**An Analysis of What the New Testament Letters**

**Say About the Role of Women in the Church**

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April 17, 2016

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# **Introduction**

All believers naturally approach Scripture with a variety of preconceived ideas that have been placed into their minds by their families and the culture within which they have been raised. Those experiences become excellent starting points to contextualize the truths in Scripture and to provide opportunities for their assumptions to be challenged. The continual change in the way that society organizes itself has led to profound transformation from an agricultural based economy, through the industrial age, to the current development of an information based economy. Those changes have caused our culture to revise the ways that women are perceived in their family roles, their workplace roles, and their community roles. Similarly, those cultural changes have led to discussions reevaluating the roles that women fill within churches.

This paper will examine the current thinking regarding the role of women in churches in view of what the New Testament had to say about their roles, and attempt to define the three prominent positions that have been taken by those considering this issue as well as the underlying arguments that support each argument. The three arguments have been labeled as the hierarchical view, the egalitarian view, and the complementarian view. Typically, only the egalitarian and complementarian views are discussed in contemporary analysis, but they both presume the hierarchical view as a beginning point. These positions will be used to assess the roles of women as deaconesses and pastors within a local congregation, and to examine the biblical support for their positions.

**Hierarchical view**

The hierarchical theology places woman under the man's authority — in marriage and in the church, and throughout society as a whole. The predominant family structure in Scripture was patriarchal. A wife would call her husband master or “baal.”[[1]](#footnote-1) A wife was listed among a man’s possessions along with his livestock, servants, and physical possessions. In this patriarchal period, a father could sell his daughter into slavery or prostitution. While the Jewish people were still nomads and under the rule of patriarchs, one wife was the law, but a man could gather as many concubines as he could afford. Once the Jews settled into the Promised Land of Canaan, polygamy in marriages was legalized. Women were never able to own property. Transfer of property was accomplished solely through inheritance.

In the Bible there are clear statements describing the ideal wife in Prov 31: 10–31.[[2]](#footnote-2) The wife was to be industrious, a good manager, and a wise counselor. Yet, there was always concern that a strong woman or wife would assert herself to the detriment of the husband. In Prov 31:12 “She does him good and not harm all the days of his life”, suggests that women were capable of injuring their husbands, and in Prov 31:3, the king is warned not to spend his strength or stamina on women. This is a common theme that suggests that men could be easily deluded by the women in their lives as they were persuaded through the power of women’s sexual favors. Prov 31:10 relates how valuable a good wife is to her husband: “Who can find a wife of noble character? For her value is far more than rubies.” This passage insinuates that such a woman is rare and that men should be wary of the “bad” wife.

This hierarchical viewpoint represents the position that men are superior to women and should rule over them in all aspects of life. These same men should recognize that women are a threat to them and they should remain vigilant in their relationship to them. Individuals who hold to this view are uncomfortable with women holding any form of leadership position, even in the workplace. In fact, some feel that women should not work at all if they have children or if they are married. It was common in the past for a woman to devote herself entirely to the care of her husband as he provided for her financial needs. Some who hold to this viewpoint might even question the need for women to seek education at the college level.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Historically, the hierarchical view has excluded women from any church leadership positions that would place a woman in a position with any kind of authority over men. The hierarchical perspective holds that roles of authority and teaching are exclusively to be fulfilled by men both in the church and in their homes. Women are often allowed to do little more than teach children or other women in the local church. In hierarchical churches, women are often restricted from leading worship, leading prayer in services or praying with other women after church services, or helping to lead small groups. Those who adopt this hierarchical view establish the basis for their practices upon a literal interpretation of passages like 1 Tim 2: 10–13: “A woman must learn quietly with all submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. She must remain quiet. For Adam was formed first and then Eve.” In addition, this view would reference Gen 3:16 which states: “To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Each of these passages appears to show a divine assignment to men to rule over women and establish that women should not have authority over men.

**Egalitarian view**

The egalitarian viewpoint presents that God does not require women to assume “traditional” gender roles in order to please Him. Egalitarians do not believe there are any differences between men and women,[[4]](#footnote-4) Supporters of this viewpoint would assert that egalitarian relationships do not appear to suffer from not having roles clearly defined; rather, they benefit from the lack of definition.

Egalitarianism, within Christianity, is a movement based on the theological view that all people are equal before God in their personhood, and that there are no gender-based limitations regarding the functions or roles each can fulfill in the home, the church, and the community. Egalitarians understand the Bible as teaching the equality of women and men of all races, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

The egalitarian position is usually characterized by a belief that the Bible teaches the full equality of men and women both in Creation and in Redemption. In Creation, both man and woman were created in God’s image, have direct access to God, and share the responsibilities of bearing and rearing children (Gen 1:26-28). This view also advocates the belief that both woman and man were created for full and equal collaboration. The word “helper” (ezer) used to designate woman in Genesis 2:18 is also used to refer to God a number of times in the Old Testament (1 Sam 7:12; Ps 121:1-2).[[5]](#footnote-5) Consequently, the word conveys no implication of female subordination. This viewpoint also advances the idea that man and woman were co-participants in the Fall: Adam was just as guilty as Eve. Additionally, egalitarianism supports the idea that spouses are joint heirs together of the grace of life and that they are bound together in a relationship of mutual submission and responsibility.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Christian Egalitarians believe that partnership in an equal marriage is the most biblical view. As persons, husband and wife are of equal value and as such, there is no reason to place one spouse over the other. Egalitarians believe that Gal 3:28 applies to all Christian relationships, including Christian marriage: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[[7]](#footnote-7) Egalitarian theologians also find it significant that the "two becoming one" concept, as cited in Gen. 2:24, was quoted by Jesus in his teachings on marriage (Matt. 19:4-6). In that passage, Jesus reemphasized the concept by adding to the Genesis passage these words: "So, they are no longer two, but one.” Jesus did not conform to a mentality unfavorable to women, but reacted against the traditional attitudes of His day, which were based on sexual differences. By calling women to follow him he showed that he looked beyond the customs and outlook of his environment. The Apostle Paul also cited the Genesis 2:24 passage in Eph. 5:30-32.

Egalitarians advocate ability-based, rather than gender-based, ministry of all Christians. Egalitarians support the ordination of women because their interpretation of scriptures and spiritual convictions bring them to the conclusion that Jesus’ teaching abolished discrimination against racial minorities, slaves, and women, in both the church and marriage. They conclude that the Bible teaches that all believers of all racial and ethnic groups and all economic classes are equal in God’s eyes.

Again, egalitarians use the Gal 3:28 passage to support their advocacy of full equality in both responsibility and authority for women and men in ministry.

**Complementarian view**

Complementarianism is the theological view that even though men and women are created equal as individuals, they are intended to complement each other with different roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious leadership. This view is rooted in more literal readings of the creation account in Genesis and the roles of men and women presented elsewhere in Scripture. The word “complementarian” is intended to denote the idea that men and women have differing talents and skills, and their roles complement each other.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The complementarian view of marriage promotes gender-based roles. This view is characterized by a generally patriarchal view of the family (it is the father’s role to lead, provide for, and teach his children to love God and follow His commands) as found in Scripture. There is also a belief that a Christian husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25) and that a believing wife should submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ.[[9]](#footnote-9) This viewpoint asserts that the love/respect marriage relationship was designed by God to reflect the relationship of Jesus and the Church.

The complementarian position has been articulated and defined by evangelical leaders in what is called the Danvers Statement. It is named as such because it was prepared by several evangelical leaders at a December 1987 meeting of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, in Danvers, Massachusetts. This council bases its understanding of gender-based roles and authority structures in marriage and in ministry as defined on their studies of Scriptures such as Eph 5:21-33, Col 3:18-19, Tit 2:3-5, 1 Pet 3:1-7.

A detailed statement of the complementarian view of marriage was presented in the Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Faith and Message (2000).* Even though it is a denominational-specific statement, it is consistent with most contemporary complementarian views in conservative Christianity:

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to his people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Complementarians view women's ability to serve in leadership roles in ministry, particularly in church settings, as limited on the basis of their interpretations of certain scriptures. The complementarian view proposes that women may not hold church leadership roles that involve teaching or authority over men.[[11]](#footnote-11) For some complementarians, this would include the roles of pastors, deacons, ruling elders, and teachers of classes that include men.[[12]](#footnote-12)

When complementarians consider women in ministry, some believe that women should not be ordained as a pastor or as an evangelist, while others believe that it is acceptable for women to serve as evangelists but not in pastoral roles. In a complementarian church, some limitations will be placed on leadership roles for women. Those limits will differ from church to church, but elders and senior pastors will almost always be exclusively men. Women will hold a number of informal leadership roles, but often formal ones as well. Many churches will have women deacons, and women may lead mixed-gender small groups, and contribute from the platform on Sundays.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Conclusion**

These three viewpoints represent a spectrum of relationships that establish order and authority among believers. The hierarchical view is the most traditional and conservative viewpoint and assigns authority almost exclusively to men. The egalitarian view is the most liberal and assigns authority based upon skill-sets rather than having any requirements based upon gender. The complementarian view lies between these two poles and ascribes authority and responsibility according to gender, but advocates that men and women were meant to work together in complementary fashion.

The hierarchical view appears to be based upon Old Testament tradition. The literal interpretations of the consequences of Eve’s sin defining women’s inherent weaknesses provides a basis for males to establish dominance over women. However, Jesus redefined many of the assumptions that had become tradition. He demonstrated that he valued all people without regard to their societal status, age, or gender. The Apostle Paul redefined marriage roles and challenged both spouses to serve each other rather than demanding rights based upon tradition. Their service to each other was supposed to mirror Christ’s service to the Church.

The New Testament shows evidence of women serving the church and leading home churches. However, Paul did use very specific male references when he defined the role of elder or pastor. In view of this, it appears that the complementarian view is consistent with the Bible’s direction. The senior leader of a congregation should be male and have the other attributes that are described in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1. Women can be called into service to the Lord and should be respected and empowered appropriately. They can serve the church as deaconesses or as pastors who work under the authority of a male leader. It is challenging to resist the egalitarian view in our current culture. There is a strong attempt to empower women and recognize them as being equal in all roles in the workforce, political organizations, and the community. Christians can certainly affirm that women are equal in God’s eyes to men. However, God does establish roles that are gender specific, and each gender must choose to submit to His leadership and serve others to the best of their abilities within their roles.

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