**Sexual Distinction in the Church Resource Paper**

Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should be considered an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues.

Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary recognizing that the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel.

***What drives this particular paper?*** *Because of the pressures from contemporary culture, a biblical understanding of sexual distinctions in the church is increasingly hard to receive by today's college students. We also find that many students come from a variety of church backgrounds within the spectrum of egalitarian and complementarian traditions. How we teach the biblical perspective on this topic matters, and how we answer questions around this topic matters. God has designed something beautiful through the collective work of men and women. Both are essential and indispensable to the mission of humanity and the church.*

Egalitarian and Complementarian Perspectives

The scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive survey of the egalitarian and complementarian perspectives. It is important to note that within each perspective exists a sliding scale of thought and practice. The far side of the egalitarian scale moves toward Christian feminism which seeks to remove any distinctions of gender within Christian faith. The far end of the complementarian scale moves toward patriarchy which claims all women must be submissive to all men. While there is great nuance within each perspective, most Christians lack an accurate understanding of the different points of view which leads to a lot of accusations and finger-pointing.

There are, of course, extremes that will not fall within the realm of Christian orthodoxy (feminism, patriarchy). But, with great charity, we can seek to understand the biblical perspective being applied by each camp and move forward in the mission of the church.

The Egalitarian Hermeneutic

Genesis 1:26-28, since God has given man and woman equally the functional role of “image bearer,” any distinction in gender roles must be a result of the Fall.

Joel 2:28-29, is interpreted as foreshadowing the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all types of believers which empowers and authorizes anyone to preach. Images of this are seen throughout the Old Testament through the leadership of women like Esther, Miriam, Deborah, and various prophetesses.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Luke 8:1-3, several women who provided financially to Jesus’ ministry followed him and traveled with him.

Luke 10:38-42, Mary is commended for listening at the feet of Jesus instead of helping the worried Martha with household preparations.

Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 7:36-50, examples of some women Jesus held in high regard.

John 4:39-42, the Samaritan woman becomes the first evangelist of the gospel from among the non-disciples of Jesus

Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8, Jesus first appears to the women who come early to his tomb on Resurrection Sunday and tasks them with telling the good news to his disciples.

Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8, the proclamation of the gospel and the responsibility to teach and baptize are not gender-specific in the Great Commission.

Acts 2 (17-18), men and women alike receive the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12, women and men alike are gifted by the Holy Spirit with gifts to be used in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:5, mention is made here of women in the church “prophesying,” clearly a speaking gift used to instruct and edify those in the church (cf. Acts 21:9).

Acts 18:26, Priscilla (named first) and Aquila took Apollos aside “and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Priscilla, then, was exercising a teaching gift and instructing a man, who was himself also a teacher (cf. Rom 16:3-5)

Romans 16:1, 7, Figures like Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Priscilla (Acts 18:26), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), and Junia (Rom. 16:7) are all treated as examples of women in church leadership.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Galatians 3:28, it is often argued that Paul’s words “demolish” gender distinctions. This verse is then used to dismiss many of Paul’s other teachings on sexual distinctions as context-specific events in the different church communities (1 Tim 2:12-15).

1 Timothy 3:1-7, by using the word “whoever,” Paul invites women, also, to desire the noble task of pastoring. Even the phrase “one-wife man” is not exclusively masculine and should be viewed as an androcentric Greek phrase. Jesus uses a similar type of phrase in the Sermon on the Mount when he talks about not coveting “your neighbor’s wife”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Complementarian Hermeneutic

Genesis 1:26-28, God creates humanity as male and female. Both are made in his image and both are given the task to regulate the world and multiply the glory of God throughout creation *collectively*. This task is often called the cultural mandate. This job is impossible without the complementary relationship of both sexes. Genesis 1 affirms that sexuality is not an accident of nature, not a biological phenomenon; rather, it is a gift of God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Genesis 2:18-25, at the end of the creation narrative, everything is said to be good except for one thing—the man is alone. These verses emphasize several important points about the man/woman relationship:

(1) The structure of the Hebrew sentence emphasizes that the man’s current state was “**not good**” because he could not follow God’s design for him in his current state.[[5]](#footnote-5)

(2) God continues his creative work by giving the man a “**companion**” or “**helper**.” These most common English translations are less precise than the Hebrew. There is nothing in the text that presents the woman as just a “buddy” to man with a lesser role. And there is nothing in the word that implies subordination. The narrative of Scripture tells us that the woman is man’s indispensable partner and a necessary ally. This is why this word is used primarily to describe the Lord as Israel’s helper (Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26, 29; Ps 33:20; 115:9-11; 124:8; 145:5).[[6]](#footnote-6) From the context of the whole OT, Tim Mackie translates “helper” here as “delivering ally”.[[7]](#footnote-7) All these help us understand the weight of the relationship and the task given to men and women.

(3) The creation of woman from the “side” of man should not be viewed as a secondary creation but instead a parallel creation. “**Likeness**” is used to describe what man and woman share with God in chapter 1, and here to describe man and woman together.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Genesis 3:14-19, because they rejected God’s provision and design, man and woman’s relationship with God and one another changes. Before they are removed from their closeness to God in the garden, the interpersonal consequences of their sin are revealed. Genesis 3:16 says, "Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you.” This shows that man and woman will be in rebellion against their God-designed partnership.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Joel 2:28-29, sees a future event when the Spirit of the Lord will be poured out on all humanity, young and old; men and women. The resulting prophecies, visions, and dreams along with cosmic signs will signify the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. Peter picks up on the significance of these events on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter draws a line from the promise in Joel to the death and resurrection of Jesus and then to the thousands of men and women from many nations and languages entering God’s Kingdom through repentance and baptism.

Romans 16:1-16, there are many noteworthy women listed in Paul’s final greeting showing the significant number of women who are actively involved in the ministry of the church. Four women are said “to labor” for the church, which is how Paul describes his ministry. Men and women are both called “co-workers”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Romans 16 echoes the earliest chapters in Genesis, which depict men and women co-laboring alongside one another stewarding the kingdom of God. [[11]](#footnote-11)

1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Paul addresses a specific practice in Corinth that was blurring or subverting the distinctions between men and women in the church.[[12]](#footnote-12) The *context* of the message was the Corinthian customs surrounding men growing out long hair and women shaving their heads. The *principle* of the message is that gender distinction is more than a matter of mere physiology, and it is more than the result of a social construct.[[13]](#footnote-13) Paul grounds this principle in (1) God’s complementary order in creation (11:8-12) and (2) the lack of other churches affirming the Corinthian practices (11:16).

1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul addresses the lack of orderly worship at the church in Corinth. The *context* of the message is centered on the need to silence several groups during the worship gathering of the church.[[14]](#footnote-14) The *principle* of the message is that worship and the particular offerings of speech surrounding it should always be carried out in a way that is consistent with the God of peace and order.[[15]](#footnote-15) Women and men both are meant to submit to the elders’ role of judging prophecies and guarding the church from false teachings.

1 Timothy 2:11-15, the command to “let a woman learn” shatters Roman stereotypes. This is not a prohibition on women teaching anyone. Women are called to participate as teachers in the Great Commission, and older women are to train younger women (Titus 2:3-4). Timothy has the same faith as his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5;3:15). Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, taught Apollos (Acts 18:26). Believers are to teach each other (Col. 3:16). The teaching in view seems to be the twofold responsibilities of authoritative and public teaching about Christ and Scripture which is a function of qualified men in the role of pastor/elder/overseer.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Ephesians 5:22-23, wives are to submit to their husbands in response to their submission to the Lordship of Christ (5:22). The church is subject to Christ. Church family submits to one another. When men and women love and submit to God’s designs for authority we see the sinful distortions of male/female relationships defeated.

1 Peter 3:7, indicates fundamental gender differences between a husband and a wife 1) while she is fully equal in essence (3:7b), she likewise is constitutionally different from him as a woman (3:7a), and 2) the husband bears particular God-sanctioned responsibility to care for his wife, indicating his leadership and primary responsibility in their relationship.

Our Common Task

God’s design emphasized in Scripture seems to be that only men should serve in the authoritative, teaching role of pastor/elder/overseer. But this in no way places all men in authority over all women, nor does it excuse women from exercising the role of leaders, evangelists, and teachers.

Women are meant to play a central role in fulfilling the Great Commission, by multiplying what they are now: disciples. Disciples who have the responsibility to teach everything Jesus commanded.

The various gifts given generously to all by the Holy Spirit equip men and women to teach, encourage, and proclaim the gospel message. The “one another” commands are given to the church at large. Within them is the responsibility to teach and train one another as “brothers and sisters.” The language of the church family helps us see that within Christian fellowship, we have a common task. Qualified men and women must teach men and women under the authority and guidance of overseers/elders/pastors.

The solution to properly practicing the sexual distinctions in the church is not necessarily stricter guidelines, although churches should have a clear policy of who, where, and when people can teach. Egalitarians and complementarians must be cautious to move more closely to the principles of Scripture rather than reacting to culture and moving further away from Scripture.

For egalitarians, fear of the culture outside the church should never influence the commands and principles put in place by God’s Word.

For complementarians, fear of failing to practice perfect complementarianism withholds from women opportunities to exercise gifts of the Spirit and ignores the grace extended to imperfect people in imperfect churches. Mary Kassian summarizes these thoughts well when she says:

God hasn’t given us a cut-and-dried list of what is and isn’t permissible. Trying to offer strict guidelines would be like trying to offer strict rules for a dating couple’s physical contact. It’s not advisable — or even possible. God gives us the principle of male headship, a clear boundary, and the gift of his indwelling Holy Spirit, in faithful community, to help us figure out the rest. And when we mess up, he extends grace upon grace.

An externally focused, rule-based approach to women teaching coed audiences in the church neither reflects nor honors the beauty of God’s design. God wants us to have a grace-soaked, joyous spirit that delights in honoring headship as a beautiful aspect of his good and wise plan — one that respects and engages men and women as joint heirs and coworkers who wholeheartedly exercise their gifts together in the service of each other and the advance of the gospel.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Appendices:**

***Definition of Terms***

There are several terms found within Scripture or used by the church to describe sexual distinctions in church leadership:

“Complementarianism” is a view on gender roles that holds that women and men are spiritually equal but have distinct and complementary roles in the home, church, and wider society. Complementarian positions usually hold that certain positions in church leadership are reserved for men only and that in a marriage the husband is properly the head of the family and has some degree of authority over the wife.[[18]](#footnote-18)

“Egalitarianism” is the position that men and women are equally capable of serving the church in all capacities and that their participation should not be limited by gender. For example, an egalitarian would argue that both men and women should be ordained to the pastorate.[[19]](#footnote-19)

“Pastor, elder, overseer” are three terms that denote the same office in the New Testament. In Acts 20:17, 28 the elders of the church at Ephesus are said to have been made overseers (or bishops) over the flock, with the purpose that they should feed (shepherd or pastor) the church of God. Here we have the terms elders, overseers, and pastors all used of the same men (1 Pet. 5:1; Titus 1:5-9; Phil. 1:1).

“Deacon” comes from the Greek *diakonos* (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8). It is used in the general sense of servant (Mark 10:43; John 2:5; 12:26). The verb form is translated “to minister” or “to serve” (Matt. 4:11; 20:28; Rom. 15:25). The term is also used in a non-technical way of any minister of the gospel (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:6).[[20]](#footnote-20)

“Deaconess” is the translation of the female of *diakonos.* That certain women functioned in some type of official capacity in the early church seems clear. Phoebe is called a servant, that is, deaconess (Rom. 16:1), and in Paul’s discussion of church officers (1 Tim. 3:1–13) he lists women (v. 11). The interpretation of “women” in 1 Tim. 3:11 has been variously understood. Because the diaconate was not a governing body, women could serve on it.[[21]](#footnote-21)

“Apostle” can have a technical sense, when used to refer to the Twelve, and a more non-technical sense, when used to refer to an important messenger. The early church believed that the Twelve held the “office” of an apostle, while many others had the spiritual gift of an apostle.[[22]](#footnote-22) Among some churches today (some of them egalitarian), there is an effort to restore the *office* of apostle bringing with it an increase in authority or revelation.

“Headship” most often refers to Christ as the head of his church, but Paul says that this applies to the husband’s role in marriage as well. Specifically, the husband is head, “as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, to make her holy” (vv. 25–26). In marriage headship emphasizes the husband’s Christlike role of sustaining and protecting his wife and encouraging her personal and spiritual growth. This does not mean that all men exercise headship over all women.

“Teaching, preaching” are outlined in the various “commission” passages in the gospels. Preaching is the recruiting and motivating ministry of the Church; teaching is the maturing ministry.

***Q&A*:**

What is meant by “saved through childbearing” in 1 Timothy 2:15?

This difficult-to-understand verse has two primary perspectives. (1) This could be about salvation coming through the offspring of Eve. (2) This could be about the significance of women nurturing children since only women can bear children. God has created women uniquely, and their responsibilities are uniquely good…in the church, in marriage, and in bearing children. Women are sanctified as they glorify God in the distinct roles and responsibilities He has entrusted to them in the home and church. Women are saved, not through the birth of a child, but through the death of Christ.

Does the use of “headship” in passages like 1 Cor 11:3 and Eph 5:23 where “head” (*kephale*) is used, ignore the meaning of this term as “source?”

The strongest lexical evidence suggests that while kephale is sometimes used of impersonal objects to mean “source” (e.g., the “head”, i.e., “source” of a river) its predominate, if not exclusive, use as it relates to human beings is as “authority over,” not “source.” Exegetically, it becomes difficult to understand how Paul could mean anything other than “authority over” in particular passages. It seems impossible to take kephale as “source,” for to do so requires that God be the source of Christ as Adam is the source of Eve and Christ is the source of man.[[23]](#footnote-23)

What about the significant examples of female leadership in Israel (Deborah) and the early church (Junias)?

Women did play some significant roles in Israel. Most of the examples of female leadership are in roles other than the highest authority in government and religion. Yes, there were prophetesses and female teachers, but there were no female priests, heads of tribes, queens of Israel (Athaliah wrongly usurped the throne), women apostles, or women elders in the early church. A notable exception is Deborah (Judge 4-5), but given the spiritual state of Israel, none of the Judges illustrate God’s ideal leadership for His people. In Acts 1:14-26, the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem are tasked with choosing a replacement for Judas, but the only names that they offer are from the “men.” This shows that the immediate practice of the disciples after the ascension was men serving in these highest places of leadership. These were the leaders who stood before religious and political leaders and suffered beatings and imprisonment.

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1. Exod. 15:20; Judg. 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Neh. 6:14; Isa. 8:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harris, Steven. 2015. “The Egalitarian Impulse in the Black Church.” 9Marks Winter 2015, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Williams, Terran. 2022. “Resolving Five Complementarian Protests to Priscilla the Pastor-Teacher - CBE International.” May 5, 2022. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/resolving-five-complementarian-protests-to-priscilla-the-pastor-teacher/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The Role of Women at the Village Church.” Accessed July 26, 2023. <https://www.thevillagechurch.net/content/externalsite/about/The%20Role%20of%20Women_Full%20Version.pdf>, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Heb “The being of man by himself is not good.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “The Role of Women at the Village Church”, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mackie, Tim, and Jon Collins. “Why Cain Builds a City.” Audio. The City. May 1, 2023. <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/why-cain-builds-city/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew Henry’s comment on these verses is memorable: "not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some, from the Egalitarian tradition in particular, argue that the distinction in gender roles and even the notion of headship are the result of the fall. But Gen 3 and the rest of Scripture show that Adam bears primary culpability in the events of the fall which argues for Adam’s headship preceding the fall. For further study see Wayne Grudem, “Ten Reasons Showing Male Headship in Marriage Before the Fall,” Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There has been some confusion in these verses concerning Andronicus and his wife, Junia, being “distinguished among the apostles.” Paul is not placing them among the Twelve, but he is noting that their ministry is “noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “The Role of Women at the Village Church”, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Worth noting, Paul affirms that the practices of prayer and prophecy are practiced by both men and women, but the language of headship only applies to men. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “The Role of Women at the Village Church”, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The three groups are (1) those who speak in tongues without an interpreter (v. 28), (2) those who would prophesy at the same time others were talking (vv. 30-31), and (3) disruptive women who could ask questions of their husbands at home (vv. 34-35). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “The Role of Women at the Village Church”, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kassian, Mary. 2019. “Where Can Women Teach? Eight Principles for Christian Churches | Desiring God.” October 26, 2019. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/where-can-women-teach>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Barry, John D., David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, Elliot Ritzema, and Wendy Widder, eds. 2016. “Complementarianism.” In The Lexham Bible Dictionary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mangum, Douglas. 2014. The Lexham Glossary of Theology. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thiessen, Henry Clarence, and Vernon D. Doerksen. 1979. Lectures in Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Among those who had the spiritual gift were James (1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Corinthians 9:6), Andronicus and Junias (Romans 16:7), possibly Silas and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:7), and Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. CBMW. 2007. “Summaries of the Egalitarian and Complementarian Positions.” CBMW. June 26, 2007. <https://cbmw.org/2007/06/26/summaries-of-the-egalitarian-and-complementarian-positions/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)