

WHAT ALDERWOOD TEACHES ABOUT WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

In Short:

Alderwood teaches that men and women are each invaluable partners in life and ministry, and that women should be equipped and empowered to serve in every area of church ministry, with one exception, which is the role of elder. Our position is that God has established the role of elder within the church to serve as the spiritual fathers of the church family, and that this one role is reserved for Biblically qualified men. When considering what roles, functions, and activities are appropriate for women, the question to ask is not, "What may a woman do?" But rather, "What may a non-elder do?" If something is available to non-elder men, then it should be available to women as well.

At Alderwood, we do not expect everyone within our church family to agree completely on this issue. Our most strongly held beliefs and the beliefs that we require all members to hold can be found in our *Essential Doctrine* statement. Our position on women in church leadership, while important, is secondary to that, and we ask that our church family submit to it without causing division, while being free to personally hold differing convictions about what the Scriptures teach on this issue. For those in teaching and leadership roles, we require that they teach Alderwood's position in good faith in whatever way they are representing Alderwood.

The Long Version:

The topic of women in church leadership is an issue on which there is a great level of disagreement today within the Church globally. The debate is often framed as being between two sides: complementarians and egalitarians. While these terms fail to adequately convey the variety of positions on this topic, they are helpful starting places for understanding the conversation. The complementarian position is generally understood to be that men and women are created equal in value and dignity, but that men and women are also created differently in a way that complements one another, and in light of this difference God has restricted certain roles of authority within the family and the church to Biblically qualified men. The egalitarian position can be described as believing that while men and women are different and do complement one another, those differences are not a basis for restricting women from any leadership role within the church and that the equality of men and women can only be fully expressed when women are allowed to exercise any role that men can exercise. Both of these positions can be held in good faith by followers of Jesus who believe in the authority of the Scriptures and both of these positions are within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

One of the shortcomings of this debate is the way that these positions are often described as being opposites from one another, when in reality they actually share more in common than they hold in disagreement. Complementarian and egalitarian Christians agree whole heartedly in the equality of men and women before God, the spiritual giftedness of both men and women, the necessity of women using their gifts for the flourishing of the church, and the evil nature of misogyny and the mistreatment of

women. At Alderwood, our position falls within the umbrella of a complementarian understanding of the Scriptures, but much of what we believe could be easily associated with egalitarian theology and we would also disagree with other complementarian churches who restrict the role of women in the church beyond what we think is supported by the Scriptures. Our allegiance is to the Lord Jesus and the Word of God, not to any one theological camp or denomination.

Our position on women in church leadership arises from the following convictions on what the Bible teaches:

- Male and female are intentionally created categories and are part of God's good Creation. Human flourishing is dependent on accepting and living into this design. Questions related to gender should always be resolved by appealing to the Scriptures which reveal God's will to us, and not by appealing to human desire or cultural pressure.
- Men and women are created together in the image of God and are equal in value, dignity and standing before God. No distinction in role between men and women is made on the basis of value or superiority. While every individual is created in the image of God, the fullness of the way that humanity images God can only be seen in the partnership of male and female together.
- Men and women are created distinct from each other, and their differences complement one another. In creating men and women differently, God also calls men and women to different roles in the family and the church. These different roles are a part of God's good design and are not the result of sin, since we can see these differences reflected in Genesis 2 before sin enters the world.
- After **Genesis 2**, God consistently calls men to fill the roles of the highest level of spiritual authority. The Levitical priesthood, the spiritual leaders in the temple system, are only male members of the tribe of Levi. God only appoints male kings of Israel. This pattern is confirmed in the New Testament. While Jesus had many female disciples, he called 12 men to form his inner circle that would eventually become the Apostles of the early church. The instructions to churches in the New Testament leaders also assume and instruct that elders of the local churches will be men. For the church today, the role of elder is the role of highest spiritual authority, and that role is restricted to Biblically qualified men as the spiritual fathers of the church family.
- Despite these restrictions on roles, there are no gendered gifts of the Spirit, and the Spirit distributes all gifts freely to both men and women. Outside of the role and function of being an elder, women can and should freely exercise their gifts, including gifts of teaching and leadership, within the church for the purpose of edifying God's people and building up the church. Women can and should teach the Scriptures, study theology, lead groups and ministries of all ages and both genders within the church. When considering whether a role, function, or activity within the church is open to women, the question shouldn't be "Is a woman

allowed to do this?" but rather, "Is a non-elder allowed do this?" If a non-elder man can fill a certain role, then a woman should be able to fill that role as well.

- It is the role of both men and women to advocate for women to use their giftedness and their skills in church ministry. The church as a whole is hindered when any of our people are wrongly kept from fulfilling their unique function as a part of our body, and the roadblocks and hinderances that have unnecessarily kept women from leading and teaching in the church have only served to hurt the body as a whole. Tradition and structures that restrict women from using their gifts do not glorify Jesus and should be reformed wherever they are encountered.

So, what does this mean for how Alderwood views women in church leadership?

1. We strive to encourage women to grow as disciples of Jesus.

Following Jesus, studying the Scriptures, learning theology, building community, discipling others, sharing the gospel, and serving one another are not things for only men to aspire to; they are things for men and women to aspire to together. Alderwood desires to build a church culture in which girls and women are consistently encouraged to pursue Jesus in every way, just as much as men.

2. We seek to equip women to use their gifts in church ministry of all kinds.

The church can only function to its highest capacity when all of us are using our gifts for the good of the body as a whole. Alderwood desires to build a church culture in which women with all kinds of giftedness are developed and trained to utilize those gifts for the kingdom. This means we champion not only women with gifts of hospitality, service, encouragement, but also women with gifts of teaching, leadership, and administration.

3. We commit to empowering women and removing hindrances.

Much of what has kept women from flourishing and using their gifts within the church has not been the theology of the church but has been the sin of sexism and discrimination that is the result of the Fall. As we partner with Jesus to seek a reality where God's will is done on Earth as it is in Heaven, we commit to opposing and repenting of these sins wherever we encounter them.

APPENDIX 1 - INTERPRETATIONS OF SPECIFIC PASSAGES

Genesis 2:20-23 The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.

²¹ So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

One key question in the debate over the roles of men and women in church leadership today is if distinctions between the roles of men and women are the result of the curse of sin that has come after the Fall in Genesis 3, or whether they are a part of God’s very good design for Creation that was already present before the Fall. Several aspects of the Creation of Adam and Eve Genesis 2 lend credibility to the idea that distinction of role between men and women was present before the Fall. There is an ordering of Creation in which Adam is created first, placed in the garden to “work and keep it” (**Genesis 2:15**), given the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then afterwards Eve is created out of Adam’s side. The reason given for the Creation of the woman is that it is not good for man to be alone, and that Adam is in need of a “helper fit for him” (**Genesis 2:18**).

Unfortunately, this word “helper” has often been used to describe the role of women as being beneath or subservient to men. This is not the case - the word “helper” in English is a translation of the Hebrew word “ezer” (pronounced to rhyme with “razor”). The word “ezer” is used to describe God more often than anyone else (**Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalm 33:20**, etc.). In these contexts, it is clear that “ezer” does not mean some sort of helper of menial tasks or someone who is less valuable or capable than someone else, but rather someone who enables you to do something you are incapable of doing by yourself. While the role of the woman as an “ezer” is a role of equal partnership, dignity, and value - it is evident in this passage that there is a distinction of role between Adam and Eve. Adam is given the mission of caring for the garden and the instructions from God on how to go about that mission, but being incapable of accomplishing that mission alone, Eve is created as the necessary and indispensable helper to Adam. Applying this story in the modern world requires wisdom, but the idea that all distinctions between the roles and function of men and women are the result of the curse of sin should be rejected.

1 Timothy 2:11-14 Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Paul's main concern in this passage is that women be allowed to learn alongside men and not be hindered in their growth as disciples of Jesus because of their sex. In **vs. 12**, Paul does issue a prohibition—specifically that women not “teach or exercise authority over a man.” Understanding exactly what Paul has in mind here and how broadly he intended this prohibition to be applied is a challenge. However, several things should be observed. First, Paul did not prohibit women from speaking in church generally when men were present, and in fact he assumed that women would be bringing prayers and words of prophecy for the church (**1 Corinthians 11:5**). Furthermore, Acts records Priscilla, a woman, teaching and discipling Apollos, a man, in a positive light in **Acts 18:26**. Finally, while some will want to dismiss this passage entirely from any modern conversation about women in church leadership due to the unique cultural expectations of the church Paul was speaking to, it should be noted that Paul gives his reasoning for this prohibition and he appeals to the order of Creation and the Fall, not to any cultural considerations. Whatever the principle is that Paul is applying, it is a principle that transcends individual cultures. Considering all these things, it is most likely that Paul is prohibiting women from performing the specific kind of authoritative teaching that is reserved for the elders of the church, which would include critiquing and rendering judgement on what was being taught to the community and publicly separating true and false doctrine. This was the job of the elders, and by extension not to be done by women. This view is bolstered by the fact that the other place in the New Testament that combines the ideas of authority and teaching is in the description of the job of the elders in **1 Timothy 5:17**.

1 Timothy 3:1-3 This saying is trustworthy: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer,¹ he desires a noble work.” ² An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy.

For many, this passage both begins and ends the debate about whether women can serve in the role of elder (or overseer, as in this passage). This is because in **vs. 2**, Paul says that the overseer must be the “husband of one wife.” Since husbands are men, it is implied that elders must be men. While this passage is certainly consistent with the position that the office of elder is restricted to Biblically qualified men, it should not be overly relied on to prove that point. This is because the phrase “husband of one wife” is emphasizing monogamous faithfulness in marriage, not necessarily gender. This issue can be seen clearly just several verses later, where one of the qualifications for the office of deacon is also to be a “husband of one wife” (**1 Timothy 3:12**), even though the office of deacon is open to women as can be seen in Paul’s reference to Phoebe as a “deaconess” in **Romans 16:1** and likely female deacons are addressed in the very same chapter of **1 Timothy 3** in **vs. 11**.

Galatians 3:28-29 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. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

For many, these verses in Galatians serve as a foundation for the belief that there should be no distinctions of any kind made between men and women when it comes to roles

and responsibilities within the church. Paul is speaking of the way that the gospel has torn down the dividing walls of the past that have so often caused bitterness, oppression, and enmity between people groups. Because Jesus has created a new family, those things no longer divide us. However, it is going too far to interpret this passage as teaching that these categories no longer exist or have any significance because of Jesus. The emphasis is on the ending of division and enmity, not on the erasure of the categories in full. The categories of male and female precede the Fall in Genesis 3 and are a part of God's very good design for Creation. The diversity of ethnicity described in this passage (Jew and Greek) is a part of the New Heavens and New Earth described in **Revelation 7:9**. Paul is not arguing that these categories are now meaningless, only that the division and enmity between them has been healed by Christ's death and resurrection.

Ephesians 5:18-21 [...] be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This passage is often brought into the discussion on women in church leadership because of **vs. 21**, where Paul encourages "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." Often referred to as "mutual submission," this teaching is often interpreted to mean that every Christian is called to submit to every other Christian in the same way. This would mean that while Paul encourages wives to submit to husbands and women (and men) to submit to the male elders within the church, it should be implied that the submission goes both directions in the same ways, so that there are no truly one-way authority/submission relationships within the church. This interpretation, however, doesn't make sense of the very next verses Paul writes in **Ephesians 5 and 6**. Paul goes on to talk about three relationships that involve authority and submission. The first is the relationship between husband and wife, where Paul instructs wives to submit to husbands but issues no command for husbands to submit to wives (rather, they are instructed to love their wives self-sacrificially as Jesus loved and died for the church.) Then Paul goes on to instruct children to obey their parents, and bondservants/slaves to obey their masters. While many want to believe that Paul's instructions in vs. 21 should lead us to imply that he believes husbands should submit to wives in the same way that wives submit to husbands, almost no one will apply that logic in the same way to Paul's instructions to parents and children. It is obvious that in the family, children are called to submit to the authority of their parents and not the other way around. When Paul says, "submitting to one another", he means that Christians are called to submit within the appropriate relationships where authority is rightly being exercised, not that everyone is called to submit to everyone.

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 As in all the churches of the saints, 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.

At face value, this passage is one of the most restrictive passages on women in the church in the entire Bible. It should be noted that almost no church, even among those who place the most restrictions on women, applies this passage literally and precludes women from speaking in any way when the church is gathered. And that is for good reason, because Paul gives us evidence within this same letter that he did not apply this teaching that way. Just three chapters earlier, Paul instructs women to wear head coverings while they are praying and prophesying within the church (**1 Corinthians 11:5**). While we may struggle with why Paul requires women to wear head coverings, it is at least apparent that Paul expects women to be praying and prophesying, which cannot be done while remaining silent. So, what does Paul intend to prohibit in these verses?

Two possibilities are most likely. First, it is possible that Paul has in mind here the same sort of authoritative teaching that is assigned to elders within the church that he addresses in **1 Timothy 2:11-14** and which this paper explains in the section on that passage. Paul is prohibiting women from doing the job that only elders should be doing.

Secondly, it is possible that Paul is not actually teaching that women should keep silent at all, but rather he is quoting something that the male leadership of the church in Corinth has written to him in a previous letter and then refuting it when he says to them in **vs. 36**, "Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" This rhetorical device of quoting from someone he disagrees with and then refuting it has been used earlier in this letter as many as three times (**1 Corinthians 6:12, 7:1, and 8:1**) and it possible that is exactly what Paul is doing in chapter 11 as well, so that it is Paul's opponents, not Paul, who is actually the one saying "the women should keep silent in the churches." In either case, Paul's other writings and his personal practice preclude the interpretation that Paul intends to communicate that women have no speaking roles in church gatherings.

APPENDIX 2 - FAQ'S (WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AT ALDERWOOD?)

Is it permissible for a woman to teach to the corporate gathering on Sunday mornings?

Yes, it is permissible for a woman to teach to the corporate gathering on Sunday mornings. While the elders exercise the role of guarding the doctrine of the church and ensuring that the teachings of the church are in line with our doctrine, they can and do delegate the weekly teaching to non-elders. Both men and women are gifted by the Spirit to teach, and both male and female non-elders can exercise that gift in the corporate gathering under the authority of the elders and with the elders' approval.

Is it permissible for a woman to lead a co-ed small group or Bible study?

Yes, it is permissible for a woman to lead a co-ed small group or Bible study. Both male and female small group leaders and Bible study teachers must submit to the doctrine of the church and the authority of the elders.

May a woman be elected to serve on the team of elders?

No, a woman may not be elected to serve on the team of elders. The role of elder is reserved for Biblically qualified men.

May a woman be given the title of “pastor”?

Yes, a woman may be given the title of “pastor.” At Alderwood, pastors and elders are distinct roles and serve different functions. The elders hold the office of highest authority in the church and are responsible for guiding and guarding the life of the church. The title “pastor” at Alderwood refers to those in professional ministry who are using their gifts to minister to and shepherd the church under the authority of the elders. There is only one position at Alderwood that is both elder and pastor, and that is the position of lead pastor. There are three words used in the New Testament to describe different offices of church leadership. They are elder, overseer, and pastor. The terms elder (presbuteros in Greek) and overseer (episkopos in Greek) are likely synonymous, referring to the same thing, the office of highest authority in the church. Many also believe that the term pastor (poimēn in Greek) is synonymous and refers to the same office. However, the case for this is uncertain. The noun “poimēn” literally means “shepherd” and it is only used one time in the New Testament to refer to a church office. This is in **Ephesians 4:11** where Paul describes the gifts God has given to the church. Nowhere in the New Testament is it explicitly taught that this term is the same as the term “elder.” Elders are commanded to shepherd, or pastor, the church (**1 Peter 5:1-2**), and therefore in a sense all elders must be pastors, but that does not mean that all pastors are also elders. While we respect churches who treat these terms as being one and the same, we also believe there is Biblical freedom to use them differently as we do at Alderwood.

May a woman serve as the Lead Pastor of the church?

No, a woman may not serve as the Lead Pastor of the church because the person in this role is both a pastor and an elder. Our position is that the role of elder is restricted to Biblically qualified men.

APPENDIX 3 - COMPARING POSITIONS ON WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP BY GERRY BRESHEARS AND DEBBIE TODD

The following chart is an attempt to show the similarities and differences of the positions in brief form. The statements are typical and certainly do not represent the views of everyone who might fall into the particular category. Adrian Warnock's [summary](#) is helpful. Authoritarian or patriarchal is a view to the right of these three can be summarized as "Women should always function under male authority and be in submission in the God-ordained authority structure that is central to Christian life." Bill Gothard and [Doug Wilson](#) typify this view. There is an unnamed view to the left of these three that can be summarized as "Women have been an oppressed group for too long. As Christians, we must follow the example of God in the Exodus and liberate oppressed people. We must make up for wrongs of the male dominated past. We must promote women over men at every opportunity."

COMPARISON	EGALITARIAN MUTUALIST	MALE ELDER COMPLEMENTARIAN	MALE LEADER COMPLEMENTARIAN
Descriptive phrase	Men and women are partners together everywhere in life. All ministries and offices of the church are equally open to all qualified men and women. Gender is not a relevant distinction for excluding a person from any office.	Women are encouraged to minister in any office or ministry open to any other non-elder, assuming their qualifications and appropriate gifting. The office of elder is reserved for men.	Women are encouraged to minister in multiple ministries, but they should not exercise any ministry that includes public teaching to the corporate body, teaching Bible to men or the exercising of authority over men in the church.
Authority in Creation Genesis 1 & 2	None. Fully equality at Creation.	Equal in essence, partnership in work. Hints of male headship in complementary partnership of marriage.	Equal in essence with ordered roles with male headship defined as a pattern of family life.

COMPARISON	EGALITARIAN MUTUALIST	MALE ELDER COMPLEMENTARIAN	MALE LEADER COMPLEMENTARIAN
Effects of Fall Genesis 3	Created illegitimate hierarchical system. Man becomes ruler because of sin.	Woman's desire is for oneness with her husband (cf. Gen. 2:23-24). Husband's rule instituted which lasts as long as it hurts to have babies. "Desire" and "rule" may be positive or negative.	Painful distortion of the creation order. Woman's desire is to overthrow God's pattern of male headship. Men exercise legitimate authority in domineering way.
Restoration in Christ	Abolished hierarchy as redemption is achieved	Christlike roles in ordered relationship.	Proper creational role relationships restored.
1 Cor. 11	Shows women active in ministry in the local church but must use freedom in Christ properly.	Shows women active in speaking ministry in the local church but must use freedom in Christ properly. Male headship is tied to Genesis 3.	Shows pattern of male headship in creation. Women speaking is outside the assembly of the church. Male headship is tied to Genesis 1-2.
1 Cor. 14	Paul bans some kind of disruptive speech.	Paul bans some kind of disruptive speech.	Women are to be silent in the judging of prophecies, a role for elders only.
Gal. 3:28	Ethnic, economic and gender limitations are ended in Christ or Christ's body.	Ethnic, economic and gender limitations in being part of Abraham's seed.	No gender distinctions in being part of Abraham's seed.
1 Tim. 2:11-15	Corrects a first century problem in Ephesus and is not universally normative.	Limits women from eldership and the elder exclusive roles as defined by a local church.	Limits women from teaching or having authority over men in the gatherings of the church.
Biblical Offices	All offices including senior pastor open to qualified women and men.	Elder office and functions for qualified men only. Deacon office open to qualified women and men.	Both elder and deacon offices closed to women.
Gifts	All gifts given apart from gender distinctions.	All gifts given apart from gender distinctions. Used in biblically appropriate roles and offices.	All gifts are given apart from gender distinctions. The gifted persons of Eph. 4:11 are males only.

COMPARISON	EGALITARIAN MUTUALIST	MALE ELDER COMPLEMENTARIAN	MALE LEADER COMPLEMENTARIAN
Ministry	All ministries open to qualified women and men.	All non-elder ministries open to qualified women and men.	All ministries involving authority over or teaching men reserved for men.
Some Proponents though there will be significant differences in the specific points above	Millard Erickson Cynthia Westfall Gordon Fee Walt Kaiser Craig Keener Mimi Haddad <i>Christians for Biblical Equality</i>	Tim & Kathy Keller Craig Blomberg Beth Moore Jen Wilkin Dan Jarrell Debbie Dodd Gerry Breshears	Tom Schreiner Bruce Ware John Piper Marry Kassian Andreas & Margaret Kostenberger <i>Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood</i>

Practical church questions to consider: Can women serve as ushers? Communion servers? Committee chair? Small group Bible study leader? Prayer group leader? Can women participate in the morning service occasionally or regularly as preacher? Choir director? Worship leader? Scripture reader? Lead in congregational prayer? Should women be included in ministry and leadership committees? Can a woman be ordained? Licensed? Missionary church planter? The key point is why decisions about these areas are made.

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E—Egalitarian Position

ME—Male Elder Complementarian Position

ML—Male Leader Complementarian Position

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The definitive CBE collection of scholarly exegetical and interpretive essays treating the full range of biblical material relevant to the gender role issue in all of life, not just confined to ministry or the church. Its complementarian equivalent is the Piper/Grudem book.

ME Craig Blomberg's article in the Two View book is the best presentation of the male elder position.

Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* is a good short statement of the Male Elder position.

John Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach* makes this case from the Male Elder perspective.

ML Andreas J. Köstenberger *Women in the Church* 3rd Edition is the best. Male Leader

Piper, John and Wayne Grudem. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Revised Edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2021.

The definitive CBMW collection of scholarly exegetical and interpretive essays treating the full range of biblical material relevant to the gender role issue in all of life, not just confined to ministry or the church. It introduces the term complementarian to include both male elder and male teacher positions as distinguished from the egalitarian position. It is the egalitarian equivalent is the Pierce/Groothuis book.