The Biblical Equality of Men and Women – Also in Teaching and Leadership

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Quotation: "Yes, there really are two Bible texts that for generations have decided whether women may be or not be."

When I read this sentence for the first time, I thought: this is what pure feminism sounds like. Today, years later, I have to recognize that this sentence is true, even if it is phrased in an exaggerated way. Only the most recent publications and letters to the editor in the magazine IDEA have confirmed this to me once again.

A Brief Guide to the Terminology:

Leadership and Teaching

The persons who lead a church are designated in the New Testament (abbreviated from here on as NT) by various terms:

- Overseers (Gr. episkopos; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1),
- Elders (Gr. presbyteros; Titus 1:5)
- Deacons (Gr. diakonos; 1 Timothy 3:8)
- Shepherds (Gr. poimen; Ephesians 4:11)
- Leaders, guides (Gr. hegeomai; Hebrews 13:17; Acts 15:22, probably translocal)

In Acts 20:17, 28, overseers and elders are used synonymously as two designations for one ministry/office. Although the necessary qualifications are described more than the content of their ministry, we can state:

- They "preside over" and lead the church with care and are responsible for it before God (1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2–3);
- They protect the church from internal dangers (quarrels, divisions, etc.), oppose false teaching (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:28–31), and correct;
- They provide pastoral care for people and look after the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17; Acts 20:35);
- Like a shepherd, they give the church guidance, protection, and spiritual food (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2f.). The flock is the church, made up of the strong and the weak, old and young, women and men, youth and children.

Apart from Peter and John, not a single such person, man or woman, is mentioned by name in the New Testament. There is perhaps one exception: Phoebe of Cenchreae near Corinth is called a deacon (Gr. *diakonos*) and a leader/patron (Gr. *prostatis*) (Romans 16:1–2).

The pastor as we know him today does not exist in the NT; rather, the role is a combination or blend of these terms and the ministries that go with them. That is why the NT cannot address such a person —because that person did not exist in that form—nor can it forbid or endorse women being pastors.

The book of Acts and Paul's letters do not mention any formal offices in the early Pauline churches. Today it is difficult for us to grasp exactly how the churches were led, because the evidence from the NT does not show uniform titles for leadership. Leadership was important and was emphasized, but Paul often referred to other leaders quite generally as "co-workers" or "fellow combatants." He preferred to speak about leaders in terms of their activities rather than giving them titles.

Being a teacher (Gr. *didaskalos*, 1 Corinthians 12:28) or a leader/one who presides (Gr. *kybernesis*, 12:28; or Gr. *proistemi*, Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17) are different activities and different gifts, but one person can have both.

Presiding and leading do not mean ruling (not even in the sense of 1 Timothy 2:12, where a woman is forbidden to rule over a man). Jesus describes these ministries as follows:

> *"And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And when Jesus had called them to him, he said to them: You know that those who are considered rulers of the nations lord it over them, and that their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you;* ***but whoever would become great among you must be your servant; and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all****." Mark 10:41–44*
>
> *"A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them: The kings of the nations rule over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. But you are not to be so; rather, let the greatest among you be like the youngest, and* ***the one who leads*** *(Gr. hegeomai)* ***like the one who serves****. For who is greater, the one who reclines at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. Luke 22:24–27*
>
> *"Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as* ***domineering*** *over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." 1 Peter 5:2–3*

The ministry of overseers includes an authority that is given by God and grounded in various gifts, and that is perceived in an exemplary life as a *moral* authority. The church recognizes the overseer in his office as such.

There is the **teaching** of the apostles—that is, the good and sound teaching that accords with godliness, that belongs to God our Savior, the teaching of Christ (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 1:10; 4:6; 6:3; Titus 2:10; 2 John 9). The content of this teaching is the gospel, the counsel of God, and ultimately the whole of Scripture, Old and New Testaments. Timothy was urged to teach this; elders are to be able to teach; and there is the spiritual gift, or gift of grace, of the teacher.

Teaching is also part of leading. It has nothing to do with ruling. Here too there is an authority. But it consists in being equipped to teach and being recognized within the church as someone who can pass on sound teaching and rightly handle the word of truth. The teacher serves the learners.

Preaching as it takes place in our church worship services is not to be equated with teaching. Paul does not list "preaching" among the gifts and functions of ministry, probably because preaching was not something that normally happened in the gatherings of the churches. It was not a ministry to fellow believers. In the NT, preaching in the context of Christian ministry is practically synonymous with evangelizing (Gr. *kerysso*, to preach, proclaim, announce). And from the very beginning women preached the gospel to their families and friends and beyond.

Now to two terms that are not found as such in the Bible. They name the two controversial schools of thought on the gender question in Christendom.

Complementarianism

This term comes from American usage and was applied to the relationship between men and women by well-known theologians such as John Piper and Wayne Grudem. This position was published in 1988 in the so-called ***Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*** (downloadable here in German: **Danvers-Erklaerung.pdf (reformierte-freikirche.de)** (used with kind permission)). Only since then has this term also become established in the German-speaking world to describe the relationship between men and women—though in a hierarchical relationship. The woman is of equal worth, but not of equal standing. The differentiation between the sexes is described as "equal in worth but differ-

ent in roles." There are ministries that she may not perform because she is a woman. In this view, these include above all teaching and leading men.

Complementarianism does ***not***, however, reflect the historical teaching of the church, which until about 60 years ago assumed the inferiority and subordination of women to men. Hence the subordinate position of women—all in all a low and restrictive view of women. Equality of worth and extensive equality of standing, as complementarianism advocates, is a new phenomenon, no older than about 60 years. There are various forms of it, that is, a whole spectrum in how the preference given to men and the restriction placed on women is interpreted.

I regard today's evangelical complementarianism as a revised, moderate, or soft form of patriarchy, which in turn is a consequence of the Fall. I am aware that there are well-functioning and loving marriage relationships even where the relationship is understood and lived in a complementarian way in the sense described above. But that does not make this position right or biblical.

Egalitarianism

In the English-speaking world, the position I hold, with certain qualifications, is called egalitarianism. It is important to know exactly what lies behind the term and what exactly its content is. This view of men and women arose at the same time as complementarianism. In German usage, *egalitär* aims at social justice and equal opportunity. The definition is: no disadvantage on the basis of sex or other characteristics within a society or community.

I stand by this fully, and believing women too may gratefully lay claim to all the achievements of the women's rights movement of the last 100 years, even if they themselves were never part of these movements or never wanted to be.

But the term also has overtones of leveling everyone into sameness, which I reject just as much. The beautiful difference between men and women in many respects belongs to the creation order and must not be flattened out by egalitarianism. The term **mutualism** would be preferable; it emphasizes the reciprocal, mutual standing face to face with one another.

Personal Note

Until a few years ago I held to complementarianism and lived and taught it in my church and in my marriage. That means that as a husband I love my wife and am cooperative, but fundamentally I have the leadership and the last word. It also means that women do not lead and preach or teach before the church. I had to give up this "soft" or "Christianized" form of worldly patriarchy as a result of ongoing Bible study and through the works of Bible-believing authors. That was a difficult process for me, since for decades I had understood and lived it in exactly the opposite way. Today I am thankful that my eyes were opened to how wrong I was. In my book *Women, Forgive Us!* (*Frauen, vergebt uns!*) I set this out in detail in 2020, and on my homepage I have given further reasons with new contributions by myself and other authors:

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At the end of my talk I will briefly summarize exactly what I hold today and what I call my position in the theological discussion.

Arguments against Leading and Teaching:

Today's event shows that there are fundamentally different views on this subject. In addition, there is often a great deal of emotion, which makes an objective exchange difficult. Everyone comes to this day with his or her own story, background, convictions, good and bad experiences, and expectations. And hopefully with the openness—and a pinch of composure as well—to question oneself.

In what follows I will address what I consider the most common objections to sisters leading and teaching in the church. I myself held exactly these arguments. They were completely clear and convincing to me. Departing from them meant, for me, leaving the biblical center to adapt to the world, where equal rights and feminism are celebrated in various ideological forms.

The Prohibition on Teaching

For me, one clear instruction was this word of Paul, which I quote here:

> *"Let a woman learn quietly in all submission.* ***But I do not permit a woman to teach or to rule over a man; rather, she is to be quiet****, for Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and fell into transgression." 1 Timothy 2:11–14*

At some point it struck me that, although it seems to be a clear instruction, this prohibition on women teaching can be connected with only a single verse—I repeat, with only a single verse. That is strange, if one lets the reach of this instruction, for all times and in all places, really sink in.

To qualify this prohibition on teaching, one has to ask: Is it a total prohibition on teaching? Does it apply only with respect to men? May she teach women, young people, and children? Or may she not teach false doctrine but may she teach sound doctrine? It is impossible to answer this from this verse alone.

As always, it is not a single passage of Scripture that counts; the whole of Scripture must be consulted. Scripture must be compared with Scripture. In Luther's words: "Scripture interprets itself."

That is why I will now compare the following verses with the word of Paul quoted above, the so-called prohibition on women teaching:

> *Jesus says to his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ***teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you****. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18–20*

This is Jesus' commission to everyone, including women, to teach. Women too belonged to the circle of Jesus' disciples. The women disciples too—that is, women students—learned from Jesus in order then to be able to teach others. **Jesus wants it!** This can be in any setting, in any place: in the church's gatherings for worship, with men or only with women, in the private family sphere or in public.

> *"He (Apollos) began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when (the married couple)* ***Priscilla and Aquila*** *heard him, they took him aside and* ***explained to him the way of God more accurately****" (Acts 18:26).*

The way of God—that is salvation history. And Christian baptism, since Apollos evidently knew only the baptism of John. "Explained" must be understood as "taught" or "instructed." Whoever applies 1 Timothy 2:12 as a prohibition on teaching to every woman/sister must also apply it to Priscilla. The

only fact is: she taught, and she was not silent. It happened in Ephesus, where she and her husband instructed Apollos—the place where Timothy received Paul's letter with the prohibition on teaching. If one interprets a universal prohibition on teaching here, one would have to formulate it like this: ***But I do not permit Priscilla to teach or to rule over a man (Apollos); rather, she is to be quiet.*** Since we assume that the inspired Word of God does not contain contradictions, we must reject a universal prohibition on women teaching in the church.

Paul calls on ***all who are present*** at a Christian gathering:

> *"What then, brothers (in the sense of siblings, that is, brothers and sisters)? When you come together, **each of you** has a psalm, **has a teaching**, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation; let all things be done for building up." (1 Corinthians 14:26).*

Paul instructs Timothy that **people** (Gr. *anthropois*; brothers **and** sisters) are to **teach** others, so that they in turn can **teach** others:

> *"And what you (Timothy) have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful **people**, who will be able to **teach others** also. 2 Timothy 2:2*

In this sense, **older women are to be "teachers of what is good"** (Titus 2:3). The place and setting of this instruction is not prescribed or restricted; above all they are to instruct the young women. **(Women elders;** Gr. *presbutidas*—this is what *women elders* were called in the fourth century; but here it may also simply mean an older woman.**)**

Conclusion: There is no restriction on women teaching—no matter where, no matter whom they teach. What is decisive is their gifting, their reliability in teaching sound doctrine, and their confirmation by the church that their ministry is wanted, or authorized by the church and its leaders. **That is why, against the background of the texts cited, this word of Paul cannot be a timeless and worldwide prohibition on teaching!**

As the first letter to Timothy shows several times, the issue is false teaching and women who carried it into the houses. Here Paul is addressing a **local problem** of wealthy women in Ephesus who felt called by themselves and seized the right, or the authority, to do this. It is a **temporary instruction**, not a normative instruction for every Christian woman on this planet. This woman, or these several problem women, in Ephesus were first to submit willingly and teachably to sound doctrine, so that they would be equipped to teach—and then perhaps to become elders. It is demonstrably not a typically female problem to teach false doctrine because one has not learned in submission to sound doctrine. But it was a problem in Ephesus that Timothy was to deal with.

The word "rule" (Gr. *authentein*) in the sentence "I do not permit a woman to ***rule*** over a man" is not a positive word. It occurs only in this passage in the NT and is not the word normally used for *ruling*. On the contrary, it is negative and has the meaning of "**usurping authority**" (as the English King James Version puts it), **that is, without any right to it.**

The Prohibition on Speaking

The text on the prohibition on teaching is often linked directly with the prohibition on speaking in 1 Corinthians 14. These are in fact the only texts that speak explicitly to our subject and place special restrictions on women. Until about 10 years ago it was clear to me that women are silent in the worship service, just as the following verses clearly prescribe:

> *"The women **are to be silent** in the assemblies, for they are **not permitted to speak**, but are to be in submission, as the law also says. If they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is **shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly**." 1 Corinthians 14:34–35*

My firm conviction was called into question by Paul himself, who earlier, in 11:5, speaks of women who pray and prophesy—in all likelihood in the gathering for worship. And also because in chapter 14 there are at least 5 concrete calls from Paul to all the brothers and sisters to contribute spoken words for the building up of the church. Nor is a universal priesthood that brings God sacrifices of praise, which are called the fruit of lips, conceivable with silence. Incidentally, when Hannah's song of praise or Mary's Magnificat is read aloud in the worship service, these women are speaking through the inspired Word.

These verses are therefore a great puzzle, because they contradict everything that Paul and the NT, as well as the OT, say in general and in particular. There are countless attempts to explain this contradiction, which most Bible readers recognize. Out of a desire to be faithful to the Bible, some churches try to put absolute silence into practice. I come from the Brethren movement, where this is still practiced today. There women may not preach, may not pray, may not suggest songs, may not lead the worship service. They may only sing along and say amen.

In these two verses women are forbidden to speak three times, or rather, they are instructed to be silent. **That is absolute and rigorous and cannot be circumvented or resolved exegetically.** Conservative or Bible-believing interpreters outside the Brethren movement try to resolve this categorical command of silence, but in doing so they keep softening the absolute command of silence.

Philip B. Payne has shown that in Codex Vaticanus and Codex Fuldensis (important and extensive manuscripts from the fourth and sixth centuries) these verses are marked as a later insertion. In addition, in some manuscripts these two verses stand in this position, as in our Bibles, after verse 33, but in other manuscripts only after verse 40. To this extent that is unique and an indication that the text was a marginal note that a copyist later inserted at the place where he thought it belonged. Once inserted from the margin, all the copyists then diligently copied it as if it were Paul's original text.

Neither in the NT nor in the OT is there an instruction even remotely similar, with such far-reaching consequences—in this case for women—that could confirm this text. That is why this text cannot be a normative instruction. Many Bible commentators and Bible translators regard these verses as non-Pauline and as an early insertion (second century).

Incidentally, a practical and consistent application of these verses is hardly possible. Common sense alone tells us that women cannot be forbidden to speak at all in the assembly.

For the whole discussion of teaching and leadership, these verses drop out.

Head and Submission

The so-called prohibition-on-teaching text and the so-called command of silence point to the necessary submission of women. At least seven times in the NT women are called on to submit to their husbands. Why is that? It cannot be the creation order (more on that later), since it does not establish any difference in hierarchy from which submission could be inferred.

Mainly two texts are at issue, one from Ephesians 5 and one from 1 Peter 3.

> *"**Submitting to one another** in the fear of Christ. Wives, [submit] to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Ephesians 5:21–22*

Paul first and foremost requires not a one-sided but a mutual submission.

> *"Likewise, wives, **submit to your own husbands**, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, …. **husbands, likewise**, [submit to your own wives] live with them according to knowledge, as with a weaker vessel, the female, showing them honor as those who are also co-heirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." 1 Peter 3:1, 7*

It is the same with Peter as with Paul—he requires mutual, not one-sided, submission. Nevertheless, in practically the same breath, women are called to submission. Women at that time were in any case hierarchically subjected. For them such a call was nothing new or strange. That was the cultural and social consensus of the time. If until then they had perhaps submitted under compulsion, they could now do it as disciples of Jesus, in his strength and from the heart.

The apostles do not write and work against the gender-role relationship of antiquity at that time. On the one hand they confirm the submission of the woman; on the other hand—and this is new—they call on men to love and to behave with care. **Men are not instructed to lead, to govern, or to rule, let alone to demand submission.**

The instructions for the order of the ancient household that Luther called "household codes" (*Haustafeln*) **undermine the social orders of the time, in that the gospel and the love of Christ change relationships that were often harsh and violent.** So with the gospel not everything changes overnight; rather, a process of rethinking and of changed behavior begins. At its end stands, for example, the abolition of slavery, which the apostles did not demand but which was already present at the core of the gospel.

"Christian" submission (that is, submission between fellow believers, including believing husbands and wives) is **humble, loyal, and loving deference, cooperation, and support.** Like humility and gentleness, submission should be a normal Christian character trait. And ideally it should be mutual.

What does it mean that the man is the head of the woman (1 Corinthians 11:3)? Unlike what we might assume from our German language, it does not mean something like a "chief" (*Oberhaupt*) who heads, leads, rules, or governs. When Paul uses this metaphor, it meant **source and origin**. Thus the woman was taken from the man (11:8) and was therefore to show honor to the man. The man as head of the woman is not her ruler, not her leader, but her savior, who loves, protects, provides for, and cherishes her (Ephesians 5:21–33). The metaphor of the head pictures the loving unity of man and woman as well as the care for his body modeled on Christ.

Briefly summarized, one can say: secular Greek dictionaries, the Greek Bible, and Paul's own usage show that by "head" Paul did not mean "authority." **Nowhere does the Bible teach male supremacy or a leadership role in relation to the woman.**

The Septuagint, which translates the Hebrew into Greek, does not use the word *kephale* but another word when in the Hebrew *head* is meant in the sense of leader, chief, or ruler. From this it follows that the meaning of *kephale* does not point in this direction.

Israel's Male Priests and Jesus' 12 Disciples

Exclusively male priests and 12 male disciples were a strong argument for me for exclusively male leadership.

In Israel there were only male priests. But I had to realize that it was God's wish and will that **everyone, men and women alike,** should be priests:

> *"and **you** shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:6)*

This is also foretold for the future:

> *"you shall be called priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as ministers of our God." Isaiah 61:6*

Why it did not yet come to this in the OT is hard to say. One reason may be that the Levitical priesthood was meant to stand in contrast to the consecrated women, the priestesses and prostitutes of the Canaanite idol cults.

> *"There shall be no consecrated woman among the daughters of Israel, and there shall be no consecrated man among the sons of Israel." Deuteronomy 23:17*

Priestly service, when it took place in the Levitical sacrificial cult, was hard physical labor, comparable to that of a butcher. Men are on average (as always, apart from exceptions) physically stronger than women.

Without restriction it holds true that in the new covenant everyone born of God is a priest. That is why, looking back at the Old Testament, gender cannot have been the reason that only men were priests (Hebrews 2–10; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

Only as Jewish men could the 12 disciples represent the 12 sons of Jacob, or the 12 tribes of Israel. They stand for the unique transition from the old to the new covenant.

Leaders and overseers today do not have to be Jewish men: all who aspire to be leaders are invited, including men from the nations. Twelve apostles who were Jewish men do not mean that women are excluded from leadership tasks. Junia, a woman, is called an apostle by Paul (Romans 16:7), just as Barnabas was called an apostle (Acts 14:14).

Qualifications for Elders and Overseers

Did the woman (or the women) in Ephesus to whom the prohibition on teaching is addressed perhaps want to be an overseer? Our chapter division has 1 Timothy 3:1 begin like this:

> *The saying is trustworthy: If **anyone** aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

Paul seems to see in this woman (or these women) quite possibly the potential to become overseers if they fulfill the qualifications that follow. The first step would be to learn in quietness and submission and to be modest in outward appearance. The wealthy women of Ephesus, instead of behaving inappropriately (2:9), were to do ***good works*** (2:10). Paul uses a similar expression to refer to the office of overseer: if anyone aspires to the office of elder, he desires a ***good work*** (3:1). The office of elder is a good work that these women could aspire to if they became qualified for it.

But doesn't Paul address only men in 3:1–7? No, certainly not. "***Anyone***" (Gr. *tis*) is a gender-neutral word. It can mean ***if she or if he*** aspires to the office of overseer. **Would Paul encourage women to aspire to an office that is forbidden to them?** Paul makes clear that "anyone/everyone" is often his topic by repeating "anyone/everyone" in verse 5, and likewise in the parallel list of qualifications for overseers in Titus 1:6. ***There is not a single masculine pronoun in the qualifications for the leaders of the***

churches in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 or Titus 1:5–9. This, however, is not evident from the German translations.

But what about the qualification "**man of one woman**" ("husband of one wife")? This wording, one would think, can only apply to men. No, because the whole phrase must be understood as an **idiom**. Some take out one word, namely "man," and arbitrarily isolate it from its context in order to derive a new requirement from it—namely that every overseer must be a "man." Most Bible interpreters, including complementarians, understand "man of one woman," however, to mean that **polygamists or sexually unfaithful men** are excluded from the task of an overseer.

To read a double meaning into this idiom—both an exclusion of polygamists and a universal requirement that overseers must be men—is unjustified and would reduce most of Paul's other ambiguous requirements for overseers to absurdity. Must all overseers have their "own household" with slaves and several "children" who are old enough to "believe" and to be submissive "with all dignity"?

Since 1 Timothy 3:11 names the qualifications for female deacons, the same expression "man of one woman" in the requirements for deacons in 3:12 cannot exclude women.

The principle of **monogamy** expressed in "man of one woman" applies equally to men and women, just as "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17) applies equally to a man or a woman who covets their neighbor's spouse. That is why the most accurate translation of "man of one woman" is "***monogamous***," since it best renders the comprehensive meaning of the Greek idiom for masculine forms.

There is no apostolic instruction that forbids women the office of overseer (such as, for example, a command of silence in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35).

What, then, should one have assumed, or held to, if this question had come up in the first century? If there were already exceptions to leadership by men in the Old Testament, if there were also exceptions in society in the broader sense, if the attitude of Jesus and the apostles toward women was more positive than the prevailing culture, and if women received and exercised the gifts of the Spirit or gathered house churches in their homes, then there was no basis for assuming that leadership in the churches was forbidden to women.

Arguments for the Equality of Men and Women Also in Teaching and Leadership:

If one tries for once to approach Scripture on the gender question neutrally or with an open mind, one will find equality under various aspects. The subject of teaching and leadership must be illuminated by the whole of Scripture and not be determined or narrowed by one or two short texts.

The creation account was a new discovery for me that led me to rethink, and it set the course for how I must also read the texts of the NT on this subject. That is why we start at the very beginning:

The Creational Argument

The same applies to both sexes: both are bearers of God's image, and both are to be fruitful and to rule. There is no ranking or hierarchy in the original state, nor any division of tasks or roles.

> *"Then God said, Let us **make man in our image, after our likeness**; and **let them have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the*

> *earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth! So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And **God blessed them, and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth!"** Genesis 1:26–28*

The creation of Eve is described vividly. Why was she created?

> *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him **a helper corresponding to him**." Genesis 2:18 (Elberfelder, German Bible translation; footnote: as his **counterpart**, as his correspondence)*
>
> *Einheitsübersetzung (German Bible translation): I will make him a helper **who is his equal**.*
>
> *Gute Nachricht (German Bible translation): I will create a being that helps him and **that is suited to him**.*
>
> *Zürcher Bibel (German Bible translation): I will make him a helper, **fitting for him**.*

What exactly does "a helper corresponding to him"—Hebrew *ezer kenegedo*—mean?

> ***ʿēzer = "strength, help, rescuer, (female) rescuer, protector, power"***
>
> *In the OT 16 times "God is our help," 3 times of a military protector—so never something subordinate; on the contrary, possibly something superior.*
>
> ***kĕnegĕdô: kĕ = as + negĕd = before + ô = him: "as before him"***
>
> *Literally this expression conveys: "a strength as before him"*
>
> *In everyday language it means: "a strength that corresponds to him"*

The woman as helper does not describe a subordinate and does not establish submission or hierarchy. Rather, Adam needs a kindred spirit. An ally. A partner. A counterpart, a complement. A counterpart to every aspect of his existence: physical, emotional, spiritual, mental; outward as well as inward. In summary, that is what is meant by a helper corresponding to him.

Paul too sums up, with regard to the creation of man and woman: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not without man, nor man without woman." 1 Corinthians 11:11

The creation order before the Fall sees man and woman as equal in standing and equal in rights. There is no hierarchy. There cannot have been one, because it begins only after the Fall:

> *"To the woman he said: … and your desire shall be for your husband, **but he shall rule over you**." Genesis 3:16*

This is the description of the consequences of the Fall. The man's rule over the woman was not God's will in creation. This rule is sinful. History up to the present proves this tragedy impressively. Nothing about it is good; nothing about it is spiritual. **It is not a creation order but rather, as a consequence of the Fall, a creation DISorder.** A rule of the stronger in a fallen creation. That is why we should not support this one-sided rule of the man—not even when it has been Christianized and is read into the NT (eisegesis).

The Historical Argument

The history of Israel and the history of the NT, as well as church history, show beyond doubt that women may, can, and should teach and lead. These women are described in these functions as a matter of course. Nowhere is it called an exception, as if God were temporarily suspending an order he himself had established because no men were available.

Women in the Old Testament

The prophetess Miriam is sent by God to lead Israel (Micah 6:4; cf. Exodus 15:20–21). God himself says in Micah 6:4: "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."

So God himself also sent a woman before his people! There was no shortage of men—Moses and Aaron were there, after all; it was his will to have a woman on this leadership team.

Deborah is one of the judges whom "the LORD raised up" and who "saved Israel from the hand of its enemies" (Judges 2:16, 18; 4:10, 14, 24; 5:1–31), a prophetess and the highest leader in all Israel (4:4–5). She, a wife and mother (4:4; 5:7), had the authority to command Barak, Israel's military commander: "Go!" (4:6, 14)—and he went. They worked well together with shared authority: he as military commander, she as **commander in chief**.

Queen Esther had enough influence to bring about the destruction of the house of Haman, along with 75,000 enemies of the Jews (Esther 7:1–10; 9:1–32). Together with Mordecai "she wrote with full authority ….. Esther's decree confirmed these regulations" (9:29–32).

The priests consulted **the prophetess Huldah** about the rediscovered Book of the Law and placed themselves under her spiritual leadership. Israel's leaders, including the king, the elders, the prophets, and the people, accepted her word as divinely revealed (2 Kings 22:14–23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:22–32). The obedience of Israel's male leadership to the word of God spoken through a woman sparked what was probably the greatest revival in Israel's history (2 Kings 22:14–23:25; 2 Chronicles 34:29–35:19).

Isaiah's wife was a ***prophetess***: "And I went to the **prophetess**, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me: Call his name 'The spoil hurries, the plunder comes quickly.'" Isaiah 8:3

Not a single Old Testament text says that God allowed women to exercise such political or religious authority over men only because of special circumstances, nor are these cases described as exceptions to a biblical principle.

Women in the New Testament

With Jesus a new dimension of humanity enters the gender question in ancient Judaism. His mother becomes a prophetess and her Magnificat becomes inspired Scripture (Luke 1), as did Hannah's song of praise before her (1 Samuel 2:1ff.). With Jesus women are respected and valued; he turns to them without distinction, he raises their standing; with him they may and should learn and be his students. Apart from a few exceptions, that was nothing less than breaking a taboo.

To a woman who had lost all sense of self-worth he revealed himself as the Messiah. She hears words from him that no one had ever heard before. This encounter had consequences: the first Christian missionary was a **Samaritan woman**: "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39; cf. 4:28–42).

There were **women disciples** (Luke 8:1–3), such as Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet and learns in order to pass it on later—and thus to do exactly what Jesus commissions the disciples to do in Matthew 28, namely to baptize and to teach.

The first person whom the risen Christ sought out and commissioned to proclaim the gospel of his resurrection and his impending ascension was **Mary Magdalene** (John 20:14–18). Since "apostle" means "one who is sent," it is appropriate to say that Christ appointed her **apostle to the apostles**. Before Jesus appeared to the disciples, he had a woman deliver to them the news of his resurrection. He could just as easily have appeared to them himself right away. But in this way he wanted to teach them: you men are to believe the testimony of a woman just as much as the testimony of a man, for I have sent her! A new era of salvation was about to dawn!

For Christ, leadership—which he redefined as humble, serving leadership (e.g., John 13:3–17)—is at least as fitting for women as for men.

In Romans 16:1–16 Paul greets by name ten persons whom he describes as co-workers in Christian ministry. **Seven of the ten persons are women**:

Phoebe, "deacon of the church at Cenchreae" (16:1) and "leader[2] of many, including myself" (16:2);

Junia, "outstanding among the apostles" (16:7), who was in prison with Paul together with her husband because of her proclamation of the gospel.

Priscilla, "my co-worker in Christ Jesus" (16:3; cf. Philippians 4:3);

and **Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis** "worked hard in the Lord" (16:6, 12).

1 Corinthians 16:16 calls on believers "***to submit to every co-worker***." In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, ***"those who labor among you"*** are described as ***"those who are over you in the Lord."*** These are people with leadership responsibility! It cannot be emphasized enough that Paul is therefore not simply listing these women as believers, but as leaders in ministry. In this passage Paul greets many believers, but describes only ten persons as co-workers, that is, leaders—and seven of them are women. The three men are Aquila, Andronicus, and Urbanus. The first two are named together with their wives, which underlines their shared authority.

That Paul names such a high proportion of women among the leaders of a public community is unique in the entire history of ancient Greek literature. It points to a significance of female leadership in the early church that was extraordinary for the culture of the time.

The four daughters of Philip the evangelist are proof that the promise of Joel was fulfilled at Pentecost—also for the daughters:

> *"On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea; and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had **four daughters, virgins, who prophesied**." Acts 21:8–9*

It is likely, though not certain, that Nympha was one of the church leaders, since she made her house available to the church in Laodicea:

> *"Greet the brothers in Laodicea, and **Nympha** and the church in her house." Colossians 4:15*

In Philippi Paul mentions two women who were at odds with each other. Certainly they were active in ministries that were important for the church; otherwise Paul would not have addressed the two of them directly by name.

> *"I exhort **Euodia** and I exhort **Syntyche** to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, my true companion, help these women, who have contended side by side with me in the gospel, Philippians 4:2–3*

When Paul was not yet in Christ and was persecuting the church, he targeted men **and** women, as Luke reports twice, in order to put them in prison (Acts 8:3; 9:2). Why women too? One always takes out the leaders; the ordinary sheep of the flock are of little or no interest. To this very day this is how it is done in countries where Christians are persecuted.

Other Women

There is not enough time now to enter into the very large field of what women accomplished in the early church, in the Middle Ages, in the Reformation, and in the revival movements. Thousands taught and led, and without them Christendom would probably look different today. Many are known by name. There were women elders, just as there were women proclaimers and women teachers.

It is also often forgotten that women taught and led not only through the spoken word but also through their writing. There are famous women hymn writers and authors who strongly shaped the history of the Christian church

It is true that, compared with men, they were in the minority overall. This is explained by the cultural situation in each case, in which women were always and everywhere more or less disadvantaged and were not supposed to appear in public. That is exactly worldly culture and conditioning in the shadow of Genesis 3:16. It has nothing to do with the kingdom of God, with what has now become reality in Christ.

The Soteriological Argument – Salvation in Christ

All who call on the Lord and trust in him will be saved. That is the good news of the gospel. Salvation, rescue, and eternal life are open to all without exception. Paul writes to the Galatians in 3:26–27:

> ***"for you are all [become] sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."***

The privilege of becoming a son of God applies to men and women alike. In Paul's terminology, women too become "sons of God." Of course, as women they are also daughters of God, but here Paul emphasizes the social status that sons had in the Roman Empire: this privilege is now granted to all in their relationship with God, including women.

In addition—and especially for women—water baptism, and not circumcision, which was impossible for them, is instituted as the sign of having become a son of God.

To this Paul attaches a statement with an explosive effect for the circumstances of the time. **He does not affirm yet again that in Christ all can be saved, for he has already done that in many places. His point is that in Christ national, social, and gender differences no longer play any role**:

> ***"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*

In Galatians 2:11–3:28 Paul emphasizes that the unequal treatment of a social group, including women, in the church contradicts the gospel. He denounces Jewish Christians, including the apostle Peter, because they do not treat Gentile Christians as equals and even refuse to eat at the same table with them. Paul argues that it contradicts the gospel to assign status or privileges in the church on the basis of ethnicity, social standing, or sex. The identity of salvation of all Christians is grounded in Christ alone!

Since these are all social categories and "in Christ Jesus" refers to the church (**1:22**), the most obvious application of Galatians 3:28 is to social relationships in the church. **The passage inseparably links salvation with the social life of the church.** As in all of Paul's writings, redemption in Christ cannot be separated from life in the body of Christ. Paul's rejection of these distinctions must result in the opposite, namely the affirmation of the equal rank of all these groups in the practical life of the church, for they are all one in Christ.

The three groups of people mentioned **remain**, of course, as Christians what they were born as (with the possible exception of slaves, who could become free). But the conventions, exclusions, and discriminations of the world then and now no longer apply in the church, in the new creation. As far as man and woman are concerned, their original creational relationship is restored in Christ. Even ordinary male and female slaves could be teachers and leaders in the church—but not outside the church in their social circumstances.

A close parallel to Galatians 3:28 is 1 Corinthians 11:11:

> ***"Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is nothing without man, nor is man anything without woman."***

Paul says this in the context of affirming that women, like men, can lead the most important activities in the public gatherings of the church—prayer (the vertical dimension of worship: speaking to God) and prophecy (the horizontal dimension of worship: speaking to people)—as long as they do so in a way that does not deny marriage and Christian morality. **Consequently, this denial of a separation between men and women "in the Lord" must apply at least to these activities of church leadership.**

Paul expresses once more, unambiguously, the fact of salvation that national, social, and gender distinctions no longer have any significance in the church, in 2 Corinthians 5:16ff.:

> *"**Therefore from now on we regard no one according to the flesh**; even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we no longer regard him so. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: namely, that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and **he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation**."*

If we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh, then gender is irrelevant too. Only the new creature in Christ counts. And what does this new creature, reconciled to God, do? It carries out the ministry that preaches reconciliation! So everyone preaches.

The people who judged Christ according to the flesh probably thought, "What does this carpenter's son have to tell us?" Those who simply listened recognized that he taught "as one who had authority." So we must learn to judge all people spiritually and to block out everything that first catches our eye (social status, appearance, gender).

The Charismatic Argument

The Holy Spirit has been poured out on women and men alike. He gives gifts to every believing woman and every believing man as he wills. The gift of teaching and the gift of leadership belong to the list of charismata. **Nowhere is any distinction made according to sex.** The following texts speak for themselves, beginning with the event of Pentecost:

> *"But this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, **and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy**, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And even on my male servants and **on my female servants I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy.'"** Acts 2:16–18*

The Holy Spirit is also the giver of the spiritual gifts of grace by which the body of Christ, the church, is enlivened, sustained, guided, and provided for. These include the gift of leadership or of presiding:

> *"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; if service, **let us remain in serving; the one who teaches, in teaching**; the one who exhorts, in exhortation; the one who gives, with simplicity; **the one who leads, with diligence**; the one who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." Romans 12:6–8*
>
> *Zürcher translation (German Bible translation): 7 be it the gift of serving, **where service is called for; of teaching, where teaching is called for**, 8 of giving comfort, where comfort is called for. Whoever gives something to others, let him do it without ulterior motives; **whoever carries out a leadership task, let him do it with devotion**; whoever shows mercy, let him do it cheerfully and gladly.*
>
> *"And God has appointed some in the assembly: first apostles, **second prophets, third teachers**, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, **administrating**, various kinds of tongues." 1 Corinthians 12:28*

The charismatic argument is self-evident, self-explanatory, and the clearest of all. Why would God give gifts that the person concerned is then not allowed to use for building up the body? It is hardly necessary to point out that the gifts mentioned have also been given to women. It would be a "system error" if they were not allowed to exercise such gifts in every setting in which God places women. For gifts are always also tasks and responsibility.

What happens when women's gifts do not become tasks in the church? What Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12:21 comes about: "**The eye cannot say** to the hand, I have **no** need of you; nor again the head to the feet, I have **no** need of you." Some members of the body, who should humbly accept the service of the other members, do exactly the opposite and say: "We don't need you." In this way women are discouraged and hurt. Gifted women look for fields of work outside the church that correspond to their gifts. Thus the effectiveness of the body of Christ is diminished. What God may have wanted to say to us through this sister, whether through prophecy or teaching, is not heard. The result is that we restrict not only women but God himself! For God expresses himself through women just as much as through men. Yes, it is true: "The Spirit blows where he wills." The Spirit of God does not let human structures prevent him from blowing where he wills. But we can quench him and grieve him. And we have done that so often!

Summary

The whole of Scripture, in both the OT and the NT, does ***not*** forbid teaching and leading by women. Texts from which people want to derive the opposite describe local abuses that were to be remedied or stopped. Women taught and led in pre-Christian times, in the beginnings of Christianity, and throughout the whole of church history. For understandable cultural—but not biblical—reasons they were in the minority compared with men.

Gender justice, or simply equal rights, is a value of the kingdom that should be rediscovered and protected and promoted for the sake of God's cause.

If it is God's will that women should teach and lead as men do, but men, for whatever reasons and motives, consciously or unconsciously, keep preventing this—is that sowing to the flesh or to the Spirit?

"It is not women's right to hold 'official' offices, nor their equality with men in these offices, that determines the conditions for their service to God and their neighbors. Rather, it is their duty that does this. And indeed duties that arise from their human abilities, empowered by divine gifts." Dallas Willard

My Definition of the Relationship between the Sexes

Complementarianism in the proper sense of the word means the complementing and the togetherness of two entities of equal size, equal strength, and equal worth. That is not the case when the woman is regarded as a subordinate or secondary helper, for example because she was created after Adam in time and out of Adam. But since the term "complementarianism" is used in this way in today's theological discussion, it does not fit my definition of the biblical relationship between the sexes.

For me personally, however, egalitarianism is not an exactly fitting term either, since it in turn weakens or blanks out—at least in its wording—the differences between the sexes, which are precisely what make the idea of mutual complementing possible. In brief, my understanding of the biblical relationship between the sexes is as follows:

Complementary Egalitarianism

That is, mutual complementing and togetherness, which strengthens the other where he or she is weaker, and in which unity is lived out in love and mutual submission.

I myself, my wife, and many sisters and married couples have experienced the biblical reasons for full equality as liberation and have come to know their relationship with Jesus and with one another in a new dimension. This freedom is an integral part of the freedom of the gospel. It is good news when being a woman is not a restriction and a reduction, but an elevation to how and what God intended from the beginning.

The title of my book *Women, Forgive Us!* is meant to say sincerely that we men—of course only those who recognize it—have seized the sovereignty of interpretation and leadership and excluded women from it. I am ashamed of this discrimination, which I myself supported. I have publicly distanced myself from it through my book. The indignation of some brothers at my book shows me an attitude of how men react when their dominance is called into question. This must come to an end. It should have come to an end long ago.

Lecture of September 16, 2023, at the FeG Rhein-Sieg (Free Evangelical Church), Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

This lecture can be downloaded free of charge from the homepage: www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de

Notes

1. I use the generic masculine as an umbrella term for persons of both sexes and make exceptions where I consider it necessary or helpful for the sake of clarity.
2. ***Prostatis*** is made up of the Greek words for “ranking before” and “to stand.” Every meaning of all the related NT words that could apply here refers to leadership.