A 14-Point Biblical Case for Women Leaders and Teachers And Why Mike Winger, The Gospel Coalition, and the Southern Baptists Are Wrong About This

This topic continues to be hotly debated. The position that women may not teach or lead in the church, and that this is reserved for men alone, is called “complementarianism.” In contrast stands so-called “egalitarianism,” which grants both to women without making any distinction or restriction according to sex. Both terms were coined in the 1990s in American evangelicalism. What the term “complementarianism”[1] means is indeed a mutual complementing of man and woman, but a decidedly hierarchical one: in an alleged creation order the woman is subordinate to the man. He leads, she follows. Strictly speaking, only what is of equal size, equal worth, equal strength or of like kind can be complementary. That is exactly what a man and (his) wife are by nature—yet in their difference as man and woman.

Egalitarianism is no less ambiguous as a term. It sees man and woman as having equal rights and as commissioned to lead and to teach. But this position does not make the two sexes “equal” in the sense of indistinguishable, as the term suggests. This latter position also sees a mutual complementing of man and woman, who were created for each other to stand by one another in their difference.

We hold a position that could best be described as “egalitarian complementarianism”: man and woman complement each other as equals, without any difference in hierarchy or authority. (HJR)

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By Terran Williams, 15 March 2023.

The most debated issue in the church, certainly the American one, seems to be whether women can lead and preach to men.

Evidence for this is everywhere. Over the last few days I have listened to an interview in which Rick Warren shares how the Bible led him to change his mind about women pastors and teachers (and how the Southern Baptists kicked out their largest and most famous church for it).

Also, I watched the Internet explode as The Gospel Coalition, which uses its massive Internet reach to defend male leadership, with egg on its face after endorsing a book by Josh Butler that Christ-ified the male private part, all as a result of applying a misinterpretation of male authority in Ephesus 5 to sex.

In addition, we’ve just received a message from Mike Winger politely saying he is not able at present to read Andrew Bartlett’s and my critiques of his video teachings on Women in Ministry, the teachings that complementarians now most often point to as support for their position. Mike has said on a number of occasions that he welcomes thoughtful push-back, and yet to date has had little capacity or appetite to engage with anything of the sort. Still, we hope in time that he will engage with us.

By the time I had released my book How God Sees Women (presently free on Kindle) at the beginning of 2022, several years of researching the issue had made me quite certain that complementarian scholars like Wayne Grudem, John Piper, Andreas Köstenberger, Tom Schreiner, Albert Mohler, Kevin De

Young, and Kathy and Tim Keller had got it wrong on this topic. I had discovered that, beyond doubt, women *could* be pastors and preachers—not by bending the Scriptures but by reading them more carefully.

Since then, I have had the great privilege of partnering with British scholar and author, Andrew Bartlett, as we together respond to Winger's many, extensive teaching videos that have been released over the last two years. Along the way, I have learnt a lot more, and become even more sure. Bartlett, who is an international arbitrator and judge in his day job, shares a similar experience to me, one that concurred with his decades of experience as a judge. He explained that it is common to sit down to hear a case, and while at first, the evidence seems to point in two possible directions, as one digs deeper, all the evidence begins to point firmly and consistently in just one direction.

Many of my complementarian friends—and they are still friends—do not realize that the 'biblical' case for male authority has in fact already imploded. Its continued existence is the result of dubious scholarship, flawed logic, and the power of institutions and personalities to uphold a human construct that is devoid of biblical and divine support. So what keeps this corpse propped up? A sense of die-hard tribalism that (for now at least) still triumphs over truth.

In my opinion, too many good people have been duped into following bad theology—thinking that women in leadership is the triumph of culture over Scripture. But consider the following biblical data points:

(Note: Many of these 14 points may not, on their own, support the decision to include women teachers and leaders at the highest levels of the church. Cumulatively, however, they do.)

1. Created equal

Though Adam and Eve are made differently, **Eve was created to be Adam's functionally equal counterpart,** not his subordinate. Complementarity, yes. Hierarchy, no. See how Bartlett and I dismantle Winger's arguments for Eve's subordination here.

2. Falling into male rule

The assumption that men should rule followed the fall. Not creation, but the disobedience of humanity brought about the consequence of male rule over women (Gen 3:16). Not convinced? Click here. This should cause us to take pause before interpreting any subsequent biblical passages as if God idealizes male authority.

3. Deborah

God appointed **Deborah** to be **the highest civil and spiritual leader of God's people** in her time, so much so that she gave commands to its top military leader, Barak (Judges 4–5) [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf]. This fact casts a shadow over the complementarian interpretation of 1 Tim 2:12. See how Bartlett and I assess Winger's arguments on this here.

4. Jesus' esteeming of women

Jesus pioneered the elevation of women in value and ministry—a point I labour in chapters 4 and 11 of my book. Though Jesus never taught on eldership he did teach on spiritual leadership, connecting it not to maleness but servanthood. Notice especially Jesus' encounter with and **commissioning of Mary Magdalene** on the first Easter. See how we challenge Winger regarding this "apostle to the apostles" here and here. Amazingly, Jesus stitched into history's most important day a lesson to men: *trust the word of God in the mouths of your sisters.* (John 20:17–18) [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf] And no, Jesus didn't choose 12 male apostles because of some 'creation principle' or 'creation order' [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf]. He did so for symbolic reasons related to a transitional moment in redemptive history. This is certain. The Great Commission, given to the entire church, commands taught men and women to teach whoever—regardless of status or gender—will sit at the feet of Jesus (Matt 28:19).

5. The elders' qualification texts

1 Timothy 3 and **Titus 1**, the only passages about oversight/eldership qualifications, when soundly interpreted, **leave open the possibility of women pastors**, a fact that leading complementarians now admit. See how Bartlett and I correct Winger on this here.

6. Equality and unity in Christ

Galatians 3:28 ("In Christ is there is neither … nor …"), though not a silver bullet, upholds the equal identity, worth and purpose of men and women. This should at least give us pause on believing that elsewhere in Scripture, God would expressly forbid women (or slaves, or Gentiles) from leading or teaching.

7. Priscilla (and Phoebe)

Though we have no named local church pastor or elder in the New Testament, female or male (except possibly Peter), there's evidence that women led and taught churches. **Priscilla was almost certainly a pastor–teacher** in the Ephesian church, and possibly other churches, too. Click here to read why or watch this video. This contradicts the complementarian interpretation of 1 Tim 2:12, as does Jesus' command that his followers (men and women) should teach all people (Matt 28:19–20). It's no surprise, then, that in one church which Priscilla served, men *and women* brought "a word of instruction" (1 Cor 14:26) and that in her next church, God used Priscilla to teach doctrine to one of the great future teachers of the church (Acts 18:26). Priscilla was not the only named woman teacher. **Phoebe** most likely was commissioned by Paul to **expound 'Romans' to the gathered Roman church**—the letter she had brought from Corinth to Rome as Paul's "letter carrier" (Romans 16:1–2) [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf]. I only saw this as Bartlett and I engaged Winger on Phoebe. Click here for the evidence.

8. Women church hosts

Not just Priscilla, other **women household leaders hosted churches in their homes**, some of whom are named in the New Testament. The evidence shows that they **were leading candidates to be overseers** of those churches. Not convinced? See this response to Winger's many arguments.

9. Women prophets

Despite Grudem's arguments that this was not so, **female prophets** in the New Testament church **exercised a kind of teaching** of the gathered church (1 Corinthians 14:26) [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf]. See the heading 'Female Prophets' in my chapter on Powerful Women in the New Testament. Or watch Preston Sprinkle make this point excellently here (at 1 hr 7 min onwards).

10. Junia

There was a woman who played an even more authoritative role than a pastor or teacher. It is highly probable that **Junia, a woman, was an authoritative apostle**, much like Barnabas and Silas were (Romans 16:7) [Addition by H.-J. Ronsdorf]. Again, this contradicts the complementarian interpretation of 1 Tim 2:12. Did Winger or the ESV lead you to think otherwise? Click here to find out why and to get the facts.

11. 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 don't universally bar women

Paul's controversial texts, properly understood, don't undermine anything I have said so far. **1 Corinthians 11:2–16** and **14:34–35**, soundly interpreted, **do not constitute a universal ban on female leadership** in all churches everywhere. As debated as these passages may be, the evidence for this is strong. Click here for a deeper dive into 1 Cor 11 and here for the same relating to 1 Cor 14.

12. 1 Timothy 2 doesn't universally bar women

1 Timothy 2:12–14 may seem on first reading, especially in certain translations, to universalise male authority—but the popular translation of the word *authentein* (in "I do not permit a woman to … *authentein* a man") as "exercise authority" is almost certainly wrong. Mike Winger helps us to get to the bottom of the matter, I think, because he articulates all the fallacious arguments for that mistranslation in a four and half hour teaching that he says took him months to research. Click here to see where Winger errs in finding the meaning of the word, and why it does not mean "to have authority".

Moreover, the context dispels that that meaning, by which I refer to **the literary context**; **the situational context** (as signalled in 1 Timothy), and **the canonical context** (in particular the many women leaders and teachers in the Bible).

For a detailed analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, you can find Bartlett's book here or mine here.

13. The marriage texts don't support the barring of women

What about marriage roles? Even if the New Testament did teach a husband's authority over his wife, this does not mean that pastors and Sunday preachers must be male—a point I make in my book.

Anyway, **1 Corinthians 7**, the longest passage about marriage in the New Testament, **is clear that mutual submission and consensus is the norm for decision-making in marriage**. Strangely, hardly anyone realizes this—but see here why it's true. **Ephesians 5** and **1 Peter 3**, soundly interpreted, **teach mutual submission in marriage** not a husband's one-way authority. Check out Bartlett's and my critique of Winger on Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3.

14. God-given gifts guide who does what

One last, and most important, point: **gifts trump gender when it comes to edifying the church**. For Peter, Pentecost was the beginning of a new era in which vocal ministry gifts are lavishly bestowed on men *and women* (Acts 2:17–18). Who can pastor, lead, or teach? The biblical examples of woman leaders and preachers are best explained by Paul's counsel that gifting (as well as corresponding Christ-like character), regardless of gender, is the basis for ministry functions in the church. According to the apostle, those gifted to pastor, to lead, or to teach should do so. Bartlett and I break this down here. De Young in a TGC article asks, "Surely teaching children and other women is not a waste of a woman's gifts?" Paul's answer to De Young (in 1 Cor 12:21-24) is that this dishonours gifted women, and deprives men who need their ministry. When men refuse the ministry of women pastors and teachers, simply because they are women, it is like one part of the body saying to another part, "I don't need you."

I conclude: men and women, though made differently by God, are functionally equal. This is not an invention of the culture, it is a value of the kingdom that was, and is, and is to come.

It is also a value that works—beautifully. Mixed-gender leadership and preaching teams, and mutually submitting spouses, are healthier and happier. Conversely, the doctrine of male authority in churches and marriages has contributed to a church health crisis, needlessly disadvantaging so many churches and marriages. It has also limited gifted and called women, and undermined the church's witness to Christ, especially in a culture that releases women to use their gifts in all other sectors of society.

P.S. If you have time to watch one more thing, here's a video of me being interviewed by a large group of Assemblies of God churches in my country who upgraded their doctrine of women in ministry after reading my book. In fact, after the interview, I had the privilege of watching them, for the first time, publicly ordain many women into leadership.

German version based on Terran Williams, edited and expanded with kind permission by Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, March 22, 2023. His additions are marked in the English text above.

Complementarianism often works only because women support it. What if we all stopped supporting it?

www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de

Notes

1. ***Complementarity is a term from epistemology for two (seemingly) contradictory, mutually exclusive descriptions or experimental setups that cannot be reduced to one another, but which, by complementing each other, are necessary for understanding a phenomenon or state of affairs as a whole.***

   What is a complement? Complement (Latin *complementum* = "completion," "[means of] completing") generally denotes something that is a complement to something else.

   The most commonly used synonyms for "complementary" are: completing, mutual, reciprocal.