

This unity is reiterated in Genesis 5:1–2. The passage is a reiteration of the Genesis 1 account, applying *’adam* to both male and female. There is a certain poetry to the form, which blends singular and plural nouns and pronouns to give us a coherent vision.

Genesis 2:15–25

The Genesis 2 account of creation is expanded significantly over the first. Adam (Heb. *’adam*)¹ is created alone but God makes a helper (Heb. *’ezer*). This role as a helper is not a subordinate role, but rather a necessary one. It is placed in opposition to the concept of being alone among creation. There was no one *like* the man among creation. Only another human could truly be a companion for him.

In this account, woman is not formed (Heb. *yšr*) from the dust of the earth (Heb. *’apar mīn-ha’adam*) as man was but rather is *crafted* (Heb. *bnh*) from man’s rib (Heb. *šel’a*). In this sense, the woman shares a genetic continuity with man rather than being a distinct creation. This is why the man sings about their unity and declares that she was *taken* out of him (Heb. *lkh*, Gen 2:23).

Again, the relationship between the man and woman is shown to be equal but distinct. Just as the Genesis 1 narrative presents *physical distinction*, here there is a *processional distinction*. Man proceeded from the dust of the earth, and woman proceeded from the man’s rib. There is no inequality in this presentation, only a recognition of distinct attributes. The two share an essential unity.

Genesis 3:1–21

The Fall narrative in Genesis 3 offers an etiological explanation for the separation of roles between man and woman in the household. The woman (Heb. *’iśhah*) is cursed with the multiplying (Heb. *rbh*, literally “make greater”) of the pain of childbearing. There is no explicit reason given for *why* this is her punishment. The man on the other hand, is punished because he “listened to the voice of your wife” (Gen 3:17). In other words, because he preferred her instruction to that of God, he was cursed to work the ground (Heb. *’adamah*) which will be hostile to him until he returns to it.

In the narrative, it is *only after the curse* that Adam names his wife Eve (Heb. *ḥabbah*), which means something like “lifegiver.” Consider the way this elevates the role of the woman,

¹ Although modern translations render the Hebrew *’adam* as a proper noun in seven places, there is nothing in the text to indicate this distinction.

particularly as mother. Whereas the man is sentenced to work until he dies just to feed his family, the woman's curse is to continue to bring forth new life.

It is of note that at the conclusion of this narrative, the word *'adam* is used collectively for both genders. Just as they were created together, they are cursed together. The role division is again still a physical one, rather than a hierarchical one. Man's sin was not just listening to a woman, but rather listening to a woman *rather than* listening to God. It was the act of disobedience that brought the curse. This is an important note when considering Paul's interpretation of the text.

Conclusions from Genesis

Human beings were created in a partnership of equality, and they were cursed in the same equality. Neither escaped the consequences of sin, and it is worth noting that in this passage, neither is blamed more than the other. If anything, the woman is granted a blessing within the curse.

Female Leadership in the Hebrew Scriptures

The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory,
for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. (Judg 4:9)

There is not a great deal of information on female leadership in the Hebrew Scriptures. Certain roles, such as the high priesthood, were reserved for "the sons of Aaron" (Lev 21:1; Num 3:3); but there was no explicit prohibition on female leadership in most capacities. One could argue that the prohibition against crossdressing (Deut 22:5) is meant to address a female usurping a male role, but such a connection is tenuous.

Several women played prominent roles in Israel's history. In fact, their contributions were vital to the very existence of the nation. Deborah the prophetess composed one of the oldest sections of the Hebrew Scriptures (Judges 5) and served as the only female judge (Heb. *šepat*, Judg 4:4–5). In the Hebrew Scriptures, such judgment (Heb. *mišpat*) meant the administration of God's commandments and precepts from both the revealed Torah and application of human discernment (Num 35:29). As such, it is hard to deny that Deborah was in a position of some authority among the tribes. The most famous female leader by far is probably Esther, who rose to be queen of Persia and saved the Jews from a pogrom.

On the other hand, there were some female leaders whose actions had disastrous consequences for themselves or for others. Miriam, Moses's sister, was a crucial part of Israel's leadership during the Exodus (Exod 15:20) and yet she was struck down with leprosy for claiming equal status with her brother (Num 12:1–16). Jezebel brought Ba'al worship to Israel (1 Kgs 16:31), manipulated her husband and the kingdom (1 Kgs 21:1–16), and after Ahab's death, she ruled through her sons until she was finally killed by Jehu (2 Kgs 9:30–37). Her daughter (or granddaughter) Athaliah usurped the throne of Judah (2 Kgs 11:1–4; 2 Chr 22:10–12).

No discussion of female leadership in the Hebrew Scriptures is complete without considering Proverbs 31, an oracle (Heb. *mas-s'a*) from the mother of Lemuel. This beautifully poetic text describes “an excellent wife” (Heb. *'ešet- hayil*) in terms of intellectual and practical ability. What is significant is that the excellence of this woman is in her alignment with the created order of the family. Her efforts are in harmony with her husband, her children, and her community.

Before we jump to judgment, we should be reminded that female leaders were no different than the male leaders of Israel. There were good and bad male leaders as well. One observable distinction is that in cases such as Deborah’s, women were thrust into leadership during a crisis when men did not accept their role. Deborah called Barak to lead, but he refused. In the case of Miriam and Jezebel, it is not hard to see that their intentions in the reported incidents were out of alignment with God’s will for the people. We cannot help but be reminded of the situation with the curse on Adam. His sin was not just obeying his wife, but listening to his wife when she contradicted the command of God.

The Non-Pauline Depiction of Women in the New Testament

Matthew and Mark

The Synoptic gospels describe a group of women who went to Jerusalem with Jesus (Matt 27:55; Mark 15:41; Luke 23:49). This group included Mary Magdalene and Salome, but it is unclear how many there were. Although no females are named among the apostles, these women appear to have been part of the group of Galilean disciples that served as the core of the church. (This point is expanded in Luke, see below.)

Second Temple Judaism (STJ) was not monolithic on doctrine and practices. There were clear distinctions between the interpretations of those in the Levant (Judea, Galilee, Samaria) and the rest of the Greco-Roman world. It is hardly surprising that given the Judean and Galilean context of the gospel narratives, no women are depicted in leadership roles. In these regions, Judaism appears to have been fairly restrictive in terms of women’s public participation in synagogue worship. There were, however, some who argued for more of an egalitarian approach, and Jesus’s teachings reflect an affinity for the latter.²

In terms of the marriage relationship, Jesus appears to give the wife a stronger presence than was expected by his audience. His discussion of divorce (Matt 5:31–32, 19:1–12)

² We should not judge *all of Judaism* on the behavior of those in this region, however. STJ was extremely diverse in most respects, and that included attitudes toward women. Consider Amy-Jill Levine, “Second Temple Judaism, Jesus, and Women Yeast of Eden,” *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994): 8–33. Although she writes sympathetically with the historical Jesus movement, the evidence she offers is worthwhile. The evidence is scant for the first century AD.

emphasizes underlying sin in the husband rather than the inadequacy or failure of the wife, which was common in STJ arguments.

Although the Synoptics clearly treat women with greater equality than was common in the STJ Judean context, there are no female leaders or apostles given. This is hardly surprising given the context and the intent of these two gospels, which is the presentation of Jesus rather than the organization of the church community.

Johannine Literature

Overall, the apostle John presents a very positive depiction of women, although he does not deal with their leadership roles in the church. Instead, he offers what might be seen as female paragons. The women who appear in his gospel are uniformly examples of the Christian journey of faith and confidence in Christ, even amid doubt or questions. When his vision turns from the practical to the mystical in the Revelation, his perspective remains optimistic.

John's Gospel

The fourth gospel has three women who Jesus addresses directly as “woman” (Gk. *gynē*). He uses this to address his mother (John 2:4, 19:26), the Samaritan woman (John 4:21), and Mary Magdalene after his resurrection (John 20:13, 15). In these moments, Jesus is elevating these women and offering them respect in the way he addresses them.

John's Epistles

In his first epistle, John seems to address himself directly to the men of the church. He refers to members of the church as “brother” (Gk. *adelphos*) and writes to the church as “fathers” (Gk. *patēres*) and “young men” (Gk. *neaniskoi*) as well as “children” (Gk. *teknia*, which is always neuter). The second letter, however, is addressed to “the elect lady” (Gk. *eklektē kyria*, 2 John 1, 5), employing the feminine equivalent of “lord” (Gk. *kyrie*). He also speaks of the children of “your elect sister” (Gk. *tēs adelfēs sou tēs eklektēs*, 2 John 13). There is a division of opinion on who this “elect lady” was, whether it was a specific female leader in the church or if it is meant to describe the church itself. It is meant to be an honorific, and clues to its implicit meaning may possibly be found in John's language in the Revelation.

The Revelation

The Revelation employ beautiful female imagery, including the portrayal of “a woman clothed with the sun” (Rev 12:1) who seems to represent Israel as the progenitor of Christ. (The image has often been adapted in some Christian traditions to represent Mary as the “God-bearer” (Gk. *theotokos*) but given the focus that the Revelation has on the Jewish people, interpreting it to mean Israel makes more sense.) Equally stunning in detail is the other female portrait in the text, “the great whore Babylon” (Rev 17:1–6). In concert with the description of a corrupting female figure in the churches who John refers to as Jezebel (Rev 2:20), this latter image seems to be analogous to Rome as an agent or representation of the

world system that conflicts with the covenants of God. These covenants are manifest in Israel and in the Church.

Also in the Revelation, John speaks of “the bride” (21:9, 22:17) who is prepared for “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:6–10). The bride here is obviously meant to be the church, and it may clarify John’s use of the terms “elect lady” and “dear lady” in 2 John, since one’s bride was your chosen or “elect” lady. One could argue that this reflects the feminine gender of the word *ekklēsia*, but John was not necessarily married to grammatical gender in his statements. For example, the word for “spirit” (Gk. *pneuma*) is neuter, but John consistently refers to the spirit with masculine pronouns.

Petrine Epistles

Only 1 Peter addresses gender in the church, which like John, Peter refers to in the feminine (1 Pet 5:13). There is only one place where Peter addresses church leadership, and there he reminds leaders to lead in a way that is “not domineering over those in your charge” (1 Pet 5:3). His admonition about false teachers serves as a mirror image of this argument (2 Pet 2–3). In other words, he argues that there is an order to the church which supersedes our own abilities and desires.

Peter does address the submission relationship of marriage (1 Pet 3:1–7). While arguing for equality of inheritance between men and women (1 Pet 3:7), he disapproves of external accentuation of the feminine, in alignment with Paul’s teaching on the same subject (1 Tim 2:9–15, treated below). Most significantly though, Peter is not afraid to agree that submission is difficult, and possibly even a bit frightening (1 Pet 3:6). When he describes the wife as the “weaker vessel,” Peter is not setting up a hierarchy but rather agreeing with the created order of different functions for the two genders. Neither is innately superior, but they are designed differently within the equality of humanity.

We must also couch Peter’s discussion of submission and vessels within the larger context of his epistle. The protection of the family is a vital function of the church because it is threatened by external forces (1 Pet 4:1–6). The strengthening of the marriage relationship through an understanding *and* application of the created order was of great importance for the internal strength in diversity required for the work of the gospel. This work is something all the church is called to, not just one gender.

Other General Epistles

The three remaining non-Pauline works (Hebrew, James, Jude) do not address gender roles except tangentially. Hebrews is a sermon arguing for the superiority of Christ, containing little in the way of everyday instruction. Three women are mentioned as being faithful: Sarah (Heb 11:11), Rahab (Heb 11:32), and “women who received back their dead by resurrection,” which could include Mary and Martha in the gospels (Heb 11:35). James deals with the treatment of widows and orphans, which seems to have been a component of the early church ministry

(James 1:26–27; cf. Acts 6:1–7, 1 Tim 5:3–16). Jude makes no reference to women in the congregation.

Pauline View of Women

The churches of Asia send you greetings.
Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house,
send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (1 Cor 16:19)

The Pauline corpus comprises the bulk of the New Testament materials and includes the narrative texts of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts (hereafter Luke-Acts) as well as the didactic materials in the Pauline Epistles. The inclusion of Luke-Acts here is not typical of scholarly opinion, which tends to see the “narrative Paul” of Luke-Acts as distinct from the “theological Paul” of the epistles. Such a false division does us no service, as it treats Paul as a sort of schizophrenic literary entity when he was a real person. It is true that Luke’s depiction is external while the epistles are Paul’s own works, and so there may be some variation in expression, but to understand Paul generally and to consider the matter at hand specifically, we must see *all of Paul*. We must avoid the temptation to treat the statements made in the epistles as separate from the practical aspects of Paul’s ministry that are manifest in the Luke-Acts narrative.

Luke-Acts

Luke’s gospel goes out of the way not only to mention the women involved in the gospel narrative but also to name them. His prolegomenon has the only mention of Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s mother, and Mary (Luke 1); and only Luke records any significant amount of Mary’s speech (Luke 1:46–55). Luke names Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus (Luke 10:38–42), who also appear in John’s gospel, which was written after Luke’s.

There is also a significant expansion of the list of women who traveled with Jesus (Luke 8:1–3). Luke adds the detail that these women were paying the expenses for Jesus’s itinerant ministry, a fact that is not even hinted at in the other gospels, and he points out that they were following Jesus before the final journey to Jerusalem. These women appear to also have been present at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The grammar in Luke 8 indicates that this group of women were in some way associated with the twelve apostles.

Women figure very prominently in the Book of Acts. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is present with the apostles (Acts 1:14). Sapphira is punished with her husband Ananias for defrauding the Lord (Acts 5:1–11). The church was apparently meeting in the home of Mary, the mother of Mark (Acts 12:12–18). Timothy’s mother Eunice is mentioned but not named (Acts 16:1; cf. 2 Tim 1:5). The church at Philippi began with women, led, and hosted by Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16:13–15; cf. Phil 4:2–3). At Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Prisca, with whom he developed a lifelong partnership (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). These two always appear together, indicating their shared ministry in some of the key cities of the Greco-Roman world, including Corinth, Ephesus, and their home in Rome.

It is hard to avoid, however, that no women were selected to aid in the care of the Greek-speaking widows (Acts 6:1–7). That is not to say that Luke does not appreciate the service of these women. The same verb (Gk. *diakoneō*, “serve” or, in Luke “provide”) that appears in Acts 6 also appears in the description of the women who accompanied Jesus in Luke 8. There is also no mention of women at the Jerusalem council that discussed preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15:1–35) or among the leaders involved in the Pauline missions. Aside from Prisca and Lydia, no female companions of Paul are named, and he does not appear to have commissioned any women into church leadership.

The Pauline Epistles

Most of the criticism of biblical gender roles is focused on Paul’s statements concerning women in Christian worship. These will be addressed here, but again they must be seen in the greater context of Paul’s view of the created order and women’s place within it. Although the chronological order of Paul’s letters can only be guessed at, here I have attempted to arrange Paul’s arguments in something approximating a chronology.³ The reason is simple. If Paul’s views evolved over time from what appear in Luke-Acts to something else, we should be able to observe evidence of that shift.

The Epistle to the Galatians (AD 48–49)

As in many of Paul’s letters, he addresses his recipients as “brothers” (Gal 1:11; Gk. *adelphoi*). The collective use of this term seems apparent by his statement that in Christ there is “neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” He then applies the masculine title “heirs” (Gk. *klēronomos*) to all, which countermanded both Greek and Roman inheritance law (Gal 3:28–29). In this, Paul seems to be making the point that faith defies *culturally defined gender roles*. It does not, however, negate created order. Male and female still exist and are distinct.

Since the subject of the letter seems to be circumcision as a sign of faith, it is hardly surprising that Galatians is largely masculine in its tone. After all, women were given no equivalent physical sign of their participation in the covenant. Circumcision is really standing in for a much larger idea, the relationship to the Law when one is a Gentile rather than a Jew (Gal 6:15).

Galatians also featured one of Paul’s more curious metaphors where he describes his own suffering in ministry to the Galatian believers in terms of labor and childbirth (Gal 4:19–20). Paul is not misappropriating this uniquely female suffering, but rather is using the concept as an idiom to help his audience’s understanding of the seriousness of the situation. This was not

³ I have followed the dates set forth in D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Although the chronology is debated widely, Carson and Moo offer a reasonable argument for their dates, and they seem reasonable.

an uncommon way of describing particular difficulty or suffering for people of both genders in the Greek world.⁴

The Epistles to the Thessalonians (AD 50–51)

The recipients of the letter are repeatedly called “brothers” (1 Thess 1:4, 2:1, 4:13, 5:26; 2 Thess 1:3, 2:1, 3:13; Gk. *adelphoi*). This collective term does not necessarily exclude women from the audience and given the broad instructions of the letters, it seems unlikely that Paul’s intention was to exclude them. Paul’s ministry in the city was focused on the synagogue (Acts 17:1) which, according to Jewish tradition, would have been led by men. It is likely that the Thessalonian church, which had little time under Paul’s teaching before being persecuted, would have organized along synagogue lines. These men would have been required to read the letters aloud to the congregation.⁵

The Epistles to the Corinthians (AD 55–56)

Paul devoted quite some time to his ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:18), which included the development of his relationship with Aquila and Prisca. He does not address any female leaders in the church in Corinth, but we know there was at least one, Phoebe, who is named in Romans 16.

Apparently, Peter (Cephas) and other apostles traveled with their wives. Paul describes them with the curious Greek phrase “sister as wife” (Gk. *adelfēn gynaika*) by which he means a wife who is a sister in the faith (1 Cor 9:5). Although single (probably a widower), Paul understood that those in a marriage were *in ministry together*. Like Aquila and Prisca, these apostles’ wives appear to have ministered alongside their husbands.

Throughout the epistle, Paul addresses sexual sin and marriage. He addresses the sexual side of marriage (1 Cor 7:1–16), a matter beyond the scope of this study; but of note is Paul’s description of *mutual consent* in the sexual relationship (1 Cor 7:4–5). Paul affirms the equality of the marriage relationship in the way that directs both members of that covenant relationship in their attitude toward one another. While he appears to be addressing the question of whether a woman can pursue divorce, Paul offers a principle that marriage is a binding (Gk. *deō*) relationship for both parties and should not be discarded (1 Cor 7:39).

⁴ For a recent inventory of original sources, see the notes in Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 330–32.

⁵ While there is no epigraphic evidence of female leaders in the synagogues of Macedonia and Thrace in the first century AD, there are a small number from the second century. This may indicate that in these regions or at least in some of the cities, female leadership was permitted. Given how uncommon the inscriptions are, relative to inscriptions naming male leaders, female leaders represent an extraordinary minority. Few resources exist on the subject, but see Bernard J. Broton, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1982, repr. 2020).

We must understand his further discussion on marriage and gender roles in light of this passage. Of particular concern are two passages—1 Corinthians 11:1–16 and 14:26–40—where Paul appears to be teaching a gendered hierarchy within the church. The passages on gender *should not be read in isolation*. The overall theme of this lengthy passage is the orderliness and proper perspective on Christian worship. The Corinthian church was a chaotic mess, with the gender roles as messed up as their perspective on speaking in tongues, turning communion into an exclusive party, and the role of every member in the ministry of the church.

In short, Paul was attempting to return order to the Corinthian worship gatherings (1 Cor 14:33, 40). There are three commands for silence: tongues without an interpreter (1 Cor 14:28, allowing others to speak (1 Cor 14:30), and women keeping silent (1 Cor 14:33). Rather than singling out the women and making the issue their gender, we can see that the issue was not so much their speech but their refusal to be in submission, to their husbands and to Christ (1 Cor 11:3). The issue was not whether they wore doilies on their heads, but whether they *shaved* their heads (1 Cor 11:6) and thereby declared themselves independent of their husbands and the created order. Any understanding of these controversial passages must take into consideration the immediate context as well as strive for harmony with Paul's positive view of women in almost every instance elsewhere.

The most reasonable reading of these passages is that they address a situation specific to the Corinthian church, at least at that time. There was far more going on than women speaking. There was chaos. People were breaking up marriages, turning communion into exclusive parties, disrupting worship with random outbursts of so-called prophecies and tongues. In short, the church was in disarray, and people were justifying their behavior as being righteous and good. Paul addresses the chaos by calling for order and silence, evoking the unity of the church as a single body and community as a call for consideration and contemplation. The passage is not a universal statement concerning the hierarchy of the genders but rather an elevation of the created order, an exaltation of balance in the family as a key element of the church's conduct.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians *does not* address the gender question again. Instead, he focuses on divine reconciliation as governing our behavior (2 Cor 5:11–6:1). In fact, he does not address the worship gatherings or marriage again, indicating perhaps that the church corrected their over-exuberance in these areas and found moderation. He addresses himself to other issues in the church, specific matters that have less to do with the unity of the church.

The Epistle to the Romans (AD 57)

Within the text of the epistle, Paul does not make much mention of female leadership. He does emphasize the gender distinction as part of the created order (Rom 1:26–27). He does reference the man's sin in Genesis 3, offering that "another man," meaning Christ, reversed the entrance of sin (Rom 5:12–19). He repeatedly uses the metaphor of sonship for salvation in Christ, but this is a cultural and legal identification (Rom 8:14). That is not to say he excludes

women from the conversation. In fact, he cites Hosea 2:23 which uses Hosea's wayward wife Gomer as a description of divine restoration.

In comparison to his other epistles, Romans overflows with named female leaders. The most significant is Phoebe, who he singles out as "as servant of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom 16:1).⁶ This is the only place where the word usually translated as "deacon" appears in the feminine (Gk. *diakonon*). Paul also describes her as a "patron" (Gk. *prostatis*), which indicates she was probably wealthy and like Lydia may have been a merchant. She appears to have been a member of the party who carried the epistle to Rome and is the only named member of that group.

In his final greetings, he lists the following women: Prisca (who he names before her husband Aquila), Mary, Junia (presumably with her husband Andronicus), Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus's mother, Julia, and Nereus's sister (Rom 16:3–16). This is quite a cast of women, most of whom are unknown to us, but at least Junia was known to the apostles (Rom 16:7). Since none of the other apostles are recorded as traveling to Rome, it is possible that Andronicus and Junia were even present at Pentecost as some of the "visitors from Rome" (Acts 2:9–10). It is reasonable to conclude that these women were heavily involved in the work of the church in Rome. The word Paul uses for "work" (Gk. *kopiaō*) can designate work as a "regular" member of the community (1 Cor 16:16) or as an appointed leader (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17). Certainly, the Roman church relied heavily upon these women's work among them. Unfortunately, Paul does not elaborate on what this work entailed.

The Epistle to the Philippians (AD 61–62)

In one of the few places where Paul calls people out by name, Paul addresses a dispute between two prominent women in the Philippian church (Phil 4:2–3). These women had been engaged in the work of the church, so their division was harming the church. This church was built on a foundation of believing women, chief of whom was Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16:13–15), so it seems likely that there were a number of influential women. Still, Paul addresses himself to "my brothers" (Phil 4:1) and one cannot help but notice the absence of any other female names in the letter.

The Epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon (AD 61–62)

The epistles to Ephesus and Colossae are similar in the way that they address their audiences, and it is possible that they were sent from Paul's imprisonment to the two cities by the same couriers. Philemon is a short personal letter which was likely appended to the epistle to Colossae since Philemon was one of the leaders in the church there. It is safe to see Ephesians as the primary letter since Ephesus was Paul's center of operation in Asia and Greece (Acts 19:10) and it seems to have become the hub for Christian activity in the region for most of the first century. After Paul, Timothy and John also operated from the city.

⁶ Cenchreae was a harbor within the greater Corinthian metropolis.

Ephesians employs a great deal of adoption and sonship language, similar to that in Romans but more developed. Paul's overall message is a call to unity in the church because this is reflective of the nature of Christ (Eph 4:1–6). In this context, Paul addresses the relationship between wives and husbands, urging the married couples to mirror the relationship of Christ to the church. "The church submits to Christ...Christ loves the church" (Eph 5:24–25) so wives should submit to their husbands and husbands love their wives. Paul emphasizes that this is not some abstract concept but rather a reflection of the created order (Eph 5:31, citing Gen 2:23). Paul evokes the idea of headship, just as he did in 1 Corinthians 11.

The Pastoral Epistles (AD 65–67)

Paul's primary concern in the pastoral epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus) is protecting the second generation of the church from false teachers (1 Tim 1:5–6). Like Peter, he opposed accentuation of the feminine attributes through ornamentation (1 Tim 2:9). Like in 1 Corinthians, these outward signs marked an internal misalignment with the created order.

The most difficult passage is 1 Tim 2:11–14, which appears to be a prohibition against women teaching in the church based on the created order. First, it is worth noting that the context indicates that men were being disruptive as well by arguing during worship (1 Tim 2:8). Therefore, we should consider whether the command for a woman to "learn quietly with all submissiveness" is not a parallel to this admonition to the men. Paul seeks to silence *disruptive behavior*. It is likely that he is addressing women who either did not know enough about the Scriptures to engage properly or they believed they did not need to engage and instead were chatting about something else.

Paul further places a restriction on women. "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (1 Tim 2:12). Unfortunately, many English translations render this text without nuance, making it sound like *any woman* is prohibited from teaching *any man*. In 1-2 Timothy, however, Paul often uses the anarthrous form of the word for "man" (Gk. *anēr*) to indicate husband.⁷ He does so just a couple verses later (1 Tim 3:1). In other words, Paul is saying a wife should not exercise authority over her husband, not that any woman should never be in authority over any man. Beyond this, it seems clear that Paul is instructing Timothy concerning the *leaders* of the church and not just men and women in general. In other words, he is addressing concerns with the married couples who are leaders, and he emphasizes the created order (1 Tim 2:13).

With all of that said, it seems that Paul reserved the role of the overseer (Gk. *episkopos*) to male leaders. Among the qualifications of both the overseer and the deacon (Gk. *diakonos*) is the phrase "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3: 2, 12, Gk. *mias gynakios andra*). While *diakonos*

⁷ Anarthrous is a linguistic term meaning it lacks the definite article but has definite function. It is difficult to find an analogy in English. Think of how some people in pop culture are known by a single name: Oprah, Prince, Adele. We do not need to use the definite article ("the Oprah," etc.) for you to know it describes a single person.

appears in the feminine elsewhere in the Pauline corpus (Rom 16:1), *overseer* does not. The role of the overseer corresponds to the elder (Gk. *presbyteros*) in Titus 1:5–9, where the phrase is repeated. This term is also not used in the feminine when addressing church offices. It is used to refer to older women (1 Tim 5:1; Titus 2:3), but there is a clear distinction between age and office.

Interpreting Paul's View

Overall, Paul's emphasis on gender is that they are equal before God but created with distinctions that are beneficial to both the family and the church. He applauds the work of many women as partners in the work of the gospel.

His repeated emphasis of Aquila and Prisca calls us to consider them as a paragon or template which Paul clearly (1) approved of and (2) wished others to emulate. The two of them apparently led a church in their home in Rome (Rom 16:5), as did Philemon and Apphia in Colossae (Philm 1). These two couples were certainly in the church leadership, but Paul is quick to point out that they served together. Paul's emphasis on the proper structure of the marriage partnership, as two equals who submit to and love one another, argues that Paul is not establishing a hierarchical view of the genders but a unified view in which the distinctiveness of the genders makes the marriage union stronger.

If we consider the testimony of Paul's writings as a whole, rather than drilling down on individual passages, we come away with the impression that when it comes to gender roles in the church, Paul desired for men and women *to inhabit the created order* rather than choose our own order. He rejects the notion that a woman can simply ignore the created order of her relationship with her husband and act independently as an agent of God. It is not that men are meant to have authority by virtue of their gender. Rather, there is a created order in the Scriptures, and part of that order is the *unity* of the married couple.

It is not possible to argue for enough caution on the matter of Paul's calls for silence. It is easy to approach these texts with a myopic, culturally tinged bias and see them as just chauvinistic calls for women to be silent in all matters. First, these seem to be statements concerning specific situations in the churches of Corinth and Ephesus that were disruptive and causing disunity. Second, they hinge not on the gender of the participants as much as on the inherent imbalance of their actions in those situations. Not to harp on this again, but it is the violation of the created partnership of man and woman that is at issue.

Conclusions

This essay began with the statement that there is no *absolute* statement in Scripture concerning the limits of female participation in church leadership. Having surveyed the text, this statement is simply reinforced. Where Scripture clearly demonstrates the equality of women in the marriage partnership and before the gospel, we are wise to abide by this equality as much as Scripture allows.

Time and time again, this essay has used the term *created order* because we must always be conscious of the way in which God intended creation to operate. Sin corrupts the order, motivates us to prioritize our own needs and wants above the intended structure. This is doubly true when we compare our own abilities and gifts to others. Submission to God as Savior also means submission to him as Creator, and it requires an act of the will to accept his wisdom in both the way he has created us and the way he reveals that creation to us.

With that said, Paul's statement on leadership in 1 Timothy must give us pause before ordaining women to the role of bishop/elder. Since the woman *must* be a married person and she is called not to exercise authority over her husband, this presents us with a situation in which ordaining a woman to the role of bishop/elder would violate the created order and the order of the church. On the other hand, a man who meets all the qualifications of the bishop/elder but is in a state of disunity with his wife is equally disqualified since he is not demonstrating the created order or the love of Christ.

This truly is the crux of women being ordained into the ministry that requires balancing our personal opinions against the testimony of Scripture. Many have altered their hermeneutics to bypass the roadblocks and argue that the principles of 1 Timothy 3 can be applied regardless of gender. The issue is that this would be essentially the same sin Adam committed when he listened to his wife over the instruction of God. It would be nice to be able to simply remove the roadblock and open the door to female ordination, but such a hermeneutic raises too many questions. It is better to err on the side of caution and reserve the eldership and the primary teaching role of the church to men. Keep in mind, however, that even this role is a partnership within the created order, as evidenced by Scripture.

It is unpopular in our modern world of individual achievement to speak of marriage as anything more than an arrangement between two completely independent individuals. The biblical theology of gender, however, argues that marriage is fundamental. It is reflective of the created order, and it has been sanctified by Christ. The church rises and falls on the healthy, balance and respect of these unions in which God makes of a man and a woman *one flesh*. A man and a woman's capacity to serve in leadership is an extension of this relationship.

When in biblical partnership with her husband, a woman may act in virtually every capacity in the church. This does not mean they have to serve together, hip-to-hip in every facet of work. Women and men can serve in separate ministries, toward the same goal, and have the same harmony of the created order. The church would be greatly impoverished without the varied expression of the Holy Spirit's gifts through female leaders and ministers, sometimes right alongside their husbands and sometimes together at a distance.

Allow me one final, personal note. Writing a document like this is never easy. Years ago, a pastor friend took a sabbatical to explore the question of female ordination. When he told me he was doing this, I told him I could save him the time. "You're going to come out in favor of it," I said to him. "How can you say that?" he replied. "Simple," I answered. "You've already

decided you want it to be true, so you will see it to be true.” Six weeks later, he told me that he had come out in favor of it. The truth is that sometimes we just find what we want to find.

Perhaps my hermeneutics are flawed. We must always allow for the possibility that we are missing something. As I often quip, “One third of what I say is wrong. I just don’t know what third yet.” The joy of developing biblical theology is that we get to revisit the same passages, the same ideas and consider them in new ways. Two decades ago, I would have written this essay in a very different way. It most likely would have been much longer and cited many more secondary sources and systematic theologies, but it would probably have had less substance. The testimony of Scripture is all that matters, and it is my hope that this exploration of the Scriptures has helped you as you consider this issue.

It is my prayer that as you have read this essay, my desire to stay as true as possible to the biblical text and context has come across. In a document like this, I strive to set aside my own desires and will and let the Scriptures speak, to see how they fit together to make a coherent picture. The truth of the Scriptures is not always convenient—for any of us—but we, as Christians, are called to study them, know them, and then accept them for His glory.