

## **MEN AND WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AT IRVING BIBLE CHURCH**

**At Irving Bible Church, we believe that God created both men and women in his image, that he offers the same Holy Spirit at salvation, and that the same spiritual gifts are given to both men and women for service. We believe that the gifts and callings of God are given to both men and women and are intended for the building up of the body of Christ. Therefore, the elders of Irving Bible Church affirm that both men and women are scripturally qualified, spiritually gifted, and divinely called to serve and lead side by side in every area in the life of the church. This includes roles of teaching and spiritual leadership as they faithfully use their gifts to advance the cause of Christ's kingdom in the world.**

### **Introduction**

The roles and relationships of men and women in the life and leadership of the church have long been the subject of thoughtful discussion, disagreement, and debate among faithful Christians. Across the evangelical world (and within our own congregation), there are sincere followers of Jesus, committed to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, who arrive at different conclusions on these questions. Because Irving Bible Church is committed to being formed by Scripture, our desire has been to pursue a careful, humble, culturally informed reading of the Bible, not to arrive at conclusions based on cultural pressure or personal preference. This document summarizes the conclusions reached by our elder board after an extended season of study, prayer, and discernment.

It is of the utmost importance that we make clear that the theological position articulated in this paper does not suggest that there are no differences between men and women. Rather, it is our position that the church is better off when those differences are represented in every area of ministry and leadership. To affirm the equal gifting and calling of men and women is not to deny their differences but to recognize that God has created us as distinct and complementary, and that the church flourishes when those distinct voices, gifts, and perspectives are brought together in ministry and leadership. This theological conviction, we believe, is *biblical, practical, and missional*.

**Biblical:** For the reasons outlined below, we believe that the Bible does not place any necessary restrictions on women's service in the church. Rather, we believe that the Bible — when read in its entirety and with careful attention to its language and cultural backgrounds — affirms that both men and women are gifted by the Spirit to contribute to the building up of the body of Christ and the advancement of the mission of God in the world. This is consistent with the entire witness of Scripture, from the account of creation and fall, through the story of Israel, to the life and ministry of Jesus, and on to the account of the life and mission of the early church. In creation, men and women are given equal status, dignity, and calling. In Christ, men and women share equally in the new life of the kingdom, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the call to participate in God's mission in the world. The biblical vision is of the

“blessed alliance,”<sup>1</sup> men and women serving together side by side for the cause of Christ and his kingdom.

**Practical:** We believe that the full participation of both men and women in every area of ministry and leadership in the church is of tremendous practical benefit. We believe that this commitment leads to better decision making, as the full range of experiences and perspectives from both men and women in our body can be brought to bear on complex pastoral and organizational decisions. This helps us avoid potential blind spots, overlooked realities, or limitations of perspective or judgment. Further, we believe that this commitment leads to better care for the whole body as both men and women use their gifts, experiences, and perspectives to care for the needs of the congregation. Some people feel naturally safer sharing sensitive pastoral concerns with other men or other women. Having both in every area of ministry and leadership strengthens and expands our capacity to care for the needs of the congregation. Finally, diverse leadership helps us ensure that different voices and experiences are heard and valued in every area of the life of our church. It helps ensure that more people feel seen, understood, and supported by the leadership and ministries of our church family. And it allows men and women in every age and stage of life to imagine how their gifts might be welcomed and employed as they see others like them serving and leading without limitation. When both men and women lead, the church more clearly reflects the fullness of the body of Christ and allows more people to recognize that their gifts matter, are needed, and are welcomed.

**Missional:** We believe that the full participation of both men and women side by side in every area of the church’s life best positions us to faithfully and effectively pursue our mission of “helping our diverse community follow Jesus and bless the world.” Our witness to the world is enhanced when the whole community is mobilized to use their gifts for the glory of God, the good of his people, and the cause of his mission. The early church had a transformational influence on the Roman Empire in part because of the “blessed alliance.” The church’s view and treatment of women stood in stark contrast to the surrounding culture in ways that lead to great missional impact.<sup>2</sup> We believe that the same can be true for us today. We live in a time when there is an alarming exodus of women — particularly young women — from the church in North America. This is largely due to the ways that they perceive their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to be largely overlooked, neglected, or denied in the church. But we have an opportunity to show the world a better way, to show that this is not the way that things are meant to be in the community of Jesus. We believe that our church’s witness to the world is strengthened and enhanced by the visible partnership of men and women in the work of the gospel.

---

<sup>1</sup> This phrase comes from Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church: Recapturing God’s Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in Just a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), especially Chapter 5: “The Role of Women in Christian Growth.”

## **Our Biblical Convictions**

In approaching this topic, we began with a foundational commitment to the integrity, consistency, and authority of Scripture. We believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, is authoritative for the church, and does not contradict itself. We have sought to interpret it faithfully, allowing the whole counsel of God's word to shape our understanding. Believing the truth that "Scripture interprets Scripture," we have sought to allow the clearer passages of Scripture and the broader biblical narrative to help us understand more difficult passages. At the same time, we recognize that every reader approaches Scripture with cultural questions and assumptions that can influence interpretation. Responsible interpretation, therefore, requires careful attention to both the cultural and historical context of the original author and audience and to the ways in which cultural factors have shaped how these texts have been understood through the centuries.

It is also important to note that the Bible itself was composed in cultural settings that often assumed the inherent inferiority of women. Yet, against this cultural backdrop, the Bible repeatedly affirms the gifting, calling, and ministry of women, from the creation account, through the story of Israel, to the life and ministry of Jesus, and on to the widespread leadership of women in the early church. Over time, however, the church sometimes took on the surrounding cultural assumptions that restricted women's participation in leadership. In revisiting these questions together, we have sought to distinguish between what the Bible actually teaches and the cultural patterns that have shaped how it has sometimes been interpreted.

The pages that follow summarize the biblical and theological convictions that have led us to affirm the full participation of men and women side by side in every area of ministry and leadership in the life of the church. Our findings can be summarized with the following four theological claims:

- 1. The accounts of creation and fall (Genesis 1-3) reveal a fundamental equality of status, dignity, and calling between men and women.**
- 2. Women exercised significant ministry roles of teaching and leading with God's blessing in both the Old and New Testaments.**
- 3. Key New Testament passages that seem to restrict women's roles were culturally and historically specific, not universal principles for all times and places.**
- 4. The Bible does not insist upon any necessary restriction of women's service to and leadership of the local church, therefore, neither should we.**

The remainder of this document will expound upon these statements.

1. The accounts of creation and fall (Genesis 1-3) reveal a fundamental equality of status, dignity, and calling between men and women.

The Bible provides significant insight into the understanding of the relationship between men and women in its opening pages. The account of creation found in Genesis 1 and 2 gives us God's intention for his image bearers. The account of the fall in Genesis 3 shows how God's intentions are disrupted by sin. These insights provide a theological foundation for all that comes later in the Bible.

### **A. Equal Status, Dignity, and Calling**

Genesis 1:26-28 declares that men and women are equally made in God's image and share the same divine mandate.

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make mankind 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."

<sup>27</sup>So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>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."

In Genesis 1:26-28, God creates humanity in his image, giving both male and female the mandate to rule, fill, and subdue the earth. The human "job title" is "image of God." Our job description is "rule," "fill," and "subdue." This cultural mandate is given to both men and women without distinction, demonstrating that there is no hierarchical structure in their original roles. The radical nature of this statement in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context is profound. While surrounding cultures reserved the image of God designation only for kings, Genesis affirms that every human being — both male and female — bears God's image and is entrusted with his mission.

Being made in the image of God means human beings have an unmatched dignity in all of creation. This status is shared equally by men and women. Unlike other ANE societies where women had lesser status, the biblical account affirms equal worth and purpose from the outset. This was profoundly countercultural for the ancient world.

## B. Mutuality and Partnership

In Genesis 2, the woman is created as an *ezer kenegdo*, an equal ally corresponding to the man. There is no indication of hierarchy or authority between the man and woman prior to the fall.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>18</sup>The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper [*ezer*] suitable for him [*kenegdo*].”

Some argue that the order of creation implies hierarchy. However, the Genesis narrative itself does not suggest that woman’s later formation indicates subordination. The Hebrew word *ezer* (Genesis 2:18), often translated “helper,” is not a term of inferiority or subordination. In fact, *ezer* is most frequently used in the Old Testament to describe Yahweh himself as Israel’s help (e.g., Psalm 33:20, Psalm 115:9-11, Deuteronomy 33:29). The word shows up most frequently throughout the Old Testament in the context of battle. It is not a weak word, but a strong one. The term carries the connotation of a “strong ally” or “fellow warrior” supplying what is lacking. There is no sense of inferiority or subordination in the word or its uses throughout the Old Testament.

The term *kenegdo* in Genesis 2:18 means “corresponding to” or “facing,” suggesting equality and partnership. Therefore, *ezer kenegdo* implies a relationship of equal partners rather than a hierarchical helper.

<sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

Genesis 2:21-22 states that God took part of the man to create the woman. The Hebrew word *tse/a*, often translated as “rib,” more literally means “side,” suggesting a more holistic sense of shared nature rather than mere derivation from a small part of Adam’s body. This imagery reinforces the idea that woman was not taken from Adam’s head to rule over him, nor from his feet to be subjugated, but from his side to stand beside him as an equal partner. Throughout the Old Testament, *tse/a* is often used architecturally to refer to corresponding or equal parts of a structure, further supporting the idea of mutuality in the creation of man and woman.

## C. Hierarchy as a Consequence of Sin

In Genesis 3:16, God describes to the woman the tragic consequences of the fall:

---

<sup>3</sup> Those who argue for some sense of hierarchy based on the order of creation do so on the basis of the principle of “primogeniture,” the priority of the firstborn. It must be kept in mind that primogeniture (1) is not a timeless theological principle, (2) is elsewhere only relevant to the birth order of siblings (i.e., brothers, never spouses), (3) is primarily about property rights, and (4) is repeatedly reversed by God himself throughout the remainder of Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament. Paul’s appeal to the order of creation in the New Testament will be addressed below.

<sup>16</sup>“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

This is not a command or prescription from God, but a description of the brokenness introduced by the fall. The propensity toward male dominance is a consequence of sin not God’s original intention. This is the first mention of any hierarchical relationship between men and women, and it occurs in the context of sin’s distortion of God’s intent. Just as Christ came to reverse the effects of sin in all areas of life, the gospel works to restore the mutuality originally intended in male-female relationships.

The opening chapters of the Bible provide important insight into understanding God’s intentions for men and women that establish a theological foundation for understanding everything that comes later in Scripture. The vision in these opening chapters is not one of hierarchy of authority but of equality and mutuality. The disruption of God’s intention, leading to struggles for authority, comes as a consequence of sin. Our convictions concerning men and women in the church should be shaped and governed by God’s creational intention for his image bearers.

## **2. Women exercised significant ministry roles of teaching and leading with God’s blessing in both the Old and New Testaments.**

Discussions concerning the theology of women in leadership are often framed by the question, “What should women *not* do?” A better starting point for the discussion is to ask, “What *did* women do?” The first question prioritizes passages with apparent prohibitions. The second question causes us to make sense of apparent prohibitions in light of the widespread biblical evidence of women being used mightily by God — at his discretion and with his approval — in a variety of ministry and leadership roles.

### **A. Women in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament includes women who exercised leadership authority with the clear approval of God. These women were not leaders by exception, but by divine appointment.

#### **Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-2)**

Miriam is identified as a prophet and a leader among the Israelites, playing a key role in worship and in guiding the people alongside Moses and Aaron. In Numbers 12, both she and Aaron are noted as ones “to whom the LORD spoke,” emphasizing her authoritative role.

**Deborah (Judges 4-5):** Deborah was both a prophet and a judge, occupying two of the highest leadership roles in Israel at the time. She not only delivered God’s word to Barak but also led Israel in battle, demonstrating both spiritual and military leadership. Deborah’s leadership is sometimes framed as God’s concession due to the absence of godly men. However, the text itself never presents her role as a reluctant alternative or a judgment on Israel. Instead, she is introduced simply as a prophet and

judge (Judges 4:4), with no indication that her leadership was a response to male failure.

**Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20):** When King Josiah sought divine guidance, he turned to the prophet Huldah, even though Jeremiah and Zephaniah were also prophets at the time. Her authoritative pronouncement of God's will led to a national religious reformation. God used the spiritual leadership of a woman to convey his will to the king, to the high priest, and to her contemporaries so that she influenced the history of the whole nation.

### **Additional Roles of Women in the Old Testament**

- Women served at the entrance of the Tabernacle (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22).
- The wisdom of King Lemuel's mother was recorded as Scripture (Proverbs 31).
- Women sang in the Temple choirs (Nehemiah 7:66-67).
- Psalm 68:11 indicates that women played a part in proclaiming the word of God: "The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng."
- Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-29) foretold a time when both sons and daughters would prophesy, indicating full participation in God's mission.

## **B. Women in the Life and Ministry of Jesus**

Jesus' view and treatment of women stood in stark contrast to the cultural norms and customs of his day. His many interactions with, affirmations of, and directives to women make it evident that they were to play a vital part in the advancement of his kingdom vision.

**Women as Disciples (Luke 8:1-3):** Jesus traveled with a group of women who financially supported His ministry, a radical departure from Jewish rabbinic norms. These women were actively engaged in kingdom work alongside the male disciples.

**Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38-40):** By sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary took the posture of a disciple, a role typically reserved for men. Jesus affirmed her choice, prioritizing learning from Him over traditional female domestic roles. This story is often framed as a contrast between two temperaments: Martha as the busy, distracted servant and Mary as the quiet, contemplative disciple. However, first-century readers would have understood this story as a radical affirmation of Mary's right to sit at Jesus' feet as a disciple, a role typically reserved for men. Rather than merely commending contemplation over activity, Jesus is defending Mary's choice to take on the posture of a learner, signaling that women, too, are invited into the kingdom vision of Jesus.

**Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18):** Jesus entrusted Mary Magdalene with the first proclamation of His resurrection, making her the first evangelist of the risen Christ. In

a culture where women's testimony was often disregarded, Jesus elevates a woman as the first bearer of the gospel, the "apostle to the apostles."

**Summary:** Jesus consistently treated women with dignity and respect in ways that often ran counter to the cultural norms of his day. He spoke publicly with a Samaritan woman and, in contrast to cultural standards, treated her with respect (John 4:4-26). He ministered to the physical ailments of women (Mark 1:29-31; Luke 8:40-56; 13:10-13), and defended women in a male-dominated culture (Matthew 19:3-10; Mark 10:11; Luke 7:11-17; 20:47). Jesus publicly affirmed women in front of men (Luke 7:44-50) and drew attention to the devotion of a poor widow to teach a lesson on money (Mark 12:41-44). Women stood by Jesus at the cross (John 19:25), and some lingered and watched his burial when most of the male disciples had already fled (Mark 15:47). Jesus first appeared to women after his resurrection and commissioned them as the first witnesses of the good news in a culture where women were traditionally prohibited from being witnesses in a court setting (Mark 16:9; John 20:10-18). Jesus' ministry was marked by radical inclusion of women. Far from marginalizing them, Jesus publicly affirmed their voices and their value in the kingdom.

### **C. Women in the Early Church**

When we examine the remainder of the New Testament, we find that women were clearly functioning as leaders in the earliest Christian communities. The examples below demonstrate that Paul and the early church affirmed women in significant leadership roles.

**The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2):** The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the church in which the Spirit is given to indwell and empower all of God's people. In explaining what took place that day, Peter quoted the prophet Joel: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy... even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days" (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28-29). From the very beginning of the church's life, the Spirit's empowering presence and prophetic ministry were not restricted by gender. Men and women alike were filled with the Spirit and called to speak God's word, establishing a pattern of shared participation in the ministry and mission of the church.

**Priscilla (Acts 18:24-26):** Priscilla and Aquila together instructed Apollos, an eloquent teacher who needed further understanding of the gospel. Priscilla is frequently listed first, contrary to ancient convention, suggesting she was the primary teacher.

**Philip's Daughters (Acts 21:8-9, 19):** Philip's four daughters were prophets, engaged in authoritative public ministry. In the New Testament, prophecy is often considered an even more authoritative form of public ministry than teaching. Paul ranks prophecy above teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and emphasizes its role in strengthening, encouraging, and instructing the church (1 Corinthians 14:3, 31). If Philip's daughters were recognized as prophets, this suggests they exercised a divinely sanctioned, public, and authoritative role in the early church, challenging the idea that women were categorically prohibited from leadership or speaking roles.

**Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2):** Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. He instructs the Roman church to receive her and assist her, implying she carried an authoritative role. Scholars widely agree that Phoebe was likely the one entrusted to carry Paul's letter to the Romans, a role that involved more than simple delivery. In the ancient world, letter carriers were expected to be the first interpreters of the message, clarifying meaning, answering questions, and even reading it aloud to the recipients. If Phoebe was indeed Paul's chosen envoy, she would have been the first person to explain and expound on the most theologically rich letter in the New Testament, demonstrating the trust Paul placed in her knowledge, leadership, and teaching ability.

**Junia (Romans 16:7):** Paul identifies Junia as "outstanding among the apostles." For centuries, church fathers such as Origen, John Chrysostom, and Jerome recognized Junia as a woman and affirmed her status as an apostle. Chrysostom, for example, wrote admiringly, "Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!" (*Homilies on Romans*, 31.2). The shift from recognizing Junia as a female apostle to rendering her name as the masculine "Junias" occurred much later in the medieval period. The change arose due to cultural assumptions that a woman could not have been an apostle, despite the fact that there is no evidence for a male name "Junias" in any ancient Greek or Latin records.

**Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3):** Paul describes Euodia and Syntyche as women who "contended at my side" in gospel ministry, using the same language he applies to his male co-laborers.

**Women Who Led House Churches:** Paul specifically acknowledges Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15, 40), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Apphia (Philemon 2), and Mary (Romans 16:6) as key figures in churches that met in their homes. Their roles likely included shepherding believers, facilitating worship, and guiding the spiritual formation of their communities. Given the structure of early Christian gatherings, their leadership would have extended beyond hospitality to active participation in the teaching and oversight of the church.

### **Women Prophesying and Exercising Spiritual Gifts**

- **1 Corinthians 11:5** – Paul assumes women are prophesying in church, which indicates they engaged in authoritative public ministry.
- **1 Corinthians 12:4-31; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:11-12** – Spiritual gifts are distributed without gender distinction. Among the spiritual gifts that Paul names, given to both men and women for the building up of the body of Christ, are the gifts of leadership and teaching.
- **Galatians 3:26-28** – In Christ, old social and gender hierarchies are undone.

<sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It is sometimes argued that this passage is about equality in terms of the gospel, that is, that we have equal standing before God in Christ. This is true, but it does not go far enough. Each of the other pairs referred to here is profoundly impacted in their relation to one another and their standing in the church based on their equality in Christ. To restrict the significance of Galatians 3:28 just to the doctrine of salvation fundamentally misses the transforming power of the gospel this verse implies. The gospel has radical implications for how Jews and Gentiles relate to one another in the church. It has radical implications for how enslaved and free people relate to one another in the church. And it has radical implications for how women and men relate to one another in the church. Far from being an isolated doctrinal statement concerning salvation, Galatians 3:28 reframes identity and belonging in the community of Jesus and thereby challenges any practice that would divide access to participation or leadership based on these old categories.

**Summary:** Taken together, these examples reveal that women were not merely present in the early Christian movement but were actively participating in its leadership, ministry, and mission. They served as teachers, prophets, apostles, patrons, and leaders of house churches. Far from being marginalized, women were recognized as trusted co-laborers in the work of the gospel. The witness of the New Testament suggests that the earliest Christian communities welcomed the gifts and leadership of women as an essential part of the Spirit's work in building up the body of Christ.

### **3. Key New Testament passages that seem to restrict women's roles were culturally and historically specific, not universal principles for all times and places.**

When considering biblical teaching on women in ministry, it is striking that only two passages — 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 — appear to place any restrictions on women engaging in public ministry or using their gifts for the edification of the whole church. Given the extensive evidence throughout the New Testament of women actively serving, teaching, and leading within the early church, these passages must be interpreted carefully in light of the broader biblical witness. Before concluding that Paul intended to impose universal restrictions on women, we must examine his words within their literary and cultural contexts to determine what he was addressing and why.

#### **A. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 - "Women should remain silent in the churches"**

At first glance, Paul's statement that "women should remain silent in the churches" (1 Cor 14:34) appears to impose an absolute prohibition on women speaking in public worship. However, this interpretation faces a major, insurmountable challenge: earlier in the same letter, Paul acknowledges and provides guidance for women praying and prophesying in the gathered assembly (1 Cor 11:5). If Paul intended a blanket prohibition on women speaking, this would create an irreconcilable contradiction within the same letter.

Several factors suggest that Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 is addressing a specific issue rather than issuing a universal command:

**Context:** The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 14 concerns orderly worship, particularly regarding prophecy and speaking in tongues. Paul repeatedly instructs various groups (those speaking in tongues without an interpreter, those prophesying in turn, and now women) to maintain order.

**Cultural Considerations:** In the first-century Greco-Roman world, women were often less educated than men, particularly regarding Scripture. It was considered inappropriate for them to question or challenge public speakers in formal settings. Paul seems to be addressing disruptive speech, that is, untrained women speaking out or asking questions during worship rather than waiting to learn at home (v. 35).

**The Broader Witness of the New Testament:** Not only would we find an internal contradiction in 1 Corinthians if we read this as a universal prohibition, but it would be impossible to reconcile a universal prohibition with what we have noted above concerning the broader witness of the New Testament.

We understand Paul's instruction here is not as a universal prohibition against women speaking in church, but a culturally specific correction to ensure orderly worship.

### **B. 1 Timothy 2:8-15 - "I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority"**

This is the most challenging passage to deal with for those who affirm women serving in public ministry. It should be noted that *if this is a general prohibition, for all times and places, it is the only one of its kind in the entire New Testament*. Several key issues must be addressed to understand this text accurately.

**Context:** 1 Timothy was written to address specific problems in the church at Ephesus, where false teaching was the major concern that prompted Paul's letter (1 Tim 1:3-7). It seems highly likely that women (possibly influenced by the cult of Artemis) may have been among those spreading erroneous doctrine. Paul's restriction was likely addressing this particular issue — the primary reason for his writing — rather than establishing a universal rule.

It is important to note that in 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul says, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission." A modern reader's attention is drawn to the phrase "quietness and full submission."<sup>4</sup> But ancient readers would have been struck by "a woman should learn." This was a culturally radical statement in a context where women were not theologically educated. Paul's prohibition in verse 12 seems connected to a broader contextual concern that untaught women were spreading false doctrine. Instead of seizing authority and teaching error, women needed to learn the Scriptures.

---

<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that the phrase "quietness and full submission" is often read as though it means full submission to the male leaders. But this isn't what the text actually says. "Quietness and full submission" is the basic posture of learning for anyone learning anything, quietly submitting to those doing the teaching and submitting to the truth being taught.

The immediate context of this passage also suggests that Paul is addressing the specific situation of the church in Ephesus rather than establishing universal rules. In the same passage, Paul instructs men to pray “lifting up holy hands” (2:8) and tells women not to braid their hair or wear gold or expensive clothing (2:9). Most interpreters understand these instructions as culturally specific applications of broader principles for worship. If these directives are contextual, it is reasonable to consider that Paul’s prohibition in verse 12 may likewise address a particular problem in Ephesus rather than establishing a universal restriction.

**The Meaning of “Assume Authority” (*authentein*):** The Greek word *authentein*, translated as “assume authority” (or “exercise authority” in some translations), is an exceptionally rare word that can carry connotations of dominance or misuse of power. Unlike the usual Greek word for positive leadership (*exousia*), *authentein* likely refers to an unhealthy or domineering form of authority or seizing of power that would have been inappropriate for a man or a woman.

Early Christian and classical Greek sources use *authentein* to describe actions such as domineering, violence, and even murder. Given the Ephesian context of heretical teaching and power struggles, Paul likely meant to prohibit women from taking an improper, authoritarian role, not to forbid all women from teaching or leading under any circumstances.

**The Appeal to Creation Order:** Paul’s reference to Adam and Eve in verse 13 has been interpreted as a theological justification for male leadership, based in the order of creation. However, careful reading suggests that he seems to be using Genesis as an illustration of deception, not an establishment of hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

In verse 14, Paul states that Eve was deceived, mirroring his warnings about false teachers misleading women (cf. 2 Tim 3:6-7). Importantly, Paul does not argue that Eve’s deception resulted in a permanent subordination of all women. Rather, he applies it to the specific issue at hand: women being misled in Ephesus. As previously discussed, the Genesis account itself does not teach or imply hierarchy.

**The Broader Witness of the New Testament:** If Paul meant to prohibit all women from teaching or leading in the church for all time, it would seem to contradict the examples of women serving as prophets (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor 11:5; 14:31), deacons (Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:11), apostles (Rom 16:7), and teachers (Acts 18:26; 1 Cor 16:19).<sup>6</sup> Had Paul

---

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word translated “for” (*gar*) is used dozens of times throughout the New Testament and can have at least three distinct usages depending on the context: (1) causal - indicating a reason or basis (“because,” “since”), (2) explanatory - clarifying or expanding in idea (“you see,” “let me explain,” or (3) illustrative - introducing a supportive example or illustration (“take for example,” “consider,” “for instance”).

<sup>6</sup> It seems that Priscilla and Aquila were in Ephesus during Timothy’s ministry there. They are left there in Acts 18:18-19. Later Paul asks Timothy to greet them (2 Tim 4:19). This raises important questions related to our understanding of 1 Tim 2:12: Does Paul want women in Ephesus to learn like Priscilla so that they are able to teach like Priscilla? Or does he want

intended this to be a timeless prohibition, we would expect to see this attested to more broadly in his letters. But there is no other New Testament indication of a restriction on women teaching or leading. It is more likely that Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2 is addressing a specific problem in first century Ephesus rather than establishing a timeless prohibition.

#### **4. The Bible does not insist upon any necessary restriction of women's service to and leadership of the local church, therefore, neither should we.**

The passages discussed previously primarily address the topic of public ministry: men and women both using their spiritual gifts for the edification of the whole church, including ministry within the public assembly. But it should be acknowledged that the issue of women serving in the office of elder within the local church involves a different set of questions and a different set of texts. Consideration of these questions and the relevant texts should begin with the recognition that there is no single text that explicitly prohibits women from serving as elders. Below we will address three common reservations that are raised concerning female elders: (1) the pattern of male-only priests and apostles, (2) the New Testament qualifications of elders, and (3) the notion of male "headship."

#### **A. Male-Only Priests and Apostles**

**Male Priests in the Old Testament:** The Old Testament priesthood was limited to men, specifically to Levite males without physical defect (see Exodus 28:1; Leviticus 21:16-23). But several important factors should shape how we understand that precedent:

- The Levitical priesthood was not intended as a permanent model of spiritual leadership. It was an old covenant, symbolic office, fulfilled in Christ, our "great high priest" (Hebrews 4:14-16). Church elders do not serve as mediators between God and people in the way priests did. Their role is pastoral and communal, not sacrificial or priestly.
- The priesthood was not just restricted by gender. It was also restricted by tribe, lineage, and physical condition. Only men from the tribe of Levi, without blemish or disability, could serve. If we were to treat the priesthood as a binding model, we would also need to disqualify anyone who is not ethnically Levite or who has a physical impairment, a standard the New Testament does not uphold.
- In Christ, all believers — male and female — are considered part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9).

---

Priscilla to stop teaching? The position outlined in this paper is that Paul wants unlearned women to be taught so that they can accurately and appropriately teach like Priscilla.

The male-only priesthood was a contextual, temporary office pointing forward to Christ. It does not provide a lasting template for church leadership roles today.

**Male Apostles in the New Testament:** Jesus intentionally chose twelve men to be his apostles (Luke 6:12-16). Some have taken this to mean that only men should hold positions of authority in the church. But again, context is crucial:

- The Twelve were chosen to symbolically represent the twelve tribes of Israel. In that sense, Jesus' selection had a theological purpose tied to Israel's covenant history, not simply a leadership structure to be repeated.
- Jesus' choice of men for the Twelve aligned with the cultural expectations of his time, but that doesn't mean he was setting a permanent precedent for male-only leadership. While appointing men to the Twelve reflected the cultural realities of the day, Jesus' ministry consistently pushed beyond those boundaries to elevate and empower women. Despite cultural expectations, he still entrusted women with significant leadership roles.

Jesus' selection of the Twelve served a symbolic and contextual purpose, not a prescriptive model for all future church leadership. His broader treatment of women shows that their exclusion from the Twelve was not rooted in inability or unworthiness, but in cultural realities that did not constrain the later church.

## **B. The Qualifications of Elders**

One passage that is commonly cited in support of the contention that the office of elder is reserved only for men is Paul's instruction to Timothy concerning the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

**What Does 1 Timothy 3 Actually Say:** One prominent translation of 1 Timothy 3:1 renders the verse as follows: "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (NASB). The presence of the word "man" and the masculine pronoun "he" would seem to imply that the office of elder is reserved for men. However, it is critical to note that neither the word for "man" nor the masculine pronoun "he" occurs in the original Greek text.

The phrase Paul uses (*ei tis episkopēs oregētai*) is best translated as "if anyone aspires to the office of overseer." The pronoun *tis* ("someone,"/"anyone") is gender-neutral and does not imply maleness. Paul could have used the clearly masculine term "man" (*anēr*) if he had intended to limit the statement to men, but he did not. The implication is that this aspiration is open to any qualified person, not men alone.

Furthermore, many English translations of 1 Timothy 3 use masculine pronouns throughout the elder qualifications (e.g., "*he* must be...", "*his* children...", "*his* household..." etc.), reinforcing the sense that these qualifications are for men only. However, these pronouns are not present in the Greek text. There are no masculine pronouns or possessives in the original. Translators often supply masculine pronouns to make for smoother reading in English, but this can unintentionally narrow the

perceived scope of the text. Just as the Greek in verse 1 uses the gender-neutral phrase “if anyone...” (*ei tis*) rather than “if a man...,” the rest of the passage describes qualifications of character that can be fulfilled by any qualified believer, not exclusively men. If the role of elder had been reserved for men in all times and places, Paul could have made that clear by using masculine pronouns anywhere in the list. But he does not.

**Husband of One Wife:** In 1 Timothy 3:2, Paul states that an overseer must be “the husband of one wife.” The Greek phrase here (*mias gunaikos andra*) is more literally rendered as “a one-woman man.” While some have taken this phrase to exclude women, it is better understood as a moral idiom that emphasizes marital fidelity and personal integrity rather than gender. This idiom would have been the first century Greek way of speaking of what we might capture with the single word “monogamous,” a way of addressing sexual faithfulness and integrity. It reflects an expectation of present character: that an elder be known for marital fidelity if married. The focus is not on gender, marital status, or past history, but on ongoing, observable character.

Importantly, the rest of the qualification list supports this reading. All of the traits listed are present and demonstrated qualities of character: above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome, etc. There is no reason to treat this one phrase as a rigid rule about gender while treating the others as character-based assessments.

As New Testament scholar Nijay Gupta points out, these instructions reflect the assumed cultural norm of male leadership in the early Christian communities, not a universal restriction.

Gupta offers this helpful analogy: *“Imagine a golf course with a sign that says, ‘Golfers must have their facial hair properly groomed.’ That instruction presumes most golfers are men—but it doesn’t exclude women from golfing.”*<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Paul’s language in 1 Timothy 3 assumes that most elders at the time would be men and would be married, but he does not prohibit women from aspiring to that role (or single people, for that matter). If Paul had intended to bar women, he could have said so explicitly. Instead, the focus remains on character and maturity, not gender.

IBC has already addressed the interpretation of this same phrase when affirming women to the role of deacon. In 1 Timothy 3:12, Paul says deacons must be “the husband of one wife,” yet we concluded that this did not exclude women from serving. To apply a stricter interpretation to the same phrase for elders than for deacons would be inconsistent. Our decision regarding women deacons rested

---

<sup>7</sup> Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 86. It is also worth noting that this example does not prohibit men without facial hair.

largely on the reference to Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1 and what appears to be a reference to women deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11.

In summary, the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 focus on character, maturity, and faithful leadership rather than on gender. The masculine wording found in many English translations reflects interpretive choices rather than the actual wording of the Greek text itself. Read in context, the passage describes the kind of person who is fit to serve as an elder, not a restriction limiting the role to men.

### **C. The Metaphor of “Head” in New Testament Theology**

One final reason that some suggest that the office of elder seems to be reserved for men has to do with Paul’s use of the metaphor of “head” in two crucial passages in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5. Some take this metaphor to teach the notion of male “headship,” meant to convey a sense of leadership or authority uniquely entrusted to men. There are two main interpretive options for Paul’s use of the metaphor: (1) “head” as “authority over” or (2) “head” as “source” or “origin.” In order to navigate this important issue, we will first consider the use of the metaphor more broadly in ancient Greek, then we will examine Paul’s other uses of the metaphor in his writings, and finally we will look at the metaphor in the specific contexts of 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 respectively.

#### **“Head” as Metaphor in Ancient Greek:**

In contemporary English, the metaphor of a “head” often implies leadership or decision-making authority. We say someone is “the head of the organization” or “the head of state.” But we can also speak of the “head of the class” (the “preeminent” student with highest academic standing) or the “head of a river” (its “source” or point of origin), using the metaphor without reference to leadership or authority.

Language is always culturally situated. Just because a metaphor means one thing to us does not mean it had the same meaning to Paul or his first-century audience. To interpret the theological implications of Paul’s use of the metaphor of “head,” we first need to examine how the metaphor was commonly understood within the first century Greek-speaking world.

**(1) Lexical Evidence:** The most comprehensive and authoritative lexicon for ancient Greek is the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ), the standard reference in classical and biblical studies. While LSJ lists 48 figurative meanings for *kephalē*, it does not list “authority” or “leader” or other synonyms as a meaning of the word, suggesting that this is not the obvious way the metaphor functioned in ancient Greek.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Another important Greek lexicon, Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG, the standard lexicon employed by seminary students) does include “leader” as a possible metaphorical meaning. This is largely influenced by appeals to the very texts under dispute as evidence for that meaning. Philip Payne’s careful work shows that BDAG’s inclusion of “leader” is based largely on misrepresentation of its cited sources. See his *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 139-

**(2) The Septuagint:** In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the translators consistently avoid translating the Hebrew word for “head” (*rosh*) with the Greek *kephalē* when *rosh* is used as a metaphor for “leader.” Instead, they consistently translate the metaphor with a more literal term for “leader” (e.g., *archon*, or *hegoumenos*), further suggesting that “leader” was not the primary way the metaphor functioned in ancient Greek.<sup>9</sup>

**(3) The Church Fathers:** The writings of the early church fathers also give us valuable insight. These Christian leaders and theologians were close to the language and culture of Paul’s world. When they commented on Paul’s use of *kephalē*, many did not equate it with authority. These ancient writers used *kephalē* in ways that emphasized “priority,” “source,” or “unity,” rather than “leadership” or “authority,” despite the fact that they affirmed male leadership in other contexts.<sup>10</sup>

When we put these pieces of evidence together, it seems reasonable to conclude that “leader” or “authority” was not the obvious or default metaphorical meaning of *kephalē* in Paul’s day. While such a meaning may seem intuitive to modern readers, it likely would not have been so to Paul’s original audience.<sup>11</sup> This should caution us against reading hierarchical assumptions into texts that may be aiming at something quite different.

### **Head as Metaphor in Paul’s Writings:**

Of even greater importance for the question at hand is Paul’s own usage of “head” as metaphor. It is crucial that we consider his other uses outside of discussions of men and women. Is “leader” or “authority” the primary way that Paul uses the metaphor? Do his other uses suggest that he employed the metaphor this way at all? There are four passages where Paul uses *kephalē* as a metaphor apart from 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5.<sup>12</sup>

---

45 and *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 55-58.

<sup>9</sup> See Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 138-39.

<sup>10</sup> Payne cites Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Cosmas Indicopleustes, Eusebius, and Photius. See *Ibid.*, 148-51 and *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood*, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> One reason that we associate “head” with leadership so naturally in our contemporary cultural setting is that we know scientifically that the head houses the brain, and the brain “rules” or “directs” all of life. There is considerable scholarly discussion about what would have been most widely understood to direct or rule all of life in Paul’s context. It was widely understood in the ancient Mediterranean world that the “heart” served this ruling function, and this is reflected in many of Paul’s own uses of “heart” in the NT.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted at the outset that the question addressed here is not whether Christ has authority. He most certainly does. The question is whether that authority is conveyed through Paul’s use of the “head” as a metaphor or whether Paul is conveying something else.

### **Colossians 2:19 – *kephalē* as life-giving source of unity, nourishment, and growth**

<sup>19</sup>They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

In Colossians 2:19, Paul does not use the metaphor of “head” to speak about leadership or authority. Instead, Paul uses the metaphor to point to Christ’s role as the source of life and unity that the rest of the body is connected to and nourished by.

### **Ephesians 4:15-16 – *kephalē* as life-giving source of unity, nourishment, and growth**

<sup>15</sup>Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup>From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

In Ephesians 4:15-16, Paul uses the metaphor in a way that is consistent with Colossians 2:19, to speak of Christ’s role as the unifying source of life and growth. The notion of leadership or authority is not in view in his use of the metaphor. From Christ, the unifying, nurturing, life-giving source, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love.

### **Colossians 1:18 – *kephalē* as preeminent and source of resurrection life**

<sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Colossians 1:18 comes at the heart of the great Christological hymn in Colossians 1:15-20, which lifts up the cosmic supremacy of Christ. Paul describes Christ as both the “head” of the body and the “beginning,” the “firstborn” from among the dead. These parallel terms emphasize Christ’s priority, source, and generative role in both creation and new creation. The metaphor of Christ as “head” functions in close coordination with the phrases “beginning” and “firstborn.” These are not terms of hierarchical authority, but of origin and precedence. Christ is the source of resurrection life, the one through whom the church comes into being and through whom it will be brought to fullness.

### **Ephesians 1:22-23 – *kephalē* as “apex,” preeminent, high above all things under his feet**

<sup>22</sup>And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

In this passage Paul says that Christ has been appointed as “head over everything for the church.” The surrounding language is saturated with spatial imagery. Everything is placed *beneath* Christ’s feet, and Christ himself is enthroned far *above* all things. The

metaphor of Christ as “head” fits naturally within this spatial framework. Just as the feet represent the lowest place, the head represents the highest, the “apex.” This usage is the most plausible place that it could be argued that Paul is speaking of “authority” with his use of “head.” To be sure, the surrounding context does affirm that Christ has cosmic authority. But the metaphorical use of *kephalē* itself seems to be pointing to Christ as the “apex,” the preeminent part, in a head/feet spatial metaphor. The idea of authority comes from the surrounding language, not the metaphor itself.

When one examines each of Paul’s uses of the metaphor “head” outside the context of discussions of men and women, it becomes apparent that “head” as “leadership” or “authority” is not the obvious or default way the metaphor is employed in Paul’s writings. This suggests that we must be careful about assuming that as the default or obvious meaning when it comes to 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5.

### **Head as Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 11**

The key passage that uses “head” as a metaphor regarding men and women is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, widely considered one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire New Testament.<sup>13</sup> A treatment of the passage in its entirety is beyond the scope of this paper, but the definitive usage of the metaphor comes in verse 3.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

When Paul employs the metaphor of “head” in this passage, should we understand it as a reference to authority or is there another more plausible way to understand his meaning? Three considerations argue against reading *kephalē* as implying “authority” or “leadership”: (1) the ordering of the triad in verse 3, (2) trinitarian tensions such a reading creates, and (3) Christological tensions such a reading creates.

**The Ordering of the Triad:** If Paul’s point was to emphasize a chain of authority, the sequence in verse 3 is strangely ordered. If *kephalē* means authority, we might expect the sequence to move from highest to lowest, God to Christ, Christ to man, and man to woman (A to B, B to C, C to D), or the opposite, from lowest to highest (D to C, C to B, B to A). But Paul starts in the middle, moves to the man-woman relationship, and ends with God and Christ (B to C, C to D, A to B).

This unusual order makes much more sense if Paul is laying out a theological logic of “source” or “origin,” not authority.

- Man came from Christ (the active agent in creation, 1 Cor 8:6)
- Woman came from man (as per the creation narrative, Gen 2),

---

<sup>13</sup> This recognition alone should cause some reticence in resting too much theological weight on this passage alone in determining church policy and governance.

- Christ came from God (the Son is “eternally begotten” of the Father, and the Father sends the Son in the incarnation).<sup>14</sup>

**Trinitarian Tensions:** An even greater problem with reading *kephalē* as “authority” arises in the final pair: “the head of Christ is God.” If *kephalē* means “authority over,” this puts God in an authoritative position over Christ, leading some to defend a view referred to as “the eternal subordination of the Son.”<sup>15</sup> That is a deeply troubling position, inconsistent with orthodox Trinitarian theology, which affirms the full equality and mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son. However, if *kephalē* means “source,” the phrase fits well with the biblical depiction of the Son as eternally begotten of the Father (a relationship of origin, not subordination) and of the Father sending the Son in his incarnation.

**Christological Tensions:** Further, if Paul’s triad in verse 3 is meant to establish a chain of authority of Christ over man, and man over woman, it would imply that a woman’s relationship to a man is analogous to a man’s relationship to Christ. Yet these relations are not obviously parallel in precisely the same way. Christ is the perfect, sinless savior and Lord, while every other man is a fallen, finite human being. The suggestion that all women relate to fallen men in the same way that all men relate to the perfect Christ presses the analogy beyond what the text can sustain and risks setting up a spiritually distorted parallel that has led to the justification of abuse. Further, appeals to “male headship” on the basis of this passage often lack consistency. If *kephalē* means men are to be “heads over women,” why apply this principle only to the role of elder? What would be the basis for that distinction?

***Kephalē* as Source:** Given the lexical evidence, context, patterns of relationships, and the theological implications, the most plausible reading is that Paul is using *kephalē* here to refer to “source” or “origin,” not authority.<sup>16</sup> He is framing the discussion that follows by grounding it in a creation logic, not to establish a hierarchy, but to reflect

---

<sup>14</sup> This view is not novel in the life of the church. Philip Payne quotes Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 AD): “Thus we say that ‘the head (*kephalē*) of every man is Christ,’ for man was made through him and brought into existence.... ‘And the head (*kephalē*) of woman is the man,’ because she was taken out of his flesh and so indeed has him as her source. Similarly, ‘the head (*kephalē*) of Christ is God,’ because He is from Him according to nature: for the Word was begotten out of God the Father.” See Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> See Kevin Giles article, “The Trinity Argument for Women’s Subordination: The Story of Its Rise, Ascendancy, and Fall” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 351-71. This view was defended by some who exclude women from leadership as perhaps the decisive element in their case. It was passionately advocated for decades, until more and more prominent trinitarian theologians began to recognize that it was not in line with orthodox Trinitarianism.

<sup>16</sup> This argument is strengthened by noting that Paul appeals to the creation story of Genesis 2 in verses 8 and 12, suggesting that the creation account is in view throughout the passage, with the emphasis falling on the woman being created from the man, her original source of life.

on the interrelatedness of men and women and how that relationship should be honored in the context of worship.<sup>17</sup>

### **Head as Metaphor in Ephesians 5**

The other place that Paul uses the metaphor of “head” with reference to the relationship between men and women is in Ephesians 5:23, specifically in the context of marriage.

<sup>23</sup>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.

This is the one place in Paul’s household codes where a husband is called the “head” of his wife, and it’s often interpreted as teaching that husbands hold a position of leadership or authority in the marriage relationship. But, as we have seen, we should be careful about assuming the meaning of the metaphor prematurely.

Paul’s vision for marriage in Ephesians 5 is rooted in mutual submission (v. 21), Christlike love (vv. 25-33), and a reimagining of household relationships through the lens of the gospel. It is not a treatise on leadership roles or authority structures. Importantly, nowhere in this passage is the husband commanded to lead or exercise authority. His charge is not to govern but to love sacrificially, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The emphasis falls not on hierarchy but on self-giving, servant-hearted love.

In light of the immediate context and Paul’s use of *kephalē* elsewhere, it is unlikely that *kephalē* here means “authority over.” In Paul’s writings, *kephalē* most often means “source,” “origin,” or “preeminent part.” It refers to what gives life, nourishment, or beginning, not to what commands or leads.

In Ephesians 5:23, Paul explicitly connects Christ’s headship not with authority but with sacrifice and salvation: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” Here, *kephalē* is in apposition with “savior,” meaning the two are closely linked conceptually. As savior, Christ is the one who gives himself for the church’s life and well-being. The husband is called to imitate this self-giving posture, not in a redemptive sense, but in the very practical terms of provision, protection, and care.

As Gordon Fee points out, this reflects the social reality of the time. In the first-century household, the wife’s well-being often depended on her husband.<sup>18</sup> Paul uses that cultural analogy to call husbands to loving sacrifice, not authority. He is not saying the husband is the wife’s savior in a theological sense, but that he is to act for her good in ways that reflect Christ’s sacrificial love. The fundamental dynamic in

---

<sup>17</sup> See vv.11-12: “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” These verses make it clear that Paul has Genesis 2 in view throughout this discussion.

<sup>18</sup> See his “Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 139.

Christian marriage is not one of power and authority but one of humble, self-giving love.

**Summary:** Some biblical interpreters exclude women from certain leadership roles, including the role of elder, on the basis of (1) perceived implications of the pattern of male only priests and apostles, (2) perceived implications of the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3, and (3) perceived implications of Paul’s use of the metaphor of “head” in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5. There is no New Testament teaching that clearly prohibits women from serving in these leadership roles. Having carefully examined each of the passages that inform the reasons for insisting on a limitation, we have concluded that none of these present an insurmountable challenge that makes a restriction necessary. The pattern of priests and apostles are never presented as binding for future Christian leadership. The language of Paul’s qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy does not exclude women of established character from serving. And Paul’s use of the metaphor of head does not teach a principle of male authority over women in the church. We believe that the Bible does not present a clear, theologically binding reason for excluding qualified women from serving in the role of elder.

## Conclusion

Theological discussions about the roles and relationships of men and women in the life and leadership of the church are not merely interesting academic exercises. They have real implications for local churches and their members. We acknowledge that there are wise, godly, Bible-believing Christians who have carefully studied these issues and passages who come to different conclusions than those laid out in this paper. There are and will continue to be those kinds of wise, godly, Bible-believing Christians within our congregation. Agreement with the convictions laid out in this paper will not be a litmus test for inclusion in the life of our church. People who differ in their conclusions on these questions are and will continue to be welcomed and vitally involved in our body. At the same time, the convictions articulated above will guide how we operate together as we move forward into the future.

The church needs the gifts of both men and women fully activated and expressed for the building up of the body of Christ and the pursuit of his mission in the world. Leadership is about gifting, character, and calling, not about gender. The kingdom advances through the “blessed alliance,” men and women serving side by side in every area of ministry and leadership. This conviction is consistent with the biblical witness from start to finish, it has enormous practical importance for the church, and it positions us best to faithfully pursue our mission of “helping our diverse community follow Jesus and bless the world.” This mission will continue to be our focus as we move forward together.