

The Role of Women in Church Leadership

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Mature, Christ-centered, Bible-based believers have hotly debated the role women should take in church ministry. Many have strong opinions about this topic. It is our earnest desire that our position create clarity for our church without causing division among brothers and sisters who follow Jesus.

The foundation for our position is the Bible alone. The place of women in ministry is not determined by what's politically correct, culturally relevant, or even the opinions of church leadership. Our obligation is to God's perspective and what he wants us to do. What follows is our best interpretation of what the Scriptures say on this matter.

What's at stake?

The specific question we are examining is whether women are free to serve in the church in any capacity based on giftedness, maturity, passion, and calling (the egalitarian position) or if women, because of their gender, should limit their service so as not to hold authority over men in leadership or teaching (the complementarian position).

While this is not a salvation issue or one that should divide the church, it is important because it has a direct bearing on where half of the people in our church can serve. It is serious business to limit one's ability to serve in the church without good cause. Interpreters of the Bible should have clear and unequivocal proof to exclude someone from service because of gender.¹ Our desire and attitude should be to grant and encourage women as much freedom in ministry as the Bible allows both for their sake and for the sake of expanding God's kingdom more powerfully and effectively.

While this study is certainly not exhaustive, it will attempt to take into account the biblical example and teaching on the woman's role in leadership from beginning to end. We will start with God's intention in creation and see how the fall distorted his original design. We will consider the women who led in the Old Testament, Deborah in particular, and then move to how Jesus treated women during his ministry. Finally, we will look at how the church saw the role of women as leaders and teachers.

¹ J. I. Packer, makes this point in an article he wrote for *Women, Authority and the Bible*, Edited by Alvera Mickelsen. "...the burden of proof regarding the exclusion of women from the office of teaching and ruling within the congregation now lies on those who

1) The Creation and Fall

What was God's original plan with man and woman at creation?

Creating humanity as male and female with all the wonderful differences of each gender was certainly God's intention from the beginning.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

In a reflection of the God-head, where there is one God with three distinct personalities (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), the Creator wanted one human race made of dual genders. Both male and female were made in God's image. The differences were not meant to cause division but just the opposite, to guarantee unity. God set things up so the sexes would appreciate and be dependent on each other. Listen to the purpose statement God gives humanity:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." Genesis 1:28

This commission is given to both man and woman. The first part of the command - to be fruitful and increase in number - obviously needs the contributions of both male and female. There is no reason to believe the second part of the command does not carry with it the same need for man and woman to work in concert subduing the earth. Each is to add their unique perspectives and strengths to rule the world the way God wants.

God could have chosen one gender to rule the earth, but he did not. For the job to be done right, God wanted both male and female to be completely engaged in the project, giving their best and working in harmony.

In Genesis 2 we get a further description of how this relationship works between man and woman. The Bible describes that man was created first and then woman. In anticipation of Eve's creation, God says he is going to make a helper suitable for Adam. Some have interpreted this to imply that woman was supposed to be subordinate to the man; sort of the junior partner. Subduing the earth is primarily the man's responsibility but it is so big he is going to need a subordinate to carry it off. Thus, the woman is made to work under the authority of man.

The problem with this position is the meaning of the Hebrew word that is translated helper (ezer). It is used about twenty other places in the Old Testament and it never implies subordination. *"It is generally attributed to God when He is engaged in activities of relief or rescue among His People."*² (We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. -Psalm 33:20). In other words, the implication of subordination we draw from ezer is not biblically valid.

Some have suggested that the order of creation, where the man is created before the woman, implies the authority of man. The problem with this argument is that the animals were created before humans and the plants before the animals. Authority is actually given to the last of God's creation: humans. Either the order of creation does not imply authority, or one would have to conclude the woman, as the last created being, would hold authority over all.

So, what is the relationship between man and woman before sin entered the world? Men and women are created with equal value, equal talent, and equal purpose. Both man and woman may use their unique perspectives and strengths to carry out the purposes of God without any indication that a hierarchy exists between the two.

What happened at the fall between man and woman?

After Adam and Eve rebelled from God, the world became a very different place. It was not the world God intended. There was separation between a holy God and sinful people; there was animosity between people. This included the relationship between men and women. God cryptically predicted the following curse to the woman:

"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Genesis 3:16

What, exactly, does this curse mean? The key is to understand the word "desire." This particular word is used only two other places in the Old Testament. It is used in God's warning Cain not to allow sinful anger to overpower him (Gen 4:7) and it is used in a love poem not to give in to the *desires of sexual love* before the right time (Song of Songs 2:7). It is quite possible that "desire" in Genesis 3:16 has the connotation of both power and sex. If so, this verse is telling us that rather than God's original intention for man and woman to be fruitful and multiply (sex) and to rule the earth (power) in equality and harmony, there will be conflict and the man will ultimately dominate the woman.

² Beyond Sex Roles, Gilbert Bilezikian, p. 28

Certainly, history shows this to be true as virtually every civilization down to modern times has witnessed male dominance and the oppression of women through sex and power.

The struggle of one gender ruling over the other is not a result of God's design, but the consequence of human rebellion. Incidentally, one way to view the mission of Jesus Christ is that he came to reverse the curse of Genesis 3 and all its consequences. This reversal includes more than the gender battle, but certainly not less.

2) God's People (Israel) in the Old Testament

Why do men generally lead in the Old Testament?

Religious, civil, and military leaders are predominantly men in the Old Testament. There are few women who hold positions of leadership in Israel. But it is a mistake to imply from the ratio of female to male leaders that God didn't want women to lead. Several women exercised leadership roles in ancient Israel. Miriam led the women of Israel in worship (Exodus 15:20-21). Huldah was a prophetess whom King Josiah consulted instead of Jeremiah, her contemporary (2 Kings 22:14-20). Esther, a Jewish, teenage girl, who became the queen of Persia, not only used her position and influence to rescue the Jews from genocide, but takes lead over her male guardian, Mordecai, to come up with and implement the plan of rescue (Esther 4:15-16).³ Then there is Deborah.

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. Judges 4:4-5

There is no doubt that Deborah held a major position of leadership in Israel during the period of the judges. In fact, she is the only judge (leader) who is also a prophet. Her authority is so great that she gives orders to the general of Israel's army.

³ From this point on Esther, who had up till now done as Mordecai told her, herself takes the lead and assumes responsibility in her own right. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p. 81

She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'" Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go." "Certainly, I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."
-Judges 4:6-9

As the story unfolds, Barak balks at Deborah's order, not because he does not think she has authority, but because he wants her to direct the battle - a staggering thought for the ancient world. If, in principle, God did not want women to hold authority over men, why does he clearly call Deborah to do so? We have no reason to believe that God's call of Deborah was any less valid than his call of the other judges during this period.⁴

There are other God-appointed women in the Old Testament who are called to prophesy or lead without any biblical commentary about their gender making this inappropriate. It seems that the disproportionate percentage of men holding authority does not have so much to do with God forbidding women from holding such authority but is more a reflection of the culture of the day and the purposes God had for each situation.

3) The New Testament

In the New Testament church can women exert authority over men? This gets to the crux of the matter regarding what women can and cannot do in a local church. Many churches struggle with whether women should hold either ruling or teaching authority over men. They find themselves creating policies or holding positions that try to balance a complementarian position that keeps men in charge while allowing women to participate as much as possible. Without meaning to, a church can find itself being inconsistent and arbitrary in its application of biblical passages that teach on the woman's role in church.

⁴ Deborah actually had stronger character, did a better job leading and received more blessing from God than any of her male counterparts in Judges.

For instance, a church that believes women should not have authority over men will not allow a woman to be an elder but may have no problem with a woman holding a leadership position in the children's ministry, even if it means leading adult men who volunteer. Or they may not allow a woman to preach from the stage, but will allow her to share a devotion from that same stage. A church may say a woman can't be on the board of directors, but she may serve on the church's mission board (both boards holding oversight for men and women). There are many other inconsistencies that are common, including the belief that as long as women are under the authority of an all-male elder board, they are free to lead and teach anywhere in the church.

Such policies often lead to confusion in the congregation and unbiblical limitations to women who want to serve.

However, it is unfair to hammer churches on these inconsistencies without acknowledging that in many cases they are trying to obey certain New Testament passages that do seem to prohibit a woman's authority over a man. We will get to those passages shortly, but first let's look at how Jesus treated women during his ministry.

4) Jesus and Women

As we turn our attention to the New Testament, we are met with the extraordinary way Jesus treated women. First century Palestine, as the rest of the Mediterranean world, was slanted toward male domination. Women did not have the same rights as men and frequently found themselves on the wrong end of harassment and oppression. "In theory, women were held in high regard by first-century Jewish society, but in practice, this was not always true."⁵

Most women were illiterate, as the rabbis of Jesus day did not consider it important for women to study the Scriptures. Women were not considered reliable witnesses and therefore not allowed to testify in court. "Customarily, even a woman of stature could not engage in commerce and would rarely be seen outside her home. Only a woman in dire economic straits, who was forced to become the family breadwinner, could engage in her own small trade. If a woman was ever in the streets, she was to be heavily veiled and was prohibited from conversing with men... Women were separated from men in private, public and religious life."⁶

⁵ Zhava Glaser, "Jesus and the Role of Women", Jews for Jesus Newsletter (5748:9), June 1, 1988

⁶ Ibid

Jesus was revolutionary in his treatment of women. He often conversed with them in public. Perhaps the most famous conversation was with the Samaritan woman in which the disciples expressed surprise that Jesus was talking to her (John 4:23). Jesus included women in his inner circle and some of them were even responsible for supporting his ministry (Luke 8:1-3). In a move that surprised Martha, Jesus invited her sister, Mary, to "sit at his feet" – a euphemism to describe a disciple (Luke 10:38-42). Finally, it was Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus first appeared on Easter, ordering her to tell the disciples about his rising and making her the first witness to testify to his resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10).

Clearly Jesus elevated women in his life and ministry. "The foundation-stone of Jesus's attitude toward women was his vision of them as persons to whom and for whom he had come. He did not perceive them primarily in terms of their sex, age, or marital status; he seems to have considered them in terms of their relation (or lack of one) to God."⁷

So how did Jesus' treatment of women translate into the life of the New Testament church?

What is Jesus' perspective on authority?

Near the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus began to prepare his disciples for the birth of the church (God's vehicle for extending his kingdom on earth). In one of his final statements to the disciples, Jesus made clear who holds authority in the church.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20

Authority for the church is held by Jesus Christ. This truth is further reinforced by statements in the epistles (Colossians 1:18). Any theology of church leadership and teaching must start with the basic understanding that this is Jesus' call to make. We also need to understand the basic nature of leadership from Jesus' perspective.

⁷James Hurley, Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 83

What is leadership in the church?

In our world, to lead generally means to call the shots, take control and be served. The struggle over who has the power is played out all the time. One king goes to battle against another to see who will rule. One politician spends hundreds of thousands of dollars to win and hold the seat of power. Two kids bicker over who will get their way and finally one blurts out, *"You're not the boss of me!"*

Is this really God's design for leadership? While leadership usually includes holding authority (government officials, church elders, etc.), the notion of one person making another submit is contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:25-28

Jesus is making the following point: "Who can I rule?" is the wrong question. The right question is "Who can I serve?"

For any church, or follower of Christ, it is essential to remember the attitude of service and humility that is required of a leader. Perhaps if we imitated the way Jesus led, we wouldn't struggle so much with who leads.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:3-8

5) The New Testament Church

Who are spiritually gifted to lead and teach?

As we have mentioned, it is up to Jesus as to who leads and teaches in the church. One of the ways Jesus guides us is through the distribution of spiritual gifts.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

In this passage, as well as any other New Testament teachings about spiritual gifts, there is no indication that gifts are divvied out according to gender. Gifts like teaching and leadership are given to women as well as men, just as gifts like mercy and helps are given to men as well as women.

Since it is clear that spiritual gifts find their source in the Holy Spirit and that he alone distributes them as he pleases, we can assume that it is God's will that both men and women would be gifted and expected to use their gifts of leading and teaching in the church.

Though spiritual gifts may be given without gender discrimination, what about the offices or positions God gives to certain people in the church to lead and teach? J.I. Packer connects the offices to the gifting. He writes that offices should be an outgrowth of the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to both men and women. "Gifts are theologically prior to offices, in the sense that offices are for gifts rather than vice versa; second, that gifts from the Holy Spirit, gifts of utterance included, are given to women as they are to men; and, third, that all spiritual gifts should be put to use in the church for its building up (see Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:8-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11)."⁸

From mere observation we might also note that when women are given the same opportunities and training as men, they demonstrate great acumen in leading and teaching. God doesn't seem to have any problem transforming lives and extending his kingdom through gifted women leaders and teachers.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Women, Authority and the Bible*, Edited by Alvera Mickelsen, p. 296

Further, because women have their own feminine perspective and power when they are included in the teaching and leading teams of a local church, they create an impact that is broader in perspective and better equipped to minister to a diverse congregation.

Interpreting key passages that address women as leaders and teachers

An important principle in interpreting tough biblical passages is to recognize that they were originally written to an audience almost 2,000 years ago that lived in a culture far different than ours. Often the epistles (letters) are written to a specific church with a unique situation or set of problems. For instance, there is instruction to women about hair length and coverings for their head (1 Corinthians 11:6). There is a teaching about types of clothing or accessories they should wear (1 Timothy 2:9). There is even a prohibition about women speaking in church at all (1 Corinthians 14). Few would suggest that those are teachings that would hold for all churches in all cultures.

While the epistles often give universal principles (for all churches at all times) it is essential to try and understand the precise issue being addressed so as to apply the principle properly. Sometimes what is cultural and what is universal is difficult to ascertain. We need to do the best we can, with the least amount of bias, to land on the interpretation that honors the passages as God intends.

Should women hold authority over men?

Most passages on authority and leadership in the New Testament are gender neutral. One passage, however, strictly forbids women from having authority over men in the church.

I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 1 Timothy 2:9-14

The question of this passage is not whether Paul is restricting women from teaching or holding authority over men, but whether this is a universal principle or tied just to this particular church in Ephesus.

We should first note that the idea of women speaking with authority in the church was generally accepted through the gift of prophecy. Prophecy is defined in the Bible as encouragement, evangelism, evaluation, and teaching. It is presented as normal for women to do (Acts 21:9) or taught as appropriate in the context of a service (1 Corinthians 11:5). While teaching, preaching, and prophecy may have different nuances they all include speaking with God's authority.

We should also note that women holding leadership in the church was not uncommon in first century churches.

- Priscilla was the teacher of a powerful leader and teacher in the early church, Apollos. 9
- Phoebe is mentioned as a deacon alongside other deacons like Timothy, Apollos, and Stephen. 10
- Junia, is called an apostle by Paul. 11

So, as we turn to this instruction in 1 Timothy 2, we again need to ask the question of whether Paul is addressing something to this specific church or giving guidance to all churches. If we are to say that everything written in the passage is always to be literally applied to all churches, it would mean women could not wear braided hair, gold, pearls, or expensive clothes to church. It also seems to imply that women should not teach at all in church, regardless of who they are teaching, including children or other women ("*she must be quiet*"). Clearly, Paul is addressing a specific situation in a specific church.

It is commonly believed that women in Ephesus did not have much religious training. This was typical in much of the ancient world due to the general male-dominated society and the lack of opportunities for women to learn or develop spiritually. In the church in Ephesus many women were new Christians and did not know much about Christian doctrine or behavior appropriate for a believer. False teachers were a primary concern for Paul in addressing the Ephesians (1 Timothy 1:3-7). It appears that some women were especially susceptible to the influence of men who would take advantage of them and promote their false teachings (2 Timothy 3:6). In other words, at this time the women of Ephesus were not prepared to teach or to lead the church because of their lack of spiritual maturity, not because of their gender.

9 In Acts 18 Priscilla, along with her husband Aquilla, taught one of the most prominent leaders of the early church, Apollos. Priscilla name is mentioned first because she probably played the prominent role in instructing Apollos.

10 Romans 16:1

11 Romans 16:7

12 Christianity was radically different from other religions, organizations and customs of the day in that women were respected, treated as equals and given significant responsibilities.

To emphasize the point that women were not prepared to lead or teach, Paul gives an example from Genesis 3. 1 Timothy 2:13-14 reflects back on the familiar story of Adam and Eve's rebellion. Only Adam was given the instruction by God about not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This prepared Adam to lead. However, the serpent approached and tempted the unprepared Eve to take the lead and to eat from the forbidden tree. The result of her taking leadership when she was not ready was that she made a catastrophic mistake that still has consequences for us today.

The point of both the illustration and teaching in 1 Timothy 2 is not to give a universal principle forbidding women from leading and teaching in all churches, but rather to give a universal principle that people who are not prepared to lead or teach the body should not be allowed to do so. In this case, Paul is singling out the women in Ephesus as not being prepared to lead or teach. Incidentally Paul makes a similar point when he warns churches not to put new believers into leadership positions because they aren't ready (1 Timothy 3:6).

What about women as elders or deacons?

While remembering that the primary attitude of a leader should be humility and the primary activity of a leader is to serve, there is also a component of leadership that has to do with oversight (1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

In fact, there is a specific position in the church called the elder, pastor, or overseer (these terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament) who is responsible for leadership. The primary qualifications for elders mostly have to do with character traits (2 Timothy 3), though certain spiritual gifts such as teaching, leadership, discernment, wisdom, shepherding, etc. are important for carrying out their responsibilities.

Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 1 Timothy 3:2-5

In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. 1 Timothy 3:8-12

It should be noted that the qualifications for deacon (a position under the authority of the elders) most definitely allows for women to serve. In fact, we read in Romans 16:1 that a woman named Phoebe was a deaconess at the church of Cenchrea just outside of Corinth.

Some have suggested that the elder qualifications in verses 2-5 assume that the elder is a man (faithful to his wife). However, the deacon is also told that he must be faithful to his wife even though a woman can hold that position. ¹³ It doesn't seem to be Paul's intent to write women out of the position of elder for all churches just by the way he has worded the qualifications. ¹⁴

In Romans 16:7 we are introduced to a woman named Junia who is praised as outstanding among the apostles. The office of apostle, as modeled in the early church, most definitely carried authority in both teaching, leading, and probably authority that surpassed that of elders.

Overall, it appears Paul instructed churches with different congregational make-ups to be wise with whom they put in positions of authority. In places where women were not equipped to hold authority, they did not. In other places, where women were equipped to hold authority, they did.

What about the headship principle in the church?

Headship in the New Testament is used to describe the relationship of Jesus Christ to the church, men to women in the church and the husband to a wife in marriage. For the sake of this discussion, we are concerned with the headship of men to women in the church.

¹³ We must be careful not to conclude too much from the male-centered qualifications because using this logic we would also have to assume that single men or men without children would also be excluded from the elder position.

¹⁴ Although, as has already been noted in Ephesus it wouldn't have been proper for the women to be elders because of their lack of spiritual maturity.

We take our cue on what headship means in human relationships from what it means that Jesus is the head over the church.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. Colossians 1:15-18

It is clear in this passage that Jesus is the head of the church in two ways. He holds absolute authority over the church, and he is the source of the church ("firstborn from among the dead"). The word "supremacy" or "preeminence" (the NKJV translation) captures both ideas. Jesus Christ is the head of the church means he holds preeminence as the top authority and the initial source.

In passages where headship applies to human relationships, one human is head over the other, it would again mean preeminence, but it could mean 1) authority and source, 2) just authority, 3) just source. We rely on the context of the passage to help us figure it out.

Now to the one passage that teaches men are the head of women in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul addresses some specific issues of worship that have come up in the Corinthian church. In the first part of the chapter, the primary concern is justifying the practice of why women should keep their head covered in worship and men should not (clearly a 1st century cultural issue). While Paul addresses differences between the genders in worship, "his purpose is not to write a theology of gender but to correct an unbecoming practice in worship that will tarnish the church's reputation." 15

Paul argues that head coverings represent an order of relationship between the man and the woman.

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 1 Corinthians 11:3

At first reading, this looks like a statement on authority. This seems natural since, in English, saying someone is the head almost always means they are the boss or the person of highest rank. If that is the case, the verse would read something like this:

...the boss of every man is Christ, and the boss of the woman is man, and the boss of Christ is God.

The problem with this interpretation is the rest of the context of this passage, leading Gordon Fee, a New Testament scholar to say, "head" in this section of scripture does not mean "authority" but rather "source." This reference to "head" is meant in the same sense as when we talk about the headwaters of a river being its source. ¹⁶ Therefore the way the people in Corinth would have understood this teaching would be the following:

*...the source of every man is Christ (Christ, as creator, created the man, Adam.)
...the source of woman is man (the woman, Eve, was created out of Adam)
...the source of Christ is God (Jesus is called the only begotten of God)*

The context, a few verses later, makes this clear.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 1 Corinthians 11:11-12

After verse 3 is seen in light of the whole passage, it is evident that Paul is teaching that in God's plan there is mutual dependence of the genders as each one is now the source of the other, or as is obvious, it takes two to procreate (back to the creation account where God's original design for is man and woman is to work together to be fruitful and multiply.) Overall interdependence between men and women should generally be appreciated and celebrated when worshipping the God from which everything comes.

The main point of 1 Corinthians 11:1-12 is not to establish lines of authority between men and women through a principle of headship. Rather, in the Lord, men and women should affirm their dependence upon each other and work in harmony and partnership.

¹⁶ Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the NT p. 503

There is no doubt that the specific culture and churches being addressed by Paul influenced his teaching. From Paul's standpoint, his primary purpose in writing the pastors and churches was to help them in their specific situations. It is always the hard work of Bible students to accurately distinguish between universal principles for the church as opposed to handling a specific situation. This is not easy, so we need to give grace to others who come up with different conclusions. That being said, it is still imperative to draw conclusions so that we can lead our church with clarity.

We believe that when passages of Scripture are properly viewed in their context, the New Testament does not limit the role of women in the church in any way. Rather we can assume that proper functioning of a healthy church is to have men and women working alongside each other, each using their gifts and passions to further the kingdom of God.

Keep the main thing the main thing

An over-arching priority for Paul was the priority of the gospel.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 1 Corinthians 9:19-2

About this passage, N.T. Wright writes, "The point is that there are people out there, beyond the present Christian fellowship, who need to be 'won' - a word he uses five times in this passage, before finally changing it to 'save' (verse 22). The word is used not so much of winning a prize, but of making significant profit on an investment: God has 'invested' everything in the gospel, including his own very self in the person of Jesus his son. Now he wants 'to gain' something back from it, namely the people of all sorts and conditions whose lives will be 'won' through the gospel. 17

17 N. T. Wright, 1 Corinthians, New Testament for Everyone p. 115.

In short, the priority of the gospel means that whatever it takes, short of dishonoring God, to further the message of the gospel and win people to Christ must be done with singular focus and all-out tenacity.

This impacts how Paul treats other issues in the culture. For instance, circumcision. Several times he argues, and is quite adamant, that a person does not need to get circumcised to follow Jesus. He insists that Titus should not be circumcised in Galatians 2:3-5. However, when he takes Timothy with him on a mission trip he has him circumcised before they leave (Acts 16:1-3). While on the surface this seems contradictory it isn't if you consider Paul's commitment to spreading the gospel. 18

How this relates to our current discussion is that Paul did not see his mission as reversing the chauvinism of the Jewish and Greek cultures of his day any more than ending slavery. Where applicable he taught about the role of women and certainly saw them as co-workers in the spread of the gospel. He was often pragmatic in light of advancing the gospel. Paul was an expert at understanding the culture he was trying to reach and using it to make the gospel stick. Because of this, Paul's writings can seem inconsistent or even contrary when it comes to women. But once the priority of the gospel is taken into consideration Paul is remarkably consistent.

What this means is that if we are going to follow Paul's lead, we need to prioritize the spread of the gospel and be sensitive to how that is done in each culture. For instance, if we are taking the gospel to Saudi Arabia, a blatantly chauvinistic culture, it might be counter-productive to have women initially teaching and leading.

18 Paul felt that the Gospel would be discredited if Titus, a Greek, were circumcised. To concede that Titus should be circumcised would be tantamount to abandoning the gospel of justification by faith apart from works of the law. In Timothy's case of circumcision, Paul was being pragmatic. He was about to take Timothy with him on a mission trip where they would be visiting many unbelieving Jews and he did not want Timothy's uncircumcision to be a stumbling block for the Jewish community receiving the Gospel. For a full discussion on this issue see John Piper's on-line article entitled, "Why was Timothy Circumcised?"

19 Slavery was an issue Paul navigated carefully. While he saw slavery for the evil institution it was, he also did not crusade to end it. He realized that clearly getting out the Gospel was his main calling and did not want to muddle that message with a polarizing social issue.

20 See the salutations of many of his letters, i.e. Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16...

In western culture, where equal rights between the genders is generally seen as a positive, women can and should be front and center when it comes to teaching and leading. As we have shown, the Bible allows women to lead and teach, so let's use this to our advantage and make our churches as effective and powerful as possible! Jesus and Paul would certainly smile at this!

6) The Women's Role

Where does all of this leave us?

God originally created man and woman to work side by side to rule over the earth. However, as a result (curse) of the Fall, men have often dominated women and pushed them to the margins of leadership. With the coming of Jesus and the introduction of the kingdom of God to earth, Jesus begins to reverse the curse that had fallen on humankind. This includes how women are treated. We see Jesus quick to include women in his ministry, he allows them to sit under his teaching, and he gives them important responsibilities (unheard of for the culture).

Jesus' high esteem for women carries over into the church with congregations including women in all aspects of worship and service. Women are allowed and encouraged to give leadership and teaching to the church when they are gifted and mature enough to do so.

God is leading men and women back to a place where they serve side by side. He does not want gender differences to be a barrier but a strength. God desires harmony between men and women in order to make stronger teaching, stronger teams, stronger leadership, better decisions, better service, and a more dynamic, Christ-honoring church.

I think this is what Paul had in mind when he said,

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:26-28

In our churches, there is no doubt that our teaching and leadership are stronger, more effective and build healthier congregations when both men and women can use their gifts and passions. We need the perspective, skills, and wiring of both men and women to do an effective job of running the ministries of the church. We want all men and women to serve and lead to the level of their gifting, passion, and maturity. Our children, students, and adults will benefit from being led and taught by those men and women who are called and gifted by God.

Our mission, ministry, and message are too important to eliminate half of the people in our church from leadership and teaching as we expand the kingdom of God. In everything, we aim to please Jesus Christ who is the author of our faith and our ultimate leader and teacher.

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