

Whitton Avenue Distinctives

Week 3: Gender Roles in the Home and Church

Introduction

What is at stake when we talk about gender roles in the home and church? If we share God's hatred of the abuse of power (which we will cover in week 5), then a lot is at stake. Consider this statistic from Dr. Steven Tracy: "Conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly are found to be the least likely group to engage in domestic violence, though conservative Protestant men who are irregular church attendees are the most likely to batter their wives."¹ Do you see the connection there? Men who are vaguely aware of the Bible's teaching about the husband's headship in the home and the wife's call to submit—yet are not actually walking with God—are likely to use that as justification to harm their wives in ways that explicitly contradict those same passages.

Rachael and I saw this play out in a family that visited our church many years ago. As we got to know the husband and wife, we heard her use some disconcerting phrases about having her husband's permission to do something or him allowing her to engage in an activity. There was never any evidence of physical or verbal abuse, but he wielded an unhealthy, destructive amount of financial and emotional control in the home. I spent much time with the husband and eventually confronted him about his domineering leadership in the home. Not long after they stopped attending our church. The last we heard, they are not attending church at all since the husband found something wrong with every church they visited and implicitly forbade his wife and children to attend even without him. Because of how she understands the biblical command of submission, she holds Sunday morning Bible studies with their children in the home.

This story and the broader statistic behind it show why we must treat the Bible's teaching on gender roles in the home and church like dynamite. This is a teaching that can unleash great power as we position ourselves under God's authority and within God-ordained structures of authority. At the same time, from the beginning of the Biblical narrative, men have enjoyed the benefits of male leadership without embracing the responsibility of male leadership, and countless wives and children have suffered for it. So we must be clear about how the Bible's teachings should be worked out practically in our church life.

¹ Patriarchy and Domestic Violence: Challenging Common Misconceptions
http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/50/50-3/JETS_50-3_573-594_Tracy.pdf

The Categories: Egalitarian and Complementarian

As with any issue, there is a broad diversity of view within each position (just think about the diversity within the Democratic or Republican party). For the sake of time, I will give a broad definition of each view.

Egalitarian – Paul’s teaching that “there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) means that there should be no distinction between males and females regarding roles in the home and in the church. Any hierarchy in gender roles is a result of the fall. The emphasis of the title “egalitarian” is on equality.

Complementarian – Males and females are created with equal value. God’s created order for human families and his spiritual family restricts leadership roles to males. The emphasis of the title “complementarian” is on the equally important and complementary role women are called to serve in the home and church.

Our church lands in the middle of the complementarian camp. Some complementarian churches have a much stricter, hierarchical understandings of gender roles while other complementarian churches would restrict eldership to men but not teaching or preaching. Whitton Avenue Bible Church holds that the roles of elder and elder-like teacher (including preaching) should be restricted to men. To put it another way, we believe that God has created an authority structure in the home and that structure should not be turned on its head in God’s family structure, the church.

As we walk through the biblical foundations of these convictions, the tone and manner in which we carry them will be as important as the convictions themselves. If we are thoroughly biblical, the words of the prophets that castigate the misuse of power will weigh as heavily on us as the principles that dictate who should exercise that power. So we will move cautiously yet confidently through God’s word to discern how he has structured families and churches to function.

A Brief Biblical Overview of Gender Roles in Marriage

–The created order: Adam and Eve over creation (Genesis 1-2)

The Genesis 1 account emphasizes the oneness of Adam and Eve as image bearers who together carry out God’s creation mandate to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” (Genesis 1:28). This is the big picture of humanity, and it portrays an absolute equality between the man and the woman.

The Genesis 2 account zooms in to some of the particularities of God’s design. God creates Adam first and sets him in the Garden to work and keep it. Part of this mandate involves keeping the command to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After this God creates the woman, since “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

This is not a subservient role but a highly valued role of needed assistance. Nearly every other use of this word for “helper” in the Bible refers to God helping humans in their need. So clearly this is not a derogatory, servile role but an esteemed, valued role of lending aid in a relationship of mutuality.

At the same time, by virtue of being created first and receiving the mandate, Adam bears all the responsibility of fulfilling God’s word of tending and protecting the garden. The text implies that Adam taught Eve (perhaps imperfectly) the law concerning the forbidden tree and in this regard held a place of authority and responsibility in relation to her.

–The fallen order: serpent, Eve, and Adam (Genesis 3)

The serpent’s temptation of Eve rather than Adam was a clear upheaval of the created order. God had given the command and final responsibility to Adam, and the serpent subverts that by offering the fruit to the woman. Furthermore, rather than Adam instructing Eve not to eat the fruit—which he should have done, since he was present for at least part of the temptation—Eve persuades Adam to eat the fruit.

Yet the order, though compromised, remained in place. While Eve is the first to sin, Adam’s failure to protect the garden and to obey God’s command receives the attention of God’s judgment. After the fall God singles out the man in asking “Where are you?” The judgments walk through the reversed order of creation (serpent), woman, and man, and the bulk of the judgment is given to Adam, as is the focus of expulsion from the garden.

–Sin’s effects on the good order: The Patriarchs (Genesis 12-50)

The effects of sin on God’s good, created order are evident in the marriage relationships of the Patriarchs: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah and Rachel. In each case, the husband’s call to lead, provide, and protect is often abandoned for passivity, selfishness, and cowardice. Likewise, the wife’s call to be a helper is often replaced with manipulation of circumstances behind the scenes.

This should not call into question the structure of male leadership in itself. Rather, it displays the particular ways that sin perverts God’s good order. Sadly, the majority of marriage relationships throughout the Old Testament (with the exception of Boaz and Ruth) show the perversion of the roles God established in the Garden of Eden. Many complementarians believe that this was anticipated by God’s words of judgment: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

–Redeemed order: Christ and the church (Ephesians 5)

Christ is redeeming not only individuals but the whole fallen order. One component of his redemption is to reorient leaders in the human family and God’s family to the true nature of leadership. He taught his disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first

among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28).

Paul captures this dynamic for the family in his instructions to husbands in Ephesians 5. He has already been clear that one of the submissive relationships in the church is that of wives to their husbands. But he clarifies to the husbands what their leadership is to look like, namely, like that of Christ. Husbands’ love for their wives is to match that of Christ’s love for the church, namely, a single-minded, sacrificial love—giving himself up for her. Knowing the husband’s propensity to prioritize his own body and bodily desires, Paul writes, “husbands should love their wives as their own bodies” (Ephesians 5:28). Just as Christ nourishes and cherishes his body, the church, each husband is to love his wife with the same love he has for his own body.

Any talk of authority or headship in marriage must be understood through this gospel lens. The Christian’s eternal delight is to comprehend the depths of Christ’s sacrificial love that was specifically directed toward the believer in his death and resurrection. In the same way, wives should feel deeply loved, cherished, cared-for, and served by their husbands. Only in this context of sacrificial care should the husband also live out the God-ordained structure that “the head of a wife is her husband” (1 Corinthians 11:3). And in this context the wife can find freedom and delight in walking in the biblical call to submission:

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Ephesians 5:22–24).

Gender Roles in the Church

Flowing from this context of God’s good order for the family is God’s good order for the church. While there are multiple texts that communicate male leadership in the church, the most significant (and disputed) is 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

“Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” (1 Timothy 2:11–15)

A brief word of context: Paul left his protege Timothy in Ephesus to bring some order out of the mess going on in the church. In particular, he was to “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3). Also, Paul meant for Timothy to address the disorder in the church gatherings. For example, the men were raising their hands to one another in anger and quarreling; Timothy was to instruct them rather to lift holy hands in prayer (2:8). The women were following the cultural trends of sexually provocative

clothing and extravagantly expensive hairdos; Timothy was to instruct them rather to adorn themselves with good works (2:9-10).

Likewise, something was going on in the church in which women were usurping the created order of the husband's headship and taking on authoritative teaching roles. Into this situation Paul encourages the women to learn with the rest of the congregation but to do so within the creation order. Just as God calls men to assume leadership and responsibility in their families, he calls men to assume leadership and responsibility in the church. In the following chapter, he gives the qualifications for elders, which is distinct from the qualifications for deacons in two specific ways: it is restricted to men and it requires the ability to teach.²

Why does Paul clarify that women are not to teach or to exercise authority in the church? The answer is crucial, as many have attempted to minimize this text by arguing that it is only specific to the situation in Ephesus due to the women's lack of education or a supposed feminist movement going on in the city. Whatever the particulars of the situation, what is absolutely clear is that Paul grounds his instruction in the created order: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Timothy 2:13-14).

As we saw in Genesis, Adam's creation first and Eve's creation to be Adam's helper established—before the fall—his role of headship in the relationship. Paul's reference to Eve being deceived is not an ontological statement about women being gullible or emotional but a simple reference to the disruption of the creation order in Genesis 3: the creation (that is, the serpent) tempted Eve, who then convinced Adam. God's intended order was that Adam would faithfully lead Eve and together they would have dominion over the creation. Just as the creation order was upended in the fall, Paul sees the creation order being upended when women take on roles of formal leadership through authoritative teaching in the church.

Why teaching? What is "elder-like" teaching?

Why is teaching in particular restricted to men? It certainly has nothing to do with mental capacity or natural gifting. How is teaching tied in to leadership and authority in the church?

A study of the broader context of 1 Timothy alone gives clarity to this connection. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to correct false teaching (1 Timothy 1:3). The aim of this was not theological correctness but "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1:5). For Paul, healthy (or "sound") teaching was inherently tied in to

² Scholars debate the meaning of the word "women" or "wives" in 1 Timothy 3:11, as the Greek word (*gune*) can refer to either one, depending on the context. Does this refer to qualifications for the wives of deacons or the qualifications for women deacons? Our position is that this refers to women deacons, such as Phoebe in Romans 16:1.

healthy, godly living. At one point he lists off a number of sins and calls them “contrary to sound doctrine” (1:10). So Timothy’s role of correcting doctrine had implications for all of life. It was through his teaching his living out that teaching that he would lead the church in Ephesus into full enjoyment of their life in Christ together.

Paul’s own authority as an apostle was tied into his role as a teacher—“For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (2:7). He passed the gospel he received to Timothy, charging him to “guard the deposit entrusted to you” (6:20), and to “keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (4:16). Paul wrote that the elders who should receive financial remuneration from the church are “those who labor in preaching and teaching” (5:17).

In short, the role of teaching is inextricably tied to leadership in the church, because to rightly teach sound doctrine is to model and call God’s people into godly living. This is the essence of biblical leadership, as Paul wrote to Timothy in his second letter: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). Hence Paul’s command, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (1 Timothy 2:12).³

With this being said, it should be specified that the authority-wielding teaching Paul has in mind is that of teaching the gospel message about Christ from all the Scriptures. In our particular context, this would encompass all of the preaching ministry and most of the teaching in Sunday School and small groups. However, there could be scenarios where a woman teaches a seminar on topics such as foster care or lay counseling or practical evangelism tools. There are also small group scenarios where flexibility is biblically warranted. The qualifier “elder-like” is meant to specify the vision-casting, direction-giving, admonishing teaching that leaders are to give in the church, whether they are currently functioning as elders or giving the type of direction elders are called to give (all in conjunction with the current elders).

So what can women do?

With this being stated, we must also give full attention to the copious Biblical testimony to the significant, valued roles of women in the people of God.

- Miriam the prophetess led the women in worshipping Yahweh following his victory at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21).
- Deborah was a prophetess, and “the people of Israel came up to her for judgment” (Judges 4:5).
- A key player in King Josiah’s reform was Huldah the prophetess, who called leaders and people alike back to covenant faithfulness (2 Chronicles 34:22-32).

³ Note that the “over a man” means that this only applies to adult contexts. Children still under the authority of their father and mother are not included in this. A woman teaching children does not upend the creation order as would a woman teaching men.

- King Lemuel's mother taught him the traits of a virtuous wife in Proverbs 31, traits that include entrepreneurial initiative, well-reasoned financial decisions, competitive engagement in the marketplace, wise teaching, and balance between care for her family and business outside the home.
- When Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple for purification, the prophetess Anna "began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).
- Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna provided for Jesus and his disciples "out of their means" (Luke 8:3).
- The Samaritan woman Jesus taught at the well (against all social conventions of the day) became an evangelist to her town: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29)
- Jesus healed many women and received expressions of gratitude from women (cf. the woman who washed his feet with her tears and hair).
- Jesus praised Mary for sitting at his feet and learning from his teaching (Luke 10:38-42).
- Women were the first to witness and proclaim Jesus' resurrection from the dead.
- Jesus made women the main characters of many of his parables and pointed out the faith of women as examples to others.
- One of the few rabbinical disputes Jesus engaged was divorce. One school of thought argued that a man could divorce his wife for any cause, even for burning his dinner. Against this disempowering practice Jesus called men away from such practices, arguing that "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery" (Matthew 5:32). In the same context he expands the definition of adultery to "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent" (Matthew 5:28), disallowing the sexual objectification of women.
- Priscilla is named first before her husband in Acts 18:26, suggesting that she took then lead when "they took [Apollos] aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26)
- Philip the evangelist "had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied" (Acts 21:9).
- Paul refers to Phoebe as "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae" and "a patron of many and of myself as well" (Romans 16:1-2)
- Among the church members and fellow workers Paul greets in Romans 16, the majority are women.
- Paul refers to Euodia and Syntyche as women "who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Philippians 4:3).

Beyond these specifically named females is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 about prayer and prophecy in the church. Paul reiterates the same creation order of headship as he did in 1 Timothy 2, yet in 1 Corinthians 11 the aim is not to restrict women from speaking but to clarify how women are to pray and prophecy during the church service without disrupting God-given authority. This helps us understand that the command for

women to be “silent” or “quiet” is never a blanket command but meant for specific contexts.⁴

What does this mean for Whitton Avenue Bible Church?

The greatest desire of our elders at Whitton Avenue Bible Church is to be faithful to God’s word. Hopefully this teaching from God’s word displays why we only have male elders, preachers, and teachers of most mixed adult classes. Likewise, while public prayer is open to both men and women, we have chosen at this point to utilize that as a time for our elders and those in elder-like positions to lead the church into God’s presence.

Other than this, we have women teaching women’s Bible studies and children’s Sunday School classes, sharing testimonies during the service, doing neighborhood outreach, greeting, serving communion, handling church finances, serving on committees, and giving direction to our ministry to women. As good as that level of involvement may be, the question is, could there be more?

Perhaps even more important than the answer to that question is the opportunity to examine our own hearts. For those who are eager to see women more involved, is that desire driven by a general desire to be more progressive and politically correct, or is it driven by a desire to open opportunities to Spirit-empowered men and women where God’s word has not restricted them? For those who are more comfortable with traditional gender roles, how would you respond if women began serving more in public ways that are not restricted by the scriptures? If a woman led the training hour in a teaching that is not “elder-like” or shared a word of encouragement God brought to her mind for our church (one understanding of New Testament prophecy) or led the Sunday morning prayer, would you feel uncomfortable or bristle at that?

Our ultimate desire should be to remain as faithful to God’s word as possible. If women are more restricted in our congregation than they were in the New Testament church, the elders need to prayerfully consider how to remedy the situation. In any case, our leaders should continually dialogue with women in our church about whether they feel valued and equipped for ministry at Whitton Avenue. Where the scriptures are clear on ministry restrictions we must hold the line. Where the scriptures are unclear we should not be dogmatic. While we do not believe our equality “in Christ” erases all gender distinctions regarding roles, we do want our church culture to joyfully reflect the reality that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

⁴ For instance, Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 that “the women should keep silent in the churches” is likely a reference to the immediate context of judging prophecy, not a blanket command. Earlier in the chapter Paul told those who had a tongue but no one to interpret, “let each of them keep silent in church” (1 Corinthians 14:28). This certainly was not a prohibition of all speech but of that particular type of speech.