

## **Does the New Testament Support Women Pastors or Elders?**

Anyone pursuing or who has pursued positions in leadership in a local church inevitably will need to study and understand God's roles for men and women in the church. It doesn't take long to realize the tremendous debate and difficulty those inquisitors will find as they research the plethora of available material on this subject.<sup>1</sup> Even though basic civility permeates most discussions, passion and conviction exudes itself quite readily. This topic has very diverse opinions, but as we seek to exegete the Scriptures, I believe the truth will be made very clear that God does not allow women to be senior pastors or elders. As we examine some of the main passages related to this, it becomes increasingly clear that the main issue becomes focused on a person's specific hermeneutic.<sup>2</sup> The more literal a student takes a passage of Scripture and bounds themselves to exegetical purposes, the more the picture emerges that God does not allow women elders (or senior pastors). It seems that scholars on the egalitarian side quite often point to the "exceptions" of what characterizes the biblical model in proof of their desire to see the exceptions become the rule. The main issue resides in whether women/wives are called to subordinate themselves under male/husband leadership. If this can be demonstrated, then it is not difficult to accept, through apostolically induced extension, Paul's injunction of not allowing a woman to teach or have authority over men in the church service.<sup>3</sup> It will be the goal of this short paper to demonstrate that this

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Hoch, Jr. notes at least 431 different titles on the subject in 1987! See "The Role of Women in the Church: A Survey of Current Approaches". *GTJ* V8 #2 (Fall 87), p.241.

<sup>2</sup> There are similarities that egalitarians make in their hermeneutical approach to those labeled loosely as evangelical feminists. To see an evaluation and assessment of these, see Paul W. Felix, Sr. "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism." *Masters Seminary Journal*. V5 #2, Fall 1994, pp. 159-184.

<sup>3</sup> It seems that Egalitarians by definition need to deny any headship. If they can demonstrate this most specifically in the marriage, then it logically follows (for them) that this would not exist in the church either. I believe this assertion can be substantiated by the emphasis of Egalitarians on the concept of no subordination of women at all. Linda Belleville says this specifically, "Although the topic of this volume is

headship exists and thus Paul's further admonitions concerning his limiting the senior pastor position to men only should be obeyed. These commands are to be followed and are transcultural because Paul roots them in the original created order. Thus, the focus of this paper will be on those passages that appeal to the creation account.

It is very common in introductory hermeneutics to learn that when examining narrative texts, these are most ordinarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. This is a very good rule and provides a safe approach in interpretation, but as the case is with any rule or guideline, there are always exceptions. It is also safe to say that we would be wisely cautious to begin (or preferably not to begin) proposing prescriptive interpretations of narrative portions anywhere in the Bible (whether the OT, gospels, Acts, etc.). However, when is it possible or safe to do this? I suggest that it is only possible when inspired writers or speakers in the New Testament do just that. For example, we would be hard pressed to prove with certainty that what "God has joined together as one flesh, let not man separate" as well as the whole teaching of divorce/remarriage stemming solely from Genesis 2. Yet this is precisely what Jesus does in Matthew 19:1-12. He takes the narrative in Genesis as the reason why divorce is not acceptable (except for adultery) and yet develops further (even though not explicitly written) that the act of marriage has God as the agent in joining the two together.

The point is that when Jesus, Paul or any other inspired writer takes a narrative and builds doctrinal truth, we must allow for their Holy Spirit inspired authority. I propose that today we don't have this same freedom. We do see in Genesis 1-2 as Thomas Schreiner points out at least six indications that Adam, as the man, had a special

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*women in ministry*, the fundamental issue is that of women leading men and the extent to which they can do so." "Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian Perspective." *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Ed. James R. Beck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (2005), 103.

and greater responsibility “over” the woman.<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem goes further in stating nine different reasons.<sup>5</sup> It is granted that not all these indications can be taken as prescriptive for the reasons already mentioned. Yet what would be needed is for a NT writer to propose a doctrinal truth concerning the subordination of women/wives while appealing to these verses. We have this exact thing as found in New Testament teaching (1 Corinthians 11:8-9; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; cf. 1 Cor 14:34) which we will now examine.

When discussing that the man is the head (*kephale*) of the woman (1 Cor 11:3; cf. Eph 5:23), it is easily deduced that Paul appeals to our passage by saying that the man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man (1 Cor 11:8-9). The concept of the man as the head contains within it that of authority even though egalitarians seek to maintain that it usually denotes only “source”.<sup>6</sup> Yet as Wayne Grudem definitively shows, this is not the case.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Kenneth O. Gangel comments,

“But in the physical sense is it biologically correct to say that the head is the source of life? Is the head formed first and then the rest of the body? Does the nourishment of bodily function really emanate from the brain or any other portion of the skull? Obviously not. The head is the control center for the body. The brain identifies precisely what behavior should be followed by bodily parts, so “control” or “authority” is a much better analogy from the physical realm than is the idea of “source.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. “Women in Ministry: Another Complementarian Perspective.” *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Ed. James R. Beck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2005), 289.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1994), pp. 460-465.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Belleville, (2005), Pp. 99-101.

<sup>7</sup> See Wayne Grudem, “Does *Kephale* (‘Head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2336 Examples.” *TrinJ* 6, n.s. (Spring 1985), pp. 38-59.

<sup>8</sup> Gangel, Kenneth O. “Biblical Feminism and Church Leadership.” *Bibliotheca sacra*, 140 no 557 Jan (1983), 57.

Thus, it can be seen that Paul speaks of man as the head (ruler or authority) of the woman and appeals to creation for his support. Due to the brevity of this paper, it's not conducive to digress into the larger argument of head coverings, but instead to focus on the "reason" Paul used for his argument on head coverings (*gar* in Greek; 11:8). Paul, I believe, is appealing to the fact that the man was created first with certain responsibilities and yet God created for him a helper (*ezer*) to help him fulfill these. It is true as Linda Belleville points out that in Genesis 1, the responsibilities were given collectively to both Adam and Eve.<sup>9</sup> Yet Adam was not made as a helper for Eve (*ezer*), but Eve for Adam. Craig Blomberg comments accurately when he acknowledges that there is no inherent inferiority in being a helper, but what "makes an *ezer* a 'helper' in each context is that he or she comes to the aid of someone else who bears the primary responsibility for the activity in question."<sup>10</sup>

As the man and the woman fulfill their creation mandates together, there still is a nagging question of what happens when the man and the woman disagree in how to do this. It is right that there should be attitudes of humility and love towards one another, but egalitarians encourage an interpretation that actually provides no real solution in a determined disagreement.<sup>11</sup> By focusing only on Ephesians 5:21, "submit to one another in the love of Christ," they minimize the other clear passages denoting submission to husbands by wives (Col 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1; Eph 5:23; Titus 2:5). Even Blomberg seems

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<sup>9</sup> Belleville, Linda L. (2005), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Blomberg, Craig R. "Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective." *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Ed. James R. Beck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (2005), 129-30. To see more on the inferiority/superiority issue with (*ezer*) see Allan Harman's article in NIDOTTE.

<sup>11</sup> Keener, Craig. "Women in Ministry: Another Egalitarian Perspective." *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Ed. James R. Beck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (2005), 242. Belleville (2005), 94-97. Kenneth V. Neller. "Submission in Ephesians 5:21-23." *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*. Ed. Carroll D. Osburn. Joplin: College Press Publishing Co., (1993), 260.

over-anxious to soften this by stating that even after a husband demonstrates loving servant leadership, if there still exists a disagreement, “in rare instances, he may have to make a decision for the two when there is an impasse.”<sup>12</sup> While it is true that men are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, this form of the husband’s submission (cf. Eph 5:21) is not similar to the wife’s form of submission of respect and obedience (i.e. following the husbands lead as “head”).<sup>13</sup>

The second passage that appeals to the creation account is 1 Timothy 2:11-15. It’s important to emphasize that these verses are meant to instruct Timothy how things should be handled in the church (3:15).<sup>14</sup> It is here that women are commanded to learn in quietness, but with all submission. Again, the submission factor plays a central role for Paul to then instruct that they are not to be teaching and exercising authority over men. Although some posit that this refers to wives over husbands, the context warrants that this is not the case, but instead refers to women in general.<sup>15</sup> Others root Paul’s admonitions against women in the Graeco-Roman culture seeking to dominate men.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is not assuming rebellious women who are seeking to dominate. Paul grounds his argument in the first three chapters of Genesis, not in Jewish or Graeco-Roman cultural practices.<sup>17</sup> Paul proceeds to base this teaching of no woman having any position of

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<sup>12</sup> Blomberg, (2005), 335, in his response to Thomas Schreiner.

<sup>13</sup> See Peter’s comments after he encourages the wives to submit to their husbands. He quotes Sarah’s obedience to Abraham as a model of submission to the women in this exact thing (1 Peter 3:5-6). Thus, in Peter’s thinking, obedience is an example of the submission he is commanding. No such command ever applies to husbands towards wives.

<sup>14</sup> I think the Biblical position would then allow for men to submit to women in the secular workplace, or even to allow women professors at universities where they would teach while male students would submit to their “leadership”.

<sup>15</sup> Hugenberger, Gordon P. “Women in Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis? A Survey of Approaches to 1 Timothy 2:8-15.” *JETS* 35:3 (Sept 1992), pp. 350-53.

<sup>16</sup> Geer, Thomas C. Jr. “Admonitions to Women in 1 Tim. 2:8-15.” *Essays on Women In Earliest Christianity*. Ed. Carroll D. Osburn. Joplin: College Press Publishing Co, (1993), 295 and 291, n. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Hoch JR. (1987), p. 248.

teaching coupled with authority over men in the creation account (1 Tim 2:13-14). Man was formed first and thus has the inherent role of leading and exercising authority through the woman's submission. Additionally, this leadership should not be usurped due to the inherent designed role of the woman submitting to man's headship. As popular as it might not be, it's hard to see anything else than Paul arguing for some deficiency in Eve (women) that makes them more susceptible to deception outside of male headship (whether a male pastor, father, or husband).<sup>18</sup> It is possible also to interpret this as seeing that Satan is determined to disrupt male headship and thus cunningly attacks women more often to deceive them.<sup>19</sup>

I will mention just briefly, due to its lack of conclusiveness, that Paul encourages the women to remain silent in the churches when judging prophecies<sup>20</sup> because they are called to be submissive due to the commandments of the law. There is inherently some confusion as to which exact passage Paul refers to, but the most obvious, as in other Paul thought, is that of the creation account.<sup>21</sup>

I think it appropriate to conclude by illustrating the similarity in understanding Paul's arguments from creation for male leadership in the church to Jesus' teaching on marriage (Matthew 19:1-12). After Jesus' teaching that marriage is considered indissoluble (except for adultery), the response given to Jesus was, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce" (19:7). Regardless of their motive, they wanted an answer to the seeming contradiction of Jesus' new teaching to that of Moses. Jesus' response is the crux of the matter for both issues. It was because of the hardness

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<sup>18</sup> MacArthur, John: *Different by Design*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1997, c1994 (digital edition).

<sup>19</sup> Schreiner (2005), 315. Possibly also a reference to the male headship covering needed by women spoken of in the enigmatic phrase of 1 Corinthians 11:10.

<sup>20</sup> See more on this in note 22.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner (2005), 321. Grudem (1987), 22.

of the heart of sinful men that Moses permitted this, but from the original design it was not so. The point being is that God (through Moses) allowed this, but this permission found in the OT Law was inferior to the original design. Thus, when Paul teaches (in a similar manner appealing to creation) that women are not to teach nor have authority over men (1 Tim 2:11-15), that man is the head of the woman (1 Cor 11:8-9;), or that women should keep silent as it relates to evaluating prophecies (1 Cor 14:34), the egalitarian responds, “Why then were there female judges, prophetesses<sup>22</sup>, and queens in the OT?” I propose that the same answer Jesus gave concerning divorce/marriage applies to the occurrence of women serving in leadership roles in OT times. These were all inferior departures from the original order of male headship and leadership as rooted in the creation. It could just as easily be said that the reason this was the case is because of the hardness of the hearts of the people in that the men did not fulfill and obey the original mandate.<sup>23</sup> The consistency of NT teaching is demonstrated in that the speakers and writers are calling the church, which is filled with people who are new creations in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) back to following the original created design in these instances.

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<sup>22</sup> A whole other paper can be written on whether there are differences between the OT role of prophet and that of NT prophet / prophesying. Wayne Grudem demonstrates that there is indeed a difference between the genre of “Thus says the Lord” OT prophesying (which should be obeyed) and that of NT prophesying (which should be judged; 1 Cor 14:29; 37-38; 1 Thess 5:20-21), *Systematic Theology*, 1049-61. Additionally, even though women in the NT prophesy, their utterances are subject to male leadership’s evaluation. It is in this thinking that women are still commanded to not teach or determine authoritative doctrine in the church service, even through their evaluations. See Larry Pettigrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, (2001), 177; Also, Wayne Grudem, “Prophecy- Yes, but Teaching- No: Paul’s Consistent Advocacy of Women’s Participation Without Governing Authority,” *JETS* 30/1 (March 1987), pp. 11-23.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the fact that Barak wouldn’t go to war without Deborah is more of an indictment of his lack of leadership than it is in promoting Deborah. Interestingly, nowhere in the text does it say that the LORD raised up Deborah to be judge (as with Othniel; Jud 3:9-10; Ehud; 3:15). In fact, it seems that Barak was the one who was commanded to act as Judge in delivering Israel. Deborah asks Barak, “Has not the Lord commanded you?” (4:6). This indicates that the hardness and disobedient heart of Barak in failing to lead and judge gave opportunity (which God *permitted*) for Deborah to judge. This is identical to the LORD through Moses *permitting* divorce, which was inferior to the original design (Deut 24:1-4; Matt 19:8).

When examining all these passages, it seems clear that the role of senior pastor (and elder) is reserved only for men. The fact that the NT synonymously groups together the roles of elder, overseer, and pastor into the same office (cf. Acts 20:29; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-2), it can be noted that this position is reserved for “men” who are the husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). This language is inherently male oriented.

Additionally, the responsibilities of the position of senior pastor (and elder) are ruling, preaching, and teaching (1 Tim 3:2; 5:17). Further, the apostles along with elders ruled definitively a doctrinal position that was authoritative in Acts 15:1-22. This illustrates together in one narrative the functioning role of elder as one who teaches and exercises authority (the one thing not allowed for women according to 1 Timothy 2:11-15).

Due to the inherent teaching nature and authority that an elder/pastor would carry out, it would not be appropriate, due to the passages examined, for a woman to function in this capacity and exercise definitive teaching and authority over any men. This is rooted not just in the original design at creation, but also in practical descriptions and functions of elders/pastors as found in the New Testament.

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