

Voices: Affirming unlimited roles for women in ministry

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Read the companion article 'Affirming limited roles for women in ministry' [here](#).

The role of women in the church has been a point of contention among Christians for a long time. In this polarized cultural moment, we can show a better way. It starts by reframing the conversation.

Let's begin by restating a well-known framework for maintaining unity in the body of Christ: "In all things core, unity; in all things non-core, freedom; and in all things, grace."

As we maintain and nourish a Christ-centered, biblical faith, the core gets very tight, like the point of a spear. It comes down to believing the gospel, becoming like Jesus and joining him on mission. This focus has allowed the Great Commission to prevail throughout the world for millennia.

As a pastor, my reasons for advocating for women in ministry are three-fold: the gospel and its implications, the life and example of Jesus, and the advancement of his mission in the world.

It's helpful to begin by realizing there is a vast spectrum across the complementarian-egalitarian continuum. Simply labeling oneself and others is reductionist and unproductive.

Most pastors I know agree women and men are created equally in the image of God, are gifted by God to serve him, and are called to employ their spiritual gifts to glorify him and spread the gospel.

Opinions differ when it comes to roles within the church, particularly as it

relates to leadership, preaching and the role of the pastor.

Foundational questions

We first must answer some key foundational questions: How, if at all, did Jesus change the place and role of women? How does the gospel applied drive our understanding? What is leadership, and what did it look like in the first-century context compared to leadership today?

What did the first hearers of the New Testament understand the Gospel writers and Paul to be saying about women in the church? How does God dispense his gifts to his children? What is prophecy in the New Testament?

How do the roles of women and men reveal the glory of God and advance the gospel throughout the world? Finally, why does this matter today?

There is not space here to answer all of these questions.

A guiding principle

After years of thorough exegesis of key passages regarding women in ministry—1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-36, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Ephesians 5, Romans 16 and more—I have come to advocate for and raise up women in ministry.

A guiding hermeneutical principle that helps me interpret the debated and implicit passages is to look at the explicit life of Jesus as our guide. Unique to Christian theology is our acknowledgement that Jesus is perfect theology personified.

The Bible will not contradict itself, and thus will never contradict Jesus. If it ever seems to, the clarity most often lies in the hard work of the historical and contextual nature of the text and its application today.

Jesus liberated women more than anyone in history, and Paul turned cultural norms and roles of women upside down throughout the Greco-Roman world.

What makes our conclusions challenging is we cannot map today's understanding of leadership over the churches in the New Testament. There, we see a very different model of smaller gatherings, most often house churches, with very different roles and positions from what we see today.

Modern leadership in our churches too often mirrors more of an American corporate model than a biblical model of leadership. We are challenged by our presuppositions of leadership in our context up against a first-century model of ecclesiology.

What we do see in Jesus and in Paul is the ongoing theme of a radical reversal within the kingdom of God that applies to leadership.

Jesus' and Paul's empowerment of women

Jesus' entire ministry challenged the honor-shame culture that consisted of power, hierarchy, titles and patriarchy, which was a significant part of the fabric of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world.

Jesus announced a complete reversal within the kingdom, where the weak are strong, the last are first, and the servant is the most powerful person in the room. He speaks to this contrasting vision in Matthew 20:25-28, noting how the Gentile leaders rule over others, "but it should not be among you."

This is relevant especially as we talk about leadership in the church, because he turned secular leadership on its head. The leader as slave was a radical notion, as it is even in our day. It is one of the most revolutionary

things Jesus ever said and then embodied—such as in washing the disciples’ feet (Matthew 26) while taking on the form of a servant (Philippians 2).

Following his Savior’s lead, Paul laid out a new vision of leadership in 1 Corinthians and applied those principles in the church, in marriage and in the household codes (Ephesians 5).

Using the language of culture, Paul redefined what it means to be “head” as a loving servant, while raising up women as equal yet different from men in a beautiful picture of equality and mutual submission under the headship of Christ.

Paul summarized this new vision of life in God’s kingdom by challenging the cultural ideas of hierarchy, race, sex and equality, saying, “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).

Gifts greater than roles

It’s more profitable to talk about gifting than roles. Jesus did not genderize the Great Commission, nor does God dispense spiritual gifts to his children according to sex. We must release every girl and boy, woman and man into their God-given calling, not putting parameters around anyone based on sex, ethnicity or status.

Relegating women to specific roles—often preschool, children, youth, worship or women’s ministries—is to narrow the work of a gift-filled congregation and thus stifle the advancement of the gospel.

Such parameters have not always been imposed on the mission field in other parts of the world. Let’s release our girls and women—called by God—to lead, proclaim, teach and preach the glorious message of the

gospel to the whole wide world.

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