

# **Healthy Complementarianism**

**A discussion paper for the Presbyterian Church in NSW and ACT**

**From the Committee for Elders and Deacons**

**July 2022**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Explanatory Note from the Committee for Elders and Deacons</b>	<b>3.</b>
<b>Summary of Findings and Recommendations</b>	<b>5.</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9.</b>
<b>Part 1—Biblical and theological foundations for healthy complementarianism</b>	<b>12.</b>
<b>Part 2—Biblical teaching on the office of elder: arguments against and for male only eldership</b>	<b>24.</b>
<b>Part 3—Practical implications: Healthy complementarianism and male only eldership in PCNSW/ACT churches</b>	<b>43.</b>
<b>Part 4—Recommendations for GANSW/ACT</b>	<b>51.</b>

# Explanatory Note from the Committee for Elders and Deacons

## Why this paper?

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW and the ACT is considering the question of whether the office of elder is open to men and women, or restricted to men only.

This is an important question, which concerns God's will for men and women in the leadership of his church. Resolving this question requires us to *understand* what Scripture teaches. It also requires us to *apply* that teaching with godly wisdom into our own context. The question about the sex of elders is also related to the broader question of how men and women relate together in the life and mission of our churches. It is appropriate, therefore, that these questions be considered together.

In July 2021, the General Assembly requested its Committee for Elders and Deacons to research and write a "discussion paper...on 'Healthy complementarian church life and ministry, including a critical examination of the case for and against male only elders'."

In July 2022, the Committee for Elders and Deacons presented the attached paper to the Assembly. The Assembly reviewed the paper and resolved to use it as the basis for further discussion. To ensure widespread consultation, the Assembly resolved to send the discussion paper to all presbyteries and sessions, requesting ministers and elders in those bodies "to circulate the paper widely among men and women, to foster discussion in the church about healthy, biblical relationships between men and women." The Assembly also encouraged "all interested parties to submit responses to the Elders and Deacons Committee by 31st December 2022."

## How to use this paper

The discussion paper is designed to provide a starting point for discussion in the church about healthy biblical relationships between men and women, and specifically about the sex of elders. The Assembly has encouraged the paper to be read and discussed widely in the church. The paper can be read and discussed by individuals or by groups, whether formal or informal.

The Assembly has also asked for people reading the paper to provide feedback focussed on two specific questions:

- (1). "Which, if any, of the recommendations from Part 3 of the Healthy Complementarianism paper should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023?"
- (2). "What, if anything, should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023 in addition to, or in place of, these recommendations?"

People reading the paper are, therefore, encouraged to read the whole paper, but to focus their feedback and responses on the concrete recommendations found in Part 3 of the paper (pages 43–50).

Responses to the paper can be made by individuals or groups. All responses should be submitted, in writing, to the Convenor of the Committee for Elders and Deacons, Murray Smith (msmith@christcollege.edu.au), by 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2022.

The Assembly has also requested the Committee for Elders and Deacons to forward all submissions to the Women's Ministry Committee, and to other relevant Assembly Committees, so that the Committees can work together to bring recommendations to Assembly in July 2023.

## What is the way ahead?

The Assembly requested the Elders and Deacons Committee to take all feedback into account and to take two actions:

**(1). Recommendations for healthy complementarianism.** The Assembly requested the Elders and Deacons Committee "to collaborate" with "the Women's Ministry Committee and other relevant GANSW Committees" to bring "recommendations to Assembly [in July] 2023 designed to strengthen healthy biblical relationships between men and women in PCNSW/ACT churches."

This is a broad request, which asks the Committees to work together to propose concrete changes that could be made to the church's life at every level (congregation, session, presbytery, Assembly). Such proposals will be designed "to strengthen healthy, biblical relationships between men and women." The Recommendations in Part 3 of the paper provide a starting point for such proposals. The Committees are, however, eager to receive help from presbyteries, sessions, and all interested church members to improve and strengthen these recommendations.

**(2). Overture to change the Code to adopt male-only eldership.** The Assembly also asked the Elders and Deacons Committee "to bring an overture to Assembly 2023 to amend the Code to specify that future elders must be male." The Code is the church's formal rule book, which—under Scripture—governs church life. An overture is a formal proposal to amend the Code. The Elders and Deacons Committee intends to bring the overture requested by the Assembly to Assembly in July 2023. The overture will propose that any elders ordained in the future must be male, while preserving the rights of women currently ordained as elders.

The Assembly has not yet decided whether elders must be male. The Assembly, rather, has requested the Elders and Deacons Committee to propose rules for male only elders so that these can be debated in July 2023. If the Assembly decides in July 2023 to proceed toward amending the Code to require that elders be male, it will send the proposed changes down to the presbyteries for their approval or otherwise. Any change to the Code requires the approval of a majority of the presbyteries across NSW / ACT. If the majority of the presbyteries approve the proposed changes, the Assembly can then adopt them into the Code. The earliest that any changes could be adopted into the Code is July 2024.

Your views and feedback on this Healthy Complementarianism paper may help shape the discussion and any proposed changes.

The Elders and Deacons Committee, through its Convenor, is very happy to answer any questions, or to provide further clarification.

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## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

This paper has been prepared by the GANSW's Committee for Elders and Deacons in response to a request from the Assembly to "write a discussion paper...on 'Healthy complementarian church life and ministry, including a critical examination of the case for and against male only elders'." The paper deals with weighty and complex matters and is, therefore, relatively long. This **Summary of Findings and Recommendations** provides a brief summary. The full paper responds to the Assembly's request in an Introduction and four Parts, as follows.

The **Introduction** (pages 9–11) notes the mandate for the paper, defines key terms, locates this discussion within the history of PCNSW/ACT, limits the scope of the paper, and outlines the interpretive approach taken in it.

**Part 1** (pages 12–23) outlines **Biblical and theological foundations for healthy complementarianism**. This Part shows that in God's good design, men and women are equally created in the image of God, equally fallen in sin, equally redeemed by Christ, and equally called into wholehearted service in God's kingdom. It further demonstrates that, within this fundamental equality, God created men and women to bear his image in different and complementary ways, and so to play different and complementary roles within his purposes. This complementary difference is grounded in basic biological differences, and rightly finds expression in a range of cultural forms. Further, this Part shows that the Scriptures most directly apply the complementary difference between men and women to marriage and family life: husbands are the "head" of their wives, called to lead and love their wives as Christ does the church; wives are to "submit" to their husbands, responding to, and supporting their loving lead. Finally, this Part shows that the relationship of headship and submission applies most directly to husbands and wives in the family, and to elders and members in the church.

**Part 2** (pages 24–42) examines **Biblical teaching on the office of elder: arguments for and against male only eldership**. This Part begins by distinguishing the question of office from the broader questions of Christian ministry and preaching. This Part is concerned with the narrow question of whether both men and women may be ordained as elders, or men only; it is not concerned with the broader questions of the role of women in Christian ministry, or the appropriateness of women preaching to mixed congregations. Next, we consider the office of elder, and demonstrate: that the Scriptures present the office as prescriptive for God's church; that the Presbyterian Church of Australia recognises the office as founded on the Word of God, and; that the General Assembly of Australia (2019) has declared its understanding of the office.

The paper next focusses on the arguments against and for male only eldership. We seek to present the case for each position with full voice, from the point of view of those who hold it, but ultimately conclude that the Scriptures restrict the office of elder to men. The table below summarises the arguments for both positions.

Issue	Case for men <i>and</i> women as elders	Case for male <i>only</i> eldership
<b>Fundamental equality</b>	Fundamental equality (men and women) indicates interchangeable roles (e.g. Gal 3:28).	<p>Fundamental equality (men and women) is held together with God-given, complementary differences.</p> <p>The Bible affirms both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• equality of men and women in creation, fall, redemption and kingdom service</li> <li>• complementary difference between men and women with distinct roles in marriage and the church</li> </ul>
<b>Biblical example / description</b>	<p>Biblical women lead and teach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deborah is a prophetess and Judge</li> <li>• Women teach the apostles about the resurrection</li> <li>• Priscilla teaches Apollos</li> <li>• Phoebe is a minister</li> <li>• Junia is an apostle</li> </ul>	<p>Biblical women lead and teach, but the office of elder is always held by men</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biblical elders are always men</li> <li>• The biblical women who lead and teach are never elder-overseers</li> <li>• The biblical patterns actually affirm complementary difference (e.g. Deborah; women and the resurrection)</li> </ul>
<b>Biblical teaching / prescription</b>	<p>The Pauline passages are not prescriptive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Timothy 2:11–12 is specific to Ephesus</li> <li>• 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 requirement for “husband of one wife” is interchangeable with its opposite</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 is best understood as Paul refuting a Corinthian slogan</li> </ul>	<p>The Pauline passages are prescriptive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Timothy 2–3 is grounded in God and creation, Christ and the gospel, and concerns “how one ought to behave in God’s church” (1 Tim 3:15)</li> <li>• 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 present “husband of one wife” as a qualification for elder-overseers, confirmed by deacons (1 Tim 3:8–13) and widows (1 Tim 5:9)</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 is grounded in God’s “law” and applies to “all the churches”</li> </ul>
<b>Experience and mission of the church</b>	<p>Female elders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have evident gifts</li> <li>• have served faithfully and effectively</li> <li>• ensure women’s voices are heard</li> <li>• help guard against abuse</li> <li>• are a powerful witness</li> </ul>	<p>Male only elders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• should work with women in the congregation to ensure women’s gifts are used, voices heard, abuse minimised, and witness maximised</li> <li>• arguments from experience and mission cannot over-rule the teaching of Scripture.</li> </ul>

Part 2 of the paper concludes that Scripture prescribes male only eldership for God's church, while also holding out a vision of genuine complementarianism, where men and women work together and contribute in distinct and complementary ways to God's kingdom.

**Part 3** (pages 43–50) addresses the **practical implications** and outlines what **healthy complementarianism and male only eldership** might look like in **PCNSW/ACT churches**. This Part first clarifies what male only eldership and healthy complementarianism *does not* mean. If GANSW were to adopt male only eldership it would entail:

- (1). No implication that women have less dignity, worth, or value than men;
- (2). No implication that women only have value as wives and mothers;
- (3). No implication that women are less gifted or competent than men;
- (4). No headship and submission outside the God-ordained roles and offices;
- (5). No absolute limitation of decision-making to men;
- (6). No absolute prohibition on women providing leadership in the church;
- (7). No absolute prohibition on women teaching men or on men learning from women;
- (8). No change to the current situation regarding preaching and leading worship in PCNSW/ACT churches;
- (9). No endorsement of prescriptive gender stereotypes, including for the wives of ministers and elders;
- (10). No room for abuse.

Part 3 next indicates, more positively, what healthy complementarianism *should* mean in all cases, and *might* mean, depending on local decisions and circumstances. In pursuing a healthy complementarian culture, **ministers, elders, and sessions**, in their different responsibilities and capacities, *should* do the following:

- (1). Affirm and teach, by word and example, that God created all people in his image with equal dignity, worth, and value.
- (2). Affirm and teach, by word and example, that God created men and women as different and complementary.
- (3). Take the lead in creating the conditions in which *all* of God's people under their care—men, women, and children—can grow to maturity together as the body of Christ;
- (4). Build trust with congregation members, both women and men.

Further, **ministers, elders, and sessions**, in their different responsibilities and capacities, *might* consider the following actions:

- (5). Invite others, both women and men, to participate in speaking roles in gathered worship;
- (6). Proactively engage others, women and men, in the church's decision making processes;
- (7). Entrust others, women and men, with leadership responsibility for specific areas of ministry;
- (8). Entrust others, women and men, with pastoral and teaching responsibilities both within and beyond the local church;
- (9). Establish deacons—both male and female—to serve the congregation;
- (10). Encourage women and men to serve on the Committee of Management;

- (11). Teach and train women and men, and proactively encourage women and men, girls and boys, to study Scripture and theology at every level;
- (12). Consider appointing appropriately qualified women to formal roles, whether paid or voluntary, full time or part time;
- (13). Ensure that vulnerable people, especially women and children, are heard and feel safe within the church community;
- (14). Care for women personally and directly, while also encouraging pastoral care for women by women;
- (15). Celebrate and honour the important contribution many women make as wives and mothers.

This Part further suggests that **presbyteries and Assembly**, in their different responsibilities, *might* work to:

- (1). Renew the formal pathway for women to be engaged in paid ministry positions;
- (2). Consider how women might be better included in the courts of the church;
- (3). Ensure that appropriately qualified women are included in Student Committees and the Candidates Review Panel;
- (4). Proactively recruit appropriately qualified women to serve on Assembly Committees.

**Part 4** (page 51) provides three formal **recommendations for GANSW**. It recommends that GANSW:

- (1) Send the Healthy Complementarianism paper to presbyteries and sessions for their consideration, and encourage ministers and elders to circulate the paper widely among men and women, to foster discussion in the church about healthy, biblical relationships between men and women, and encourage all interested parties to submit responses to the Elders and Deacons Committee by 31st December 2022, further requesting that responses focus on the following two questions:
  - (i). which, if any, of the recommendations from Part 3 of the Healthy Complementarianism paper should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023?
  - (ii). what, if anything, should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023 in addition to, or in place of, these recommendations?
- (2) Request the Elders and Deacons Committee to forward submissions to the Women's Ministry Committee, and other relevant GANSW Committees, and to collaborate in bringing recommendations to Assembly 2023 designed to strengthen healthy biblical relationships between men and women in PCNSW/ACT churches.
- (3) Request the Elders and Deacons Committee to bring an overture to Assembly 2023 to amend the Code to specify that future elders must be male, while preserving the rights and privileges of existing female elders.



# Introduction

## Mandate

GANSW 2021 resolved to “request the [Elders and Deacons] Committee to:

- (a) Write a discussion paper, together with the Women’s Ministry Committee, on ‘Healthy complementarian church life and ministry, including a critical examination of the case for and against male only elders’.
- (b) Bring recommendations to the Assembly on how to proceed regarding the gender of elders, and the development of a healthy complementarian culture in PCNSW churches.” (GANSW 2021 BB Min 63)

The following discussion paper responds to this request in an introduction and four parts. In this introduction, we offer some definitions of key terms, locate the present discussion within the history of the PCNSW/ACT, limit the scope of the discussion, and outline our interpretive approach. Part 1 provides a biblical and theological account of humanity, created in God’s image as male and female, and renewed in that image in Christ. It lays out the Bible’s teaching regarding the fundamental equality, and complementary differences, between men and women, and our mutual interdependence in God’s purposes. Part 2 provides a study of biblical teaching regarding the office of elder, focused on the question of sex, and canvassing arguments for and against male only eldership. It seeks to present the arguments on both sides of this debate in the best possible light, and to assess their relative strengths. This Part concludes that male only eldership is most consonant with biblical teaching. Part 3 discusses some practical implications of male only eldership for developing a healthy complementarianism in PCNSW/ACT congregations. The goal here is to map out some of the ways in which healthy, biblical complementarianism can be expressed, and to point out some sub-biblical, and therefore unhealthy, distortions. The discussion seeks to set principles and parameters, without being overly prescriptive. Beyond that, it aims to paint a positive vision of what healthy complementarianism and male only eldership might look like in our churches. Part 4 lists two recommendations for GANSW to consider.

These questions matter. They matter, fundamentally, because God created us in his image, male and female, such that our shared humanity, and sexed differences, are a basic feature of human life. They matter also because—for a range of reasons—questions of sex, gender, marriage, and family are currently at the forefront of public discourse in western culture, including in Australia, and are the subject of significant confusion and debate. They matter, further, because they touch us deeply as individuals, and in our families and churches. These questions matter also, finally, because they provide God’s church with an opportunity to bear witness to Christ as we live according to God’s good design for us as his children—both men and women—as we hold out the word of life.

## Definitions

**Sex and gender:** In recent discussion it is common to distinguish “sex”—a biological reality rooted in the body—from “gender”—a psycho-social reality constructed by the individual in community.<sup>1</sup> Since, “in God’s order the two align, and gender is determined by sex,” this paper refers the sex rather than the gender of elders. At the same time, we recognize the reality that in a fallen world “some people experience themselves as having a gender which is not aligned with their sex”.<sup>2</sup> We recognise, moreover, that all of us are involved in constructing our own gender identity, and that there is a range of biblically faithful ways in which men may work out their masculinity, and women their femininity, within the constraints provided by the Scriptures.

**Complementarianism** is a Christian view of relations between men and women, especially in marriage and the church, which holds that God created men and women as *complementary*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Presbyterian Church (NSW & ACT), *The Transgender Moment, the Gospel and the Church*, 2019, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Church (NSW & ACT), *The Transgender Moment, the Gospel and the Church*, 2019, 7.

expressions of the image of God. Men and women are both created in the image of God and are, therefore, of equal dignity, worth, and significance, but reflect the image of God in different and complementary ways. This view includes the conviction that God has assigned distinct and complementary roles or functions to men and women in marriage and in church life. In practice, a fundamentally complementarian position can be expressed in a wide range of ways. The Presbyterian Church of Australia holds a complementarian position in the limited sense that GAA 1991 ruled that “only men shall be eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments...” (GAA 1991 Min 75). The complementarian position is distinguished from an alternative Christian view of relations between men and women known as **egalitarianism**, which holds that “God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world.”<sup>3</sup>

**Healthy complementarianism** is a description coined for this paper. The adjective “healthy” recognises that it is possible for churches or individuals to hold a complementarian view and yet manifest that view in patterns of relating that are sub-biblical and destructive—“unhealthy”. The goal of this discussion is to map out what it looks like to hold a complementarian view of relations between the sexes in marriage and in the church in ways that are faithful to Scripture, and therefore productive, and life-giving—“healthy”.

**Male only eldership** is the view that the biblical office of elder-overseer is restricted to men. It is possible to hold a complementarian view of relationships between men and women in marriage and church life but not support male only eldership.

## History

The Presbyterian Church of Australia recognises the offices of minister, elder, and deacon, while allowing for different views on whether “minister” and “elder” are two distinct offices (the three-office view), or two different forms of the one biblical office of elder (the two-office view). In relation to Ministers, GAA 1991 ruled that “only men shall be eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments...” (GAA 1991 Min 75). In doing so, GAA re-affirmed and re-established the position which had been held by the Church from 1901 until 1967. The GAA has, however, not ruled on the question of whether elders may be male or female, or male only, and has therefore left this decision to the State Assemblies. While all of the State Assemblies apart from GANSW have subsequently affirmed the traditional position that it is only permissible to ordain men to the office of elder, GANSW has not reached this conclusion.

## Scope

GANSW requested the Committee to write on “Healthy Complementarianism” with a specific focus on the arguments for and against male only eldership. In discussing “Healthy Complementarianism,” this paper focusses on the relationships between men and women in marriage, and in the church, but does not discuss the relationships or roles of men and women in other spheres of life (the workplace, politics, the public square). By “church” in this context, we intend the Presbyterian Church in NSW/ACT, its congregations, presbyteries, and Assembly (with its committees). In discussing the arguments for and against male only eldership, this paper focusses on *the office of elder*. It does not discuss in any detail related questions such as: (1). the sex of ministers; (2). the sex of deacons; (3). whether women may preach or teach in mixed congregations; (4). the respective roles of men and women in other ministries in the church or in parachurch organisations and mission agencies.

## Interpretive approach

Relationships between men and women were designed to be a thing of beauty. All too often in our experience, however, these relationships have been a source of hurt, betrayal, and even abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbeinternational.org/content/cbes-mission>

This is important to recognise at the outset, because all of us come to Scripture with our experiences—good and bad—and these inevitably colour our reading of God’s Word. We therefore need to ask for God’s help that, by his Spirit, he would enable us to hear what he teaches about men and women in the church, to be healed from our hurts, and to move forward in faith together.

In approaching the question of God’s will for relationships between men and women in family life, and in the church, we self-consciously submit ourselves to God’s will revealed in the Scriptures, which are “the Word of God written...given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life” (WCF 1.2). The Scriptures contain “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” (WCF 1.6). Faithful interpretation of Scripture, moreover, requires that we pay attention *both* to what is “expressly set down in Scripture” (the task of exegesis), *and* to what “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (the tasks of biblical and systematic theology) (WCF 1.6).

In particular, it is important to recognise that while all of Scripture is God’s Word—“the rule of faith and life” (WCF 1.2)—not every passage rules us in the same way. The centre of the Scriptures is the gospel of God’s grace in Christ (Luke 24:25–26; 44–49; 1 Cor 15:3–4). The Scriptures also, however, include commands for us to obey, examples for us to emulate, and counter-examples to warn us from sin (e.g. 1 Cor 10:1–13; cf. WCF 14.2). In reading what Scripture teaches about the relationships between men and women in marriage and in the church, we need to distinguish carefully between God’s good design, given at creation and renewed in Christ, and the distortions of that good design, caused by sin. It is not the case that every biblical description of relationships between men and women is given to us as a model to emulate.

To put this another way, it is important for us bear in mind the distinction between the *descriptive* and *prescriptive* functions of Scripture. The Bible contains a great deal of narrative material, which describes the activities of God’s people—their faith and obedience in action, as well as their sin. In discerning what God intends to teach us through such biblical *descriptions*, we need to read them in the light of biblical *prescriptions*, which are normative for our lives as God’s people. H. Bavinck is correct: since “the revelation recorded in Scripture is a historical and organic whole...a dogma that comes to us with authority and intends to be a rule for our life and conduct *must be rooted in and inferred from the entire organism of Scripture*.”<sup>4</sup> In general, we can observe three rules for discerning what is prescriptive. We rightly regard Scripture’s teaching as prescriptive: (1). when biblical descriptions are confirmed by explicit commands or regulations; (2). when such commands are grounded in fundamental doctrines of universal significance—God and his character, God’s good design given at creation, God’s moral law given at Sinai (the Ten Commandments), the gospel of Christ, the positive apostolic instruction of the letters, and the revelation of God’s will for the age to come; and; (3). when Scripture expressly states that something is God’s will for *all* people, or for his church. We will need to bear these basic rules of faithful interpretation in mind as we proceed.

Finally, it is important that we do not dismiss any part of Scripture as “merely descriptive” or “bound by the culture.” Certainly, some biblical commands are expressed in the cultural forms appropriate to their original audience (e.g. Exod 20:17: “you shall not covet your neighbour’s...ox, or his donkey”), and some biblical commands relate most directly to particular individuals (e.g. 1 Tim 5:23: “take a little wine for your stomach”). Nevertheless, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Our fundamental assumption, therefore, must be that every passage of Scripture is given for our benefit. Our task is to discern what we are to learn, and how we are to live in light of it.

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<sup>4</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 1 – Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 460 (italics added).

## Part 1—Biblical and theological foundations for healthy complementarianism

### A. Men and women: equal in creation, sin, redemption, and kingdom service

In God’s good design, men and women are fundamentally equal, because God created both men and women in his own image.<sup>5</sup> The Bible opens with the declaration that “God created אָדָם (“the Adam”) in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*, male and female he created *them*” (Gen 1:27).<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word אָדָם (“the Adam”) here is usually translated “man” (ESV), “mankind” (NIV), or “humankind” (NRSV), and refers to humanity as a unified whole. In Genesis 1–3 the word comes to refer to the first man as distinct from the first woman, “Adam” as distinct from “Eve” (Gen 2:7–8, 15–16, 18–25; 3:8–9, 12, 20, 22, 24; 4:1; 5:3). In its first usage in Genesis 1:26–28, however, the word “Adam” refers to humanity as a unified whole, comprised of both “male” and “female” (cf. Gen 5:1–2). This is clear from the switch from the singular to the plural pronoun in Genesis 1:27: “in the image of God he created *him* (אִתּוֹ), male and female he created *them* (אֹתָם).” Humanity as a whole—men, women and, by extension, their children (Gen 5:3; 9:6)—is created in the image of God. This creation in “the image of God” has both *relational* and *representative* dimensions: *relational*, in that we were created to love and worship God (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37), and to love and serve others (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39); *representative*, in that we are created to reflect God’s character in “knowledge, righteousness, and holiness” (Eph 4:24; Col 1:10; cf. WCF 4:2), and to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26, 28; Rev 5:9–10). All of this applies equally to both men and women: we are fundamentally equal because of our shared humanity.

The Genesis account, in fact, indicates that God’s image is manifested not only in the man and the woman as individuals, but in the man and the woman together with their descendants. Herman Bavinck states it well:

Adam was not created *alone*. As a man and by himself he was incomplete. He lacked something that no lower creature could make up (Gen. 2:20). As a man by himself, accordingly, neither was he yet the fully unfolded image of God. The creation of humankind in God’s image was only completed on the sixth day, when God created both man and woman in union with each other (cf. *’ōtām* Gen. 1:27), in his image. Still, even this creation in God’s image of man and woman in conjunction is not the end but the beginning of God’s journey with mankind. It is not good that the man should be alone (Gen. 2:18); nor is it good that the man and woman should be alone. Upon the two of them God immediately pronounced the blessing of multiplication (Gen. 1:28). Not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be. It can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members. Just as the traces of God (*vestigia Dei*) are spread over many, many works, in both space and time, so also the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side.<sup>7</sup>

The manifold glory of God is more fully manifested in the diversity and multiplicity of the human race than in any individual—man or woman—considered on their own. In the fulness of God’s purposes, the image of God is most fully revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ who is “the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), and in the new humanity, renewed in God’s image through union with him (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10; Rev 5:9–10).

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase “good design”—here and throughout—is drawn from C. Smith, *God’s good design: What the Bible really says about men and women* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 2 – God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), §298 (pp. 576–77).

God is, of course, neither male nor female, but “a most pure spirit...without body, parts, or passions” (WCF 2.1). At the same time, this understanding of the image of God as more fully manifested men and women together helps to explain why the Scriptures use both masculine and feminine language to speak of God. God pre-eminently reveals himself in masculine terms as our “Father” in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (e.g. Deut 32:6; Isa 63:15–16; 64:8; Matt 6:9; John 20:17), by whose Spirit we also cry “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Scripture is, however, not shy of occasionally using feminine imagery to speak of God. Isaiah, for example, compares God’s compassion for his people to that of a nursing mother with her child (49:14–15). Jesus compares God to a woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), and pictures himself as a mother hen (Matt 23:37 // Luke 13:34). In the same way, while the Old Testament predominantly presents men as types of Christ—Adam, Israel, David—significant women also prefigure Christ and the gospel. In the book of Judges, for example, Jael, appears as a type of Christ, who anticipates the ultimate “seed of the woman,” when she “crushes” the “head” of the enemy, and lays him at her “feet” (Judg 5:26–27 with Gen 3:15; Ps 8:6; 110:1; Mark 12:35–37; Rom 16:20). Or, differently, the daughter of Jephthah provides a type of Christ when she humbly submits to her father’s will, even though it means she must die (Judg 11:34–40 with Mark 14:32–42). Other examples could be added.<sup>8</sup> The point is that both men and women reflect the image of God, and both men and women function as types of Christ. Men and women are fundamentally equal because both are created in the image of God, and because it is only in men and women together—humanity as a whole—that the image of God is more fully manifest.

Consistent with this equality in creation, the Scriptures are also clear that men and women are equally fallen in sin (Rom 3:23), equally redeemed by Christ (Gal 3:27–28), equally called to wholehearted service in God’s kingdom (e.g. 1 Cor 10:31; 12:7; Eph 4:15–16; Col 3:17; 1 Pet 4:10–12), and equally gifted for it (1 Cor 12:7).

On the one hand, Paul unambiguously testifies that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The Scriptures, accordingly, include many examples of both men and women who fall into disobedience, and who give themselves over to wickedness (think Cain, Pharaoh, Ahab, and Judas, along with Job’s wife, Gomer, and Jezebel).

On the other hand, the Gospel of John declares that “God so loved the world that he gave his own Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Paul, similarly, affirms that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” so that in Christ “there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28). The Scriptures, accordingly, include many examples of both men and women who—despite their failures—love and trust the Lord, and faithfully serve him. While the male heroes of the faith are more prominent in the biblical narrative (think Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul), the Scriptures certainly include testimony to many women of faith who play significant roles in the advance of God’s kingdom. Consider the following examples.

Eve is the one through whom the serpent crusher will come (Gen 3:15), and “the mother of all living” (Gen 3:20).

Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, Tamar ... Ruth ... and many other women carry forward the promise that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15), until it reaches its fulfilment in Mary’s son, Jesus (Gal 4:4–5).

Tamar is more righteous than Judah (Gen 38:26).

Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, save the covenant children from Pharaoh (Exod 1:15–21).

Moses’ mother Jochebed, and sister Miriam, preserve the life of the one through whom God will redeem his people out of Egypt (Exod 2:1–11 with 6:20).

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<sup>8</sup> See Nana Dolce, *The Seed of the Woman: 30 Narratives that Point to Jesus*, (10ofThose: Forthcoming 2022).

Rahab welcomes the Israelite spies as God gives his people victory at Jericho (Josh 2).

Deborah and Jael save God's people from Sisera (Jdg 4–5).

Ruth boldly leaves her family and homeland to embrace the LORD and his people, and so becomes the great grandmother of David, and ancestress of the Lord Jesus (Ruth 1:16–17; 4:13–17; Matt 1:5).

Hannah patiently trusts the LORD at a time when the male priests of Israel fail to do so (1 Sam 1–2).

Abigail bravely takes responsibility for her husband Nabal's guilt (1 Sam 25:23), and intercedes for him (1 Sam 25:28); she wisely dissuades David from senseless slaughter, by urging him to trust God's promises rather than his own strength (1 Sam 25:23–35)

Esther bravely and cleverly uses her position as Queen to deliver God's people from certain destruction (Esth 4:14).

Mary is "highly favoured" by the Lord (Luke 1:28), and a model disciple (Luke 1:38).

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, "and many others" provide for the Lord Jesus and his disciples "out of their means" (Luke 8:3).

Women, in general, are treated as equals by Jesus, and feature positively in his teaching (e.g. Luke 10:38–42).

Mary Magdalene, together with Joanna, Salome, and Mary the mother of James are the first witnesses of Jesus' empty tomb, and the first to announce the resurrection to the apostles (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–10, 22–24; John 20:1–18).

Tabitha is "full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36).

Lydia is the first to welcome the apostles and accept the gospel in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15).

Priscilla, together with her husband Aquila, explains "the way of God more accurately" to Apollos (Acts 18:26); she is the apostle Paul's "fellow worker" (Rom 16:3).

Phoebe is "a servant of the church at Cenchreae" and "a patron of many" including Paul (Rom 16:2).

Mary works hard for the Roman church (Rom 16:6).

Junia is a "fellow prisoner" with Paul for the gospel, and "well known to the apostles" (Rom 16:7).

Tryphaena and Tryphosa—whose names mean "dainty" and "delicate"—are ironically praised as "labourers in the Lord," together with Persis, who "has worked hard in the Lord." (Rom 16:12).

Rufus' mother extended her maternal care and was like a mother to the apostle Paul (Rom 16:13).

Yet other biblical women could be mentioned. This is enough, however, to show that whatever we say about the differences between men and women—and there is much to say below—these differences cannot be construed in a way that minimizes the contribution of *both* men *and* women to the work of God's kingdom.

Related to this, the Scriptures are clear that God gifts both men and women for the work of his kingdom. Paul, for example, affirms that "*To each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). Elsewhere, the same apostle affirms that the body of Christ will only grow to maturity "*when each part* is working properly" (Eph 4:16).

Finally, the fundamental quality of men and women in God's sight is emphasized by the way in which, throughout the Scriptures, God characterizes his people as both his "son" and his "bride." On the one hand, in the Old Testament, the LORD speaks of Israel—the people of God as a whole—as his "son," and this includes not only Israel's men, but the women and children as well (e.g. Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1). In the New Testament, the apostles likewise speak of the church—the people of God

as a whole—as “sons” of God. In Christ, all of us—men, women, and children—have been adopted as God’s “sons” and “heirs” (e.g. Rom 8:14–15; Gal 4:4–7). On the other hand, in the Old Testament, the LORD also characterises Israel as his “bride” or “wife,” and this again includes the whole people of God—men, women, and children (e.g. Ezek 16; Hos 2). In the same way, the New Testament authors picture the church—all of God’s people—as the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22–33; Rev 19:6–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17). Indeed, in Revelation 21–22, these two images appear side by side: in the new heavens and the new earth, “the one who overcomes” through Christ will be welcomed as God’s “son” (Rev 21:7), and—simultaneously—be part of his “bride,” the purified and perfected church in all her glory (Rev 21:2, 9; 22:17). Thus the Scriptures, from beginning to end, use both the masculine image of the son, and the feminine image of the bride, to picture God’s people.

Taken as a whole, these considerations indicate that our shared humanity is more fundamental than our sexed differences. All human beings—men, women, and children, both young and old, both those in the womb and those about to die—are of equal dignity, value, and worth in God’s sight. We are all equally created in the image of God, equally fallen in sin, equally redeemed by Christ, equally called to service in God’s kingdom.

## **B. Men and women: different and complementary**

### **(1). Complementary difference in creation**

Within this fundamental equality, the Scriptures are also clear that God created men and women as different and complementary.

The creation mandate—to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28)—could not be fulfilled by Adam alone, but only by Adam and Eve and their descendants working together. More than this, however—as we noted already—the glory of God could not be imaged in Adam alone, but required both Adam and Eve, together with their descendants, ultimately united in the final Adam, the true image of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

For this reason, while all that God made was “good,” and “very good” (Gen 1:31), God declared that it was “not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Adam needed “a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). This crucial description simultaneously indicates the dignity of the woman whom God created as Adam’s “helper,” and her complementary difference from him. On the one hand, the designation “helper” (עֲזָרָה) indicates her dignity. This term, in fact, refers to God himself in most of its occurrences in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exod 18:14; Deut 33:7, 29; Ps 20:2; 70:5; 115:9–11; 121:1–2; 124:8; 146:5). The woman is the man’s “helper” in the sense that he needs her. He cannot fulfil God’s purposes for him without her. On the other hand, the phrase “fit for him” (ESV) or “suitable for him” (NIV) indicates her complementary difference from him. The phrase could be translated “like opposite him” (כְּעֵצָה). It indicates again that the woman is “like” the man, in a fundamental way, while also different from him. The animals which God brings to the man share a kinship with the man (Gen 2:19–20)—they too were created on the sixth day (Gen 1:24–31), and from the “ground” (Gen 2:7, 19; cf. 1:24)—but they are not sufficiently “like” the man to be the “helper” he needs (Gen 2:20). The LORD God, therefore, forms the woman from the man’s very substance, from one of his ribs, and brings her to the man (Gen 2:21–22). Adam’s exclamation—the first piece of poetry in the Bible—expresses his delight in the woman. She is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). She is like him in the fundamental sense that she shares his very substance. But she is also different from him. In a word-play that works as well in English as it does in Hebrew, he calls her “woman” (אִשָּׁה) because “she was taken out of man” (אִשָּׁה) (Gen 2:23). The man and the woman share fully the same humanity, but are also different from each other—even “opposite” to each other—in a good and necessary way. The woman is the man’s equal match, his complement. The second chapter of Genesis therefore climaxes with the Bible’s paradigmatic description of marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). The “one flesh” relationship indicates the most intimate form of kinship. It includes the sexual union,

but refers—beyond that—to the new family that is formed by the union of two equal, but different and complementary, individuals.

## (2). Complementary difference after the Fall

The God-given differences between the man and the woman are reaffirmed in Genesis 3, following the Fall. When the LORD God judges Adam and Eve for their sin, his pronouncements affect the two differently according to the complementary ways in which they were designed to contribute to the fulfilment of the creation mandate.

The LORD first speaks to the woman: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen 3:16). The phrase could be translated, “I shall greatly multiply your pains and your pregnancies.” It most probably refers not only to the physical pain of childbirth, but to the anxiety and pain of the whole child-rearing process, from the difficulty of conception, through the anxieties of pregnancy, to the physical pain of labour, and the challenges of raising children.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, there will be difficulty in the woman’s relationship with her husband: “your desire shall be contrary to / for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16). Various interpretations of the woman’s “desire” have been offered. On the basis of the parallel expression at Genesis 4:7 (where sin “desires” to have Cain), some argue that the woman’s desire in Genesis 3:16 refers to her desire to dominate her husband.<sup>10</sup> It seems more likely, however, that “desire” refers more broadly to a basic instinct, whether it be the basic instinct of sin to dominate or, as here, the woman’s basic instinct towards her husband for the purpose of bearing children. Since, however, this cannot be fulfilled without his help, the man will be able to use this desire to manipulate the woman to his own advantage (“he will rule over you”).<sup>11</sup> This, of course, describes the *perversion* rather than the ideal of male leadership. In God’s original design, Adam’s headship was to be expressed, like God’s own rule, in love and sympathy towards his wife. The reference here at Genesis 3:16, then, to the man “ruling” over his wife, is not to male leadership *per se*, but to its parody in the “harsh exploitative subjugation” which has all too often characterized the treatment of women by men.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of sin, “to love and to cherish” tragically becomes “to desire and to dominate.”<sup>13</sup>

The LORD next announces a curse on the ground, which most directly affects the man (Gen 3:17–19). The man is originally commanded “to work and to keep” the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15) and, after the Fall, he is appointed to work the ground outside the Garden, the ground from which he was taken (Gen 3:19, 23). The man suffers because he listened to the voice of his wife rather than the voice of God when he ate from the tree (Gen 3:17–19). For this reason, God curses the ground so that it will bear “thorns and thistles” (Gen 3:18; contrast Gen 2:5, 9). The man will only be able to bring good fruit from the ground through painful toil and sweat (Gen 3:17, 19). It is not that work itself is evil, for God originally placed Adam in the Garden “to work and to keep” it (Gen 2:15). It is only that now the good, God-given work of extending blessing to the whole earth will be characterised, because of sin, by difficulty and frustration.

Indeed, although the curse affects the man and the woman differently, in both cases the *fruitfulness* of the creation is frustrated: God curses both the fruit of the womb and the fruit of the earth. Just as the LORD’s judgment affects the woman in her basic instincts as wife and mother, so the curse strikes at the man’s fundamental activity in working the ground to bring forth fruit. In both cases God will not allow his good earth to be fruitful without obedient image-bearers. The primary

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<sup>9</sup> J. H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 227.

<sup>10</sup> S. T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *WTJ* 37, no. 3 (1975): 376–83.

<sup>11</sup> See Walton, *Genesis*, 227–29.

<sup>12</sup> G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC. (Waco: Word, 1987), 81.

<sup>13</sup> D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. TOTC. (London: Tyndale, 1967), 71.



point for our purposes is that the different curses confirm the complementary difference of the man and the woman.

### **(3). Complementary difference in the remainder of the Scriptures**

Throughout the Old Testament, the difference and complementarity of men and women is celebrated and affirmed. In the Law, the LORD's prohibition of same-sex sexual activity assumes a fundamental and complementary difference between the sexes: "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev 18:22; cf. 20:13).<sup>14</sup> The same complementary difference is expressed in the command that "A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God." (Deut 22:5).

In the Prophets, the complementary difference between men and women is reflected in the image of the LORD as the "bridegroom" or "husband" of Israel, his "bride" or "wife" (e.g. Ezek 16; Hos 2). In the Writings, Proverbs and Song of Songs celebrate the physical differences between a man and his wife, which bring joy to their sexual union (e.g. Prov 5:15–19; Song 4:1–16; 5:10–16). Proverbs 31 celebrates the "excellent wife" (Prov 31:10–31), who is characterised by strength and hard work (Prov 31:17, 19, 25), engages in profitable labour both within and outside the household (Prov 31:16–18), cares for the poor (Prov 31:20), teaches with wisdom and kindness (Prov 31:26), and brings blessing to her husband and children and so wins their praise (Prov 31:28).

In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles confirm this God-given difference and complementarity. In the Gospels, Jesus makes use of the prophetic description of God as the bridegroom of his people to announce himself as the "bridegroom" who has come to bring God's kingdom (Matt 9:15; 25:1–13; Mark 2:19–20; Luke 5:34–35; cf. John 3:29). Further, in response to a question from the Pharisees about divorce, Jesus alludes to Genesis 1:26–28 and affirms "that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matt 19:4). He then cites Genesis 2:24 to confirm the "one flesh" nature of marriage between "a man" and "his wife" (Matt 19:5).

Among the New Testament letters, Paul affirms the difference and complementarity of men and women in a number of passages. In Romans 1, Paul re-affirms the teaching of the Law, that the God-given, created, and therefore "natural" expression of human sexuality is in heterosexual unions (Rom 1:24–27). In 1 Corinthians 11, more fully, Paul alludes to Genesis 2:18–23 when he affirms that "man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor 11:8–9). He then affirms the complementary truth that "in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Cor 11:11–12). Paul here teaches that, within our common humanity, there is a significant, God-given, difference between men and women. In particular, the fundamental physiological differences between male and female bodies necessarily result in men and women playing different, and complementary, roles in procreation. While the first woman, at creation, was taken from the first man (1 Cor 11:8), in every case since it is true that "man is now born of woman" (1 Cor 11:12). To state the obvious, men cannot fall pregnant, carry a child, give birth, or breastfeed. The propagation of the race relies on the complementary differences between men and women. Beyond this, however, Paul also affirms here that male and female are not independent of one another, but interdependent; the differences are important, and they are important because life works best when men and women work together according to their God-given differences. On this basis, Paul further affirms that the God-given differences between men and women are rightly expressed in particular cultural forms. Within the first-century Roman culture of Corinth, he judges it self-evident that a wife should pray with her head covered, as a sign of her submission to her husband: "judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?" (1 Cor 11:13 with 11:10). In the same way, Paul asks rhetorically, "Does not nature

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<sup>14</sup> Jay Sklar, "The Prohibitions against Homosexual Sex in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Are They Relevant Today?" *BBR* 28 (2018): 165–98.

itself (ἡ φύσις αὐτὴ) teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.” (1 Cor 11:14–15). The apostle’s appeal here to “nature itself” is an appeal to the God-given order of creation (cf. Rom 1:26–27), which is rightly expressed in cultural forms, including the way in which men and women wear their hair.

Yet further, both Paul and Peter issue different and complementary instructions to husbands and wives (Eph 5:22–33; Col 3:18–19; 1 Pet 3:1–7), and to men and women generally (1 Tim 2:8–13; Tit 2:1–8). We will discuss these passages further below. Finally, in the book of Revelation, the complementary difference between men and women is affirmed in the picture of the Lord Jesus as the “bridegroom” of his “bride” or “wife” the church (Rev 19:6–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).

#### **(4). Masculinity and femininity: faithful expressions of complementary difference**

Given this biblical teaching, any attempt to minimize, or even erase, the differences between men and women is a serious error. Granted, the nature of the difference, and the “essence” of masculinity and femininity, are difficult to define.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we are right to affirm that there *is* a basic biblical shape to masculinity and femininity, rooted in the biological differences given at creation, and in the distinct and complementary roles that God has given to men and women in “filling” and “subduing” the earth (Gen 1:26–28; 2:18; 3:16–19). Faithful expressions of masculinity and femininity are not merely arbitrary.

At the same time, the application of this principle requires gracious and careful attention. For while Scripture affirms the complementary difference between men and women, apart from in the instructions regarding marriage and church office, it does not specify in much detail how this difference is to be expressed. Deuteronomy 22:5, for example, insists that we make a distinction between male and female clothing, but does not define what the distinction should be. 1 Corinthians 11:14–15 distinguishes between male and female hairstyles, but does not specify anything other than length. More broadly, we can observe that King David is just as much a man when he plays the lyre (1 Sam 16:14–23) as when he slays Goliath (1 Sam 17), and that the “excellent wife” of Proverbs 31 is just as much a woman when she plants a vineyard with strong arms (Prov 31:16–17) as when she makes bed coverings and clothes with fine linen (Prov 31:22). Indeed, the Bible’s teaching on men and women often challenges our cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity. In a culture which often considers the raising of children to be “women’s work,” Paul directly charges “fathers” to take the initiative in raising children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4).

It is, therefore, important that we simultaneously affirm the truth, beauty, and goodness of our sexed differences, *while also* resisting any overly rigid applications of culturally-bound gender stereotypes. The Scriptures allow for masculinity and femininity to be expressed in a range of different forms in different cultures, and in different individuals. Cultural expressions of masculinity and femininity will rarely be absolute. There is, for example, nothing intrinsically masculine about the colour blue, or feminine about the colour pink, nothing absolute about trousers for men and skirts for women, no God-given command that requires men to mow the lawn and women to cook. To insist on the universal and rigid application of these or other cultural norms would be unbiblical and oppressive. A godly—and therefore healthy—culture will learn to express the God-given differences between men and women, boys and girls, in ways that reflect the basic biblical shape, *while also* recognising that this basic biblical shape can find a wide range of appropriate cultural and individual expressions.

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<sup>15</sup> For evangelical attempts, see John Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. Wayne A. Grudem; 2nd ed.; Crossway Books, 1991), 29; K. DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021).

## **(5). Husbands and wives: the Bible's teaching on complementary difference in marriage**

### ***(a). Ordered family relationships at creation***

The complementary difference between men and women includes, from the start, a God-given order in relationship between men and women, which applies first, and most clearly, in marriage and the family.

This God-given order in marriage is part of God's good design, prior to the Fall. At creation, Adam is formed first from the ground (Gen 2:7). Eve is formed second, and from his rib (Gen 2:21–22). God reveals his will to Adam directly, in the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16–17). The command comes to Eve indirectly, through the man (Gen 3:2). When the couple sin, the order is reversed: the serpent tempts the woman, who eats the fruit, then gives some to her husband, and he also eats (Gen 3:1–6). The man is, however, fully culpable in this sin, for he was present with the woman, and failed to act (Gen 3:6). And so, in God's dealings with them after their sin, God re-affirms the order he established at creation. Although, in chronological terms, it was the woman who sinned first, in terms of God's good order, the man is primarily responsible. God, therefore, comes first to the man, and holds him accountable for his disobedience (Gen 3:9–11). He then holds the woman to account (Gen 3:13), and finally the serpent (Gen 3:14). The order in the relationship is further indicated by the fact that Adam names his wife, first and before the Fall, with the generic description "woman" (Gen 2:23), and then, after the Fall, with the personal name, "Eve" (Gen 3:20). Further, in the first marriage, which is presented as the paradigm for all marriages, the man takes the initiative towards the woman: "for this reason the man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife" (Gen 2:24). Similarly, in the first act of procreation, Adam takes the initiative towards Eve: we read that "Adam made love to his wife Eve," rather than the other way around (Gen 4:1).<sup>16</sup>

This God-given order is assumed throughout the Old Testament. The Law, for example, makes a distinction between a man who makes a vow to the LORD, and who is directly responsible for its fulfilment, and a woman who makes a vow, whose responsibility is ordered under that of her father, if she is "within her father's house in her youth," or her husband, if she is married (Num 30:1–16). These regulations in no way indicate any inherent inferiority or weakness in women, since "any vow or obligation taken by a widow or divorced woman will be binding on her." (Num 30:9). The Law's concern, rather, is with rightly ordered "relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living at home." (Num 30:16).

In the New Testament, this God-given order is confirmed by the apostle Paul, when he teaches that "man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor 11:8–9). Similarly, the same apostle affirms that "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:13). Paul also affirms the order of moral responsibility in the relationship. On the one hand, he recognizes that, chronologically speaking, the woman was the first to sin: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." (1 Tim 2:14). On the other hand, he also affirms that primary responsibility for this sin rested with Adam, when he teaches that "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin" (Rom 5:12), that man being "Adam" (Rom 5:14).

### ***(b). Headship and submission in marriage***

This God-given creation order applies first, and most clearly, in marriage. The statement in Genesis 2:24 provides the biblical definition of marriage, and is repeated and affirmed by the Lord Jesus (Mark 10:7; Matt 19:5), and the apostle Paul (Eph 5:31). In the fullness of biblical revelation,

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<sup>16</sup> It would be over-reading to insist that men must, in every case, take the initiative in first proposing marriage, and then in conjugal relations within marriage. The point, rather, is that the relationship is rightly characterised by the male partner taking the initiative towards his wife for her good, and to enable their mutual participation in God's purposes for the world.

Paul reveals that this God-given creation order for marriage is grounded in God's eternal plan to redeem his people through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 5, Paul declares the "profound mystery" that God's good design for marriage, revealed in Genesis 2:24, ultimately "refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:31–32). For this reason, the apostle affirms not only that God has created husbands and wives as different and complementary, but that he has ordered the relationship between them as one of headship and submission: "the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour" (Eph 5:23; cf. 1 Cor 11:3b).

This biblical teaching regarding the husband's "headship" in marriage can be difficult to hear, especially for those who, tragically, have suffered abuse. It is important, therefore, that we take care to understand the Bible's teaching clearly, and to apply it carefully and sensitively, at this point.

The Greek noun κεφαλή ("head") ordinarily refers to "the part of the body that contains the brain," and also refers—by extension, and metaphorically—to a person of "superior rank".<sup>17</sup> Although it has been argued that κεφαλή means "source,"<sup>18</sup> or "preeminence,"<sup>19</sup> rather than "authority," these interpretations are not supported by the lexical evidence.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, it does not make sense of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5 or 1 Corinthians 11. The idea of the husband being the "source" of the wife might work in the specific case of Adam and Eve—since she was taken from his rib—but it cannot work for any subsequent married couple. In what sense can a husband be said to be the "source" of his wife? The more straightforward reading is correct: "the husband is the head of the wife" in the sense that God has ordered the relationship between husband and wife as one of "authority" and "submission". Certainly, this reading makes best sense of Ephesians 5:22–23, where the "headship" of Christ in relation to his "bride," the church, and of husbands in relation to their wives, is co-ordinated with the language of "submission" (ὑποτάσσω). It also makes best sense of 1 Corinthians 11:3, where Paul's "language and the flow of the argument seem to reflect an assumed hierarchy," so that "in this context the word [κεφαλή] almost certainly refers to one with authority over the other."<sup>21</sup>

The verb "submit" (ὑποτάσσω) means to "be subject" or "subordinate" to another person.<sup>22</sup> Granted, this idea has decidedly negative connotations in modern Western culture. Nevertheless, by God's common grace, even unbelievers recognise that submission is fundamental to well-ordered human community; they instinctively recognise that it is good and right for children to submit to their parents, as also for students to submit to their teachers, employees to their employers, and citizens to their governments. As God's people, recipients of his saving grace, we recognise that this reality is part of God's good design for his world, and that throughout the Scriptures God commands "submission" to authorities of various kinds—in family, church, and society (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16;

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<sup>17</sup> W. Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 541 §§1–2.

<sup>18</sup> S. Bedale, "The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles," *JTS* 5 (1954): 211–15; A. Mickelsen and B. Mickelsen, "What Does κεφαλή Mean in the New Testament?," in *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. A. Mickelsen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 97–117; C. C. Kroeger, "Appendix III: The Classical Concept of Head as 'Source,'" in *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home*, ed. G. G. Hull (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 267–83.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. R. R. Cervin, "Does κεφαλή Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal," *TJ* 10 (1989): 85–112; "On the Significance of κεφαλή ('head'): A Study of the Abuse of One Greek Word," *Priscilla Papers* 30.2 (2016): 8–20.

<sup>20</sup> See esp. W. Grudem, "Does κεφαλή ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," *TrinJ* ns 6.1 (1985): 38–59; "The Meaning of κεφαλή ('Head'): A Response to Recent Studies," *TrinJ* 11 (1990): 3–72; "The Meaning of κεφαλή ('Head'): An Evaluation Of New Evidence, Real And Alleged," *JETS* 44.1 (2001): 25–65; J. A. Fitzmyer, "Another look at κεφαλή in 1 Corinthians 11:3," *NTS* 35 (1989): 503–11; "Kephale in 1 Corinthians 11:3," *Int* 47 (1993): 32–59.

<sup>21</sup> R. E. Ciampa and B. S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 509.

<sup>22</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 1042 §1.

Rom 13:1, 5; 1 Cor 16:16; Eph 6:1, 5; Phil 2:12; Col 3:20, 22; 2 Thess 3:14; Tit 2:9; 3:1; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 2:13, 18; 5:5). Our Lord Jesus himself modelled this kind of submission for us by the way in which he humbly and willingly submitted to his earthly parents (Luke 2:51), and to his heavenly Father (Mark 14:36; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 1 Cor 15:28). Despite our cultural baggage, “submission” is a deeply Christian—because deeply Christlike—posture.

In Ephesians 5:22–24, Paul applies this general principle of submission to marriage: “wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord...as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph 5:22, 24; cf. Col 3:18; Tit 2:5). Two important observations may help us to see the beauty and goodness of this God-given order in marriage, and to reject false interpretations and applications.

First, Paul’s teaching about headship and submission in marriage comes in the context of his command to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18), which manifests itself in *all* Christian people “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).<sup>23</sup> The command to submit applies not only to wives in relation to their husbands, but is common to *all* believers. Indeed, a person’s willingness to submit to others is a mark of being filled with the Spirit, who enables them to submit to the Lord himself. Submission is basic to Christian discipleship.

Second, the command to submit—in every case—comes with a corresponding command to the one in authority to use their authority for the sake of those ordered under them. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, giving themselves up for their wives (Eph 5:25). Fathers are not to provoke their children to anger, but to serve them by bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). Masters are not to threaten their slaves, but to remember that they, like their slaves, answer to their Master in heaven, and so are to treat them “justly and fairly” (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1). This, of course, is entirely consistent with the Bible’s teaching everywhere, that those to whom God grants authority are to use that authority to serve those God has given to their care, for “even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:35–45; cf. John 13:1–17; Phil 2:5–11). Thus, the authority God grants to husbands as the head of their wives is not an overbearing, manipulative, assertive, or aggressive kind of authority, but a gentle, humble, authority modelled after that of Christ himself. The authority God grants to husbands is to be used in the same way that Christ used his authority for his bride the church—husbands are to lay down their lives in sacrificial service for the good of their wives.

Peter’s teaching on the relationship between husbands and wives is consistent with that of Paul. He commands “husbands...be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” (1 Pet 3:7). Peter here reminds husbands that their wives are fellow heirs of the gracious gift of life. In a culture where only male children could be heirs of the family property, Peter’s instruction affirms the consistent biblical teaching that men and women are fundamentally equal in God’s sight—“co-heirs of the gracious gift of life.” Given this strong affirmation, Peter’s reference to the wife as “the weaker partner” cannot mean that women are spiritually or morally weaker than men in any way. It probably also does not mean that women are intellectually or emotionally weaker than men. Peter’s statement is a simple observation that women, in general, do not have the same physical strength as men, which therefore places on husbands the obligation to “be considerate” of their wives, and to “treat them with respect.” This, of course, is not to deny, in any way, the remarkable strength and courage regularly shown by women in the work of childbearing. Indeed, the carrying, bearing, and nursing of children requires a kind of strength that is unique to women, even as—in a fallen world—these unique responsibilities also expose women to many dangers, which render them vulnerable. Peter, therefore, reminds husbands—as those who generally

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<sup>23</sup> In the Greek, the imperative “be filled (πληροῦσθε) with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18) is followed by five present participles, which fill out its meaning: “*addressing* (λαλοῦντες) one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* (ᾄδοντες) and *making melody* (ψάλλοντες) to the Lord with your heart, *giving thanks* (εὐχαριστοῦντες) always and for everything...*submitting* (ὑποτασσόμενοι) to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph 5:19–21)

have the greater physical strength, and who are not exposed to the dangers of childbearing—that they have a responsibility to use their strength in the service of their wives. In this context, Peter employs the same language as Paul when he instructs “wives...submit yourselves (ὑποτασσόμεναι) to your own husbands.” (1 Pet 3:1). He fills out the meaning of this godly submission by drawing attention to “the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Pet 3:4). The wife who puts her hope in God (1 Pet 3:5) will be able to rest in God’s provision, and so submit to her husband, even if that husband does not obey the word (1 Pet 3:1). Peter concludes by holding out the example of Sarah, whose submission to her husband Abraham included “obeying” (ὀπήκουσεν) him, and showing him respect by “calling him lord” (κύριον αὐτὸν καλοῦσα) (1 Pet 3:6)

A fundamental conclusion from these observations is that the biblical teaching on headship and submission in marriage cannot rightly be used to justify any kind of abuse. While both Scripture and experience tell us that those in authority can—and tragically often do—abuse their authority, the biblical teaching not only provides no basis for such abuse, but actively prohibits it. The more positive conclusion from these observations is that the relationship of headship and submission between a husband and wife is designed by God as a thing of sacred beauty—it is designed to manifest the relationship between God and his people, between Christ and his church. The application of this teaching, therefore, should not be reduced to functional rules such as “the husband has the final say in family decisions”. Rather, the biblical teaching envisages a beautiful dynamic of husbands leading and wives supporting, husbands initiating and wives responding, modelled after the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. The Christlike husband, therefore, will lead his wife, taking the initiative towards her, and any children, seeking their good in every way, and especially seeking their salvation and maturity in Christ. The godly wife will respect her husband, and willingly support his initiatives for her good.

#### **(6). Complementary difference in Christian relationships between men and women outside marriage**

The Bible’s teaching regarding the relationships between men and women focusses on marriage. Nevertheless, the biblical principles of fundamental equality and complementary difference also apply—in different ways—in relationships between men and women in the extended family, and in the church.

Within the family, God gives leadership to husbands and fathers, and calls on wives and children to follow their lead. Within God’s family, God gives leadership to the elder-overseers and calls on the whole congregation—men and women—to support that leadership. Certainly, while the Scriptures characterise relationships between men and women in the church using the familial language “fathers,” “mothers,” “brothers,” and “sisters,” there is no command in Scripture for women in general to “submit” to men in general. Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus explains that “whoever does the will of God” is his “brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33–35). In the letters, Paul honours Rufus’ mother as one who “has been a mother to me as well” (Rom 16:13). Paul, similarly, commands Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2). The use of sexed language in these passages indicates, again, that our unity and equality in Christ does not erase or over-ride our sexed differences. It is, therefore, appropriate that Christian men relate differently to their brothers in Christ than to their sisters in Christ, and that Christian women, likewise, relate differently to Christian sisters than to Christian brothers. Similarly, we are right to take age into account as we relate to older men as “fathers” and older women as “mothers.” There is, however, no biblical warrant for all women submitting to all men. The Bible’s concern is with rightly ordered relationships within the family, and within the family of God. Outside of and beyond the leadership-submission relationships of husband and wife, and elder-overseer and congregation, men and women are to relate to each other with love and respect as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

## **Conclusion**

The goodness, beauty, and truth of God's purpose in creating men and women in his image—equal but different and complementary—is finally confirmed not only by a close reading of particular biblical texts, but by the grand sweep of the biblical narrative. The fact that God reveals himself as the husband of Israel, his bride (e.g. Ezek 16; Hos 2), and that the gospel can be spoken of as the sacrificial, self-giving love of Christ for his bride the church (Eph 5:25–28), indicates that God created us male and female ultimately for this purpose: to reveal his love for his people. Paul says this much when he quotes God's institution of marriage in Genesis 2:24, but then affirms that in doing so he speaks of the “profound mystery” of “Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31–32). It is not that human marriage is primary, and God's relationship with his people can be compared to it. It is the other way around. God created us male and female, and instituted marriage, in order to give us a picture of his love for his people. Thus, while the biblical story begins with the institution of human marriage (Gen 2:18–25), it ends with the glorious picture of “the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2).

## Part 2—Biblical teaching on the office of elder: arguments against and for male only eldership

### A. Introduction

The more specific question now before us is whether men and women, or men only, may be ordained as elders in God’s church. At this point, we need to clarify the question and, in particular, to distinguish it from two related questions often raised in wider evangelical circles.

First, our question here is *not* whether women can serve in Christian “ministry.” Although the discussion is often framed in these terms, the category of Christian ministry is much broader than the category of biblical eldership.<sup>24</sup> In contemporary evangelical parlance, “ministry” can be used in the broad sense of Christian service, or in the more technical sense of ordained pastoral ministry.<sup>25</sup> Even this more technical sense, however, is difficult to define, because pastoral ministry takes a wide variety of forms within different denominational structures, and an even wider variety of forms in para-church contexts. Nevertheless, this breadth of usage in our “ministry” language is entirely appropriate. Biblically speaking, “ministry” is a very broad category. The Hebrew Bible employs two key terms for “service” or “ministry”—עָבַד (“serve” / “servant”) and שָׁרַת (“serve” / “servant”)—but neither of these consistently designates a particular “office” or a specific function among God’s people. In the New Testament, the most important words for ministry are the nouns δᾱκονος (“servant” or “minister”),<sup>26</sup> and διακονία (“service” / “ministry”),<sup>27</sup> and the cognate verb διακονέω (“I serve / minister”).<sup>28</sup> The New Testament applies this “ministry” language generally—to *all* the saints and to *all* they do in serving the Lord, his people, and his world (e.g. Eph 4:12; 1 Cor 12:5). Paul even employs this language to describe the unwitting “ministry” of the unbelieving Roman

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<sup>24</sup> E.g. from different perspectives: M. F. Bird, *Bourgeois babes, bossy wives, and bobby haircuts: A case for gender equality in ministry*, Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); K. Keller, *Jesus, justice and gender roles: A case for gender roles in ministry*, Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); L. Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019); B. A. Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> The WCF uses ministry language in this more technical sense when it refers to “a minister of the Word lawfully ordained” (WCF 27.4). The PCA Declaratory Statement §1 similarly speaks of who the Church “admits to the office of the Holy Ministry.”

<sup>26</sup> The noun δᾱκονος (“servant” / “minister”) occurs 30 times in the NT. It is applied to Christ himself (Rom 15:8; cf. ironically Gal 2:17), to a generic Christian servant (Matt 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 12:26), to the apostles and their associates (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; Eph 3:7; 6:21; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim 3:2 v.l.; 4:6), to the false apostles in Corinth (2 Cor 11:23; cf. 2 Cor 11:15), to those who hold the office of “deacon” in the church (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12; cf. Rom 16:1?), and to the governing authority outside the church (Rom 13:4).

<sup>27</sup> The noun διακονία (“service” / “ministry”) occurs 34 times in the NT. It is used for the “ministry” of the apostles and their associates (Acts 1:17, 25; 2 Tim 4:5, 11), especially Paul (Acts 20:24; 21:19; Rom 11:13; 2 Cor 3:8, 9; 2 Cor 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 11:8; 1 Tim 1:12; 2 Tim 4:11), and is even set in contrast with Moses’ “ministry of death/condemnation” (2 Cor 3:7, 9). At one point the apostolic ministry is distinguished from others kinds of ministry by the modifier “ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1: τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου). But διακονία is also used for Martha’s practical service of the Lord (Luke 10:40), for the “daily distribution” to the widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1), for the financial contributions of Christians to the needs of the saints suffering famine in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29; 12:25; Rom 15:31; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1, 12, 13), for general Christian service in the body of Christ (Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:5; 1 Cor 16:15; Eph 4:12; Col 4:17; Rev 2:19). Note also Hebrews 1:14, which describes angels as being sent out “for service” (εἰς διακονίαν).

<sup>28</sup> The verb διακονέω (“I serve” / “I minister”) occurs 37 times in the NT. It is used of Jesus himself serving others (Matt 20:28//Mark 10:45; Luke 12:37; 22:27), of the angels serving Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 4:11//Mark 1:13), of Peter’s mother-in-law, and Martha and other women serving Jesus and/or the disciples (Matt 8:15//Mark 1:31//Luke 4:39; Matt 27:55//Mark 15:41; Luke 8:3; 10:40; John 12:2), of people failing to serve Jesus’ “brothers” in their need (Matt 25:44), of Jesus call for leaders to serve (Luke 22:26), of general Christian service given by all those in Christ to the Lord and his people (John 12:26; Heb 6:10; 1 Pet 4:10-11), of the task of “serving tables” to care for the widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:2), of Paul serving Christ among the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:3), as well as his “bringing aid” to the saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25; 2 Cor 8:19, 20), of the work of Paul’s associates and assistants (Acts 19:22; 2 Tim 1:18; Philem 13), of the service rendered by deacons (1 Tim 3:10, 13), of the ministry of the Hebrew prophets (1 Pet 1:12).



ruler, who is “God’s servant (θεοῦ...διάκονός) for your good” (Rom 13.4).<sup>29</sup> For this reason, the question of whether women should be involved in “ministry” must be answered with a resounding “yes”! All of God’s people—men, women, and children—are called to serve him with all of their lives. This conclusion, however, is too broad to be useful for our purposes.

Second, and related to this, our question here is *not* whether women ought to preach, either in general terms or more specifically to mixed congregations. Again, the debate has often been framed in these terms in evangelical discussions, but unhelpfully so.<sup>30</sup> As we will see, the passages which restrict public teaching to men (esp. 1 Tim 2 and 1 Cor 14) are not concerned with women imparting information to men, but with rightly ordered relationships in the family and the church. The New Testament, that is, locates the activities of preaching and teaching within a more fundamental understanding of rightly ordered relationships including, in the church, an understanding of office. It is with this category—specifically the office of elder—that we are concerned.

## B. The office of elder

Sharply put, the question before us is whether both men and women, or men only, may be ordained into the office of elder.

The long-held Presbyterian conviction is that the office of elder is given by God as an “ordinary and perpetual office” for the church.<sup>31</sup> This is well grounded in Scripture. The concept of “office” is grounded, broadly, in the biblical practice of people being appointed to public leadership roles among God’s people, often through the “laying on of hands” and prayer.<sup>32</sup> In the New Testament, the noun ἐπισκοπή (“oversight” or “office”) is specifically applied to two offices: the extraordinary office of apostle (Acts 1:20 citing Psalm 108:8 LXX), and the ordinary and perpetual office of overseer-elder (1 Tim 3:1).<sup>33</sup>

The ordinary and perpetual office of overseer-elder is grounded, more specifically, in five observations. First, God’s people are ruled by elders throughout biblical history, from the exodus onwards, and across both old and new covenants (e.g. Exod 3:6, 18; 2 Sam 5:3; Ezra 10:14; Acts 4:5; 1 Pet 5:1–4). Rule by elders is the norm for God’s people throughout the Scriptures. Second, the book of Acts marks a clear transition from the apostate elders of the old covenant church, who rejected the Messiah, to the faithful elders of the new covenant church, who embraced him. This appears from a comparison of Acts 4 and Acts 15, where the “apostles and elders” of the church (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23) take up and take over the role of the “chief priests and elders” of the Jews (Acts 4:5, 8, 23), who disqualify themselves for leadership by their rejection of Christ.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while there is a significant transition from the Jewish elders of the old covenant to the Christian elders of the new covenant, the office of elder remains the norm among God’s people into the new covenant age. Third, the apostles made it their practice to appoint “elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). This was not idiosyncratic to Paul, but was common to Paul (Tit 1:5), Peter (1 Pet 5:1–4), and James (Jas 5:14). Across the New

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<sup>29</sup> While it is true that the New Testament does sometimes use the noun διάκονος (“servant” or “minister”) in a more technical sense to refer to a church office, this is not the pastoral and teaching office of overseer-elder, but the office of “deacon” (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12; also probably Rom 16:1).

<sup>30</sup> E.g. J. P. Dickson, *Hearing her voice: a case for women giving sermons*, Revised edition. ed., Fresh perspectives on women in ministry (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014); P. G. Bolt and T. Payne, eds., *Women, sermons and the Bible: Essays interacting with John Dickson’s ‘Hearing her voice’* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (AD1647), Preface, and §3.

<sup>32</sup> Num 8:10–11; 27:18, 23; Deut 34:9; Acts 6:6; 13:3; 14:23; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6; Tit 1:5; cf. Heb 6:2.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Num 4.16 LXX. The term “office” is, thus, a useful shorthand for formally established public leadership roles in the church. For discussion, see: J. Murray, “Office in the Church,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2: 357–58.

<sup>34</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 822.

Testament, we find elders in Jewish, Gentile, and mixed churches, and across the whole of the Mediterranean—in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2–6, 22–23; 16:4), in Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17), in Philippi (Phil 1:1), in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 5:1–4 with 1:1), and in the whole of the dispersion addressed by James (Jas 5:14 with 1:1). As Bavinck observes: “The office of elder was a familiar, universally present apostolic institution.”<sup>35</sup> Fourth, overseer-elders appear in the New Testament as a divine appointment: “God has appointed...teachers” in the church (1 Cor 12:28); the risen Lord Jesus “gave...the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph 4:11–12); “the Holy Spirit” made the Ephesian “elders” to be “overseers” in the church, “to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:17, 28). Fifth, Paul explicitly uses the noun ἐπισκοπή to speak of “the office of overseer,” and then lists qualifications which indicate that he speaks of a formalised role (1 Tim 3:2–7; cf. Tit 1:5–9). Paul gives these instructions in the middle of a discrete section of his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 2:1–3:16) which addresses universal and enduring concerns, grounded in God and Christ, creation, and the gospel, and which relate to “how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” (1 Tim 3:15). Taken together, these considerations indicate that the biblical teaching regarding the office of overseer-elder is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive for God’s church.

Certainly, the New Testament is clear that “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος) and “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) are alternative designations for one and the same office.<sup>36</sup> In Acts 20, Paul calls “the elders of the church” (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας) of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20:17), and then addresses the same group as those whom the Holy Spirit has appointed as “overseers” (ἐπισκόπους) (Acts 20:28). Peter addresses “the elders” (πρεσβυτέρους) among the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 5:1 with 1:1), and charges them to “shepherd the flock of God...exercising oversight” (ἐπισκοποῦντες) (1 Pet 5:2). Paul charges Titus to “appoint elders (πρεσβυτέρους) in every town” (Tit 1:5) and then lists the qualifications for the office of “the overseer” (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον), using a generic singular to identify a single member of the class of elder-overseers (Tit 1:7). Similarly, in 1 Timothy, Paul employs the generic singular to lay out the qualifications for the office of “the overseer” (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον) (1 Tim 3:2), and then speaks of “the elders” (1 Tim 5:17–18: πρεσβύτεροι) in terms which make it clear that the two titles refer to one and the same role (they both “rule” and “teach”). Since the New Testament makes this identification clear, we assume, in what follows, that New Testament texts that speak of “overseers” also apply to the office of elder.

The Presbyterian Church of Australia (PCA) has always recognised the office of elder as an integral part of the Presbyterian form of church government, which is “founded on the Word of God.” The PCA requires all ministers and elders to vow that they “own the Presbyterian form of government to be founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto” and to promise that, by God’s grace, they “will firmly and constantly adhere to, and to the utmost of [their] power, in [their] station, assert, maintain, and defend the same.” There can be no doubt that this vow includes a commitment to “assert, maintain, and defend” the office of elder in the PCA.

The General Assembly of Australia (GAA 2019) has declared the church’s understanding of the office of elder in the following terms:

elders occupy a pastoral office to which belongs the spiritual oversight of the Church. Under the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, elders shepherd and serve the church by sharing in its government,

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<sup>35</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 4 – Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 343.

<sup>36</sup> For extended argument to this effect, see: B. L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, StBL 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); cf. M. J. Smith, “πρεσβύτεροι in Paul’s letters to his delegates (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus): the Lord’s stewards, entrusted with the gospel for the church,” in *Presbyters in the Early Church: The First Two Centuries*, ed. B. J. Koet, E. Murphy, and M. J. Smith, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

teaching the word of God, praying with and for God's people, and modelling life in Christ, according to their gifts. (GAA 2019 Min 42 (12)).

This definition employs biblical language and categories from passages like Acts 20:17–35, 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9, James 5:14, and 1 Peter 5:1–5. It assumes that elders in the PCA are modelled after the biblical teaching on elders. The discussion which follows assumes this definition of eldership.

### **C. The sex of elders in the PCA**

As we noted in the introduction, while GAA 1991 ruled that “only men shall be eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments...” (GAA 1991 Min 75), the GAA has not ruled on the question of whether elders may be male or female, or male only. Since GANSW has also not reached a conclusion on this question, it is appropriate at this point to review the biblical and theological arguments against, and for, male only eldership.

In what follows, we outline the arguments on both sides, giving full voice to each, before assessing their relative merits. Although the PCNSW Committee for Elders and Deacons holds to the view that only men ought to be ordained as elders, *our goal here is to present both sides of the argument in the best possible light, from the point of view of those who hold each position.*

### **D. The case for men *and* women as elders**

The case for ordaining both men *and* women as elders has four major pillars. It is grounded: (1). in biblical statements regarding the equality of men and women; (2). in biblical examples of women exercising significant leadership and teaching functions; (3). in the arguments that passages which seem to restrict teaching or leadership functions to men do not, in fact, do so, when carefully understood in their original contexts; (4). in empirical observations regarding the effectiveness of godly women in Christian ministry (including eldership), the dangers of sexism and abuse sometimes associated with complementarian positions, and the opportunities that ordaining women as elders may create for the gospel in contemporary Australia.

#### **(1). Fundamental equality of men and women indicates interchangeable roles**

First, the case for ordaining men and women as elders argues that the fundamental equality of women and men in God's sight suggests that women as well as men can serve as elders. We have already stressed the way in which the Scriptures teach that men and women are equally created in the image of God, equally fallen in sin, equally redeemed by Christ, and equally called into wholehearted service in God's kingdom. The strongest statement here is Paul's declaration in Galatians, that “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” (Gal 3:28). The apostle here relativises all distinctions between people—including the distinction between men and women—against the fundamental unity and equality of God's people in Christ. Given this fundamental equality, it seems only right that men and women should exercise the same functions in the church, that is, that no functions or roles can rightly be restricted to men or women.

#### **(2) Biblical examples of women leading and teaching**

Second, the case for ordaining men and women as elders points to the many biblical examples of women exercising significant leadership and teaching functions among God's people. It urges that these indicate that women as well as men can serve in leadership and teaching roles in God's church. In the Old Testament, several women are identified as “prophetesses”—Miriam (Exod 15:20), Huldah

(2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chron 34:22), Noadiah (Neh 6:14), and Isaiah's wife (Isa 8:3). Although we receive little by way of detail, the designation "prophetess" is enough to indicate that these women received and declared the word of God. Similarly, in Proverbs 31, the "excellent wife" is celebrated, in part, for her teaching: "she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Prov 31:26). The most significant female figure in the Old Testament, however, is Deborah, since she is identified both as a "prophetess," and as the person who was "judging Israel" and therefore providing leadership to the covenant community (Judg 4:4–5). In the extended account in Judges 4–5, Deborah and another woman, Jael, are the heroines of the story. The leading male, Barak, is a weak character, and Deborah is clear that his failure to trust and obey God's word means that "the glory" in the battle will not go to him, "for the LORD will sell Sisera [the enemy] into the hand of a woman" (Judg 4:9). This woman is Jael who, after the battle, welcomes Sisera into her tent as he flees in defeat, lulls Sisera into a false sense of security, and then kills him as he sleeps by driving a tent peg through his skull (Judg 4:17–22). When Deborah celebrates this victory in her song, she is clear that Jael is the heroine of the story: it is Jael who—by her "right hand" and her "workman's mallet"—"crushed" the "head" of the enemy and left him dead "between her feet" (Judg 5:26–27). The whole account indicates that Deborah and Jael are fully capable of doing anything the men in Israel can do, and that, in fact—at least in this case—they do it better. It is the LORD who saves his people, and he does so through the leadership, the prophetic word, the wisdom, and the strength of women.

In the New Testament, women continue to exercise significant leadership and teaching functions. In the Gospels, we find Anna, another "prophetess," who speaks "to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36). Perhaps more significantly, we also find that the Lord Jesus, after his resurrection, appears first to women, and entrusts them with the first announcement of the gospel. In a culture which discounted the testimony of women as unreliable,<sup>37</sup> the Gospels present women—at the Lord's command—being the first to convey the news of the resurrection to the apostles, and so teaching the apostles the most fundamental gospel truth—that Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised bodily from the dead (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–10, 22–24; John 20:1–18). This trajectory continues in Acts and the Letters. Priscilla, for example, plays an important teaching role. In several references, she is listed ahead of her husband Aquilla (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3; 2 Tim 4:19; but note Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:19), and she seems to have played the leading role in instructing Apollos in the faith (Acts 18:26). Further, Paul commends Phoebe to the Romans as "a deacon (διάκονον) of the church in Cenchreae" (Rom 16:1). The phrase could be translated "a minister of the church at Cenchreae" and so possibly indicates that Phoebe served in a role that involved leading and teaching the church. Further, Paul's commendation of her, and command to welcome her, probably indicate that she carried his letter to Rome, and so suggests that she was also charged with reading the authoritative apostolic letter to the various house churches in the capital, and perhaps also teaching them from it as she went.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Paul affirms that Andronicus and Junia "are well known to the apostles" (Rom 16:7: οἱτινὲς εἰσὶν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις). This could be translated "outstanding among the apostles" (NIV) and so indicate that Junia was herself an apostle. If so, then even the office of apostle was not limited to men, but included at least one woman.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, Paul includes Priscilla, Euodia, and Syntyche among his "fellow workers" (Rom 16:3; Phil 4:2–3), and speaks of Typhena and Tryphosa as "workers in the Lord" (Rom 16:12). More generally, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses the church as a gathered community, and assumes that women will "pray" and "prophesy" in church, that is, exercise speaking and teaching roles in gathered worship (1 Cor 11:5). Taken together, these biblical examples indicate

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<sup>37</sup> E.g. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4.219: "From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex."

<sup>38</sup> For this case, see: <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/phoebe-through-eyes-paul>

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Barr, *Making*, 65: "Junia, is identified not simply as an apostle but as one who was prominent among the apostles."

that women served as prophets, judges, apostles, ministers, co-workers, and teachers and so suggest that women may also be ordained as elders.

### (3). The key New Testament texts do not restrict eldership to men

Third, the case for ordaining men and women as elders argues that the New Testament passages which seem to restrict leadership or teaching functions in the church to men do not, in fact, do so, when carefully understood in their original contexts. Three passages are significant.

**(a). 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35:** Paul here seems to prohibit women from speaking in church when he states “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches...” Earlier in the same letter, however, Paul recognises that women rightly “pray” and “prophesy” in church (1 Cor 11:5). It therefore seems unlikely that Paul now commands the opposite. Given that there is some textual uncertainty about these verses, it may be that 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 are a later interpolation in the text, not written by Paul, and not part of Scripture.<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, if these verses are from Paul, the injunction is best understood as Paul quoting a Corinthian slogan *in order to refute it*. Paul does this elsewhere in the letter (1 Cor 6:12–13; 7:1), so it is possible he does the same here. Significantly, the instruction regarding women remaining silent in the public gathering, and asking their husbands at home, finds parallels in roughly contemporaneous Roman texts such as Livy and Juvenal.<sup>41</sup> Thus, as Beth Allison Barr puts it, Paul “quoted the bad practice, which Corinthian men were trying to drag from the Roman world into their Christian world, and then countered it.”<sup>42</sup> On this reading, 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 presents the false Corinthian view, which Paul corrects in 1 Corinthians 14:36: “Or was it from you that the word of God came?” Paul’s new instruction—which he identifies as “a command of the Lord”—is, in fact, the exact opposite of the Corinthian position (1 Cor 14:37). Against the common Roman view, women ought not to be silenced in the churches. 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 therefore provides no argument against women being ordained as elders in our churches and, in fact, tends to support it.

**(b). 1 Timothy 2:11–12:** Paul here declares, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” While at first glance this declaration may seem to prohibit women from teaching men, on closer inspection Paul’s instruction appears as a correction to a problematic situation in Ephesus. Later in the same letter, Paul indicates that some younger widows in Ephesus were causing trouble by “going about from house to house,” as “gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.” (1 Tim 5:13–14). This explains why Paul states the command in the first person (“I do not permit”). The command is his response to the present situation in Ephesus, rather than anything more universal. Certainly, Paul elsewhere distinguishes his own teaching from that of the Lord, so we should not be surprised to see him doing the same here (cf. 1 Cor 7:6–9 contrast 7:10). Consistent with this, Paul uses the present tense verb ἐπιτρέπω (“I allow / permit”) to show that his injunction applies to the present situation in the church in Ephesus. This is confirmed by Paul’s choice of the unusual verb ἀυθεντέω to describe the kind of “authority” he prohibits women from assuming. This is a different verb from the one Paul uses to describe how overseer-elders “rule” (1 Tim 3:4–5; 5:17: προϊστημι), and—unlike that verb—carries the negative senses of “dictating” or “giving orders.”<sup>43</sup> This again indicates that Paul does not prohibit women from exercising authority over men in general, but from exercising authority *in this negative form*, which

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<sup>40</sup> This may be suggested by the fact that some manuscripts place these verses after 1 Corinthians 14:40. This view is commonly held. For the literature and discussion, see: A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1148–50.

<sup>41</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, 34; Juvenal, *Satires*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Barr, *Making*, 61. Cf. D. W. O’Dell-Scott, “Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b–36,” *BTB* 13 (1983): 90–93; C. H. Talbert, “Biblical Criticism’s Role: The Pauline View of Women as a Case in Point,” in *The Unfettered Word*, ed. R. B. James (Waco: Word, 1987), 62–71; L. Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul’s Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 4, 67–68.

<sup>43</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 150.

is what seems to have been the problem in Ephesus. Paul's command in 1 Timothy 2:11–12, therefore, should not be taken as a universal and enduring command against women teaching men, but as an apostolic injunction against certain false teachers in first-century Ephesus. Since these false teachers happened to be women, Paul prohibited women from teaching men. The problem, however, was not that they were women, but that their teaching was false. For this reason, 1 Timothy 2:11–12 presents no argument against women being ordained as elders in our churches.

**(c). 1 Timothy 3:1–8 and Titus 1:5–9:** In these two passages, Paul lists qualifications for elder-overseers. While it is true that he uses masculine pronouns throughout, and requires that elder-overseers must be “the husband of one wife,” this does not necessarily mean that elder-overseers must be male. The qualification lists describe the Christ-like character required of Christian leaders, and do not specify the sex of such leaders. In first-century culture, it was only natural that Paul would use masculine pronouns, and refer to elder-overseers as husbands, just as he elsewhere refers to the body of believers as “brothers” when both men and women are included. Even though Paul refers to elder-overseers having wives and children, we do not require that all elder-overseers must be married and have children. It is, therefore, a mistake to insist that the gendered pronouns in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and the “husband of one wife” clause, indicate that only men can be elder-overseers.

Thus, although these passages (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2; 1 Tim 3; Tit 1) are often taken to argue against women being ordained as elders, none of these texts can bear the weight put upon it.

#### **(4). Female elders are effective, even crucial, for the mission of the church**

Fourth, in addition to these biblical arguments, those who argue for ordaining men and women as elders also add arguments from experience and from the mission of the church. On the negative side, some recent studies have argued that social systems which promote male headship and minimise women's voices in decision making are more prone to foster abusive relationships.<sup>44</sup> The concentration of power in the hands of men is dangerous. Women's voices need to be heard. Moreover, many women understandably feel uncomfortable approaching male only leadership teams, and this has the effect of further disempowering women in our churches. As a church committed to protecting the weak and the vulnerable, we must do everything we can to fight against the marginalisation and abuse of women and children. Retaining women as elders seems to be the most prudent way forward to ensuring healthy relationships between men and women in our churches. Finally, in addition to all of this, we need to face the very real question of what churches should do when they lack appropriately qualified men to serve as elders, or when the men in the church are unwilling to serve in this role.

On the positive side, we can all recognise from experience that women have often served faithfully and effectively in church leadership roles, including as elders in PCNSW/ACT churches. Many women have clear gifts in leadership, preaching, and teaching, and our church is significantly weakened if we do not encourage and foster these gifts. Moreover, having women serve on sessions, presbyteries, and assemblies means that we have male and female voices working together on the important decisions facing our church. Even secular studies recognise that diverse leadership teams tend to make better decisions.<sup>45</sup> To exclude women from these forums is to rob the church of the God-given wisdom and experience of women. Moreover, as our society increasingly expects equality between men and women in all spheres of life, having women and men serving together in our leadership structures will be a more positive witness, and create opportunities for the gospel that may be lost if we move to male only eldership.

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<sup>44</sup> E.g. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028?pfmredir=sm&nw=0&r=HtmlFragment>

<sup>45</sup> E.g. <https://hbr.org/2019/03/when-and-why-diversity-improves-your-boards-performance>

Taken together, these arguments suggest that we are right to continue to allow sessions to ordain women as elders in PCNSW/ACT churches.

## **E. The case for male only eldership**

The case for ordaining only men as elders responds to the four arguments outlined above by focussing sharply on the biblical office of elder. In what follows, then, we respond directly to each of these arguments, outlining—in the midst of these responses—a positive biblical case for male only eldership.

### **(1). Fundamental equality does not mean interchangeable roles**

First, the case for male only eldership wholeheartedly affirms that God created men *and* women in the image of God, and that men and women are equally fallen in sin, equally redeemed by Christ, and equally called to whole-hearted service in God’s kingdom. This case also affirms, however, that equality in creation, sin, redemption, and kingdom service is not the same as identity of roles. Certainly, Paul’s affirmation in Galatians 3:28—“there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”—underscores our fundamental unity and equality in Christ. Men and women are, together, “heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). This does not, however, indicate that the roles or functions of men and women are simply interchangeable. From a biblical point of view, this cannot be the case in marriage and family life. The created order teaches us that men and women, husbands and wives, play different, and non-interchangeable, roles in procreation. Moreover, as we have already observed, the Bible everywhere characterises men and women as equal but different and complementary, and this is especially emphasised by Paul (1 Cor 11, 14; Eph 5; 1 Tim 2). Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28, therefore, cannot reasonably be interpreted to mean that the differences between men and women are completely obliterated by our unity and equality in Christ. The distinction between men and women—as between Jew and Greek, and between slave and free—is *redeemed* by the gospel, but not *removed*. This is clear from the way in which Paul, throughout his letters, continues to recognise the ongoing significance of these secondary identity markers, even as he also locates them within our fundamental unity in Christ.

The biblical truth that men and women are equal in God’s sight, therefore, does not provide a clear argument against male only eldership. Indeed, the positive case for male only eldership is grounded in the consistent biblical pattern of male leadership in marriage and the family, which creates the context for, and expectation of, male leadership also in the church.

### **(2). The Bible consistently depicts male only eldership**

Second, the case for male only eldership also recognises and celebrates the way in which the Bible depicts women serving in significant leadership and teaching roles. It argues, however, that the biblical examples fall short of supporting the ordination of women as elders, and actually serve to confirm a complementarian understanding of the roles of men and women in the church.

It is significant that although there are many biblical women who serve in leadership and teaching roles, there is no indication of any woman serving as an elder, despite the fact that the office of elder is evident in both old and new covenants, and consistent across the Scriptures. Certainly, the Scriptures consistently assume that elders are male. In the Old Testament, the masculine form of the Hebrew adjective זָקֵן (“elder”) is consistently used to refer to Israel’s elders. The feminine form does occur—as in Zechariah 8:4 in the pair “old men and old women” (זָקֵנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת)—but it is never used to refer to recognised leaders in Israel. Similarly, in the Septuagint, as Susan Docherty observes, “The employment...of the masculine forms πρεσβύτερος and πρεσβύτεροι when referring to ‘elders’

would seem to indicate...that this body was composed entirely of males.”<sup>46</sup> This is confirmed by more explicit statements. At the time of the exodus, the LORD commands Moses to gather “seventy *men* (שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ) of the elders of Israel” to receive the Spirit and share in the work of leading the people (Num 11:16, 24; cf. Deut 29:10). At the time of the Judges, the elders of Succoth are described as “seventy-seven *men*” (שִׁבְעִים וְשֶׁבַע אִישׁ) (Judg 8:14), and Boaz is described as taking “ten *men* (עֲשָׂרָה אֲנָשִׁים) of the elders of the city” to witness his redemption of Elimelech’s land (Ruth 4:2). Under the monarchy, “the elders and the leaders” of Naboth’s city are identified as “the *men* of his city” (οἱ ἄνδρες τῆς πόλεως) (1 Kings 21:9 LXX). At the time of the prophets, Ezekiel speaks of “seventy *men* (שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ) of the elders of the house of Israel” (Ezek 8:11).

This pattern continues in the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts every named member of the Sanhedrin is male (Mark 14:53; Luke 23:30: Joseph of Arimathea; John 3:1: Nicodemus; Acts 5:34: Gamaliel), as are those identified as “ruler of the synagogue” (ἀρχισυνάγωγος: Mark 5:22, 35–36, 38: Jairus; Acts 18:8: Crispus; 18:17: Sosthenes). Paul explicitly addresses the Jewish Council of elders, the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, as “men, brothers” (Acts 23:1, 6: ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί). Across the New Testament, the biblical authors consistently use the masculine form of the Greek adjective πρεσβύτερος (“elder”) to refer to those holding office, whether among the Jews or in the church. The feminine form is well-attested in Greek literature, and Paul uses it once when referring to older women (1 Tim 5:2: πρεσβυτέρα; cf. the cognate noun at Tit 2:3: πρεσβυτίδας), but the New Testament never uses the feminine form for those who hold office in the church. Put negatively, there is no indication anywhere in the Bible of women functioning as elders. Put positively, the Bible everywhere assumes that elders are men.

In this context, the following brief observations on the most important biblical examples of women serving in leadership and teaching roles will show that, while women do exercise a range of significant ministries, the Bible never presents a woman holding the office of elder.

(a). Deborah was a “prophetess” who “judged” Israel (Judg 4:4), but she is never identified as an elder, despite the fact that there were elders in Israel in the period of the judges (Judg 2:7; 8:14, 16; 11:5, 7–11; 21:16; Ruth 4:2, 4, 9, 11).

(b). Phoebe is described as a “διάκονος of the church in Cenchrea” (Rom 16:1), but she is not described as an “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) or “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος). As we have noted already, the New Testament uses the noun διάκονος in a wide range of ways. In relation to Phoebe, it could indicate either that she was a faithful Christian “servant” or “minister” in the more general sense, or that she held the office of “deacon” in the church of Cenchreae. Given that Paul elsewhere employs the noun in this technical sense to specify the office of “deacon” (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12), the latter seems quite likely.<sup>47</sup> Significantly, however, in these same texts, Paul clearly distinguishes the office of “deacon” from the office of elder-overseer, indicating that it is an important, but secondary, role of assistance and service, which does not involve formal public teaching, or pastoral oversight. It is true that Stephen and Philip were among the “seven men” chosen to “serve tables” in Acts 6, and went on to exercise significant preaching and teaching ministries (Acts 6:10; 7:2–53; 8:5, 26–40). This observation, however, does not prove that *all* deacons did the same, or that preaching and teaching was a function of the office, especially since Paul does not require deacons to be “able to teach” when he regulates the office (1 Tim 3:8–13 with 3:2). Paul’s designation of Phoebe as a διάκονος, therefore, does not indicate that she

<sup>46</sup> Susan Docherty, “Presbuteroi in the Septuagint,” in B.J. Koet, E. Murphy, M.J. Smith (eds), *Presbyters in the Early Church: The First Two Centuries*, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2022 forthcoming).

<sup>47</sup> See: J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, CC (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1961), *loc. cit.*; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975–79), 2:781; G. R. Perry, “Phoebe of Cenchreae and ‘Women’ of Ephesus: ‘Deacons’ in the Earliest Churches,” *Presbyterion* 36.1 (2010): 9–36; T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 787; M. J. Smith, “Shepherds and Servants: The Two Offices Christ appointed in his Church,” *Haddington House Journal* (2018): 199.



exercised an authoritative leadership or teaching role. While Phoebe clearly played an important role in the life of the church at Cenchreae, and was trusted by Paul to deliver his letter to Rome, she was not an “elder” or “overseer” of any church.

(c). Junia is described, together with Andronicus, as “well known to the apostles” (Rom 16:7: ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις). This is, by all accounts, a difficult text, both because the sex of the person identified as Ἰουνιαν (“Junia”) is uncertain, and because the phrase describing this person can be understood in various ways. The difficulty in identifying Ἰουνιαν’s (“Junia’s”) sex arises from the fact that the feminine name Ἰουνία and the masculine name Ἰουνιάς take the same form in the accusative case—Ἰουνιαν. The masculine and feminine forms can only be distinguished by the Greek accents applied to them (Ἰουνιᾶν = masc.; Ἰουνίαν = fem.), but these were not part of the original text. Nevertheless, it seems most likely that Paul here does refer to a woman—Junia—since the earliest Greek manuscripts accentuate the noun with the feminine form, and the female name Junia occurs frequently in Greek and Latin inscriptions from Rome, while the male name Junias, probably a shortened form of Junianus, is “unattested anywhere.”<sup>48</sup> Still, assuming Junia is a woman, the phrase which describes her—together with Andronicus—does not clearly identify either of them as apostles. The combination of the adjective ἐπίσημος (“outstanding” or “well-known”) with the preposition ἐν (“in,” “by,” or “among”) could indicate that Andronicus and Junia were *either* “of note among the apostles” (KJV, RSV), “prominent among the apostles” (NRSV), “outstanding among the apostles” (NIV), *or* that they were “well known to the apostles” (ESV), “esteemed among the apostles” (NIV marginal note), or “noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles” (CSB). The difference is whether Paul identifies Andronicus and Junia *as* apostles, or merely indicates that they were well known *by* the apostles. It is difficult to be certain. Still, even if Paul does here refer to Andronicus and Junia *as* apostles, this does not mean that he attributes to them the same kind of authority as the Twelve, or of Paul himself. The New Testament most often uses the noun ἀπόστολος (“apostle”) in a semi-technical sense to refer to the Twelve plus Paul, but it also uses the term in a broader sense to refer to other “sent ones”—missionaries or emissaries—who are “apostles of the churches” (e.g. 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25; Acts 14:14) rather than apostles of the Lord.<sup>49</sup> Thus, if Paul characterises Andronicus and Junia as apostles, it is almost certainly in this broader, non-technical sense.<sup>50</sup> The important point for our purposes, again, is that Paul identifies neither Andronicus nor Junia as an “elder” or “overseer” of any particular church. If they were “apostles,” they were itinerant missionaries rather than authoritative witnesses akin to the Twelve and Paul. If they were “well known to the apostles,” then they were outstanding Christian servants, but not necessarily office-bearers of any kind.<sup>51</sup>

(d). Priscilla, likewise, exercised a significant ministry, but did not hold any formal leadership role. She certainly does appear before her husband Aquila in several New Testament texts (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3; 2 Tim 4:19; but note Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:19), and in Acts 18:26 Luke describes how “Priscilla and Aquilla...took him [Apollos] aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” The listing of Priscilla’s name first in this reference likely does indicate that Priscilla took the leading role in instructing Apollos. Nevertheless, Priscilla and Aquilla instructed Apollos together. More to the point, this *ad hoc* and private instruction is a different kind to the public

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<sup>48</sup> B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 475.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 4, 335–36.

<sup>50</sup> So Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 322; *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960 [1559]) §4.3.5. For recent review of the discussion, with bibliography, and similar conclusions, see: D. J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 939–40; Schreiner, *Romans*, 795–97. For the view that Anronicus and Junia were merely “well known to the apostles,” see: J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: the English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 230.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 797: “One should scarcely conclude from the reference to Junia and the other women coworkers named here that women exercised authority over men contrary to the Pauline admonition in 1 Tim. 2:12.”

leadership and teaching role which is elsewhere limited to men. As we will see, the Bible is not concerned with women teaching men in the narrow sense of imparting information to them. Its concern is with the more fundamental structure of male-female relationships in marriage and the in the church, that is, with rightly ordered relationships between husbands and wives, and elders and congregations.

(e). Paul describes several women as his co-workers (Rom 16:3, 9, 12; Phil 4:3)—just as he also describes several men in this way (Rom 16:9, 21; 1 Cor 3:5–9; 16:15–16; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25; Col 4:11; 1 Thess 3:2; Philem 1, 24)—but there is no indication in any of these texts that Paul considered his co-workers to hold the same authority he held as the apostle to the Gentiles. There is, indeed, no indication in any of these texts that Paul’s co-workers held any formal office in the churches. The description “co-worker” is not a title for a formalised role, but a broad description Paul applies to men and women who laboured with him in the work of the gospel (cf. Matt 9:37–38). While it is possible that some of these “co-workers” were “elders,” “overseers,” or “pastors,” none of them is identified as such.

The result of all of this, again, is the recognition that men and women labour together in the work of the gospel. Since men and women are equal in creation, in sin, in redemption, and in kingdom service, it is no surprise that the Scriptures record the service of women as prophetesses, judges, witnesses of the resurrection, deacons, and co-labourers in the gospel. These examples provide us, again, with a salutary reminder that God calls *all* of his people—men, women, and children—to play their part in the life of his church and the work of his kingdom. At the same time, this does not mean that God calls all of his people to the particular office of elder-overseer. When the significance of the office of elder is minimised or obscured or homogenised with other roles, it is possible to argue that the bible depicts women serving in “ministry.” When, however, we pay attention to the Bible’s consistent teaching regarding the office of elder, it becomes clear that while women certainly do serve in a range of teaching and leadership roles, they never appear in Scripture as elders.

Moreover, the most significant biblical examples of women serving in leadership and teaching roles actually confirm a complementarian understanding of God’s design for men and women. The account of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4–5, for example, certainly affirms that women are equally competent to lead and to teach God’s people, but also suggests that the LORD raised up Deborah and Jael to shame the men of Israel, who were failing in their God-given leadership and teaching roles.<sup>52</sup> In the context of the book of Judges, where every other Judge is male, Deborah’s judgeship appears as an anomaly; it signals that things are not right in Israel. The LORD then specifically commissions Barak, through Deborah, to lead Israel’s army and defeat Sisera: “I will give him into your hand” (Judg 4:6–7). Barak, however—despite his impressive name (“Lightning”)—offers only a weak response, prompting Deborah to declare that he will not receive “glory,” but in fact be shamed, “for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judg 4:9). This word affirms the good God-given order—that the men of Israel ought to take the lead—and announces a form of judgment on Israel’s men, especially Barak, for their failure to do so. This is confirmed in the “Song of Deborah and Barak” in Judges 5, which further celebrates the ideal, and laments the failures, of Israel’s men: the LORD, the God of Sinai, is the one who comes and delivers his people (Judg 5:4–5, 31); the princes of Israel *ought* to have taken the lead, and the fighting men *ought* to have offered themselves willingly (Judg 5:2),<sup>53</sup> but since they didn’t in this case (Judg 5:7, 16–17), the LORD raised up a woman instead (Judg 5:7), and disgraced his enemies by defeating them through the hand of a woman (Judg 5:24–30). The story of Deborah and Barak is thus extremely positive about the dignity and strength of women: it is through the faith, intelligence, and bravery of Deborah and Jael that the LORD saves his people. At the same time, the story of Deborah and Barak makes it clear that the LORD saved his

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Isaiah 3:12 where the fact that “women lead over them” [God’s people] is part of the LORD’s judgment on his people.

<sup>53</sup> The text here does not specify “men,” but refers to the “people” (ἄνδρες / λαός). In context, however, it is surely the fighting men of Israel who are intended.

people in this unusual way because the men of Israel, who should have taken the lead, failed in their task, and suffered shame as a result. Deborah herself delivers the LORD's command that Barak should lead, and does not take on his role of leading the army (Judg 4:6). Indeed, she expresses her own delight in the men who did rise up: "My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people" (Judg 5:9). The story thus provides a good illustration of biblical complementarianism: women and men are of equal dignity and honour in God's sight, equally called to serve the LORD, and equally capable of being used by the LORD; yet, the LORD has established a good order in which men are to take the lead.

In the New Testament, similarly, the Gospel accounts of Jesus commissioning women to announce the news of his resurrection to the apostles underscore the dignity of women, honouring them as the first heralds of the good news, while also affirming the God-given order of male leadership. In this regard, it is significant that the risen Lord does not commission the women to declare the good news in general, or to all, but to tell the apostles (Matt 28:7–10; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:10–11; John 20:17–18), that is, to tell those men whom Jesus specifically chose and commissioned as his witnesses (Matt 28:16–20; Luke 24:33, 46–49; John 20:19–23; Acts 1:2, 8, 21–26, 39–42). It is for this reason that Paul, in his semi-credal account of the resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8, omits any mention of the women, and focusses instead on the Lord's appearances to the apostles. Given Paul's overwhelmingly positive teaching about women elsewhere, his omission of the women cannot reasonably be taken as any kind of misogyny; it reflects, rather, his concern for rightly ordered witness.

### **(3). The key New Testament passages teach male only eldership**

Third, the case for male only eldership receives its strongest support from Paul's more explicit teaching about the office of elder-overseer, which includes the requirement that elders be male. While our discussion so far has largely focused on *descriptive* texts, which establish a biblical pattern for male only eldership, the key passages now before us are rightly considered *prescriptive* for God's church. Here we consider again the key texts in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, 1 Timothy 2, and 1 Corinthians 14. At each point we take account of the arguments noted above in the case for ordaining men and women as elders, and show that a more satisfactory understanding of these texts recognises that they teach male only eldership.

#### **(a). 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1**

In 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:5–9 Paul provides lists of qualifications for elder-overseers in God's church. The universal and enduring nature of these qualifications—that they are not merely descriptive but prescriptive—is clear in both cases from the context. The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 come in the middle of a discrete section of the letter (1 Tim 2:1–3:16) which deals with universal and enduring realities: "there is *one* God, and there is *one* mediator between God and men" (1 Tim 2:5); "God our Saviour...desires *all* people to be saved" (1 Tim 2:3–4); "Christ Jesus...gave himself as a ransom for *all*" (1 Tim 2:6); prayers are to be made "for *all* people" (1 Tim 2:1), including "for kings and *all* who are in high positions" (1 Tim 2:2); men should pray "in *every* place" (1 Tim 2:8). Indeed, the whole section provides instruction for "how one *ought to behave* in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). More particularly, Paul introduces the regulations regarding the offices with the formula "here is a trustworthy saying" (1 Tim 3:1), which he otherwise reserves for summaries of the universal and enduring gospel itself (1 Tim 1:15; 4:8–10; 2 Tim 2:11–13; Tit 3:5–8). He then prescribes a list of qualifications, declaring what "an overseer *must be*..." (1 Tim 3:2: δεῖ οὖν τὸν ἐπίσκοπον...εἶναι; also 3:7).<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in Titus, Paul's command to "appoint elders in every town" (Tit 1:5), who "hold

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<sup>54</sup> A. D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, LNTS 362 (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 6 discusses this question of prescriptive and descriptive passages in Paul and judges that Paul's instructions regarding overseers and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 are "clear instances of prescription".

firmly to the trustworthy message” (Tit 1:9), flows directly from Paul’s own apostolic commission to announce the gospel in fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose (Tit 1:1–3). Paul again draws attention to the prescriptive nature of his command with the phrase “an overseer *must be...*” (Tit 1:7: δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον...εἶναι). There should be no doubt, therefore, that these instructions regarding “the office of overseer” are given as prescriptions for God’s church.

In this context, it is significant that throughout the Pastoral Letters, Paul uses the masculine adjective πρεσβύτερος and the masculine noun ἐπίσκοπος to refer to those who hold the pastoral office in the church. He consistently employs masculine forms of the article, masculine pronouns, and masculine participles to refer those who hold this office (see esp. 1 Tim 3:1–7; 5:17–23; Tit 1:5–9). Most significantly, Paul twice stipulates that the elder-overseer must be “a husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2: μᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα; Tit 1:6: μᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ). This stands in direct contrast with his requirement that widows who receive church support must have been “the wife of one husband” (ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή) (1 Tim 5:9). Thus, in the very same letter, Paul speaks of men and women in distinct ways in regard to their marital faithfulness: elder-overseers are to be “a husband of one wife”; widows supported by the church are to have been the “wife of one husband.” In both cases the requirement is gendered in a non-interchangeable way. From this it is clear that the apostolic requirement is for elder-overseers to be men.

Further, in 1 Timothy 3, Paul goes on to provide regulations regarding the office “deacon” (1 Tim 3:8–13) and includes the same requirement that “deacons” must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:12). In the middle of this section, Paul addresses either “their wives” (ESV) or “women” [deacons] (NIV). (1 Tim 3:11). There is significant debate about which of these translations is to be preferred, but this need not detain us here.<sup>55</sup> The point for our purposes is that whether Paul addresses the wives of deacons, or female deacons, this address clarifies that the deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–10 and 12–13 are men—either they have wives, or they are distinguished from the female deacons. From this it follows, again, that the injunction that each deacon must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:12) is not interchangeable with its opposite (“the wife of one husband”). This, in turn, confirms that the same requirement for elder-overseers (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6) indicates that elder-overseers must be men.

The objection that we do not require all elders to be married or to have children, when Paul refers to these qualities (1 Tim 3:2, 4–5 and Tit 1:6), is easily countered. The lack of a contingent quality is not the same as the presence of its opposite. A male elder-overseer who is single does not stand in contravention of these requirements. He has not been called to marriage or fatherhood, but he is able to meet these qualification—to be “a husband of one wife”—if the Lord so calls. A female elder-overseer, however, either stands in direct contravention of the qualification (if she is married), or in potential contravention of it (if she is not yet married). The apostolic requirement that elder-overseers be “the husband of one wife,” therefore, clearly indicates that elders are to be men.

### **(b). 1 Timothy 2**

In 1 Timothy 2:11–12, Paul issues the following command:

<sup>11</sup> Let a woman learn quietly (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ) with all submissiveness (ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ). <sup>12</sup> I do not permit a woman to teach (διδάσκειν) or to exercise authority (αὐθεντεῖν) over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ). <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup> and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

The universal and enduring nature of this command is clear, first of all, from its context in the letter: as we have just noted, the whole section from 1 Timothy 2:1–3:16 deals with enduring and universal realities. More specifically, Paul indicates the universal and enduring nature of this command by grounding it in God’s good design, given in creation. The γὰρ (“for”) at the beginning of verse 13 is

<sup>55</sup> For the interpretive options, see: G. W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 170–73.

a “marker of cause or reason”:<sup>56</sup> it is *because* “Adam was formed first, then Eve,” that Paul does not “permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12–13). Paul goes on to ground the command further in the order of events at the Fall: “and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim 2:14). This provides a further reason why Paul does not “permit a woman to teach (διδάσκειν) or to exercise authority (αὐθεντεῖν) over a man” (1 Tim 2:12). Nevertheless, he first grounds the command in the good order of creation. Ordered relationships between husbands and wives, and so between men and women in the church, are an integral part of God’s good design.

Thus, the arguments we noted above—that Paul here addresses a specific situation in first century Ephesus—cannot do justice to the text. Even if we could establish the situation in Ephesus with any certainty (which is doubtful), Paul’s instructions have the character of universal and enduring commands, rather than an *ad hoc* response to a specific situation. Certainly, the present tense of the verb in the phrase οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω (“I do not permit”) in no way limits Paul’s injunction to the first century. Similarly, it is a mistake to make much of his use of the verb αὐθεντέω (“exercise authority”). While this verb certainly does carry negative connotations, there is no indication in the context that Paul would affirm a woman holding authority over a man, if only she exercised that authority in the right way.

The issue at stake is the right ordering of relationships and the right exercise of authority in the church. This is clear from Paul’s choice of language. To begin with, Paul’s reference to women learning “in full submission” (1 Tim 2:11: ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ) employs the noun ὑποταγή (“submission”), a cognate of the verb ὑποτάσσω (“I submit”), which Paul employs elsewhere to describe the posture wives are to take towards their husbands (Eph 5:24; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5). It is only consistent, therefore—at least in relation to married women—that Paul now also commands women to adopt the same posture of submission in the church. A married woman who assumes an authoritative teaching role in the church will find herself in an irreconcilable conflict with God’s command for her to submit to her husband, and to the church’s eldership.

Further, Paul’s concern for rightly ordered relationships is clear from his pairing of the verb διδάσκειν (“to teach”) with the verb αὐθεντεῖν (“to exercise authority”), which together indicate that he prohibits women from giving the authoritative, official teaching in the church. In the Pastoral Letters, Paul employs the διδάσκ- word group with the semi-technical sense of authoritatively declaring and defending the apostolic gospel. He employs the verb διδάσκω, for example, when he charges Timothy to “devote” himself to “the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:11; cf. 6:2), and when he speaks of the solemn task of passing on the apostolic gospel, which Timothy is to “entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).<sup>57</sup> Paul similarly employs the cognate noun διδασκαλία (“teaching”) to refer to “a relatively fixed ‘orthodoxy,’ which the churches have received and which it is their duty to preserve against heresy.”<sup>58</sup> This is evident from the way in which Paul customarily employs the article to speak of “the teaching” (ἡ διδασκαλία: 1 Tim 4:13, 16; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim 3:10; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1, 10), and pairs the noun with adjectives to describe it as “the sound teaching” (ἡ ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία: 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1; cf. 1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; Tit 1:13; 2:2), “the good teaching” (ἡ καλὴ διδασκαλία: 1 Tim 4:6), “the teaching according to godliness” (ἡ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλία: 1 Tim 6:3), or “the teaching of God our Saviour” (ἡ διδασκαλία ἡ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν θεοῦ: Tit 2:10). Thus, throughout the Pastoral Letter’s Paul’s concern is not with “teaching” in the narrow sense of imparting

<sup>56</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 189 §1.

<sup>57</sup> διδάσκω: 1 Tim 1:10; 3:2; 4:6, 11, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 2, 3; 2 Tim 2:2; 2:24; 3:10, 16; 4:2, 3; Tit 1:9, 11; 2:1, 7, 10; cf. 1 Tim 4:1.

<sup>58</sup> “διδάσκω,” in *NIDNTTE*, vol. 1, ed. M. s. Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 715. For διδασκαλία: 1 Tim 1:10; 4:1, 6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim 3:10, 16; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7, 10. The noun is prominent in the Pastoral Letters. These fifteen occurrences make up nearly three-quarters of the total of twenty-one occurrences across the whole New Testament.

information, but with “teaching” viewed as part of the exercise of authority in the church. In 1 Timothy 2:11–12, this is confirmed by Paul’s use of the verb ἀυθεντέω (“have authority over”), which carries the sense of “assuming a stance of independent authority,” with the negative connotations of “giving orders” or “dictating.”<sup>59</sup> Paul’s primary concern in these verses, then, is with rightly ordered relationships between men and women in the church. He reserves the church’s authoritative, official teaching, to men.

Consistent with this, the phrase translated “quietness” or “quiet” (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ) does not require that women are “silent” in church. Although the word can mean “silence” (Luke 14:4; Acts 11:18; 21:14; 22:2), it also means “with a quiet demeanour” (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:12; 1 Pet 3:4).<sup>60</sup> The latter is more likely in 1 Timothy 2:11–12. Paul employs the cognate adjective ἡσύχιος with this sense in the immediate context (1 Tim 2:2), and his only two other uses of the word group denote a quiet demeanour rather than silence (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:12). There is, moreover, nothing in the context which requires the meaning “silence.”<sup>61</sup> Paul’s command, then, does not impose any absolute rule against women speaking in gathered worship, or teaching in the church in a range of appropriate contexts, but affirms that men rather than women are to provide the authoritative teaching in the church.<sup>62</sup>

Significantly, however, it is not just any men who are to provide this authoritative teaching, but the male elders. Paul’s commands about men and women in church (1 Tim 2:8–15) are immediately followed by his instructions regarding the offices of overseer and deacon (1 Tim 3:1–13). In this context, the apostolic requirement that overseer-elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2: διδακτικός) indicates that it is the role of the elder-overseers to authoritatively declare and defend the apostolic gospel in the church. This is confirmed by the parallel passage in Titus 1, where Paul requires of each elder-overseer that “he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Tit 1:9). The references here to “the trustworthy word as taught” (τὴν διδαχὴν πιστοῦ λόγου) and “the sound doctrine” (τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ τῇ ὑγιαίνουσῃ) make it clear that Paul speaks of the church’s official teaching—the apostolic gospel at the centre of the whole counsel of God—and that it is the responsibility of the elder-overseers to declare and defend this body of truth. Certainly, in 1 Timothy 2–3, the correspondence between the verb διδάσκειν (“to teach”) in 1 Timothy 2:12, and the cognate adjective διδακτικόν (“able to teach”) in 1 Timothy 3:2 ties the two passages together and indicates that both have the same kind of activity in view. This observation simultaneously confirms that the kind of teaching prohibited of women in 1 Timothy 2:12 is the church’s official, authoritative teaching, and that the elder-overseers charged with this teaching are to be male. It is hard to see how Paul could in one breath prohibit women from this kind of teaching (1 Tim 2:12), and then in the next breath allow for women to be elder-overseers, who are charged with precisely this teaching function (1 Tim 3:2).

Further confirmation of this understanding of Paul’s teaching in the Pastoral Letters comes from Titus 2, where Paul instructs “older women...to teach what is good” (Tit 2:3). Paul’s use of the adjective καλοδιδασκάλους (“teaching what is good”) indicates the content of what the older women are to teach must be consistent with the church’s official teaching. Like the elder-overseers, the older women have a significant role in passing on the gospel, in declaring and defending it, “that the word of God may not be reviled” (Tit 2:5). The teaching of the older women is crucial to the life and

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<sup>59</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 150.

<sup>60</sup> *BDAG*, 440. *BDAG* observes these two senses, but classes 1 Timothy 2:11 as an instance where the word means “silence”.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g. W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 118–19.

<sup>62</sup> G. L. Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, ITC (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 54 notes that Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428), one of the earliest commentators on 1 Timothy, “interpreted Paul’s prohibition against them speaking [in 1 Tim 2:11–15] as referring to prophecy in the church, not to teaching in the home, which he thought was perfectly acceptable.”

mission of the church. Significantly, however, the scope of this teaching is limited. Unlike the elder-overseers, whose sphere of teaching encompasses the whole church, the older women are specifically instructed to “train the young women to love their husbands and children...” (Tit 2:4). This specific focus further confirms that Paul reserves the office of elder-overseer to appropriately qualified men, while also encouraging the older women to play their part in promoting the truth of the gospel and so strengthening the church and advancing its mission.

The elder-overseers and the older women are not, of course, the only people called to teach in the church. Paul elsewhere speaks of the gift of “teachers” (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11–12), using a broad category which almost certainly includes the elder-overseers, but is probably not limited to them.<sup>63</sup> In addition, there is the important sense in which all of God’s people are called to teach each other, “speaking the truth in love,” so that we grow up to maturity in Christ (Rom 15:14; Eph 4:15–16; Col 3:16; Heb 5:12). Nevertheless, as we have noted, it is the male elder-overseers who are responsible for the church’s authoritative, official teaching as they declare and defend the apostolic gospel, at the centre of the whole counsel of God.

### (c). *1 Corinthians 14*

In 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, Paul makes a similar command about women being “silent” in the churches:

As in all the churches of the saints,<sup>34</sup> the women should keep silent (σιγάτωσαν) in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak (λαλεῖν), but should be in submission (ὑποτασσέσθωσαν), as the Law also says.<sup>35</sup> If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak (λαλεῖν) in church.

The view that 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 is a later interpolation, not original to Paul, is unconvincing. The vast majority of the manuscripts include these verses, including the earliest and best manuscripts (P<sup>46</sup>, 123; N A B). While a minority of later manuscripts do not include the verses at this point (D, F, G), even these manuscripts include Paul’s statement following 1 Corinthians 14:40. There is, therefore, no good reason to doubt that these instructions come from the hand of Paul; they are rightly regarded as part of the canon of Scripture.<sup>64</sup>

The universal and enduring nature of this command is indicated in two ways. First, Paul introduces his instructions with the phrase “as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33b). This immediately indicates that Paul’s commands are neither specifically directed to the church in Corinth, nor even unique to the Pauline churches within the wider apostolic communion of churches, but are universal; they apply “in all the churches of the saints.” Moreover, since there is nothing to indicate that Paul’s reference to “all the churches” is time bound, we are right to recognise that the command applies to all the churches in all ages until the Lord’s return. Second, Paul appeals to “the Law” (ὁ νόμος) as the authority upon which this command is based (1 Cor 14:34). Throughout Paul’s letters, ὁ νόμος has a range of meanings, but always refers in one way or another to God’s law in Scripture. By grounding his command in the law of God, Paul again indicates its universal and enduring character. Moreover, while it has been common in Christian tradition to take this appeal to the law as reference to God’s curse in Genesis 3:16—“your desire shall be contrary to/for your husband, but he shall rule over you”—it is far more likely that Paul appeals, again, to the God-given order of creation.<sup>65</sup> Paul, that is, implicitly appeals to the creation order—Adam first, then Eve—as the ground for ordered relationships in marriage and the church. This is confirmed by his use of the language of

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<sup>63</sup> See: Smith, “Shepherds and Servants,” 189–90; cf. D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 284.

<sup>64</sup> See Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1148–50 and literature cited there.

<sup>65</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 136: Genesis 3:16, “speaks of a woman’s instinctive inclination...towards her husband, of which he takes advantage so as to dominate her. The reference is more probably to the creation narratives . . .”

“submission” (1 Cor 14:34: ὑποτασθήσθωσαν) which elsewhere characterises a wife’s posture towards her husband (Eph 5:24; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5).

These two observations make it difficult to read 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 as a mistaken Corinthian slogan, which Paul quotes only in order to refute it. There is no indication that the Corinthians elsewhere appealed to the practice of “all the churches,” or were even in a position to do so. Paul, by contrast, certainly was in a position to do so, and does so elsewhere (1 Cor 11:16). Further, Paul nowhere else employs the noun νόμος to refer to Roman law, even when citing others, and his use of the articular form—“the Law” (ὁ νόμος)—without further explanation, evokes not Roman law but “the Law” of God. Certainly, Paul refers to God’s law in this way elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, where he cites Deuteronomy 25:4 (1 Cor 9:8–9) and Isaiah 28:11–12 (1 Cor 14:21) as things written in “the Law.”

The nature of the “silence” commanded, however, needs to be understood within the context of Paul’s letter. In the wider context, as we have already noted, Paul indicates that women may rightly “pray” and “prophecy” in gathered worship (1 Cor 11:5). Unless we assume that Paul contradicts himself, his command to “silence” in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 cannot mean that women may never say anything in church. The verb σιγάω can mean “to say nothing,” but it can also mean “to stop speaking.”<sup>66</sup> Paul, in fact, uses the same verb twice in the immediate context with these two senses, when he commands, first, that someone who speaks in a tongue should “keep silent” unless there is an interpreter (1 Cor 14:28), and, second, when he commands that a prophet who is speaking in gathered worship ought to “become silent” if a revelation is made to someone else (1 Cor 14:30). In neither of these cases does the command “to be silent” indicate that the person may say nothing in church. The command applies, rather, to specific forms of speech which are not helpful for building up the body of Christ: tongues spoken without an interpreter (1 Cor 14:28), and prophecy spoken in competition with others (1 Cor 14:30). Given this context, Paul’s command that women must “be silent” in the churches should not be taken as an absolute command against women speaking in any way in gathered worship, but a command against specific forms of speech which are not helpful for the building of the body of Christ. Indeed, the most immediate context of the command for women to remain silent concerns the weighing of prophecy.<sup>67</sup> In 1 Corinthians 14:29 Paul commands, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” It is specifically this kind of speech which Paul forbids women to make in the church; they are not to engage in the authoritative weighing of prophecy. Understood in this way, we can see that Paul’s primary concern, again, is not with women’s speaking *per se*, but with rightly ordered relationships and the right exercise of authority in the church. He makes this concern explicit in 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40: “for God is not a God of disorder but of peace” and “all things should be done decently and in order.” For a woman to be engaged in the weighing of prophecy would be to participate in the authoritative teaching role in the church. Consistent with Paul’s teaching elsewhere, however, the responsibility for recognising orthodox teaching in the context of gathered worship rests with the male elders (cf. 1 Tim 2:11–12; 3:2; Tit 1:9). Thus, while Paul does not, in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, impose any absolute rule against women speaking in gathered worship, he does command that women should not participate in the authoritative teaching role of weighing prophecy.

Taken together, these considerations provide a strong case that the Scriptures restrict the office of elder to men.

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<sup>66</sup> Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 922 §1 a, b.

<sup>67</sup> Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1152 observes (following Ellis and Witherington) that Paul’s commands regarding women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 are closely tied to the immediately preceding instructions regarding prophecy and the weighing of prophecy in the church. Indeed, four key terms from 1 Corinthians 14:13–33 are repeated in these three verses, namely, λαλέω (“speak”; 1 Cor 14:14–32), σιγάω (“be silent”; 1 Cor 14:28, 30, 34), ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ (“in church”; 1 Cor 14:28, 35; cf. 34), and ὑποτάσσω (“submit”; 1 Cor 14:32, 34).



#### **(4). The recognition that women play a crucial role in the church's mission does not mean we should ordain women as elders**

Fourth, the case for male only eldership agrees whole-heartedly that women play a crucial role in the life and mission of the church, but argues that this does not mean we should ordain women as elders. There is no doubt that many women have served faithfully and effectively as elders in PCNSW/ACT churches since 1967. There is also no doubt that God gifts many women with leadership, preaching, and teaching gifts, and that the church is poorer if we do not recognise, welcome, and proactively foster these gifts. There is, yet further, no doubt that the church will be significantly strengthened by the appropriate involvement of women in our decision-making processes at every level—in sessions, presbyteries, and assemblies, in the committees of presbyteries and assemblies, and in the various ministries of our congregations. A genuinely healthy complementarianism recognises the different and complementary roles of men and women, and celebrates both as equally necessary for the life and mission of the church.

The biblical vision of complementary roles for men and women in the church requires that careful thought be given to how the ministry of women—including leadership and teaching ministry by women—might genuinely complement that of the male elders. This does not mean that male elders should abrogate their God-given responsibility to lead. It does mean that elders must be proactive in inviting, including, and involving women—together with all of God's people—in the life and ministry of the church. In our context, there is ample scope to further consider how women might complement the leadership and teaching provided by male elders, and in a range of ways.

Moreover, the case for male only eldership recognises the need to work proactively against abuse in all of its forms, and to create leadership structures and processes in our churches in which women who have suffered abuse, or who are vulnerable in other ways, are protected and cared for. For while it is not the case that the Bible's teaching on the complementary roles of men and women in the family and the church promotes abuse, it can certainly be misused in this way.<sup>68</sup>

Having acknowledged all of this, and recognising that PCNSW/ACT has a great deal of work to do to realise a genuinely healthy complementarianism, the case for male only eldership is grounded not on empirical observations about the life and mission of the church, but on biblical teaching. The teaching of Scripture is good and right, and the life and mission of the church will be best served when we embrace it in all its fullness. Although a move towards male only eldership may seem to work against current cultural trends, it may well be that the goodness and glory of the gospel of Christ is more clearly seen in this counter-cultural witness.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible restricts the office of elder to men. The broader biblical teaching regarding the husband's headship in the family creates the expectation for male headship in the family of God. The Bible then consistently depicts men, and men only, serving as elders in God's church. In this broader context, 1 Timothy 2–3, Titus 1, and 1 Corinthians 14 clearly indicate that the Bible not only *describes* but *prescribes* male eldership. Paul's instructions in these passages are not merely *ad hoc* instructions for particular churches in the first century. They are grounded in God's good design given at creation (1 Tim 2:11–14), in the universal and enduring law of God (1 Cor 14:34), and in the gospel of Christ (1 Tim 3:1). They are instructions given for “all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33), and concern “how one ought to behave in the household of God” (1 Tim 3:15).

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<sup>68</sup> For careful consideration and analysis of a wide range of relevant data, see: S. R. Tracy, “Patriarchy and Domestic Violence,” *JETS* 50.3 (2007): 573–94.

This conclusion does not, in any way, take away from the Bible's clear teaching on the fundamental equality of men and women in creation, sin, redemption, and kingdom service. It merely shows that the different and complementary roles God gave to men and women at creation apply not only in the family, but in the family of God. It is therefore important to recognise that male elders in the family of God are called to the same high standard to which husbands are called in the family. Like the Lord Jesus Christ, they are not to exercise their authority for their own advantage, but for the good of those they serve. Their calling is "to shepherd God's flock" by laying down their lives in the service of their Lord and of his church, proactively seeking the good of God's people, as they wait for "the Chief Shepherd" to return (1 Pet 5:2–3). This will involve caring for God's people—men, women and children—individually and personally, as they share not only the gospel but their lives as well (1 Thess 2:8). It will involve leading gently, like a nursing mother with her baby, like a father with his children (1 Thess 2:7–8; 11–12). By this kind of humble, gentle, sacrificial, Christ-like leadership, elders will earn the trust of those whom they are called to lead.

Corresponding to this calling for elders, the challenge for congregation members—both men and women—is to trust in the Lord, and his provision of godly elders, and to grow in trust of those whom the Lord has appointed over them. Both elders and congregation members need to rely on the Lord to work in them the fruit of his Spirit, so that together they can love each other, encourage each other, bear with each other, forgive each other, and grow to maturity in Christ. This is the spiritual challenge that faces all of us as God's people together.

## **Part 3—Practical implications: Healthy complementarianism and male only eldership in PCNSW/ACT churches**

### **A. Introduction**

The goal of this Part is to outline some of the practical implications of the biblical and theological conclusions reached in Part 2. We aim, first, to rule out some common misunderstandings and sub-biblical distortions of complementarianism. We describe, next, and more positively, what it might look like for PCNSW/ACT churches if the Assembly adopted male-only eldership, together with a commitment to develop a healthy complementarian culture.

### **B. What healthy complementarianism and male only eldership *does not* mean**

In a world marked by sin, God's good design for relationships between men and women in the family and in the church can easily be distorted. It is therefore important to identify what the Bible's teaching about male headship in marriage, and male eldership in the church, *does not mean* for life and ministry in our churches.

**(1). No implication that women have less dignity, worth, or value than men:** The Bible's teaching about the husband's headship in marriage, and male eldership in the church, in no way implies that women have less dignity, worth, or value than men. The Bible's teaching—that all people, men and women, are created in God's image, and that all Christians are being remade in God's image through their union with Christ by the Spirit—categorically rules out any implication that men are superior to women, or women inferior to men. There are not two classes of people, and there are not two classes of Christians. We are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

**(2). No implication that women only have value as wives and mothers:** The Bible's teaching about men and women also does not imply that women only have value as wives and mothers. Certainly, the Bible celebrates these roles as part of God's good design. Nevertheless, the fundamental value of all people—women as well as men—rests not in their relationships they have with others, or in the things they do, no matter how good and noble, but in God's love for all that he has made (Ps 145:9), and in God's costly redemption of those whom he has chosen to save (John 3:16; 1 Pet 1:18–19).

**(3). No implication that women are less gifted or competent than men:** The Bible's teaching about men and women also does not indicate, or imply in any way, that women are less gifted or competent than men. The Bible affirms a complementary difference between the sexes, indicating that men and women have unique contributions to make to God's purposes in the world. It also emphasises that men and women need each other, especially in marriage and the church, and that humanity as a whole, and God's people in particular, will only reach its God-given goal as men and women work together. While the God-given roles of men and women are not interchangeable, they are both indispensable. Moreover, several biblical examples make it clear that women are fully capable of doing work more commonly completed by men (e.g. Deborah and Jael, Priscilla). The New Testament makes clear that *all* of God's people are uniquely gifted to play their part in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7). If “the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:21), certainly no man in the church can say to any woman, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, we will only grow up together into maturity in Christ “when *each part* is working properly” (Eph 4:16).

**(4). No headship and submission outside the God-ordained roles and offices:** The Bible's teaching about the husband's headship in marriage and the family and male-only eldership in the church does not mean that every Christian man is head of every Christian women, or that every Christian woman is to submit to every Christian man. The God-given order of creation certainly affects all of our relationships as men and women, but the specific dynamic of leadership and submission is limited to the roles of husbands and fathers with their wives and children in the family,

and to the office elder-overseers with church members in the family of God. Each husband is to lead his own wife and children in the family, but his leadership does not extend beyond this sphere to other women or children in the church. Each wife is to submit to her own husband, but she is not called to submit to other men merely because they are men. Single men, likewise, have no authority over others in the church simply because they are men, and single women are not called to submit to any man simply because he is a man. The elders are to lead the church, and all church members—men, women, and children—are called to submit to their leadership.

**(5). No absolute limitation of decision-making to men:** The leadership of the husband in the family, and of the male elders in the church, means that men will take the lead in decision making in both spheres. In the church, male only eldership will mean that only men will have the right to vote in sessions, presbyteries and assemblies. This, however, does not mean that all decision-making is to be limited to men. Good leaders always seek to involve others in their decisions. Godly husbands will regularly speak with their wives, learn from their wives, and rely on the wisdom of their wives, as together they make decisions in family life. Indeed, husband and wife together may also, when appropriate, engage children in family decision-making processes. In the same way, godly elders will regularly and proactively seek to engage other church members—men, women, and (as appropriate) children—as together they make decisions about the life and mission of the family of God (cf. Acts 15:22). Moreover, there are other decision-making bodies beyond and outside the courts of the church—Deacons, Committees of Management, Committees of Assembly, other leadership teams in the local church. Women may rightly play an important part in all of these. Further, the Bible's teaching about male only eldership in no way requires or implies that the elders' deliberations and decisions ought to be secret or hidden from the rest of the church. While Christian prudence, and care for people, requires that some pastoral discussions and decisions be made in private, there is no biblical reason why all eldership discussions and decisions should be made in private, or not communicated to the church.

**(6). No absolute prohibition on women providing leadership in the church:** The responsibility of the elders to provide the overall leadership to the church does not mean that women cannot provide any leadership. Under the general oversight of the elders, there is no biblical reason why other church members—women as well as men—should not take on significant leadership roles, and exercise responsibility for specific areas of ministry within church life. Certainly, there is no biblical reason why the ministry of women in the church should be limited to a small set of stereotyped activities (children's ministry, flower rosters, food preparation). Women, as well as men, may be ordained and serve as deacons, or be elected as managers on the Committee of Management. Beyond all this, women as well as men, can and should exercise significant responsibility in church life for a whole range of activities—everything from music ministries in gathered worship through to local evangelism and world missions.

**(7). No absolute prohibition on women teaching men or on men learning from women:** The responsibility of the elders to provide the authoritative teaching in the family of God does not entail any absolute prohibition on women teaching men (including elders), or on men learning from women. In Scripture, women serve as prophetesses, pray and prophesy in church, and are (of course!) included in the general commands to all of God's people to teach each other. Priscilla (with Aquila) instructed Apollos in the faith. These biblical texts make it clear that women can and should teach men, and that men can and should learn from women. We need each other. Godly men (including elders) will, therefore, be eager to discuss Scripture with their mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and sisters-in-Christ, expecting to learn from them. Godly women, likewise, should not be shy about offering their insights into God's word in a wide range of contexts, including discussions at the dinner table, over coffee, in mixed Bible studies, in lectures, and more. Beyond those informal opportunities for teaching and learning, there is also ample scope for women to teach others (including men) in a range of more formal ministries, such as teaching in Christian education contexts, writing books and blogs, and more. Both God's particular churches and his universal church are enriched as both men and women share their biblical wisdom and insight.

**(8). No change to the current situation regarding preaching and leading worship in PCNSW/ACT churches:** The Bible's teaching regarding male only eldership is related to the question of who preaches and leads worship in church. The Bible's concern, however, is primarily with rightly ordered relationships rather than with the act of preaching or teaching understood on its own. Among those who advocate for male only eldership, a range of views exist regarding what implications, if any, this has for women preaching and leading worship. The GANSW Code assigns responsibility for preaching and leading gathered worship in each congregation to the inducted minister, who is accountable to the presbytery (Code 4.30–31). Ministers are free to invite others to preach and lead worship, including women, at their own discretion. If GANSW were to adopt male only eldership, this situation would remain unchanged.

**(9). No endorsement of prescriptive gender stereotypes, including for the wives of ministers and elders:** The Bible's teaching on men and women provides no justification for the rigid application of prescriptive gender stereotypes. While the Bible certainly affirms and celebrates the complementary difference between men and women, it also allows for a range of faithful expressions of masculinity and femininity across different cultures and individuals. This is particularly important to remember in relation to the wives of ministers and elders. The Bible gives no job description for "elder's wife." The wives of ministers and elders certainly play a significant role in church life. There is, however, no biblical prescription for how such women are to serve. It is good and right, therefore, that the wives of ministers and elders support their husbands, and exercise their own ministry in the church, in a range of different ways.

**(10). No room for abuse:** The Bible's teaching cannot rightly be used to justify any kind of abuse, whether verbal, physical, sexual, emotional, financial, or abuse of any other kind. Although it is tragically true that some men have used the Bible's teaching about male headship to justify their sinful behaviour, the Bible—in fact—nowhere provides any justification for such abuse, but rather condemns it.

### **C. What healthy complementarianism and male only eldership *should* and *might* involve in PCNSW churches**

What, then, might it look like for the PCNSW/ACT to embrace the Bible's teaching regarding male only eldership, together with a robust biblical understanding of healthy relationships between men and women? The answer to this question will, necessarily, involve a combination of some common features—those which stand at the heart of biblical teaching regarding men and women—and a broad outline of biblical patterns and possibilities which can be applied in different ways in different contexts. While it may be tempting to be more prescriptive than Scripture, this temptation must be avoided. Since Scripture is "the rule of faith and life," we must not impose on each other anything beyond what is written, or which flows "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.2, 6; cf. WCF 20.2). A "healthy complementarianism" will always share some basic common features, but will also look quite different in practice as it is worked out in different cultures, churches, and families. Each marriage and family, and each team of elders with their congregation, need to determine—under God—how to apply the Bible's teaching in their own context. In what follows, then, we offer four things ministers, elders, and sessions *should* do, eleven things ministers, elders, and sessions *might consider* doing, and four things presbyteries and Assembly *might consider* doing. This list is indicative rather than exhaustive. Apart from the first four points, it suggests patterns and possibilities, rather than prescriptions.

**Ministers, elders, and sessions**, in their different responsibilities and capacities, *should* do the following:

**(1). Affirm and teach, by word and example, that God created all people in his image with equal dignity, worth, and value:** This fundamental biblical truth applies, of course, not only to men and women, but also to the unborn, the young, and the old, to those who enjoy full health and

to those who are sick, or who live with disability, to those who are wealthy and to those who are in need, to those in the majority culture, and those who belong to various kinds of minorities, to those who are righteous, and to those who are living in unrepentant sin. Ministers and elders teach the truth that God created all people in his own image not only by their words but also by their example—by the way they treat all people, regardless of their age, sex, class, ethnicity, or status. In view of the particular focus of this paper, it is vitally important that male ministers and elders treat women and girls with honour and respect, both in their public teaching and in their private conversations and actions.

**(2) Affirm and teach, by word and example, that God created men and women as different and complementary:** Ministers and elders may help to promote a healthy complementarianism by explicitly teaching about God’s good design for men and women in the family and in the church. Such teaching can be provided in various formal settings, such as in preaching, Christian education classes, Bible studies, and marriage preparation and enrichment courses. It can also be provided in a range of informal ways, such as in casual conversations over morning tea, or in one-to-one discipleship relationships. It is again important to recognise that ministers and elders teach not only by their words but also by their example.

In teaching about God’s good design for men and women, ministers and elders should be careful to distinguish between the Bible’s teaching, and cultural applications and expressions. Since the Bible’s teaching about men and women often challenges our cultural assumptions about gender roles, ministers and elders need to “keep a close watch” on their own “life and teaching” (1 Tim 4:16) in this regard. In particular, male ministers and elders who have children must be careful to heed Paul’s instruction to “fathers” to be proactive in raising their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:14), rather than following the common cultural trend of considering child raising to be exclusively “women’s work”. They will then be in a better position to encourage other fathers in the congregation to do likewise. This, again, can take many forms. It might include everything from formal training for fathers in how to lead family devotions, through to a quiet word to a young father to be engaged with the kids during the sermon so that his wife can focus on listening to the word of God.

**(3). Take the lead in creating the conditions in which *all* of God’s people under their care—men, women, and children—can grow together towards maturity in Christ:** Ministers and elders, working together in the session, have the responsibility of leading the congregation. Such leadership can be well defined as creating the conditions in which *all* of God’s people—men, women, and children—under their care can flourish.<sup>69</sup> This requires significant thought and care and can involve a wide range of things, including: (a). structuring church life in ways that allow men and women to participate fully in the life of the church; (b). proactively engaging men and women to consider how they might fruitfully use their God-given gifts in the service of God’s kingdom; (c). proactively taking interest in, and responsibility for, specific ministry to women and children; (d). regularly asking, “are we giving women opportunities to meaningfully participate in church life?” (e). not taking women for granted, for example, by assuming that women will care for children while men attend meetings or Bible studies.

**(4). Build trust with congregation members, both women and men:** A central challenge that faces ministers and elders is to build trust with congregation members, both women and men. When congregation members know that those who lead them are good and godly men, who are actively seeking their good, they are better able to trust those leaders, to support their initiatives, and to submit to their decisions. A healthy complementarianism, then, will be cultivated when ministers and elders seek to build personal relationships with congregation members—both women and men. This is the example set by the “Good Shepherd” who knows the sheep and is known by them (John 10:14). It is also the example set by the apostles, who ministered “from house to house” (Acts 5:43;

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<sup>69</sup> See <https://gospelleadership.com/article/33148-leadership-foundations-for-christian-leaders>

20:20), and who shared with God's people not only the gospel of God but their lives as well, being gentle with them, as a father with his children, and a nursing mother with her baby (1 Thess 2:7–12). This kind of personal leadership is also implied in 1 Timothy 3:3–5, where the overseer-elder's relationship with his family is the test of whether he is fit to lead in church, and in 1 Peter 5:3, where elders are to watch over "those entrusted to their care," and in Hebrews 13:17, where leaders are to give an account for the souls of those they lead. Ministers and elders, therefore, must not lead from a distance, but in the context of personal, loving relationships with those they lead. Moreover, ministers and elders, working together in the session, must give careful thought to how to build trust with the congregation—by the example they set, by their willingness to listen and engage, by their transparency in communication, and by their reliability in following through.

**Ministers, elders, and sessions**, in their different responsibilities and capacities, *might* also consider the following actions:

**(5). Invite others, both women and men, to participate in speaking roles in gathered worship:** Since the minister is responsible for public worship (Code 4.30–31), it particularly falls to him to consider how other people might fruitfully contribute to gathered worship. While each minister will work this out in different ways, according to his own convictions and context, there does not seem to be any biblical reason to limit speaking roles in gathered worship to men (Part 3 above). Ministers might, therefore, consider inviting both men and women to participate in a range of speaking roles in gathered worship, including Bible readings, prayers, singing, interviews, testimonies, and announcements. Ministers might also consider a range of other, more creative, ways of inviting women and men to participate in speaking roles in gathered worship. For example, women and men could be provided with a transcript or outline of the sermon before Sunday, and asked to prepare and then deliver a brief response after the sermon, as a way of helping the whole congregation to consider their own response to God's word.

Regarding preaching and leading in gathered worship, we have argued that the Bible restricts the office of elder to men, while also noting that the Bible is primarily concerned with rightly ordered relationships within the family of God, rather than with the act of preaching or teaching abstracted from those relationships (Part 3). The preaching of the word of God and the leading of gathered worship are, of course, the most significant teaching moments in the life of any particular congregation. For this reason, many of those who hold to male only eldership also hold that only the minister and elders should preach or lead gathered worship. On this understanding, preaching and leading gathered worship are a primary means by which the minister and elders exercise their God-given responsibility to authoritatively declare and defend the gospel together with the whole counsel of God. Others who hold to male only eldership, however, consider that it may be appropriate for others to preach and lead worship, under the general oversight of the minister and elders. The Code assigns the "conduct" of "public worship" and "the right of admission to the pulpit...exclusively to the minister" (Code 4.30–31). It therefore currently falls to each minister to decide whom he will invite to preach and lead worship. This paper has not discussed, and does not recommend any change to this current practice.

**(6). Proactively engage others, women and men, in the church's decision making processes:** The minister and elders, working together in the session, are responsible for overseeing and directing the congregation in its life and mission. Good leadership, however, always involves proactively listening to those who are being led, and engaging them, as appropriate, in decision making processes. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem, for example, engaged "the whole church" in their important decision regarding the freedom of the gospel (Acts 15:22).

Although the session is, by default, a closed court, it is also free to "hold open meetings when it sees cause" (Code 4.17). Sessions are, therefore, free to meet with others in the congregation, both men and women. There would seem to be wisdom in doing so on a regular basis. Sessions, for example, may meet regularly with the COM, or with the deacons, or with other groups of leaders in

the church, all of which may include women. Some sessions may decide to establish a team of senior women in the church, and to meet with them regularly to discuss important matters facing the congregation. Given the value of such meetings, the recommendations below (Part 4) include a recommendation to amend the Code to make session meetings open by default, while reserving session's right to close the meeting when necessary.

Beyond this, sessions can involve the whole congregation, men and women, in important decisions facing the life and mission of the church. This, too, can be achieved in a range of ways. At the most basic level, sessions can communicate regularly with the congregation, via announcements in church on Sunday, or via email, or by other means, regarding the regularity of their meetings, and the public items on their agenda. This practice helps to create a healthy culture of transparency and to engage the congregation to join in prayer and informal conversation regarding important issues facing the life and mission of the church. More formally, sessions can organise meetings of different kinds, to engage the congregation, including men and women, in decision making processes. While the Code requires an Annual Congregational Meeting (Code 1.23–35), it also allows for the session to call other formal meetings of the congregation as need arises (Code 1.17–22). The session is also free to convene informal meetings of the congregation, or sub-groups within it, to discuss and workshop all manner of issues, as it sees fit. While such meetings can be overdone, when managed well, they often result in better decisions and outcomes, and help to create a sense of shared mission and purpose among the congregation.

**(7). Entrust others, women and men, with leadership responsibility for specific areas of ministry:** The minister and elders, working together in the session, hold overall responsibility for leading the congregation. There is, however, ample scope for others, men and women, to be entrusted with leadership responsibility for specific areas of ministry. This can include: diaconal ministry, the Committee of Management, men's ministry, women's ministry, children's and youth ministry, small groups ministry, music ministry, local mission and evangelism, global mission, fundraising, playgroups, school holiday clubs, and more. There is wisdom in sessions creating discrete areas of ministry within the church's overall life and mission, and in entrusting these to appropriately gifted and godly people—both men and women. Here again, sessions have the opportunity to work against unhelpful gender stereotypes by inviting women to take leadership roles in a wide range of different ministries, not only in those relating to other women, children, and hospitality, while also inviting men to take responsibility in some of those areas. The ideal model of ministry is one where both men and women are actively participating together across the life of the church.

**(8). Entrust others, women and men, with pastoral and teaching responsibilities both within and beyond the local church:** The authoritative teaching ministry, and the overall pastoral responsibility for the congregation, belongs to the minister and elders. There is, however, ample scope for ministers and elders to train and equip others, both men and women, to exercise various other pastoral and teaching responsibilities within and beyond the congregation. The Lord gifts his church with “teachers” beyond the minister and elders, and Paul specifically instructs the older women to teach the younger women (Tit 2:3–4). Thus, both men and women may be involved in teaching Christian education classes, Sunday school groups, and small group Bible studies, as well as teaching in men's ministries, women's ministries, kids' clubs, youth ministries, and in SRE in schools. Different ministers and elders will have different convictions about whether women should be invited to teach mixed adult groups. Each session needs to consider this question for themselves. Nevertheless, whatever is decided on this particular issue, it is possible to create multiple opportunities in any given congregation for women to exercise significant teaching and pastoral ministries.

**(9). Establish deacons—female and male—to serve the congregation:** The GANSW Code now includes robust biblical provisions which allow sessions and congregations to ordain and induct deacons for ministry within and beyond the congregation. Both men and women may be ordained and inducted as deacons, and assigned to various kinds of ministry (Code 2.01–08). Presbyterian churches have traditionally used deacons for mercy ministries—to care for the practical and material



needs of those who are vulnerable, weak and poor. The Code also allows for deacons to be assigned to other kinds of ministries at the discretion of, and under the direction of, the session. Sessions, therefore, might consider whether ordaining and inducting deacons—both men and women—would be a helpful biblical means of strengthening the ministry of the congregation, including involving women in this formal office within church life.

**(10). Encourage women and men to serve on the Committee of Management:** The Committee of Management is an important ministry within the congregation, taking responsibility for its “temporal affairs” (Code 2.09). Both men and women may be elected to serve on the Committee of Management, including in the roles of “Chair” (by delegation of the moderator of the session), Secretary and Treasurer. Sessions and congregations might, therefore, consider how to proactively encourage appropriately qualified women to stand for election and to serve as managers.

**(11). Teach and train women and men, and proactively encourage women and men, girls and boys, to study Scripture and theology at every level:** The minister and elders are called to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). This equipping applies, of course, to the whole body of Christ—men, women, and children. Ministers and elders, therefore, should be proactive in teaching the whole congregation, and in encouraging all of God’s people to grow in their knowledge of God and of his word. This may, again, take a wide range of forms—everything from Sunday preaching applied to the whole family of God, through Christian education programs for adults and children, and small group Bible studies, to family Bible reading and catechesis. Beyond this, the minister and elders can be proactive in encouraging congregation members—women as well as men—to engage in formal theological study through Christ College, or other theological colleges. Sessions and congregations do well to look for those whom God is raising up to be preachers and teachers of his word—women as well as men—and to encourage and support them, prayerfully and financially, as they undertake theological study in order to be equipped for different kinds of gospel ministry. In this respect, sessions might consider encouraging women as well as men to complete (as appropriate) the PY internship, the METRO program, the Ministry Training for Women (MTW) program at Christ College, and the full range of courses available at Christ College.

**(12). Consider appointing appropriately qualified women to formal roles, whether paid or voluntary, full time or part time:** Sessions and congregations might also consider employing suitably trained and qualified women to work with the minister(s) and elders. Under the current provisions of the Code, churches may employ women who have been commissioned as deaconesses, or other women as supervised pastoral assistants. There are many benefits of having women employed to serve alongside the minister(s) and elders in the work of the gospel in and through the church. Such women can take the lead in teaching and training other women, but their ministry need not be limited to this sphere. Under the session, appropriately trained and qualified women might serve in a range of other capacities, leading the church in local evangelism or global mission, overseeing children’s ministry, co-ordinating mercy ministries, or in many other ways.

**(13). Ensure that vulnerable people, especially women and children, are heard and feel safe within the church community:** Vulnerable women and children, especially those who have suffered abuse at the hands of men, may find it difficult to trust an all male team of ministers and elders, or any one of the ministers and elders individually, even if those men have treated them with love and respect. If the Assembly adopts male only eldership, it seems wise also to develop a clear plan for each session to identify and appoint a mature Christian woman, or a team of mature women, to provide a safe point of contact for vulnerable women and children, and to serve as the Breaking the Silence representative in each congregation.

**(14). Care for women personally and directly, while also encouraging pastoral care for women by women:** Ministers and elders have the responsibility of pastoral care for the whole congregation. It is, therefore, important that ministers and elders proactively develop appropriate pastoral relationships with, and provide pastoral care for, women in the congregation. There is, of

course, need for all such relationships to be completely above reproach, and this requires special wisdom and care. Nevertheless, male ministers and elders should not avoid developing appropriate pastoral relationships with women in the congregation, and should be proactive in getting to know the women under their care, in showing a genuine interest in their lives, in praying for them, and caring for them in other ways. In addition to this, there is also an important place for older and more mature Christian women to provide pastoral care and teaching for younger women in the congregation (Tit 2:3–4). Sessions, therefore, might consider how to foster and encourage such relationships between women within the congregation, and to provide appropriate support for this important ministry.

**(15). Celebrate and honour the important contribution many women make as wives and mothers:** Since God’s good design includes a special role for many women as wives and mothers, it is important that ministers and elders celebrate and honour this God-given calling. This, again, can be done in a range of different ways, both publicly and privately, in everything from interviews with, and prayers for, mothers in gathered worship, through to training sessions for parents (men and women), and quiet words of encouragement. In providing this recognition and encouragement, ministers and elders need also to be mindful of the special calling of some women to serve the Lord in their singleness, and of the pain and heartache of other women who desire to be married, or to have children, but have not received these blessings.

**Presbyteries and Assembly, in their different responsibilities, *might* consider the following:**

**(1). Renew the formal pathway for women to be engaged in paid ministry positions:** PCNSW/ACT currently has a clear pathway for women to be trained, tested, and commissioned, and employed for service as deaconesses. This role, however, has not been taken up by many women in recent years. There is, therefore, an opportunity for the Assembly to give serious consideration of how to renew this formal pathway for women to be theologically trained and engaged in PCNSW/ACT churches.

**(2). Consider how women might be better included in the courts of the church:** The courts of the church (session, presbytery, assembly) are already comprised of a majority of men. If GANSW/ACT adopts male only eldership, these courts will soon be exclusively male. The Assembly, therefore, might consider how to engage women in the discussions and decisions of Assembly and of presbyteries and sessions, and to better communicate about these to women as well as men across PCNSW/ACT congregations. The PCNSW/ACT’s Women’s Ministry Committee has produced a paper on this topic which merits careful consideration.

**(3). Ensure that appropriately qualified women are included in Student Committees and the Candidates Review Panel:** Presbyteries carry the important responsibility of admitting, supervising, examining, and ordaining men as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Since the men ordained into this office play a crucial role in the life of our church, and since leading, teaching, and caring for women is an important part of their calling, it is appropriate that presbyteries identify and engage appropriately qualified women to serve on their student committees, and to bring their perspective to bear during the examination of candidates. The same applies, at the Assembly level, to the Candidates Review Panel.

**(4). Proactively recruit appropriately qualified women to serve on Assembly Committees:** The various standing Committees of the Assembly oversee a wide range of significant ministries (M&M, PTCC, PY, METRO, APWM, PAC, Jericho Road, WMC, PWA, School Councils, Trustees). In God’s good design, men and women need each other to fulfil God’s purposes in the world. It is appropriate that the Assembly committees proactively recruit appropriately qualified women to serve in their ministries, and to benefit from the wisdom, expertise, and experience these women will bring.

## **Part 4—Recommendations for GANSW/ACT July 2022**

[Editorial note: these recommendations were adopted by the Assembly in July 2022]

That GANSW/ACT:

- (1) Send the Healthy Complementarianism paper to presbyteries and sessions for their consideration, and encourage ministers and elders to circulate the paper widely among men and women, to foster discussion in the church about healthy, biblical relationships between men and women, and encourage all interested parties to submit responses to the Elders and Deacons Committee by 31st December 2022, further requesting that responses focus on the following two questions:
  - (i). which, if any, of the recommendations from Part 3 of the Healthy Complementarianism paper should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023?
  - (ii). what, if anything, should the Assembly consider declaring or enacting in 2023 in addition to, or in place of, these recommendations?
- (2) Request the Elders and Deacons Committee to forward submissions to the Women's Ministry Committee, and other relevant GANSW Committees, and to collaborate in bringing recommendations to Assembly 2023 designed to strengthen healthy biblical relationships between men and women in PCNSW/ACT churches.
- (3) Request the Elders and Deacons Committee to bring an overture to Assembly 2023 to amend the Code to specify that future elders must be male, while preserving the rights and privileges of existing female elders.