



Women and Men in the Church

A Position Paper for Grace Fellowship Church

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Introduction

A matter of discernment: women in leadership

For three years our Elders engaged in a discernment process regarding the appropriate roles for women in leadership. The first thing to say about this issue is the most important: *it is not simple*. Many come to this issue with absolute clarity in their thinking and with amazement that anyone reading the Bible faithfully could reach any conclusion different from theirs. This is true for those who cannot fathom how women can be excluded from positions of leadership, as well as for those who cannot see how a faithful reading of the Scriptures could permit such a thing. While some find this to be a simple question, the more we studied it as an elder team, the more complex we found it to be. The very fact that our process spanned three years speaks to this complexity. It also speaks to the fact that we are committed to due diligence to hear God's voice collectively — as best we are able. This process of study, discussion, and prayer (including the times we did not agree with each other) has drawn us closer to the Lord and to each other as we have engaged with it humbly and respectfully.

Our process

It is fair to say that this is a very difficult issue in Christendom. There are many faithful, conservative scholars and churches who do not all see this the same way. This process of seeking to discern God's intentions for Grace Fellowship Church through our study of the Scriptures does not occur in a vacuum. We rely on the Holy Spirit to illuminate our process as we search and wrestle and study.

We believe that “all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament provide the instruction and authority for all matters regarding our lives as individuals and our life together as the church. The primary responsibility of our elder team is to diligently seek to understand what God is saying to us through the Scriptures. As we conduct this work, our goal is to seek to understand what the divinely-inspired authors meant when they produced the books of the Bible in their original language and culture, and then apply these truths and principles to our lives and situations today. We were also aided in our work by reading the works of faithful scholars who have come to a variety of conclusions on these issues. Additionally, we invited the participation of several women who have served this congregation well for many years.

While we believe that God has led us to a conviction and a position for Grace Fellowship Church, we deeply respect the responsibility of the governing bodies of

other churches to discern God's will for them. We know enough to know that ours is not the last word. We, therefore, take our position with humility and openness.

Our position

The position that we have reached together is this: as we move forward, women who are appropriately gifted and called will be welcomed to serve as elders, to teach in our weekend services, and to be considered for ordination.

Believing that God has led us to this decision, we are eager for how our congregation will be blessed by this affirmation and the full release of gifted women to serve, teach, and lead.

Principles for Biblical Interpretation

Before we begin to look at the scriptural passages that speak to this issue, it is important to take a moment and consider the manner in which we interpret Scripture.

Whole to part

There are several passages to which people generally point when discussing this matter. It is important that these passages be understood in light of the whole of Scripture, which is why this paper spends significant time (although not nearly an exhaustive treatment) looking at a broad view of women and men within. When deciding doctrinal issues, *it is critical to look at the preponderance of scriptural evidence and understand individual passages of in light of the whole of what Scripture teaches*. It is important to note here that faithful, diligent scholars and teachers have, after looking at the entirety of Scripture, come to different conclusions. We do not maintain that our position is the best or the last word on this matter. Rather, this is our understanding of what God desires for Grace Fellowship Church.

Universal and particular

Furthermore, when deciding matters of doctrine, we believe that the Bible contains both *universal* and *particular* teachings and mandates. Universal teachings and mandates are for all believers, in all cultures, for all time. Particular teachings and mandates are intended for the initial readers only. There are always principles and lessons that can be learned from studying the *particular* teachings and mandates because we believe that "all scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." No scripture is to be avoided or dismissed, but not all teaching or mandates are intended for universal application.

The principle for determining whether or not a teaching or mandate is universal or particular is this: "Whenever we share common particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first-century hearers, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them" (*How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart).

Here are some examples of passages whose teachings or mandates are *particular* to first century hearers:

¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13).

²³Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23).

⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved (1 Corinthians 11:5; we'll look at this passage in greater detail later).

Each of these passages contains teachings or mandates that are particular to their first-century hearers. If we sought to follow the command in 2 Timothy 4:13, we would likely not find Paul's cloak or scrolls in Troas because Timothy has already retrieved them. For some among us who suffer from the disease of addiction, obeying Paul's advice to drink a little wine could have devastating consequences. Our particulars are different than were those of the first century hearers – Paul's cloak is no longer in Troas, and our water has been purified more thoroughly than in Timothy's time.

1 Corinthians 11 provides a more difficult analysis, but the vast majority of scholars, regardless of their views on women in leadership, agree that women do not need to wear head-coverings when they pray or prophesy. In first century Corinth an uncovered head on a woman was viewed to be sexually immodest according to the prevailing cultural norms. In our culture, this is not so. So since our particulars are different, this teaching is not universal, but particular. But there is a universal principle that can be gained from this text: women should dress modestly in accordance with applicable cultural standards.

Some passages are easier to recognize as either particular or universal. 1 John 3:23 is clearly *universal*:

²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

Passages that deal with sin and morality are by definition universal. Sin is universal to the human condition. God's standard for sexuality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed are the same for all cultures and times. So passages like Colossians 3:5 are *universal*.

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Some passages that we would view as clearly particular today were not so clear in the past. 1 Peter 2:18 is an example:

¹⁸ Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

In the passages in which Paul is commanding slaves to be subject to their masters, he is imploring them to do so in order that their masters might come to faith. Paul is encouraging them to endure hardship, injustice, and harsh treatment so that others

might know Christ. What Paul is not doing is arguing that slavery is an institution or practice that God supports. Thankfully, many faithful followers of Christ were able to do good interpretation to read these verses in light of the whole of scripture and recognize that God is opposed to injustice in all its forms. These followers of Christ led the movement to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain and slavery in our country. Sadly, others used these verses out of context to argue that the New Testament endorsed the institution of slavery. This is why it is so important that our biblical interpretation is diligent and thorough.

The following pages are intended to present the biblical basis that led to the understanding and position we have reached. This is in no way an exhaustive treatment of this issue; many books have been written and many more will be written on this significant matter.

Creation: God's Design for Humankind

From the beginning, God existed in perfect community within the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God also created human beings to live in perfect community with him and with one another. Genesis 1 says,

26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

We see in Genesis 1:26 that the image of God is both male and female. Men and women reflect God's image equally but in distinct ways. In community with one another we reflect God's image in its fullness. God's design is for men and women to be one with one another as the Trinity is indeed one.

Human beings are created to live in community with God and one another, and to "rule" together as reflected in verse 26. The command to "rule" is given to the man and the woman in verse 28. God's design is for man and woman to co-rule and co-reign in community with one another to advance God's purposes.

The second chapter of Genesis retells the creation account and fills in some important details. We see a stunning statement in Genesis 2:18. After declaring everything in creation very good, God declares a condition within his creation as "not good," despite the fact that sin had not yet entered the world.

18 The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

It is *not* good for the man to be alone, so God made a "helper" to save him from his aloneness. In the language of present-day English, the word "helper" sounds as if it is describing a subordinate. This is not at all the connotation for the Hebrew word used here. The Hebrew word translated "helper" is a word that appears more than twenty times in the Old Testament and nearly every time it appears, it refers to God. Psalm 33:20 says, "We wait in hope for the Lord. He is our *help* and our shield."

Clearly, since this word most frequently refers to God, it does not by itself infer any kind of subordinate status or role.

The "helper" is also "suitable." This word could also be translated "corresponding." The word picture is eye-to-eye or face-to-face. So God created the woman to save the man from his aloneness and in so doing gives the man a partner corresponding to him and who equally, but differently, reflects the image of God.

The account goes further to describe how God causes the man to fall into a deep sleep and removes one of his ribs. It is from the man's rib that the woman is formed. This is a beautiful image of God's design for men and women to relate to one another side-by-side. Neither is intended to be over or under the other. Neither is to be in front or behind.

The Fall: Sin Enters Our World

In Genesis 3, the man and woman disobey God and sin enters the world. We understand Adam and Eve to be equally responsible for sin entering the world. Paul's writing places responsibility on both of them. In Romans 5, he says that sin entered the world through Adam. In I Timothy 2, he states that it was Eve who was deceived, not Adam. As Eve is being deceived and willingly falls into sin, Adam is by her side. When confronted by God, Adam blames Eve (and God) and Eve blames the serpent, but the Scriptures are unequivocal that both are sinners—as are we all. Neither Eve nor Adam is more responsible for sin entering the world. They both fell short of God's creative intent. They both disobeyed. They are equally in need of a Savior.

The immediate impact of sin is the corruption of the relationship between the man and woman. They realize that they are naked and they are ashamed.

Sin also corrupted the manner in which power and authority will be experienced between the genders. In Genesis 3:16, God describes how sin will affect the relationship between them.

16 Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."

It is our understanding that this passage of scripture is *descriptive* of the corrupted relationship between man and woman as a result of sin. We do not believe that it is *prescriptive* for how men and women ought to relate with one another in God's redemptive design.

God's Redemptive Desire: the Old Testament

In a very short period of time this relational corruption between men and women, and the misuse of power, becomes evident in many ways.

One of the most pervasive indications of this corruption is demonstrated in polygamy. God's design is for two to become one. Yet, even in the lives of the Patriarchs—men who are part of God's gracious, redemptive work—polygamy is prevalent. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, has twelve sons by four different women, two of whom are his wives and two of whom are servants of his wives. Solomon takes this perversion of God's design to an extreme level with 700 wives and 300 concubines. It is incontrovertible that sin corrupts the relationships between men and women and the manner in which power and authority are used.

Despite these corruptions and the male-dominated cultures of the Old Testament times, God provides pictures of godly women who lead and speak God's truth authoritatively.

Miriam

Micah 6:4 describes the prophet Miriam as being part of a leadership team, along with Moses and Aaron who led Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

4 I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.

Deborah

In Judges 4, we encounter Deborah, who served Israel as prophet, judge, and leader. She provided political, judicial, and spiritual leadership during a time in history when Israel operated as a theocracy. God blessed her leadership and makes no corrective mention that it was out of order for a woman to be leading men or that she was only leading Israel because no qualified man was available or willing to serve. Deborah led Israel into battle and God provided the victory.

Huldah

In 2 Kings 22 we meet the prophet Huldah. King Josiah “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” He commissioned the rebuilding of the temple and in their rebuilding effort they discover the Book of the Law. When they read it, they were undone because they realized they had fallen away from the ways of God. King Josiah needed someone to tell them what the Book of the Law meant, so he gave this instruction in 2 Kings 22:13:

¹³ “Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.”

To whom did they turn to inquire of the LORD? The high priest and the king's advisors (men) turned to the prophet Huldah and she prophesied, giving them instructions and warnings from God. She spoke on God's behalf, authoritatively to the king and his men. They submitted to her authoritative word from God.

Joel's foretelling

The prophet Joel, writing near the end of the Old Testament period, provides a picture of how God's redemptive design will one day manifest itself, seen in Joel 2:28-29:

²⁸ “And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

So, in the Old Testament, we see God's design for men and women to co-rule and co-reign in community with one another as evidenced in Genesis 1-2. While the predominant leaders and voices are men, we see examples of godly women leading and teaching men, and speaking authoritatively under God's authority.

Jesus Typifies Redemption: the Gospels

No one in history has done more to elevate the status of women than Jesus Christ. One only has to look at the opportunities afforded women in those countries whose cultures are highly influenced by the Christian faith and compare them with countries that have not been so influenced to see this evidenced.

The cultural norm

Jesus entered a culture in which women were marginalized. A common prayer that men prayed in first century Judaism was “I thank you Lord that you did not make me a gentile, a dog, or a woman.” There were rabbis who taught that it was better for Scripture to be burned than to be taught to a woman.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man.” In talking about the practices in the synagogues, Josephus further reported, “The outer court was open to all...women during their impurity were alone refused admission. The second court, all Jews were admitted and, when uncontaminated by any defilement, their wives; to the third *male* Jews.”

Sirach, a Jewish thinker who influenced the culture into which Jesus was born, wrote, “From a woman did sin originate, and because of her we all must die” (Sirach 25:24, 2nd century B.C.).

Jesus entered a world in which women were viewed as inferior—they were relegated to the back of synagogues; they were viewed as being responsible for sin; they were not to be taught; men thanked God daily that they were not women. Against this backdrop, Jesus affirmed and included women in ways that were radical when compared to the norms of his culture.

Jesus introduces a new norm

Women are elevated and included

From the outset of the Gospels we see women elevated and included. The genealogy of Jesus in Mathew lists five women among his lineage. This is counter to cultural norms which would have only mentioned fathers, not mothers. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is praised and honored in the gospel accounts for her faithful service. In Luke 2:36-37, we meet the prophet, Anna, an elderly widow who “never left the temple but worshipped day and night, fasting and praying.”

Women advance his public ministry

Women are a significant part of Jesus' public ministry and he relates with them in ways that are far more inclusive and affirming than prevailing cultural norms. In John 4, his disciples were "surprised to find him talking with a woman" as he engaged the Samaritan woman about deep spiritual truths and even disclosed to her that he was indeed the Messiah. He then sent the woman back to her town where she became an effective evangelist to presumably both men and women. We are told, "Many of the Samaritans of that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39).

John's use of the word "testimony" is provocative since a woman's testimony was not permitted in a court of law in first century Palestine. Jesus shattered a number of cultural barriers in this account. He engaged with a Samaritan at a time when Jews generally did not. He engaged with a sinner, something rabbis and ceremonial clean Jews did not do. And he engaged a woman in a discussion about God, something that rabbis simply did not do. Of these, it was "talking with a woman" that "surprised" his disciples.

The account from Luke 8 demonstrates Jesus engaging women in a far more inclusive manner than prevailing norms:

¹ After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Women travelled with him and were indeed his disciples. These women even helped to fund his ministry out of their own means.

Jesus teaches women

In Luke 10, Jesus was at the home of Mary and Martha:

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

This account would have been striking to a first century reader. Jesus obliterates a significant cultural boundary. Martha was doing what women did—serve the men. Mary, on the other hand, was doing something that the culture did not affirm. She was sitting "at the Lord's feet." This is a technical term that described the posture of a disciple with a rabbi. It is the same Greek word used to describe Paul's relationship with his rabbi, Gamaliel, in Acts 22:3. Rabbis did not teach women. Some rabbis even taught that it was better for the Scripture to be burned than to be taught to a woman. Yet Jesus welcomed Mary into the community of learners. He affirmed her choice saying that she "has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus entrusts women with his first resurrection appearance

In Matthew 28, we see that the first people to whom Jesus appears after he is raised from the dead are women.

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

These women are given the amazing privilege of being the first people ever to be able to proclaim, "He is risen!" Jesus sent them to preach this gospel to men and to give them instruction on his behalf for what to do and where to go to meet him.

Many more passages from Jesus' life could be explored, but it is unchallenged that Jesus included and affirmed women in ways that were far greater than the prevailing culture. But some question, if indeed women are to be leaders within the church, why Jesus did not appoint one or more women to be among his twelve apostles. This is an understandable question. Jesus and his twelve apostles lived together for three full years. They travelled together, ate together, and slept together. And while there were times when women travelled in their company, to include women within this intimate community would have been scandalous. It also would have created a number of very real challenges as married men (some, if not all, of the disciples were married) travelled and lived in such close company with women who were not their wives.

One might also ask why Jesus did not include a Gentile. The inclusion of a Gentile would certainly have been helpful to Paul as he navigated differences of understanding between Jewish and Gentile believers in the early expansion of the Church. One might also ask why Jesus did not include a slave among the twelve. That also could possibly have helped resolve some differences in the Church regarding the institution of slavery.

What is unmistakable is that Jesus included, engaged, and affirmed women far more than prevailing cultural norms. He elevated their status and affirmed their dignity.

Redemption Continues: the Early Church

The early church period was marked by men and women working in redemptive partnership to advance the gospel. In Acts 2, the church period begins when the Holy Spirit descends with power upon the apostles. Peter and the others emerge from the upper room onto the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim the good news. Peter's sermon is the inaugural address of the church. In Acts 2:17-18, he reaches back to the prophet Joel to describe this new movement of God:

17 "In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.'"

This new movement will be marked by the power of the Holy Spirit moving through both men and women. It is striking that of all of the passages of the Old Testament that look forward to Christ's redemptive work, this is the passage that God inspires Peter to cite as he inaugurates the work of the Church.

In Romans 16, Paul mentions the names of people who worked in redemptive partnership to advance the work of God through the Church. Many of the names mentioned are women.

Phoebe

Paul describes Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.² 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.

The manner in which he commends Phoebe is consistent with the manner in which the writer of a letter would commend the person charged with the assignment of delivering the letter. Cultural practices would have required the one who delivered the letter to read it and then answer the recipients' questions. Anyone who has ever read the letter Paul wrote to the Romans can only imagine the questions that would have arisen during that initial session. This significant responsibility was entrusted by Paul to a woman. For her to discharge this responsibility faithfully would have

required Phoebe to provide instruction to the men and women in Rome who received this letter.

Priscilla

³ Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Paul initially met this married couple in Corinth. They then travelled with him to Ephesus where he left them to continue his ministry. Now, apparently, they are ministering together in Rome. In Acts 18, while still in Ephesus, Apollos came to them and “they explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26). Apollos was one of the early evangelists and leaders of the Christian movement. In this passage, Paul lists Priscilla first, before her husband Aquila (as he does in Acts 18), when describing their teaching relationship with Apollos. It would not have been normative for a wife to be named before her husband. Nearly always, husbands were named before their wives and when they were not, the author had a reason for reversing the order. Clearly, Priscilla was a leader and teacher in the early Christian movement and Apollos apparently was very willing to receive instruction from her.

Junia

Continuing in Romans 16:

⁶ Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Throughout the epistles Paul commends men and women who labor alongside him for the sake of the gospel. Rarely does he differentiate them by title or function. Men and women, like Mary, served in redemptive partnerships with Paul and each other to advance God’s purposes. In verse 7, however, Paul does use a title to differentiate when he describes Andronicus and Junia as “apostles.” Andronicus is a man, but Junia is almost certainly a woman. Some translations list “Junias” rather than “Junia.” Junias would be a masculine name and Junia feminine. There is no record of anyone with the name Junias in first century Greek writings. Junia, however, is a common woman’s name. The writings of the early church refer to Junia as a woman. Some later manuscripts have the name listed as Junias. The difference in the Greek is an accent mark over the last letter. The best and most reliable manuscripts and the writings of the early church leaders indicate that the

person Paul is commending as an apostle is a woman named “Junia” and not a man named “Junias.”

Seeing Creation Intent: Gifting

Ephesians 4:11-12 states:

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Equipping gifts for public ministry

These equipping gifts for public ministry were as critical to the advancement of the early church as they are today.

The Apostle

The epistles teach of two different types of “apostles.” The original twelve (with Matthias replacing Judas) and Paul are in a class by themselves. These eyewitnesses to the incarnate life of Christ and authors of the New Testament are unique in their position in church history. However, Paul also refers to others who serve as “apostles.” After the original twelve plus Paul, the word “apostles” refers to those who are gifted by the Holy Spirit and appointed by God (1 Corinthians 12:28) to advance the church into new territory. They are church planters, leaders who take the gospel to new territory. There are very few people named to have served in this role and one of them is a woman, Junia.

The Prophet

The second equipping gift for public ministry listed in Ephesians 4 and in 1 Corinthians 12:28 is that of a prophet. A prophet is not one who primarily or even necessarily predicts the future. A prophet is one who is gifted by God to speak the word of God authoritatively and to apply God's word authoritatively to current circumstances.

In Grace Fellowship Church's understanding of the gifts of the Spirit, the prophetic gift is defined as:

“A divine anointing of one grounded in Scripture and his or her walk with God, who speaks for God; passionately challenging believers to the highest standard of God's Word and using the Word to convict and stimulate people to action. A prophet functions with the highest personal standard reflecting God's reputation and character, is perceptive of cultural and spiritual conditions addressing them openly, and is given insight into God's will and purpose for His people. Because the prophet is able to spontaneously and persuasively declare God's Word or will, he or she bears greater responsibility

for what is said. Everything the prophet declares in the name of God must be aligned with God's Word" (Definition of Gifts, Grace Fellowship Church).

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, men *and* women serve in prophetic roles. We saw Huldah and Miriam named as prophets above. In the New Testament, we have already mentioned Anna. Luke records prophecy from both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Martha, her cousin and John the Baptist's mother. Philip's four daughters are named as prophets. In 1 Corinthians 11, women are encouraged to prophesy, as long as their heads are covered (which we will discuss later in this document).

1 Corinthians 14:3, 31 tell us:

³ But those who prophesy speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort... ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

In the early New Testament church, God used both men *and* women to speak His Word authoritatively to strengthen, encourage, comfort, and instruct the people of God.

The Evangelist

The third equipping gift for public ministry is that of the evangelist. Although there are few people, men or women, who are specifically listed as evangelists, we see many who are clearly serving in that role. The Samaritan woman is described in John 4 from whom "many believed." Priscilla and her husband Aquila clearly were doing ground-breaking evangelistic work alongside Paul. Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3) "contended at (Paul's) side in the cause of the gospel."

No one questions whether or not women served as prophets or evangelists. The Bible is absolutely clear that they did. So if women served as apostles, prophets, and evangelists, are they not gifted to serve as pastors and teachers? While, thoughtful scholars and faithful churches do not all agree on this, we believe that these offices are also open to women who are appropriately gifted and called.

Gifts given without regard to gender

All scholars do agree that the gifts of the Spirit are given without regard to gender as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

It is the Spirit that determines to whom a particular gift is given. Paul says again in Romans 12:

⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

The gifts are given without regard to gender, and each of us is responsible to use the gifts God has given us. The church has the responsibility to create an environment where each person has the opportunity to discover his or her gifts and use these to build up the body and advance God's purposes in the world. Leaders are to lead; teachers are to teach; and givers are to give.

The priesthood of all believers

1 Peter 2:9 tells us:

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

No one would argue that this declaration by Peter is meant for men, but not for women even though the Jewish priesthood was exclusively male. It was also, by definition, exclusively Jewish. The priesthood was only open to men who were born into the tribe of Levi. Peter makes this strong declaration that *all* of us who follow Christ are now priests—able to appropriate the grace of God to others. At GFC, we strongly affirm the priesthood of all believers and believe that the distinctions between clergy and laity should be minimal. We are all ministers of the gospel, male and female, clergy and laity.

Paul says it this way in Galatians 3:

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

While the context of this verse is that salvation is for all, it is also clear that Paul is breaking down the barriers that separate us from one another as a result of sin and declaring a new day.

All scholars agree that in the early church, men and women worked together, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to advance the work of God and to bring the gospel to the world.

Now we will turn our attention to the passages of Scripture around which most of these discussions about women in leadership generally take place.

Key Passages: a Discussion

Husband of one wife

There are three positions of church governance mentioned in the epistles: overseer, elder and deacon. For each of these positions, qualifications are listed as requirements for service in these roles. While many of the qualifications are different for these different offices, one qualification is identical:

² Now the overseer is to be above reproach, *faithful to his wife* (1 Timothy 3:2).

⁶ An elder must be blameless, *faithful to his wife* (Titus 1:6).

¹² A deacon must be *faithful to his wife* (1 Timothy 3:12).

This phrase, “faithful to his wife,” is often translated “husband of one wife.” The literal in the Greek is “one woman man.” In the Greek, there is no specific word for “husband” or “wife.” Instead, the words “man” and “woman” are used and the reader must determine, based on the context, whether the writer is speaking about a “man” generically or a “husband” specifically.

So the question is: What criteria is Paul requiring?

A literal interpretation would require overseers, elders, and deacons to be married men. This would preclude Paul from such service, as he was single. This would also preclude Timothy, the man to whom Paul wrote two of these instructions, because most scholars believe that he was also single. Even though a literal reading of the text would require it, scholars are divided as to whether Paul is requiring overseers, elders, and deacons to be married, although there are some who do.

Is Paul then requiring that only *men* may serve in these offices? We discussed earlier that Phoebe was described as a “deacon.” There are some who argue that Paul described her in the generic sense of that word (servant) as opposed to the specific sense of the word (office of deacon). Most scholars believe, however, that Phoebe indeed served in the office of deacon and there is virtual unanimity among scholars that there were women who were deacons. So it is clear, at least as it refers to deacons, that this requirement does not preclude women from service.

Perhaps the virtue that Paul is requiring in order to serve as an overseer, elder, or deacon is *fidelity*, as opposed to gender. Would it have been reasonable for Paul to assume that most, if not all elders in the contexts of these letters, would be men? It might be. Women were largely uneducated and had little opportunity to develop the leadership qualities that would be necessary to serve well as an overseer or elder. Some might ask, specifically as it relates to elder, were there any women

named to have served as an elder in the New Testament. There were not. But there are very few men specifically named in the New Testament serving in this office.

One might also ask if our particulars are different from the first-century church as they relate to a woman being prepared to serve as an elder. Women today are as educated as men. They have many opportunities to develop, demonstrate, and refine their leadership and governance skills. This was not so in the first century.

Therefore, our belief is that these passages of Scripture teach that elders (as well as overseers and deacons) must be *faithful* to their marital commitments.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

The next passage of Scripture that we will discuss is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35:

³⁴ Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

This is a passage that is often interpreted to mean that women may not teach in the church, particularly from the pulpit in the context of weekend services. As with any passage of Scripture, it is important to read it in the context in which it rests.

Orderliness, not chaos

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians deals with a number of issues within the church, but one of the most prominent themes and the one being addressed in this section of the letter is order within the worship service. The Corinthian church was experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in some profound ways. Unfortunately, there was also a good bit of disorder—there were problems with the way in which the Lord's Supper was being administered, there were issues of propriety of dress, and there were issues of people speaking in tongues without interpretation.

In Chapter 11, Paul encourages both men and women to pray and prophesy in the church. In 14:26 he says, "When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up." So, when Paul says in verse 14:34 that women must remain silent, he does not mean complete silence, otherwise he is contradicting himself.

Learning not Teaching

It is also important to note that the context of his correction is *not* that women are teaching. It is that women are *learning*. It is impossible for us to fully understand the significance of this fact. In the early church, it was revolutionary that women were

being invited into the community of learners. This is a new day for the people of God in light of the larger culture.

For a variety of reasons, women were largely excluded from educational opportunities. Jews in Corinth were influenced by the prevailing Jewish practices of limiting the educational opportunities for women and relegating them to the back of the synagogues. Everyone in Corinth would have been influenced by the teachings of Aristotle. Aristotle was the dominant thought leader who influenced first-century Greek culture. He believed that women were inferior to men and were, by nature, defective. He also believed that the value of women was limited to their functions of procreation and work. Therefore, women were largely uneducated in this cultural context.

The early church changed this. Christians welcomed women into the community of learners. This is profound and should not be overlooked in this passage.

By way of background, it is also helpful to remember that the first century church did not gather in large buildings like ours today. The churches met in homes that could accommodate twenty to fifty people at most. The prevailing teaching method employed at the time was the Socratic Method which was very interactive. Questions were raised both by the teachers and the students. Students of the Socratic Method were encouraged as novices to remain quiet and listen attentively. More experienced students were invited to engage in the dialogue and questioning.

Against this backdrop, is it possible that Paul is encouraging women who are new to the learning environment to remain quiet and submissive – the posture of a learner – and to refrain from entering the discussion? Instead of disrupting the flow of teaching, they are encouraged to save their questions and ask their husbands later, when they are home. While this might sound repressive to twenty-first century Americans, it was radically inclusive when compared with the prevailing culture of their day.

When Paul says, “They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says,” there is no scholarly consensus on the “law” to which Paul is referring. There is no Old Testament law requiring women to be silent. No one is aware of a local ordinance that would have required silence.

Particular, not universal

So, is Paul's teaching for women to remain silent universal or particular? Is Paul requiring complete silence, which a literal reading would require? Or is he asking women, who are new to the community of learners, to assume the posture of a

learner? Our understanding is that this requirement is *particular* to the first century. Women today are as equally qualified as men to engage in the learning process. It would in no way be disrespectful or lacking in submission for a woman (or a man) to ask questions within the learning context, assuming that it was a context that entertained questions.

The universal principle that we can gain from this is that we should require that people learn and engage in the worship experience in ways that promote order and peace, and that we should all assume the posture of learners when teaching is being conducted.

1 Timothy 2:9-14

The next passage that we will discuss is 1 Timothy 2:9-14:

⁹ I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

This is a difficult passage and there is not scholarly consensus on a number of issues within it. Let's begin by considering the context:

Artemis: goddess of fertility

Paul's first letter to Timothy is largely corrective in nature. Timothy is serving in Ephesus at the time and there is a significant concern regarding false teachings and doctrine. There are people who want to teach, but they "do not know what they are talking about or so confidently affirm" (1 Timothy 1:7).

Ephesus is also the location of the temple to the goddess Artemis. This temple is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is a significant influence in the culture within Ephesus. In Acts 19, there is a riot when Paul initially brings the gospel there because people did not want this new teaching to disrupt the worship of Artemis and the commercial interests of the temple. They chanted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" (Acts 19:28).

Artemis was the fertility goddess to whom women prayed for safety in childbirth. Bearing children was risky in the ancient world and it is not surprising that women looked “to the gods” for assistance. Women believed that Artemis would keep them safe in childbirth, or if the pain was too great, would deliver them to their death.

Artemis: female domination

In the worship of Artemis, women dominated men. According to the Greek myths, the goddess Artemis killed the male gods Adonis and Orion.

So the culture of Ephesus had a variety of influences. The prevailing Greek culture would have viewed women as inferior and would have provided them with little or no educational opportunities. The cult of Artemis elevated women over men.

Against this backdrop, let's look at the passage, verse by verse:

Verses 9, 10

⁹ I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

Women belonging to the cult of Artemis did not dress modestly; instead, they dressed provocatively. As mentioned earlier, standards for immodest dress vary from culture to culture. So Paul's specific prohibitions against elaborate hairstyles (braided hair), gold, pearls, or expensive clothes are particular to the cultural setting, but the encouragement to dress with decency and propriety can be understood to be universal. Paul wanted to make sure that the women of the church were differentiated from the women of Artemis.

Verse 11

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

Just as we discussed when looking at 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, we cannot miss the fact that this command for women to learn is radically inclusive when compared to cultural norms. The verb tense is imperative—a woman *should* learn. This is a command and demonstrates new values being taught by the church about women. Unlike what Aristotle taught, women are not valued simply for the functions they perform, but are welcomed into the community of learners. Her posture for learning, however, should be one of quietness and submission—as should be the posture of any learner.

Verse 12

¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

While Paul used the imperative verb tense in the previous verse (“a woman *should* learn”), here he uses the indicative verb tense. This could just as accurately be translated, “I am not currently permitting a woman to teach.” Is Paul saying that before one can teach, she must learn? Earlier in the letter, he said that some wanted to teach, but didn’t know what they were talking about.

The structure of the Greek here also connects “teach” with “assume authority.” A more literal translation would be, “I permit a woman to neither teach nor assume authority over (authentain) a man.”

In this structure, teach and authority are linked. According to the Greek grammatical structure of the day, when a sentence read “neither a nor b,” it meant one of the following: either a and b are opposites (neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Gentile) or that the second is an extension of the first (neither night nor darkness). Clearly in this case, they are not opposite.

So if the second (assume authority over) is an extension of the first (to teach), it is important that we understand what Paul means by “assume authority over.” There is a challenge for us today because there is no scholarly consensus on what the Greek word “authentain” means. It is translated “assume authority over” or “have authority over.” But it is a very unusual word. It appears once in the entire New Testament. There are only two recorded uses of the word in Greek literature prior to or contemporary with the New Testament. There is another word that Paul used dozens of times to talk about authority (“exousia”). It would seem clear that Paul is trying to communicate something unique about the type of “authority” he is prohibiting here.

Many scholars believe that this word, “authentain,” has a very negative connotation. The first time the words were translated out of Greek and into another language was in the fourth century when they were translated into Latin. At that time, this word was translated “dominate.”

So in using this word, is Paul prohibiting women from ever having authority over men? Or is he saying that women should not dominate men, as was the practice in the cult of Artemis?

Many scholars believe that Paul is prohibiting women from dominating men—or teaching them in a domineering way. There are other scholars who believe that the

word “authentain” does not carry a negative connotation at all and Paul is simply and clearly prohibiting women from exercising authority over men.

However, if women are never to exercise authority over men, what about Deborah in the Old Testament?

The argument for this being a particular, rather than a universal, teaching is strong. Our cultural situation is vastly different from first century Ephesus. On the other hand, the argument that this is a universal, rather than particular command is also strong, because Paul refers back to creation to support it.

Verses 13, 14

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

Some read this to mean that women are inherently more easily deceived than men and are therefore predisposed to falling victim to false teaching more readily and, consequently, should not be able to teach. This was the teaching of the church for centuries. Other, more thoughtful complementarian scholars would say that Paul is demonstrating that there is a God-ordained order and men are to lead and teach and this passage is, therefore, universal in its application.

There is variability in interpretation even among those who believe this is a universal teaching. Some believe that men should never sit under the teaching of women. Others believe that the fact that “teach” is linked with “authentain” means that women cannot teach men authoritatively and therefore limit the application to teaching within church services. Some allow women to teach when under the authority of men. Some prominent female teachers have men stand on the platform with them so that it is clear that they are under the authority of men.

It is our understanding that this is a particular teaching and that Paul is saying two things. First, anyone should learn before they teach, and secondly, no one should seek to dominate another. Our understanding is that Paul's reference to creation and Eve's deception is to correct those who would argue that women ought to dominate men. In Romans 5, Paul says that sin entered the world through one man, Adam. Here, he says that it was Eve who was deceived. We err when we make either the man or the woman more responsible for sin. We are all sinners in the eyes of God. We are equally responsible for sin and are all equally in need of a Savior.

Verse 15

¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

This is another difficult verse, but becomes much clearer in light of the cultural context. Paul is not arguing that women will be saved (in the sense that they will get into heaven) through childbearing. We are all saved by grace through faith, not as a result of works. Some argue that Paul is talking here about the high calling of motherhood. Motherhood is indeed a high calling and one that is clearly reserved for women. But there are many women who are unable to have children and others who never become married. Does this mean that their standing with God is somehow diminished in light of this? We believe not.

Perhaps Paul is refuting the prevailing myths that Artemis keeps women safe through childbirth and is telling them that it is through God alone that we can be saved. Is he encouraging them to entrust their safety and security to the God of the universe and his Son Jesus Christ and not to the mythical goddess Artemis, whom they believed to be the protector of childbearing women? Context matters and understanding the context helps us understand this more fully.

Note: Some who have the conviction that men should never be under the authority of a woman may feel that as a matter of conscience, they must leave this church if women serve as elders. It is important to note that our elder team believes that our authority is collective authority, not individual authority. We make decisions as a group of elders, not as individuals. We do not believe that individual members of our church are subject to the authority of individual elders. We all submit to the team of elders, not to individual elders.

1 Corinthians 11:3-14

The question of headship is an important part of this discussion because it speaks to God's design for men and women in relationship with one another. We want to affirm at the outset that we believe the passage unequivocally teaches headship. Therefore, it is very important for us to understand what this does and does not mean.

There are two passages of Scripture that we will explore regarding headship. In 1 Corinthians 11:3-14 Paul writes:

³ But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵ But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶ For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

⁷ A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

¹³ Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵ but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

Context

There has been a great deal of scholarly work done to understand this passage of Scripture and faithful scholars do not all agree with one another. Paul is dealing with a couple of major themes in this letter to the church at Corinth. First, the surrounding culture within Corinth is highly engaged in sexual immorality and these immoral practices have infiltrated the church community. Secondly, he is concerned about disorder in the worship practices. This passage addresses both of these concerns directly and in so doing points out God's design for the relationships between men and women.

The women of the Corinthian church are apparently attending their worship services dressed immodestly. Women whose heads were uncovered in public were immodest and provocative, according to the standards of the day. Similarly to our discussion of 1 Timothy 2, the particulars are different today when it comes to what is or is not immodest, but the principle of dressing in a manner that is respectful of men and appropriately modest is universal.

What did Paul mean by “head”?

In this context Paul begins his argument by writing, “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man and the head of Christ is God.” Clearly, Paul is writing figuratively. He uses the Greek word “kephale” that is translated “head.” We need to be very careful not to impose a twenty-first century English understanding on a first century Greek word.

As we will also see in the work on Ephesians 5 below, this is a translation issue in which there is not agreement within the scholarly community. For most of us, the common figurative sense of “head” as ruler or leader immediately suggests itself.

Such a reading can lead to a hierarchical interpretation of Paul's teaching. Some who stand in this interpretive tradition will go so far as to suggest a "chain of command" where authority is passed along from God to Christ to man to woman, in that order. One must note that when "kephale" is interpreted in this way, we have God occupying a rank superior to Christ, and thus a potential revival of the early heresy of "subordinationism," and a challenge to the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity.

Furthermore, if husbands/men are under the authority of Christ, and women are under the authority of their husbands, we have a situation wherein women are only indirectly related to Christ. Clearly, women may enjoy a direct relationship with Jesus. Just as clearly, the man is called the "head" of the woman. So the core issue centers on the question, "What is the meaning of kephale (head) in the common Greek language of this time?" This is where one must apply good hermeneutical practice. How would Greek-speaking Christians in Corinth have heard Paul when he used kephale?

The linguistic evidence points strongly away from a meaning of "chief" or "ruler." The most exhaustive Greek-English lexicon covering Greek literature from 900 B.C. through A.D. 600, among numerous metaphorical meanings for kephale, contains not a single definition to indicate that in ordinary Greek usage it included the meaning of "superior rank" or "leader" or "authority." Interestingly, in the 1897 eighth revised edition of this lexicon, the final entry under "metaphorical" meanings is "of persons, a chief." But not a single citation from any text is cited to support or illustrate such a definition. In light of the lack of evidence, this definition was deleted in subsequent editions.

However, the range of meanings for kephale in Greek literature included most often, "origin" or "source" and "crown" or "completion." These meanings do far greater justice to Paul's use of kephale in the New Testament. One must note that nowhere else in the New Testament is "kephale" used to designate a figure of authority. Additional compelling support comes from the Septuagint (LXX), where the Greek translators of the Hebrew Old Testament faced a similar challenge with the Hebrew word "ros," meaning "head." Ros has a range of meanings that demand agile translation. More than 200 times "ros" clearly refers to a physical head, yet the Greek translators almost always use "kephale." In the 180 times ros refers to "leader," the Greek translators choose "archon" 138 times. "Archon" means ruler or commander. The other 42 times, other Greek words for leader are chosen, with only eight exceptions. It is clear that Greek translators were keenly aware that kephale did not generally carry a meaning of "ruler" or "authority." The

best translation based on this evidence is that the literal translation of “head” in this passage carries a metaphorical meaning of “source” or “origin.”

The Greek reader of the time may have understood this passage similarly to Cyril of Alexandria (an important leader of the church in the 4th century) who wrote about this passage, “...the kephale of every man is Christ, because he was excellently made through him. And the kephale of woman is man, because she was taken from his flesh...” This refutes the previously mentioned problems with the translation, yet still satisfies all the requirements of the passage.

1 Corinthians 11:7-9 furthermore confirms this meaning where Paul clearly has the creation narrative of Genesis 1-2 in mind.

⁷ A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

Paul is here considering the sequence of creation of the human species, and deliberately referring the reader back to the duality of the male-female image of God. After doing this hermeneutical work, the reader would be well served when reading “head,” to substitute the metaphorical “source” for the default metaphor “ruler” or “leader,” and the text would translate, “I want you to understand that Christ is the source of man’s being, and man is the source of woman’s being; and God is the source of Christ’s being.” This reading sheds clear light on the rest of 1 Corinthians 11.

Creation Intent

Verses 11-12 are perfect New Testament reflections of creation design, and they would be read with surprise in this ancient culture.

¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

These verses present the conclusion of this passage. Men and women are to live together in an interdependent community. They are not the same—they reflect God’s image in distinct ways, but neither is meant to operate independently of the other.

Ephesians 5:21-33

Ephesians 5: 21-33 states:

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Background

This passage speaks to the relationship between husbands and wives and the relationship between Christ and his Church. We do not believe that the manner in which men and women are to relate within marriage is intended by God to be universally applied for how men and women are to relate within the church. For example, a husband is the head of his wife (we'll talk more about what that means). That does not mean that all men are the head of all women—or that a man is the “head” of any woman other than his wife. Underscoring this point, the NASB renders 1 Corinthians 11:13 as “the man is the head of a woman.” We believe this to be a more accurate translation of the Greek.

Furthermore, the elders are not the head of the church; Christ is the head of the church. We will not take an exhaustive look at this passage, but we will make a couple of observations that are relevant to our discussion about women in leadership within the context of the church.

Paul is using marriage as a metaphor for how Christ relates to the church. It is at this point that we must be very clear: Paul is not saying that the elders of a church are the head of the church. When Paul speaks metaphorically about the Church being the bride of Christ, Christ is the head and all of us collectively are his bride. We, male and female alike, are his body.

By welcoming women who are appropriately gifted and called to serve as elders or teachers within our weekend services, we are not redefining the roles for men and women within the context of marriage.

But the passage does speak about the interdependent nature of men and women and God's design for how we are to relate to one another within marriage. It also gives us clues about gender differences. With this as a backdrop, we will take a brief look at this passage.

Mutual submission

First, this passage must begin with verse 21, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." The verb "submit" does not occur in verse 22. Verse 22, literally says just, "Wives to husbands."

God's design for marriage is one of mutual submission. We are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. That having been said, it is clear from the rest of the passage that the ways in which submission expresses it is different for the man than for it is the woman.

The wife is commanded submit to her husband in everything as to the Lord. This would not have been a surprising command for women to receive. According to the prevailing cultural norms, women were treated by their husbands as possessions and would have been submissive to them in everything. They needed little further instruction about what it meant for a wife to submit to her husband. Despite the fact that their status and freedom were being elevated by their participation in the life of the early church, Paul does not eliminate a wife's need to submit to her husband. He does, however, elevate her status and dignity by painting a new picture of marriage in which the husband also submits to his wife.

In this new picture for marriage, Paul makes it clear that the husband is commanded to love his wife as Christ loved the Church "and gave himself up for her." Moving back to our discussion of head (kephale) above, we get clues for the nature of what Paul is taking about. How did Christ love the Church? He gave himself up for her. Christ's love was an initiating, self-sacrificing love. Christ is the head (source) of the Church. It is out of Christ's death and resurrection that the church was born. Christ's death brought life to the church. He is our source.

In Christ's death on the cross, he gave up something that was precious and dear to him—his very life—in order to bring life to the church. Paul is instructing husbands that the days of dominating their wives for their own pleasures and preferences are over. This passage is ground-breaking for how men are to relate to their wives.

Many will say that Christ is the authority for the church—and they are absolutely correct. So is Paul also saying that the husband is the authority of the wife? Generally, when Paul spoke of Christ as our authority, the word he chose was “Lord.” Here, he uses the metaphor “head” (kephale). As we have discussed previously, it would have been unusual to use kephale to figuratively mean “authority figure.”

Those who do read this to mean “authority” (and many faithful Christians do) will do well to understand the nature of authority as Jesus taught for it to be exercised. In Matthew 20, Jesus says,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Whether we understand head (kephale) to mean “source” or “authority,” it is important to note that Paul’s instructions are to the wife for *how* she is to submit and to the husband for *how* he is to submit. They are both to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul’s teaching is directed to the husband and wife for how each should submit to the other, not how a husband should force his wife’s submission, or how the wife can make her husband love her well. Submission by its very nature is voluntary and, in this case, mutual.

One thing is clear from this passage, men and women are different and we are to relate to one another in unique ways. Verse 33 provides the conclusion for this section of Scripture in which Paul writes, “However, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” A husband’s submission to his wife most often takes the form of initiating, self-sacrificing love. A wife’s submission to her husband takes the form of respect.

In verse 32, Paul calls this relationship of husband and wife as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and his church as a “profound mystery.” If Paul had been referring to a traditional, hierarchal view, there would be no mystery. Instead, Paul is painting a new picture for men and women to live in mutual respect and interdependent community—with each taking personal responsibility to follow this new paradigm for marriage.

Next Steps: Some Thoughts on Authority and Unity

When we read the Scripture from beginning to end, we see that God is a giver of authority. In the first chapter of Genesis, God gives the man and the woman the authority to “rule” God’s newly created world. When Jesus established his Church, he said to Peter in Matthew 16:

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

In Matthew 28, Jesus says,

“All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...”

God ultimately has all of the authority and yet he gives it freely to his people to empower them to do his work. As we saw above, God has given the church the authority to bind and loose. The church has the responsibility to make the decisions that are necessary to accomplish the work God has given us to do. Scripture is the authoritative basis for how we are to exercise that responsibility. In this case, we believe that our study of the Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit have led us to the conviction that women, who are appropriately gifted and called, are to be welcomed to serve as elders, to teach in our weekend services, and to be considered for ordination.

Other churches have reached different convictions on these matters and their governing bodies have the authority to bind and loose different practices for their churches. We love and respect churches and Christians who think differently on this issue, and we can and will work together with those who differ from us on this issue in the work of the Church to advance the kingdom of God.

We, the elders of Grace Fellowship Church, believe that by inviting women into the community of elders and providing the opportunity for them to fully release their teaching and leadership gifts, we are following God’s example of giving authority to others to advance God’s purposes.

We also recognize that there are some in our body who will have a conviction that the Scripture teaches the complementarian view that, while men and women are equally created in God’s image, there are distinct roles for men and women in the church—and that women should not serve as elders or teach from the pulpit. While we disagree with this view, we welcome those who hold these convictions to

remain in our congregation as fully participating members for the sake of unity within the body. Christ prayed that his church would be one, just as He and the Father are one. Christian unity does not always mean agreement. In fact, it is perhaps more profound for us to be unified when we have differences in understanding and theology than when we agree on everything.

Those among us who differ in this view are welcome to teach and lead and fully use the gifts God has given them. When someone who has a different view on this matter of women in leadership is teaching or leading a group and this topic is raised, he or she is free to express his or her personal theological understanding, while simultaneously, respectfully explaining the church's position. There are many issues about which we don't all agree. This is an issue, however, in which the church must take a position. We welcome those who disagree, as long as we can fellowship together in love and respect and as long as those who disagree can, in good conscience, fully participate in the life of the church.

Our hope, prayer, and expectations are that as the gifts and calling of women are fully released, the work of Christ's church will be advanced in greater and fuller ways. We also believe that we will experience more of God's design intent as men and women serve in leadership communities together, in mutual submission, according to gifting.

The Governing Elders of Grace Fellowship Church
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