

Contents

Foreword	7
Introduction	15
Part 1	
1. Different By Design	25
2. Understanding the Past and Present	37
3. Beginning of a Ministry	47
4. The Care Team	57
5. There Will Be Trouble Ahead	69
6. On the Receiving End	79
Part 2	
7. Loving Others Enough to Share the Gospel	91
8. Titus 2 Discipleship	101
9. Accountability	113
10. Saved for a Purpose	123
Part 3	
11. When You Don't Agree with Leadership Decisions	135
12. When Men Won't Step Up	139
13. Dealing with Others' Expectations	149
14. Leadership Is Isolating	155

Afterword	161
Appendices	
Appendix 1: Women's Ministry Plan Outline	165
Appendix 2: Evaluating Members' Gifting Toolkit	169
Appendix 3: Guarding Your Heart Activity	175
Appendix 4: Passing on the DNA	181

Different By Design

For over a decade, everywhere I go it feels like the only thing people want to talk about is the role of women in the church. It's always a part of the discussion or one of the questions I'm asked on a panel Q&A. I'm genuinely over this debate. But, as I mentioned in the introduction, if I am going to discuss the practical ins and outs of women's ministry, I must first lay a strong, biblical foundation.

What is the Role of Women in the Church?

Women have a significant role to play in the life of any church. But exactly what that role is can be an emotive subject for many, causing division and sometimes public debate – which can get quickly messy. Why is this topic so controversial?

First, we must acknowledge there have been – and, in some cases, still are – bad examples in churches of male leadership and complete misuses of power. Sadly, some women (and men) have been spiritually abused, side-lined, unable to serve, treated like lesser humans and oppressed. There have been those who

unconventional

have used Scripture to defend their sinful actions. Let's be clear: Christian feminists weren't protesting without some cause. In fact, 'feminism has drawn attention to a crucial problem that exists for women in society and in the church'.¹ We can't simply brush the ugliness under the table because we don't like it, pretending it wasn't there or didn't happen. Just because that isn't a palatable truth doesn't negate that in some cases it was true.

Second, differences of opinion and scriptural interpretation when it comes to this topic still exist. It's a complete minefield. Even Christians who swim in the same theological pool, so to speak, can disagree on interpretation.

Ultimately, when we start to think about this topic, we must remember not all male leaders abuse their power, not all women hate men and want to rule the world, and not all Christian viewpoints and opinions are biblical. It makes me sad I have to remind us all of that. This topic is complicated, messy and confusing. So where do we start? How can we possibly navigate this subject, avoiding the potholes and distractions, and start to explore it well?

In one chapter we aren't going to have time to delve into the biblical minutia or cultural context for the text or even debate the interpretation of just one significant word. But I do want to give a brief overview and recommend some helpful resources for further study (this is an important topic, so I hope you will study it further!).

I want to specifically look at the impact of recent history, the three primary Christian views and the elder/pastor headship role.

1. Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Culture* (Crossway, 2005), p. 10.

Impact of Recent History

As long as I can remember, I have known about the importance of the women's vote and the price that was paid to make sure I had a voice in the political arena. I cannot remember one specific moment or conversation, but I have no doubt my mother was very influential in planting this seed.

It would be so easy for us to think originally feminism was just about the right to vote, but it was about so much more. In the UK, and eventually the US, it focused on the promotion of equal contracts, marriages, parenting rights, child custody, education and property rights for women.

Feminism started in the late 1700s with a publication written by Mary Wollstonecraft called *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The late 1800s and early 1900s started to see real traction for feminism, with changes to the law and legislation being adopted in the Western world. Legal, political, economic and educational barriers that had been restricting women were slowly being demolished – barriers we still see in many parts of the world today. As Western troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, women in key roles had to leave, go into hiding or step down. We watched as images of women were painted over, slowly disappearing. We have been moved by, affected by and horrified by these types of injustices. Few Christians would question us praying about and even protesting these wrongs.

Subsequent waves of feminism have been different. They haven't only looked at the existing inequality (fewer rights, less pay for the same job, treatment as the 'second/lesser sex', limited education, domestic violence, marital rape and so on). Quickly the primary focus became women's happiness. Women were seen to be discontent, dissatisfied, frustrated and straitjacketed

by a lack of fulfilment. The assumption was that *all* women were dissatisfied and confined within their ‘enforced’ roles.

Within the church, women vocalised their discontent against the different treatment they received. Author and speaker Mary Kassian explains the development of feminism in the church: ‘Christian feminists began to pursue the inclusion of women in leadership hierarchies without a clear analysis of whether or not the hierarchies themselves were structured and functioning according to a biblical pattern.’² Christian feminists argued that women’s exclusion from leadership may have had some validity at one point, but that this was a cultural and historical practice, and as times had changed, so this should too.

Christian feminists started to reject a theology that they felt had its roots in patriarchy. They questioned all aspects of theology and doctrine. I would suggest *Christian feminists allowed their worldview to affect how they interpreted the Bible instead of allowing the Bible to affect how they interpreted the world*. I feel like I should pause and underline that a few hundred times or write it in flashy lights. The fundamental lie at the heart of Christian feminism is simply this: it claims to give us something that God has already pre-designed and established clearly in his Word – equality. Men and women are created equal in his image.

Writer Claire Smith goes even further, suggesting in Christian feminism, ‘it was not equality with men that was sought but a reversal of order so that women would rule where men once did’.³ Feminism, notes Smith, has ‘brought huge and radical

2. Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake*, p. 32.

3. Claire Smith, *God’s Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women* (Matthias Media, 2012), p. 14.

Different By Design

cultural changes. It is difficult to think of any element of society or our lives that has been immune from it'.⁴ Again, Smith puts it like this: the 'dust of feminism has settled on the pages of our Bibles and obscured God's word...feminism has reached into every corner of Christian truth. Even God has had a feminist makeover.'⁵ Smith describes it like the fine red dust, after builders have been working, that settles all over the house and takes endless cleaning to get rid of. It's so fine, it gets into every nook and cranny, even in the most inaccessible and unreachable areas. This is why I'm belabouring the point – feminism is so fine a dust many of us don't even realise we are being influenced by it. I would suggest some of the discussions started by second-wave feminism and the focus on sexuality opened the door for much of the thinking and ambiguity we have around sexual identity today. But that's a discussion for another day.

We need to be honest about what's influencing us as we think through the topic of the role of women in the church.

Three Primary Christian Views

As we shift into a brief definition of the three primary views it's worth saying that even within each definition, some people will be far more fundamental whilst others will be more liberal in certain areas. After all, we all have our own biblical interpretations, contextual influences, emotional narratives and agendas that influence us as we come to the discussion.

So, how do you know what's true and what to believe? I would simply repeat what I said earlier: Don't allow your worldview

4. Ibid. p. 12.

5. Ibid. p. 12.

unconventional

to affect how you interpret the Bible. Instead allow the Bible to affect and impact how you interpret the world.

Here is my attempt at simple definitions for the three Christian views.

Egalitarian

Egalitarian means men and women are partners together in every aspect of ministry and life. All ministries and offices in the church are open to all qualified church members – men and women. Gender should not and does not exclude any person from any church office, including the office of elder, pastor or minister.

Complementarian

Complementarian means men and women are absolutely equal but have been created for different roles which complement each other. Claire Smith notes, ‘One of the fallacies of much feminist ideology is the belief that for two people to be equal, they must do the same thing. There is an assumption that you cannot have differentiation and order without also having inferiority and superiority of dignity or worth.’⁶ For complementarians, all church ministries are open to qualified men and women with the exception of elder and pastor, which is only open to qualified men. Women can serve in many roles and even be in full-time paid ministry.

We see this pattern in the Trinity, all equally divine yet with different roles: ‘All the three persons of the Godhead share in the same divine being and nature, yet there is an asymmetry within the divine relationships. There is sameness and equality alongside functional or relational order. It is not a case of either equality or order, but both equality and sameness, and order and difference.’⁷

6. Ibid. p. 63.

7. Ibid. p. 63.

Different By Design

There are a few clear distinctions in the roles of men and women within the church, but there are also significant corresponding ways men and women are called and equipped by God to participate in the ministry of the local church and the work of the gospel. We aren't just allowed, but expected, to participate in the ministry and practices of our local church. We have been saved for a purpose after all.

I would suggest complementarian is the true biblical interpretation of God's Word. This viewpoint influences what I'm saying in this book.

Hierarchical

Hierarchical means women and men are created to operate in different areas of church ministry. Women cannot serve as elders or deacons, serve communion, teach men, lead worship or speak in the church service. Women can only build ministries for women and children. There are those who even go as far as questioning whether women can write Bible commentaries or be in leadership roles of any kind, such as being a prime minister or even a member of parliament.

What Being Complementarian Is Not

There's an awful lot of confusion out there about being complementarian. It's important to understand what being complementarian is not.

Complementarian is not spiritually abusive. I have sadly heard the opposite of this statement many times, and there are some who believe complementarian theology leaves women open to abuse. Let me be very clear: it's not God's Word that's abusive. Sadly, the horrifying truth is sometimes a sinful church leader

unconventional

is abusive, ungodly and bang out of order. Abusers can and do misuse Scripture to back up their sinful behaviour. If you are reading this and you are a woman who has been badly hurt, oppressed and abused by a man in authority who wielded his manipulative interpretation of God's Word as an excuse for his oppression and abuse toward you, then I am so sorry you have been hurt in such a horrific and evil way. It's wrong. We need to call this sin out. It is not the caring, compassionate, loving leadership we see exemplified in Christ.

Complementarian is not being a closet egalitarian. I remember a conversation with a lady who said she was complementarian, but in truth she was really a closet egalitarian. What she said simply didn't pan out in her life. The topic being debated was 'Can a woman teach (preach) on a Sunday in a mixed setting (to both men and women) if there is an elder present?' Her argument was that when she taught she was under spiritual authority because the elder was present. *Sigh.* The debate will melt your head as you try to define the different versions of speaking, teaching and preaching. The Bible is much clearer. Kevin DeYoung puts it like this: 'The heraldic event – no matter the platform provided by the pastor or the covering given by the elders – cannot be separated from exercising authority and teaching, the two things women are not permitted to do in the worship service.'⁸

Complementarian does not undermine women's gifts. One of the arguments I hear a lot in favour of women pastors is 'Why would God give a woman a gift for teaching if he didn't expect

8. Kevin DeYoung, 'Should Women Preach in Our Churches?', The Gospel Coalition, 26 August 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/women-preach-churches/>

Different By Design

her to use it?’ I don’t deny women can have a gift for teaching the Word, but I would argue about *how* we are to use that God-given gift. There are many opportunities in an active congregation for church members to embrace *all* their gifts, even those with a gift of teaching. The same is true for the men in the congregation who are gifted teachers but not able to exercise that from the pulpit.

The Bible is very clear: the public, authoritative proclamation of God’s Word, the preaching of the sermon, is not open to women – they shouldn’t teach in a mixed setting. We can debate until the cows come home the interpretation of verses that say women are not permitted to teach men or have authority over them, but it does not change the reality of the biblical truth. Arguments aiming to limit or change the distinction of this text don’t hold water. We can’t simply say it’s not for today. Biblical authors aren’t just challenging or addressing a local cultural issue; there is a consistent and theological pattern found throughout Scripture. 1 Timothy 2 is clear – women are not to have authority over men in the Christian gathering. Whatever your gift set is from God, he would expect that gift to be used and exercised biblically.

The Elder/Pastor Headship Role

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