

What is the role of women in the church?

The Austin Stone Community Church holds to a Biblical Complementarian view concerning the role of men and women. In short, we believe that men and women were created by God to be both equal in value and dignity, but that He gave us differing roles, in order that we may best reflect both the equality and differing roles within the Trinity. This is a view in contrast to the Egalitarian Position which states that God created male and female as equal in all respects and makes no distinction between woman and man.

We realize that this is a divisive topic within churches today. If you don't think so, read the following passage:

[1 CORINTHIANS 14:34–35 \(ESV\)](#)

[34 THE WOMEN SHOULD KEEP SILENT IN THE CHURCHES. FOR THEY ARE NOT PERMITTED TO SPEAK, BUT SHOULD BE IN SUBMISSION, AS THE LAW ALSO SAYS. 35 IF THERE IS ANYTHING THEY DESIRE TO LEARN, LET THEM ASK THEIR HUSBANDS AT HOME. FOR IT IS SHAMEFUL FOR A WOMAN TO SPEAK IN CHURCH.](#)

This passage is one of the most inflammatory passages that we can read in our postmodern culture. It divides. Some of you are wondering why we as a church should take a position on an issue that divides and upsets people. The reason is precisely *because* it divides. We must seek the unity of the body of Christ. The other reason is that, if the Bible speaks about these issues, we shouldn't be too cowardly to talk about them. Instead, we ought to say, "How can we talk about this in a gracious, humble way for the purpose of building up and creating unity?" We have to talk about it because the Bible speaks about it.

With all of that said, I want you to know something about our church. I want you to know that this church leadership has laboriously studied the role of women in the church through the Scriptures, and the elders have taken great measure to honor, respect and redeem the value of women in the church, which for centuries has been abused.

I'd like to expound upon this text, and, in doing so, let you know the heart behind the stance we're taking as a biblical Complementarian church.

What in the world does Paul mean here? Let me disarm your greatest concern, so that you're not so angry and so that you'll pay attention to the rest of what I'm going to say. This does NOT mean that women can't teach, speak, pray or take any leadership within the church. Paul has already taught in 1 Corinthians 11 that women can lead out in prayer and that they could "prophecy" or declare the Word of God in the church, as long as they do it under the cultural display of submitting to the elders of the church and to their husbands (by wearing a head covering in the case of their context). So, Paul cannot mean that without qualification women must be silent in the churches. What, then, does he mean?

The gospel had done a remarkable thing. When sin entered into the world, what was the curse that Adam and Eve, Man and Woman received? In Genesis 3:16, the curse that God gave Eve was, “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

The woman’s curse was that she will always try to find her significance from a man in a world where men are cursed to always desire to dominate women.

We’ve seen this curse play out throughout the history of mankind, haven’t we? Throughout the bulk of man’s history, women were seen as second class citizens, often treated as property, only seen as objects of men’s sexual fulfillment and as necessary for procreation. Christian Conservatives, you may have a bad taste in your mouth for feminism, but I tell you, in this fallen world, feminism was necessary. Feminism failed miserably, as I will talk about later, but early on, it was necessary. It was necessary because the church failed in fighting for the equality of women. The church failed in fighting for equal work and equal pay. The church failed in fighting against the brutal oppression of women. But what we see in the Corinthian church is that the gospel came into this fallen world and reclaimed equality for women when injustice and the curse of sin had taken it away. It reclaimed freedom for women when tyranny had taken it away. Though in every other formal gathering women were forbidden to speak, in the Christian gathering, women were free to pray and prophesy. So the gospel did a remarkable thing in reclaiming equality and freedom for women. But it didn’t stop there. It was doing something else.

The Gospel wasn’t merely protecting the value of women’s equality; it was also protecting the value of gender difference.

Protecting the value of gender difference is where feminism fails. Feminism has been necessary, but where feminism goes too far, or doesn’t go far enough, depending on how you look at it, is when it tries to achieve equality among the sexes by removing every distinction between male and female. If equality in the eyes of God truly means the doing away of every distinction, God would not have created us male and female. He would have created us neuter. If that’s what God wanted, He could have done that. But, He created male from the dust of the ground and made him independent from any other living creature. When God created Eve, He created her not independently from dust, but dependently from the side of Adam to show her dependence on her husband to lead her, protect her and provide for her.

God created us male and female with distinctions in how we are meant to operate in this world and with each other. Man to be independent and Woman to be dependent. But, sin came into the world and changed everything. Sin distorted and exaggerated the way that God designed us. “Eve, your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Woman was created to be content and satisfied when she lived in dependence on her husband to lead her, protect her and provide for her. But sin came in and exaggerated that design by causing her to feel like she has no significance in this world unless she has a man. Man was created to feel alive and satisfied as he lives in independence to lead out and provide, but sin came in and exaggerated that design by turning independence into tyranny and dominance over women.

This is why we needed the gospel. The gospel came and spoke significance back into women and reclaimed equality and freedom for them. The gospel came to teach men how to properly lead in servanthood and humility, not dominance. The gospel came and destroyed all the wrong distinctions in gender created by sin. However, it's not trying to destroy ALL distinction, because there is a right and a true distinction that God intended from the beginning.

The distinction is in the call of eldership within the church, which is reserved for qualified men only, not women.

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7 (ESV)

QUALIFICATIONS FOR OVERSEERS

1 THE SAYING IS TRUSTWORTHY: IF ANYONE ASPIRES TO THE OFFICE OF OVERSEER, HE DESIRES A NOBLE TASK. 2 THEREFORE AN OVERSEER MUST BE ABOVE REPROACH, THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE, SOBER-MINDED, SELF-CONTROLLED, RESPECTABLE, HOSPITABLE, ABLE TO TEACH, 3 NOT A DRUNKARD, NOT VIOLENT BUT GENTLE, NOT QUARRELSOME, NOT A LOVER OF MONEY. 4 HE MUST MANAGE HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD WELL, WITH ALL DIGNITY KEEPING HIS CHILDREN SUBMISSIVE, 5 FOR IF SOMEONE DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO MANAGE HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD, HOW WILL HE CARE FOR GOD'S CHURCH? 6 HE MUST NOT BE A RECENT CONVERT, OR HE MAY BECOME PUFFED UP WITH CONCEIT AND FALL INTO THE CONDEMNATION OF THE DEVIL. 7 MOREOVER, HE MUST BE WELL THOUGHT OF BY OUTSIDERS, SO THAT HE MAY NOT FALL INTO DISGRACE, INTO A SNARE OF THE DEVIL.

The Bible teaches that the office of elder is reserved only for qualified men. Paul is affirming that here in these verses. He says women are to keep silent. He already said three chapters back that women can pray and prophesy, so he doesn't mean completely silent. So...silent when and where? What was Paul talking about in the previous verses? He said in verse 32, that when prophets spoke, their prophecy had to be weighed by other prophets. The practice of worship at this time was in a synagogue-style. In a Jewish synagogue, instead of having a regular preacher week after week like we do here at our church, they had many different travelling teachers that would stop in to speak, sometimes two or three of them. As you can imagine, the thing to be concerned about in this style of worship was keeping doctrinal integrity. You ultimately never knew what the prophet would speak. So, each synagogue had a group of male elders that sat in the front row and would verbally weigh prophecy that was spoken. If they completely agreed with what a prophet said, they would say "amen, amen." They would affirm, deny, or qualify the prophecy.

This is what the Bible is teaching in these verses; when the elders are verbally weighing the prophecy for the congregation, women must keep silent because the office of elders is reserved for qualified men who have been called to serve as elders. One clear distinction between men and women in the church that the gospel is preserving is in the duty of the elder to guard doctrine. We see it in the tradition of the church, and we see it here in this passage. We also see it in other places like Titus 1.

But, some of us still find this difficult and hard to swallow. What do you mean only men can be elders? Why can't women do everything men can do?

This may seem like a legitimate question, but we know instinctively that there are plenty of things men can do that women can't do, and there are plenty of things women can do that men can't do. Our biology is an obvious example. No matter how much men may want to give birth to a child, we can't. It's an impossibility. It's a role that God has designed and reserved for only women to be able to play. We already see this reality established by God in nature, but he's also establishing this reality in the church. But why? Why does he reserve eldership only to men? He does it because we're all called to be like Jesus. He does it because both men *and* women are called to be like Jesus. My answer may sound strange, but let me explain it to you.

We learned back in our marriage series that a Christian marriage is like a drama being played out for the world, in which the husband plays the role of Christ, and the wife plays the role of the church. Husbands are called to love the wife just as Christ has loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Marriage is a special place in which men are called to display Jesus to the world. But the calling to display Jesus to the world isn't given just given to men. Both men and women are called to reflect Jesus to the world. So the question is, "Is there a special place in which God is calling women to display a certain aspect of Jesus to the world?" The answer is yes. It's in the church. By reserving eldership for men, what God is saying is, that even though you're equal in dignity and equal in personhood to man, I want you to humble yourself and submit under the leadership of male elders. In doing so, you will show Jesus to this world. How does this humility and submission show Jesus to this world? Because it's exactly what Jesus did, as described in Philippians 2.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8 (ESV)

5 HAVE THIS MIND AMONG YOURSELVES, WHICH IS YOURS IN CHRIST JESUS, 6 WHO, THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT COUNT EQUALITY WITH GOD A THING TO BE GRASPED, 7 BUT MADE HIMSELF NOTHING, TAKING THE FORM OF A SERVANT, BEING BORN IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN. 8 AND BEING FOUND IN HUMAN FORM, HE HUMBLING HIMSELF BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH, EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.

Jesus Christ, in personhood and dignity, was absolutely equal with God the Father, but He did not regard this equality with God as something to be grasped, as something for Him to clench with a tight fist. Instead, He let it go and emptied Himself. He humbled Himself and submitted to the will of the Father, even at a great cost to Himself. And so, if you're a woman, that's the calling you have received in the special place of the church. You should reflect Jesus to this world. Even though you are absolutely equal in dignity and in personhood with man, let go of that equality when it comes to eldership. In humility, submit under the authority of qualified male elders in your church. But, if your ambition is to preserve your reputation and/or your place in this world, you'll completely miss this.

Women, listen to me. There is a side of Jesus, there is something about Jesus, that, if you don't display it, the world won't see it.

This is so hard because it's so counter-worldly. But that is the nature of the gospel. God tells men within the special place of marriage to pursue leadership and authority, not by dominance and tyranny, but by

service, sacrifice, washing feet and dying. That is absolutely counter-cultural. The gospel tells women within the special place of the church to pursue equality and freedom, not by grasping for it, but through humility and obedience. Jesus said it in this way:

MATTHEW 16:24–25 (ESV)

24 THEN JESUS TOLD HIS DISCIPLES, “IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME. 25 FOR WHOEVER WOULD SAVE HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, BUT WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT.

The gospel tells us that we gain life by losing it. Men gain leadership and authority through sacrificial servanthood, and women gain equality and freedom through submission.

True harmony and communion will not be reached when we deny each other’s differences. It will only happen when we embrace one another’s differences. I want to give a practical application from verse 35:

1 CORINTHIANS 14:35 (ESV)

35 IF THERE IS ANYTHING THEY DESIRE TO LEARN, LET THEM ASK THEIR HUSBANDS AT HOME. FOR IT IS SHAMEFUL FOR A WOMAN TO SPEAK IN CHURCH.

This may, at first, seem like another prohibition on women, but it’s really an indictment on men. Women should keep silent during the verbal weighing of prophecy in the church, because elders need to do their job. However, this is also saying that husbands need to do their job in the home. If you’re a husband, listen to me. This is a call for every one of you to be a theologian. What would you do, husband, if, after reading this article, your wife had a challenging thought and asks you a difficult theological question over dinner? Would you be equipped to answer her?

The fact of the matter is, for the most part, women pursue knowing the Scriptures and knowing Jesus a lot more than men do.

Husbands and single men, if you ever want to get married and be a good husband, learn to study the Scriptures. Become a good theologian. Take a Get Trained class. Women, you may be wondering, “How do I obey this verse if my husband’s an idiot? Does this mean I can’t ask my pastor any question?” Let me just say this: to the extent that you desire to circumvent the authority that the Scriptures have given your husband, you cut short the ability for your husband to recognize and obey his calling. It’s not whether you can or cannot speak to a pastor; rather, the question is, “Are you avoiding talking to your husband and not providing the opportunity and the gentle challenge for him to lead?”

I'd like to give you one last illustration. CS Lewis said once that the Church needs to look more like a ball- a ball in which the men and women of God are beautifully dancing with one another. Here's the thing about ballroom dancing... one partner has to lead and the other partner has to follow. Otherwise, the beauty of the choreography turns into awkward bumping into each other, and the grace of each step that leads into another step turns into the painful stepping on each other's toes. God has designed this dance between male and female, and He has called the man to lead and the woman to follow. Here's the understanding that expert dancers have, that we all need to have.

The greater the expertise of the female dancer, the greater her realization that the male needs to lead, even if he's a lesser dancer than her. The greater the expertise of the male dancer, the greater is his realization that he must lead at the pace and style which the woman can follow.

And so, women, the greater your maturity in Christ, the more you ought to realize that your husband needs to lead, even though you think him to be less mature than you. And men, the greater your maturity in Christ, the more you ought to realize that you need to gently and sacrificially lead your wife as you serve her. So, men, as long as you seek to lead through dominance, and, women, as long as you seek to grasp after your equality, our ball will look like an ugly 8th grade dance. However, if we each embrace our calling, we will be able to dance a dance that displays the beauty of Jesus to this world.

Further Resources:

Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood by John Piper and Wayne Grudem:

http://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/books_bbmw/bbmw.pdf

Series of Essays on Complimentarianism by Sam Storms:

<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/complementarianism/>

Summaries of the Egalitarian and Complementarian Position on the Role of Women in the Home and in Christian Ministry by Bruce Ware:

http://www.cbmw.org/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=141&pop=1&page=0&Itemid=32

Sermons on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood by John Piper

<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/by-topic/biblical-manhood-womanhood>

Fifty Crucial Questions: John Piper and Wayne Grudem's give cogent summary responses to most common objections that arise:

<http://www.cbmw.org/Questions-and-Answers>