

# WOMEN, LEADERSHIP, & THE CHURCH

October 3, 2021 | Josh Siders | Tallgrass at The Well

**So What?** God's delegated authority over the earth requires both male and female representation.

**Feel What?** Submissive

**Now What?** Ask each other questions.

## INTRODUCTION

We have been in a message series called Radical Jesus where we're talking about controversial subjects in our world today. So far, we've talked about things that are creating division in our greater world, like vaccinations and immigration. I encourage you to go back and listen to those podcasts if you missed them because our pastoral team is doing the hard work of research and presenting each one in a charitable way which helps us understand to interact and, sometimes, winsomely disagree with each other.

We've started each week with a reading from scripture with the invitation to memorize it. Please read this with me:

**Isaiah 40:8 (ESV): The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.**

Today, we're going to focus on a topic that primarily has to do with us here in the church: Women and Leadership. For sure, there are implications for how we interact with the wider culture, but we really feel this one here, especially as we have people here from multiple expressions of Christianity. One of the main questions we've received over the years is: What's your view on

women in ministry. How are women allowed to participate in church, and are any roles or positions off limits to them?

Both Tallgrass and The Well have done the hard work over the years to clarify our position, to act with compassion with those who land differently, and to even recover from the fallout when there's a messy disagreement. And we want to keep speaking clearly and compassionately about where we land and welcome everyone to follow the Way of Jesus together as we walk this out together.

And make no mistake: This is messy business because it has to do with people's lives their response to God and how that interacts with the way the Scripture is interpreted. For instance, as Pastor Suzy Silk outlines, in 2002 Zondervan Publishing underwent a project to update its massively popular NIV translation, published 20 years early. A cross-denominational team was formed to update the language to reflect advances in biblical scholarship and use more gender-neutral language. Mark 5:9 was thus rendered "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" instead of "sons of God." But the backlash was swift and loud. Over 100 church leaders from the evangelical tradition wrote a statement of concern and two major denominations passed resolutions opposing the TNIV and other inclusive-language translations. Because of the pressure and resultant financial woes, the TNIV was dropped from circulation when an update to the NIV was released in 2011.

Roughly at the same time of the TNIV's release, the English Standard Version was released by Crossway publishers. It was quickly embraced and endorsed by Christians embracing a complementarian view of Scripture and the role of women because of its literal rendering from the original text and its non-gender-inclusive language. After its third revision in 2016, the publishers announced this would be the final update coinciding with some controversial language choices. In particular, the ESV chose to translate Genesis 3:16 "Your desire shall be contrary to your husband" instead of the more widely-established phrase "Your desire will be for your husband." It's quite a literary difference and, as you can imagine, caused an uproar.

Now, I'll grant you that this may all seem like minutiae that only trained biblical experts could appreciate geeking out over. And, if you're already skeptical of the authority of the Bible, this may seem like fuel for the fire. The truth is, it touches on something deeper that we need to pay attention to, which is why there's so much peer review and pushback. We view the Bible as God's written word to us, inspired and authoritative. It instructs and corrects us. How we understand scripture's meaning is formative. It answers questions, such as:

- Who am I? What purpose and contribution in our world am I alive for?
- How do I relate to others? How should our marriage be lived out?

- .Does my voice matter? What advocacy and influence can I have in the world?

**Aimee Byrd, *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*: “Our relationship with Scripture affects our relationship with our brothers and sisters in God’s household. It’s time for the church to examine whether we too are sending the same message as the radical feminists who are opposed to God’s Word by treating it as an androcentric text that lacks female contribution. It’s fascinating to see how God incorporates the gynocentric perspective in the context of such radically patriarchal background of both the Old and New Testament times.”**

When we read scripture, it matters whether we see ourselves in its words. It matters where God places us in his story and what rights and responsibilities he bestows upon us. And, as you can imagine, where you fall on the spectrum of belief really does impact how you answer these questions--both for yourself and for others.

So, briefly, I want to lay out that spectrum and as clearly and charitably as I can explain the differences.

First, there is **Hard Complementarism**, also known as Hierarchical Patriarchy

- .This belief is mostly found in ultra-theologically conservative churches, such as those who are Reformed and Calvinist

- Interestingly, cults tend to organize in this kind of high-control hierarchical manner
- The belief is that men and women are created equally but have specific and higher roles they play in church, family, and society
- Men are in charge, women follow with little questioning
- Husbands help restrain the sinful compulsions of their wives to subvert and usurp their God-given authority
- Women stay home, take care of the household, and raise the children
- In church, women are allowed to teach other women and care for the children, but only men are able to teach in mixed assemblies
- The fear is that if we deviate from this we'll embrace liberalism, heresy, and other unbiblical stances because it throws off the creation order instituted by God
- This belief tends to idealize the mid-20th century and wishes we could get back to the good old days, though it ignores rampant misogyny and racism inherent in the dominant power structures

At the far opposite end of the spectrum is **Cultural Egalitarianism**, which says:

- There is no difference between men and women. The sexes are interchangeable in roles and tasks in our world, and to highlight any differences is to do violence against women.

- The more extreme in this camp say that gender is fluid and non-binary. There are adaptations to our language that should indicate this, so instead of referring to "pregnant women," we need to say "pregnant people."
- This camp believes we should not just want equal opportunity for men and women, but we should have guaranteed equality of outcomes which will solve the wage gap issue
- Slogans such as "Smash the Patriarchy" and "The Future is Female" are chanted to capture the feminist ideal
- The fear is that if we continue to let men continue to lead and have authority like they've always had, abuses like this will continue to happen; Anything else than this is restrictive, regressive, and oppressive to women
- The belief is that if we became secular, educated, and affluent, then misogyny and inequality will be ended. But as the #MeToo movement exposed in the likes of Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, this is not so and situations with assault still occurs.

The two extremes vie for power: One fears ongoing oppression and the other fears disobeying God. But, as these two camps shout at each other over a vast chasm, many of us are left feeling like a casualty in a cultural and religious war. In between them are two more approaches which, in many ways, look similar to each other and differ only in degree.

**Soft Complementarianism** which we find in many Baptist traditions and other evangelical expressions. They believe:

- Men and women are created equally, and they affirm distinctives that exist in hormones, neurochemistry, and physiology. They're expressed through preferences for vocation, friendships, and participation in church.
- Men and women have differing roles in church and marriage
- Men are mostly in charge, women mostly follow; men having final say in all matters because of how headship is interpreted from scripture
- Wives are welcome to work outside the home, but the home is their primary concern and focus
- Women can hold political office, be seminary professors, and occupy the C-suite
- Women may be deacons, work on church staff, but cannot be a pastor or elder

**Soft Egalitarianism**, or what scholar Scot McKnight calls Mutualism, and is found in Wesleyan and holiness traditions, along with Pentecostal/Charismatic streams of the church. They believe:

- Men and women are created equally yet distinct
- Roles in the home are interchangeable based on need, though some roles naturally fall to men and women
- Together, women and men together express God's nature

- Men and women are both welcomed to lead in the church according to the gifts and call of the Holy Spirit. In other words, there is a complement in our design but without hierarchy which elevates one over the other.
- Thought we work to advocate for women's roles, in the words of Pastor Bethany Allen, "The goal is advancement of the kingdom, not just advancement of women."

The trouble we sometimes experience with these two middle views is when we're tempted to collapse them into the more extreme points on the spectrum. Or we treat the middle road as some sort of slippery slope to the extremes. We need to engage the nuance in each position because we may find that more aligns us than divides us.

**Transition:** Now, let's turn to Genesis to look at the origin story and how we can understand God's intention and design for how we interact.

## **SOLUTION**

In the first chapter of the Bible, we're told how God created the heavens and the earth. There's a rhythm to God's work where we creates and he calls it good. He says, "Let there be," and it was so, and he saw and declared it *tov*, "good." "Let there be light," and it was so, and it was good. "Let there be land," and it was so, and it was good. "Let there be life," and it was so, and it was good." But there comes a point at which the narrative changes"

**Genesis 1:27-28 (NIV): God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”**

God creates humans and gives them charge over all of his creation. The word “image” here means likeness or resemblance, which indicates that these people are stamped with God’s representation and authority. God is sharing himself with humanity in a unique way not experienced with anything else in creation. These are the image-bearers of God meant to stand in for him as regents and rulers to push Eden outward to a wild and unformed world.

But the cosmic record scratch occurs because unlike every other act of creation, God does not call this good. In fact, moving forward to chapter 2, we see why. Chapter 2 of Genesis is a recounting of the creation of humanity via a zoomed-in route so we get a picture of how it went down.

**Genesis 2:18-22 (NIV): The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. ... But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 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 then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.**

In Genesis chapter 1, we read it is good, it is good, it is good. But, now, we read it is not good. This is a literary device meant to bring tension to the story. And the tension is heightened as Adam names the animal and no suitable helper is found.

Now, this phrase “suitable helper” is *ezer kenegdow*. One might think “suitable helper” means someone to help around the house, do the laundry, help make all the man's dreams come true. But one would be wrong. *Ezer kenegdow* is a phrase which means “alike opposite”— someone who is just like the other in value and meaning; only different in design. There is no designation of authority or subordination here; there is not differentiation in value or usefulness.

*Ezer*, helper, is sometimes used in scripture to describe God himself as he comes to the rescue. So, helper can be understood as aiding or bringing to completion. Which brings up this important point:

**God's delegated authority over the earth requires both male and female representation. Things are not good if it is missing.**

**Transition:** Now, let's look at how men and women relate from the New Testament:

**Ephesians 5:18, 21-25 (NIV): Be filled with the Spirit... Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

Something interesting happens in many translations where there is a **[Paragraph Break]** inserted before verse 22. The thing is that there's no punctuation or breaks in the original Greek, so this is decision imposed by translators. The effect is that it looks as if Paul begins a new thought:

**Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....**

But looking more at a literal translation, it's not as much a new thought as it is an out working of being filled with God's Spirit. In addition there are words inserted which are supposed to clarify the paragraph. What translators did was insert another "submit" at the beginning of verse 21. What this does is highlight the instruction to wives to submit over and again.

So, let's look at the paragraph as a continuation of thought without the extra words included:

**Ephesians 5:18, 21-25 (Edited): Be filled with the Spirit... Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the**

**Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....**

This doesn't seem nearly as controversial. Instead of instructions intended to wayward wives intent on usurping their husband's God-given right to rule the home and the church, we see a nearly noncontroversial approach to church and home. Submit to each other, wives to your own husbands, just as you do Jesus.

Moreover, the word "submit" doesn't have any connotation of inferiority or lesser value. Submission explains the relationship between partners who are peers or equals for the care of the other. To submit in this verse literally means to place in an orderly fashion something under something else. The word was used to show the proper arrangement of a household, family, or empire. For example, we submit everyday by placing our desires under the common laws that govern, like traffic laws that keep people safe.

And to submit doesn't mean to be mindlessly obedient. Submission is the voluntary preference of others for their well-being. And verse 22 isn't saying you should be a doormat, be abused, have no voice, let the husband make all the decisions, etc. There has been so much harm done by people taking these verses out of context so that there have been women who have stayed in abusive relationships because they thought they were supposed to submit.

Mutual submission, especially in the context of marriage, is a direct assault on the culture of self-fulfillment. It's the realization that I'm called to act loving when I don't feel loving. And that's what makes it a picture of Jesus: when you're willing to pour yourself out for a sinful person who doesn't deserve it.

All this helps us understand the word "head," which can mean different things according to context. To be the head doesn't mean hold all the power, get the final say. To be the head as Jesus is the head means to go first. To take the lead, but in this way. To first:

- Express love
- Forgive
- Initiate reconciliation
- Ask forgiveness
- Prefer the other
- Lift up and make great
- Lay your life down

And then Paul tells husbands to love--to agape--their wives. He's not talking about an emotion. In Scripture, love is a commitment to act for the welfare of another person.

This was massively offensive to husbands of this culture—they only owed their wives food, shelter, and the opportunity to bear children. They had mistresses and were expected to visit the temple prostitutes regularly. The command to love their wives was revolutionary because no one in the 1st century would have told husbands to love their wives.

Now, if you're single, neither does this make you a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God, nor does it disqualify you from practicing mutual submission. But what I will tell you is that you should see your married friends becoming more like Jesus every passing year because God has provided a place for their pride and self-will to get worked out every day of the week. If you see us not growing in humility, patience, and so on, you can ask us, Hey what's up with your marriage?

**Transition:** Now that we understand God's intention for us to submit to each other, let's put this to rest by looking at how Jesus interacted with women. Here's an overview from the four Gospels:

### **Jesus Welcomed Women To:**

- Influence miracles he performed (John 2:3)
- Turn his attention to outsiders (Mark 7:26)
- Fund his ministry (Luke 8:3)
- Learn among fellow students (Luke 10:39)
- Serve him (John 4:7)
- Discuss theology with him (John 4:20)
- Evangelize their hometown (John 4:39)
- Prepare him for crucifixion and burial (Matthew 26:6)
- Have their story told alongside the gospel (Matthew 26:13)
- Be present for his death (Mark 15:40)
- First witness his resurrection (John 20:14)
- Tell the other disciples about his resurrection (Matthew 28:10)
- Be part of the birth of his church (Acts 1:14)

**Dr. Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical***

**Womanhood:** “In a world that didn’t accept the word of a woman as a valid witness, Jesus chose women as witnesses for his resurrection. In a world that gave husbands power over the very lives of their wives, Paul told husbands to do the opposite—to give up their lives for their wives. In a world that saw women as biologically deformed men, monstrous even, Paul declared that men were just like women in Christ.”

**Transition:** We see that Jesus and Paul treated women with dignity and elevated their status in society. But we don't want to simply gloss over the texts that give us trouble throughout church history. Let's look at 1 Timothy 2:

## **OBJECTIONS**

**1 Timothy 2:11-15 (NIV):** A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

My #1 problem with this? None of us take this literally. We all use some sort of framework for interpreting these verses. In other words, when we attempt to enforce women learning in silence and not talking in church, we must remember that none of us think that women are

saved, or put in right standing before God—when they give birth. As miraculous and awe-inspiring as carrying life in the womb is, we know that we're saved through the cross of Jesus. Scripture is telling us that God is using childbirth to bring about spiritual formation and in the new covenant redeems the curse from the old covenant.

So, how should we understand verse 11? First, let's understand the cultural context. Paul is writing to Timothy who leads the church of Ephesus. Overshadowing the entire city is the Temple of Artemis, where prostitutes their male customers and earned them favor with the deity. Women were elevated as spokeswomen for the gods and, when they left temple prostitution behind, some brought that mindset into the church. Sometimes, in church meetings, there were ecstatic outbursts from women that had to be dealt with. They were instructed to learn from Timothy and other trained leaders until they understood guidance from the Holy Spirit. Instead of taking control as their culture instructed them, they were to practice mutual submission in the way of Jesus.

Second, we must read these verses in light of the full context of scripture, especially other places where we see Paul giving guidance to local churches.

**Romans 16:1-2 (NIV): I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon, of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.**

Pheobe is a woman of affluence who has been given a place of leadership in her local church. And she is so trusted by Paul that she's been given the letter to the Romans--no small thing in the Ancient Near East. And when she arrives at Rome, as was custom, she was to read the letter aloud to the believers, inflecting certain words as she and the letter-writer had practice. And Pheobe would be in the only position to take questions and clarify the original intent of Paul. Meaning, it's probable that Pheobe was the first commentator on the Epistle to the Romans in history.

**Dr. Michael Bird, *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts*: “This is Romans, his greatest letter-essay, the most influential letter in the history of Western thought, and the singularly greatest piece of Christian theology. Now if Paul was opposed to women teaching men anytime and anywhere, why would he send a woman like Phoebe to deliver this vitally important letter and to be his personal representative in Rome? Why not Timothy, Titus, or some other dude? Why Phoebe?”**

**Transition:** How can we practically walk this out together?

## **APPLICATION**

**Sarah joins me on stage.**

So, you're a woman who is a pastor and held leadership positions within the church. What's has your journey been like?

Here are several ways in which we can apply today's teaching:

• **Embrace mutual submission**

- Jesus told us to pick up our cross and follow him, which leads to self-denial
- This goes for both men and women
- Beyond being a man or woman, it's about the choice to set our spouse or partner up for success in everything we do - and we both do that for each other

• **Advocate for women**

- Know that structures are built for men ("it's a man's world")
- We'll keep getting the same results unless we disrupt them
- Women, back each other up instead of supporting patriarchy by trashing other women who could be competitors

• **Expand our learning**

- Be intentional in listening and learning from women

• **Walk towards Jesus in our inner life**, aka walk in holiness

- Porn is 88% violent towards women
- Music is a prime exporter of themes of objectification and denigration

**Transition:** Here's something that I hope challenges all of us to embracing the kind of mutual submission the writers

of scripture had in mind. Let's increase our awareness of each other's experience by asking the following:

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Next Step:**

- Men, ask your wife, sister, coworker, etc.:
  - What's it like being on the other side of me?
  - When I enter the room (or a conversation), do I increase or decrease peace?
  - How can I make more room for you to exercise your gifts?
- Women, ask yourselves:
  - How can I be more honest about my experience?
  - How can I advocate for myself and other women?

### **Next Week:**

- Mammon and Consumerism

### **Creed:**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

## **Prayer**

### **Invitation**

### **The Lord's Supper**

We are all welcome to the Table, both men and women.  
There is only one mediator, Jesus Christ who welcomes  
us into his kingdom equally.