

Gender equality in Christian ministry and leadership

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Position statement

We believe that the biblical narrative validates, as a matter both of creation and of re-creation, gender-balanced or egalitarian leadership. We believe that men and women leading together as equals is both God's original and redeemed design. Therefore, we make available all positions within CA to both qualified men and women, married and single. These available positions include elders, teachers, team leaders, lead church planters, ordained pastors, organizational leaders, board members and board chair, executive leadership and president.

We are also committed to providing developmental pathways for men and women to become better qualified for leadership in all leadership positions of CA, as well as providing pathways for women and men to lead together.

In creating these pathways, we want to consider people in various God-given stages of life including those parenting young children, those seeking higher education, those in part-time or bi-vocational ministry, those in full-time secular employment, etc.

Introduction

Our approach to gender equality in leadership is grounded in the view that churches are *communities of new creation*. We hold that the relevant passages in the New Testament—notably those which restrict the participation of women in ministry—have to be understood within an overarching narrative of renewal, culminating in the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21-22. So we must look, first, at the creation narratives and ask whether hierarchy was part of the original relationship between the man and the woman.

Created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27)

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Man and woman were created equal as “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-27). The context suggests that this has to do primarily with the fact that they are given joint dominion over all living creatures—they have been entrusted with the

management of the abundant life which God created. The statement gives us no reason to think that the woman was created subordinate to the man.

The woman as helper (Gen. 2:18)

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Gen. 2:18)

The woman was created after the man as a "helper". The word for "helper" both in Hebrew and Greek describes a person who comes running to help someone in need of assistance, typically when in a situation of danger or great need. God is described as the "helper" who delivers the Psalmist from his predicament (e.g. Ps. 69:6). In the context of the Genesis story the man's deficiency is that he is alone, and the creation of the woman as a helper for the man becomes the basis for marriage. The verse cannot be taken to mean that the woman is inherently subservient. Bilezikian writes:

If anything, the word points to the inadequacy and the helplessness of the man when he was bereft of the woman in Eden. God provided him with a "rescuer" to become with him the community that God had intended to create all along.¹

The helper must be "according to" or "corresponding to" the man. If she had been created from the earth as Adam was, she would have been another species, like the animals, not fit to be either a co-worker or "one flesh". The Hebrew word *knegdô* occurs only here in the Old Testament and has the literal sense "like opposite him", suggesting both likeness and difference or complementarity. This also provides the background for the naming of the woman, which in context is not an assertion of authority over but a recognition of her unique and distinct identity.

The curse of patriarchy (Gen. 3:16)

To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen. 3:16)

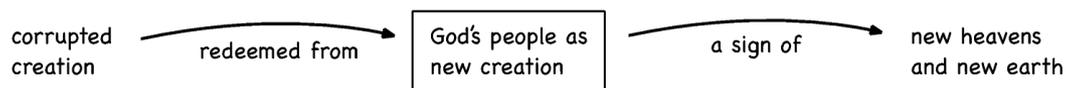
The subordination of the woman to the man enters the narrative as a predicted consequence of the judgment pronounced on the couple: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). There is no basis for the

¹ G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Kindle location 279.

view that Genesis 3:16 refers to the corruption of an original good “rule” of the man over the woman, as is sometimes argued. On the one hand, there is no previous reference to a benign patriarchy. Prior to the expulsion from the garden the question of “rule” arises only in Genesis 1:26, where the man and woman are together given “dominion over” all living creatures. On the other, the Hebrew word *mashal* (“rule”) does not have the negative connotation of “domineer over”. Subordination, therefore, was not part of the original good *complementarity* that existed between the man and the woman. They are created different, and the formation of Adam *before* Eve will have some significance for Paul (1 Cor. 11:8; 1 Tim. 2:13). But this difference does not entail the subordination of the woman to the man.

The narrative of new creation

Gender inequality, therefore, was not part of the original good creation. It was a consequence of the Fall. This has implications for both church and mission. As a *redeemed* community the church is set free from the degrading and distressing condition of fallen humanity, including the “curse” of patriarchy. As a *prophetic* community it is under an obligation to embody for the world the full potential of creation made new. Gender equality, therefore, is not a concession to modern cultural pressure; it should be regarded as integral to the calling of the church.



This gives us the overarching biblical story within which 1) we interpret those texts which address the place and role of women in the community of faith, and 2) we develop policy and practices regarding ministry in our own context.

One in Christ

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27–28)

The *redemptive-prophetic* dynamic is evident in the remarkable prominence of women in the ministries of both Jesus and Paul. In the Gospels the participation and intervention of women at critical moments in the story is as much a sign of the radical transformation of God’s people that was underway as the healing of the sick and demon-possessed or the inclusion of tax collectors and “sinners”. Paul is vocal about the role of women co-workers in pastoral and apostolic

ministry—for example, Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa in Romans 16:1-12; Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2-3. What Bilezikian refers to as “inaugural texts” suggest that the early Christian community was conceived as functionally without gender bias.²

In the Pentecost narrative the Spirit is poured out indiscriminately on men and women (Acts 2:17-18). Paul argues in Galatians 3:25-29 that women and men are equally “sons of God... Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise”. Peter writes that a husband and wife are “heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7). We believe that in its life and mission the church should always be straining towards the full expression of that equality. But there have been, and no doubt will be, circumstances under which it is inappropriate for women to exercise the full scope of Christian ministry and leadership—for example, in socially conservative cultural contexts. With that in mind, we turn to the passages in Paul’s letters which have commonly been invoked by those who wish to maintain hierarchy in gender relations.

The head of the woman is the man (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor. 11:3)

This is a complex passage that has been subjected to a wide range of interpretations. The chief point to make is that Paul here neither argues for nor presupposes the *subordination* of the woman to the man. His argument is not that women have been insubordinate and should respect the authority of their husbands. It is that the manner in which women pray or prophesy may bring *shame or dishonour* on their husbands.

In Hellenistic Greek the metaphor of a person being “head” of another person speaks not of a relationship of authority but of the relative prominence or pre-eminence of one person with respect to another. In the context of Paul’s argument in this passage, the behaviour of the woman reflects upon the man as her “head”, either for glory or for shame, because in ancient culture it was the man who had public status and visibility. The word for “authority” occurs in only one verse, where Paul in fact insists that the woman should “have authority over” her own head (1 Cor. 11:10). Paul’s concern here is for the socio-cultural impact of the new exuberant, charismatic freedom that women were finding in Christ.

² G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Kindle location 2583.

Women should keep silent (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14:33–35)

The requirement that women should be silent and submissive in church, that they should ask questions of their husbands when they get home (1 Cor. 14:34-35), is essentially practical in character. It is not presented as a restriction on charismatic ministry—this would conflict with the assumption underlying Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that women prayed and prophesied in church gatherings. If the passage is genuinely Pauline (there is some evidence that it was a later addition to the text), it is best read as an attempt to moderate the negative effects of the clash between new-found freedoms in Christ and prevailing cultural values. Just as Paul was willing to restrict his own freedoms in order to win both Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:19-23), he asks women in Corinth to observe traditional proprieties for the sake of the reputation both of the community and of Christ.

John Stackhouse says it is crucial to understand that when Paul wrote these letters, he was giving the church a few instructions on how to “survive and thrive in a patriarchal culture that he thinks will not last long and to maintain and promote the egalitarian dynamic already at work in the career of Jesus that in due course will leave gender lines behind”.³

I do not permit a woman to teach (1 Tim. 2:12)

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)

In this passage Paul clearly prohibits women from teaching. The question is why. Interpretation of the passage is fraught with difficulties, but in our view there are good reasons for thinking that the prohibition is a pragmatic response to a particular set of conditions.

1) That Paul makes it a matter of *not giving permission* already suggests that he did not regard it as an absolute theological principle.

³ J.G. Stackhouse, *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender*, 51.

2) The verb *authenteō* does not mean “to have authority over” as traditionally understood. It means “to instigate or perpetrate” (typically a crime) or “to exercise influence over”. In this context it seems that Paul is concerned that if women are given permission to teach, they will have a damaging influence over the congregation.

3) Paul appeals to the creation narrative in verses 13-14 because he finds in it a calamity analogous to the situation in Ephesus. Eve was deceived by the serpent and became the means by which his false teaching was transmitted to Adam.

4) In 2 Timothy Paul warns against “those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:6–7).

These observations lead us to conclude that Paul regarded women in the church as susceptible to deception—on the one hand, because they lacked education or “formation”; on the other, because they were the natural target of *seductive* deceivers. He did not want them to do what Eve had done. To retain the prohibition under very different cultural conditions, where women are not less educated than men and no more likely to be seduced by false teaching, would be a matter of simple prejudice and injustice. It may also suggest that we have failed to grasp the real point of Paul’s teaching, which is that church leaders should exercise critical, *contextually appropriate* judgment in their oversight of the teaching ministry. “The principle he lays down to protect the teaching ministry and the exercise of authority functions from incompetent persons is valid for all times and for all churches”.⁴

The household codes

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. (Col. 3:18)

The so-called “household codes” or *Haustafeln*, which enjoin the submission of women (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1), differ sharply from the prevailing Greek-Roman model in that 1) the subordinate partner is addressed first; 2) she is urged to submit voluntarily, as a matter of free moral choice; and 3) the form of the texts in the New Testament presupposes not the rigid social structure of the prevailing culture but the socially liberating message of Jesus and the early church. John Howard Yoder notes that the admonition to submit or obey in the New Testament is directed “first to persons on the bottom side of the social order, and assumes that they have heard a message which calls into question the

⁴ G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Kindle location 2667.

subjection they have hitherto not been able to challenge”.⁵ Paul does not impose an immutable hierarchy on husbands and wives. He teaches them how to maintain the integrity of their newly redeemed relationships in an uncongenial but socially inescapable patriarchal context.

Husband of one wife

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. (1 Tim. 3:2–3)

It is sometimes argued that Paul’s insistence that overseers and deacons should be “the husband of one wife” restricts these offices to married men (1 Tim. 3:2, 12). The passage appears to assume that these positions were held by men (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12), though “women likewise” in verse 12 may refer to female deacons (rather than to the “wives” of the deacons), and Phoebe is described as a “deacon” in Romans 16:1. Also, the restriction to *married* men would have excluded Timothy and quite likely Paul himself. The phrase is idiomatic and the emphasis is on “one”. An alternative view is that it means “married only once”—that is, not remarried after death or divorce. But in this context it more likely means simply that the married overseer or deacon should be “faithful” (a “one-woman man”), which fits appropriately alongside the other *character* traits (“sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money”) which constitute what Paul means by “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:1).

Conclusions

1. It is an integral part of the prophetic calling of the church to demonstrate in its life together the concrete possibility of creation made new, which must include its freedom from the curse of patriarchy. Gender equality in leadership is not an accommodation to cultural change. It is a *missional priority*.
2. This freedom, however, must sometimes be restricted for the sake of the order, integrity and reputation of the community. This was true under the cultural conditions of the early church, and in parts of the world today—including parts of multicultural western cities—it may still be appropriate to limit the ministry of women. Decisions of this kind are the responsibility of the local body.

⁵ J. Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 178.

3. The restrictions that Paul imposed should be acknowledged and affirmed. It is our responsibility to read the scriptures honestly and not to make them serve our own interests, no matter how good or right those interests may be.
4. But generally speaking we think that the cultural context in the West has changed to such an extent since Paul's day that it is now the *retention of patriarchy* that brings the community—and Christ—into disrepute.
5. We understand that this remains a contentious issue for the church and we want to work hard both to allow differences of opinion in this area within Christian Associates and to nurture a continuing healthy conversation. We do not seek to dictate the theological convictions of our missionaries or the churches we establish; nor do we wish to tell missionary couples how to run their own households in this regard. However, we will ask that all CA staff respect the priority of gender balanced leadership *within our organization*.

Bibliography

In a document of this nature it is impossible to defend adequately the decisions and positions taken. We provide a brief listing here of the main books and articles that influenced our discussions and shaped our conclusions.

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