# – Theological Brief –
# Gender in Church Leadership

## Background:

As part of our Governance Restructuring conversations from 2020-2024, the SVA Leadership Team prayerfully, slowly, and intentionally sought to discern God's formation for our church governance. If/when asked "Why do you have a Governance Board of Elders?" we wanted a more Biblical answer than, "That's the way it's always been done."

After discerning that a unified Board of Elders is the Biblical model, we looked to the descriptions of the character of an Elder found in 1 Timothy and Titus as our guide in determining who should be considered and how they should be chosen to serve on that Board. The result of that effort is summarized in the ***Theological Brief on Roles, Responsibilities, & Qualifications of Elders/Pastors***. The definitions of the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of an Elder are described in detail and founded on the study of relevant sections of scripture, including 1 Timothy and Titus.

This document goes into greater detail in one specific area of qualification for an Elder, so that our church family understands the approach, study, and ultimate conclusion the Governance Board reached regarding ***gender qualifications for an Elder***. We hope this provides depth and clarity on our process and helps explain our conclusion on this matter: that women are Biblically eligible to serve in church leadership, including on the Governance Board of Elders.

## Approach:

The Leadership Team (current Leadership Council and Staff Pastoral Team) spent considerable time exploring each characteristic in 1 Timothy and Titus in their native Greek to fully understand the kind of character necessary to be an Elder. It was within this study of the character descriptors that we examined the gender specification found in Timothy and Titus. While there is no outright statement of gender as a qualification in the list of character traits for an Elder found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, Paul's use of the masculine terms (husband, father, and other masculine pronouns) certainly implies such.

But implication alone is not sufficient grounds for laying a Biblical foundation.

In keeping with good Biblical study methodology, we must interpret 1 Timothy 3 in the broader context of the rest of the letter, including the circumstances causing Paul to write it. It's in this broader context where Paul makes a definitive statement about gender and leadership,

> **"*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.*"**
> **1 Timothy 2:12 (ESV)**

The question we asked was, "Is this statement about gender a ***timeless truth***, or ***culturally conditioned*** by the specific circumstances in the Ephesian church?"

To answer that we had to look at all of Scripture around this issue. In order to inform our own study, we sought reliable references to help us identify the relevant passages and understand the different scholarship regarding interpretation. In order to be thorough in our study and unbiased in our approach, we sought different commentaries on gender and church leadership with the following characteristics:

1. They were from well-respected and recognized Biblical scholars
2. They addressed the same scriptures, so were consistent in structuring their argument
3. They spanned the scope of interpretation and conclusion so we were exposed to the full range of analysis regarding gender and church leadership

Some of the volumes selected to guide our study and analysis were:

- **Two Views on the Use of the Title Pastor within the Christian and Missionary Alliance,** 2022.
- **Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism**, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, 2012.
- **Statement of Men and Women in Ministry,** Christian and Missionary Alliance Canada, 2018.
- **Why I Believe in Women in Ministry,** Nijay Gupta, 2019.
- **Gender Issues: Reflections on the Perspectives of the Apostle Paul**, Dr. Gordon Fee, 1999.
- **Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy**; Ronald Pierce, Rebecca Groothuis, Gordon Fee, 2005.

Some of these references affirm a distinction and uniqueness of each gender (equal value, but not equivalent function, known as **complementarianism**) and concludes that the inequivalence extends to church leadership, with the result being that women are **ineligible** for the Elder role. In short, they conclude that Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:12 should be considered a **timeless truth**.

Other references also come from a **complementarian** perspective but argues to the opposite conclusion. The distinction/inequivalence in gender is necessary for church leadership and, therefore, women **should not be excluded** from the Elder role. In short, there is a **cultural context** to 1 Timothy 2:12 because of the specific circumstances of the Ephesian church.

> ***Note:*** *We did NOT seriously pursue any references that were built on an* ***egalitarian*** *viewpoint wherein a distinction between the genders is denied (equal value, equal function, the only distinction being that women can bear children). We believe the explicit* ***distinction*** *in gender, communicated by God in the act of creation ("in the image of God He created them, male and female He created them" - Gen 1:26-27), is sufficient to warrant not pursuing this line of argument.*

Using these references to thoroughly understand the analysis and argument from both sides, we pursued our study of Scripture individually over multiple months and brought our results back to the team for communal discernment. After much discussion and prayerful discernment, **we deliberated extensively until reaching a majority and unified conclusion that women were Biblically eligible for church leadership, including on the Governance Board of Elders.**

## Study, Conclusion, and Justification:

The conclusion of the majority of the team centers around interpreting 1 Timothy 2:12 in light of other passages in scripture about women and leadership. We begin by examining **Paul's other teaching about women and church leadership**. If Paul was communicating a timeless truth, then his other statements would echo that same view. There are three distinct circumstances and statements by Paul that we believe indicate otherwise:

1. Two of Paul's frequently mentioned coworkers in spreading the Gospel are the couple **Aquilla and Priscilla** (1 Cor 16:19, among other references). They led a church in their house (Paul used plural language for their leadership - Romans 16:3-4) and they both are specifically mentioned as being involved in instructing and correcting Apollos' understanding of the Gospel, specifically, baptism (Acts 18:24-26). If Paul had a timeless principle that women should not have authority over or teach men, it appears to have been violated in the case of Priscilla and her leadership of their church and her instruction/correction of the man Apollos.
2. At the end of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he lists many significant leaders/workers in spreading the Gospel but he singles out two, **Andronicus (male) and Junia (female)**, with a special designation: 'distinguished/outstanding among the apostles' (Romans 16:7). There is a great deal of scholarship of the first and second-century church leaders affirming that Junia was a female (despite later English translations that rendered the name Junias) and that Paul's statement groups both of them with the significant leaders in the church by the use of the term 'apostles'.
3. Finally, also from Romans, Paul commends **Phoebe**, the person who carried Paul's letter to the church in Rome. He refers to her as more than just a courier, choosing instead to call her a servant/minister (*diakonos*) and a patron (*prostatis*) which, in verb form (*proistēmi*) in Greek literature and even in Paul's usage (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12; 5:17) conveys leadership. These commendations appear to conflict with interpreting 1 Timothy 2:12 as timeless teaching about women not having authority over or teaching men.

Looking at Paul's other statements is not enough to reach a conclusion about 1 Timothy 2:12. We believe it is imperative to look at **the whole of God's Word** for the broad, consistent perspective on women in leadership. If Paul's statement about not permitting a woman to have authority over a man was a timeless truth then it would be echoed in other parts of scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments. Here we find two sections that we believe indicate otherwise:

1. **Miriam**, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was esteemed as a leader of the nation of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt. She, with Moses, led the nation in praise and worship after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15) and was considered essential by the Israelites as demonstrated by their refusal to move forward (Moses included) until she was restored to leadership after criticizing Moses (Numbers 12:15). God later lists her along with Moses and Aaron as those he sent to be leaders of His redemption of the nation from slavery in Egypt (Micah 6:4).
2. Moving further into the history of Israel, other women are established in leadership positions, most notably **Deborah** who served as a prophet and judge over Israel (Judges 4:4-5). It is well attested that those who 'judged' Israel held broad authority, not just over disputes among the people (who 'came up to her for judgment' - Judges 4:5), but executive authority as well (Judges 4:6).
    a. From the Teacher's Commentary (among other references supporting this same definition): *A judge was more than a person who settled disputes (which Deborah did: see 4:5). A judge in Israel exercised all the functions of a governor: he or she held executive and legislative authority, and often*

*military authority as well. We can sense Deborah's authority as she "sends for" Barak, and he comes. It is only when Barak arrives that Deborah speaks in her role as prophetess, and tells him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you."*

Finally, we return to 1 Timothy to view 2:12 in its **immediate context**. That passage on Paul's restrictions for leadership appears among several other passages about gender limitations including not wearing "braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or other costly attire" (v. 9); not "speaking up" (v. 11), and "remaining quiet" (v. 12). These other restrictions have long been held as culturally conditioned to the circumstances in Ephesus and not part of timeless teaching for women in church life. It seemed **logically inconsistent, and outside good methods of Biblical interpretation**, to assign timelessness to part of that list of distinctions when all others have been determined to be culturally conditioned.

Based on all of this, the Governance Board of SVA determines that the consistent teaching of Scripture demonstrates women are **not disqualified from leadership by 1 Timothy 2:12; those restrictions were given specifically to the circumstances at Ephesus.** Paul's other statements and commendations of women in positions of leadership and influence, Old Testament descriptions of women who carried authority and influence, and the culturally conditioned statements surrounding 1 Timothy 2:12 convinced the majority of us that women should be included in those being considered for church leadership, including those serving on the Board of Elders.

## Taking all of this study into consideration, and after much prayer, fasting, and humbly seeking God, we have concluded the following:

We believe the Bible identifies the uniqueness and necessity of both male and female genders in making up the "image of God" in humanity; while being equal in value, each gender is unique in purpose. We further believe that evidence in Scripture supports men and women in leadership. Therefore, we believe those overseeing the affairs of the church family, Elders and Pastors, need to reflect the uniqueness of both genders and should include qualified men and women.