nd imaging things on its own. Believers thus must always be willing to subject experience to the light of Scripture. The contemporary charismatic gifts are not consistent with the New Testament and on this basis must be ruled out, however impressive they seem to some who practice them.

Several other considerations support this position. First, many who supposedly experience charismatic gifts do so in environments that are emotionally charged and in which there is a social pressure to manifest such gifts. Second, the so-called charismatic gifts are occasionally found in non-Christian religions as well as in Christianity. For example, some form of glossolalia ("speaking in tongues") has been found in ancient Greek religions, the early Mormons, and certain primordial African tribes. As with contemporary charismatic practices, such religious experiences have little in common with the charismatic gifts of which Paul speaks. These nonbiblical "gifts" are merely psychological phenomena, at best, or demonic mimicking of the true gifts, at worst.

Further Reading


Posing the Question

Christina knew the evening’s conversation would be interesting, to say the least. Recently graduated from a Christian liberal arts college and home for the summer, Christina had asked her pastor to stop by that evening. Tonight was the night she would tell her parents and her pastor just what God had been doing in her heart with regard to future ministry. Tonight was the night she would tell them that she had a strong sense of calling to the pastoral ministry and that she planned to start seminary in the fall. Her dream was to fulfill the role of senior pastor in a church one day.

They all listened intently as she shared her pilgrimage with them. When she finally asked for their feedback, the responses were far from unanimous. Her pastor began: “Christina, I have watched you grow as a Christian from the time you were a little girl. Your heart for God and your passion for his kingdom have always been evident in your life. I am so excited that you want to minister within the church in a full-time capacity. However, the Bible teaches that the particular role you are aspiring to—that of senior pastor—is to be reserved for male ministers. In passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12–15, the apostle Paul is very clear about this matter.”
men and women have equal dignity, worth, and responsibility before God. This is why historically the status of women has almost always improved wherever Christianity has been received.

However, this is not to claim that men and women have identical functions, according to Scripture. God created the male-female distinction for a reason: They are to complement, not to replicate, one another. This functional differentiation is obvious biologically, but it is also taught in Scripture. Among other things, Scripture teaches that God's design is for men to have primary spiritual authority in the church.

The Biblical Argument

The Bible declares that God created woman to be a “helper” and “partner” of man (Gen. 2:18). It is important to notice that Adam was given the mandate to care for the Garden before Eve was created (Gen. 2:15). Eve was to share in this mandate (Gen. 1:28), but she was to do so as a complementary helper to Adam (Gen. 2:18). Adam alone was directly commanded by God to rule the earth. Hence, Adam bore primary responsibility for carrying out the mandate (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:17-19; cf. Rom. 5:12, 17-19). This functional differentiation between man and woman was reiterated even more intensely after the fall, for the Lord said that Eve shall "desire" Adam, and he shall "rule" over her (Gen. 3:16).

The leadership role of man is assumed throughout the Old Testament. For example, only males were permitted to appear before the Lord at the three great feasts each year (Deut. 16:16-17), and only males were allowed to serve as priests before the Lord (Exodus 28-29; Leviticus 8-9). Since only priests were allowed to teach the law (Lev. 10:11), it is clear that this restriction implied that only males were allowed to give spiritual instruction.

Some suggest that this restriction was merely part of the law of the Old Testament, which was done away with after the coming of Christ. As a matter of fact, however, the restriction is applied and explicitly reiterated throughout the New Testament. It is not without significance that Jesus chose twelve men to be the foundational spiritual leaders of the new community of God's people. When Jesus sent out seventy people to further his ministry, he sent all men (Luke 10:1-16). When he gave his Great Commission to "teach" all that he had commanded, he was speaking to his male apostles (Matt. 28:16-20). Some suggest that Jesus was simply acquiescing to the culture of his day by retaining this restriction, but the suggestion carries little weight. Jesus was perfectly willing to be radically countercultural when he wanted to be (e.g., Matt. 5:21-48; Mark 3:1-6).

The teaching that men alone are to be spiritual leaders is strongly reiterated by the apostle Paul on a number of occasions. Like Jesus, Paul restricts leadership roles to men. An overseer, Paul says, must be "the husband of one wife" and must "manage his own family well" (1 Tim. 3:2, 4 NIV). Deacons also must be "men worthy of respect" who are "the husband of one wife" (3:8, 12 NIV).

The Center and Its Contrasts

When it comes to the issue of gender in regard to the church, evangelical Christians agree on a number of foundational convictions. First, there is the acknowledgment that both genders are created in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:26-27) and thus that both males and females are of equal dignity, value, and worth. Second, there is the shared belief that since all Christians—male and female—have the Holy Spirit within them, all believers are gifted by God for ministry within the body of Christ. With this diversity of gifts come numerous possible ministry callings. The question that divides evangelicals is this: Is it appropriate for women to aspire to leadership roles within the church that will place them in positions of authority over men?

This question emerged in many sectors of the twentieth-century church. The Roman Catholic Church, continuing its tradition, allows only males to be ordained to the priesthood. In the 1990s, however, the Church of England opened the door to women's ordination. Evangelical denominations remain divided on this issue. Throughout the twentieth-century, Pentecostal churches tended to support the idea of women in pastoral roles. A number of conservative denominations, however, have retained the idea that ordained pastors should be men.

Two evangelical organizations dedicated to these issues have emerged in recent years. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood champions the complementarian view. Males and females have different, complementary roles in the church (and at home); and leadership roles in the church are reserved for males only. Christians for Biblical Equality, on the other hand, holds to an egalitarian view. Church leadership roles and roles in the home are determined by gifting rather than by gender.

The following two essays defend each of these two perspectives.

Created Equal, with Complementary Roles
(The Complementarian View)

In sharp contrast with the thinking and practices of most cultures throughout history, the Bible emphasizes that men and women are equal in God's eyes. Both are made "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). The Bible proclaims that
Paul's convictions are expressed even more explicitly in other passages. One of the strongest is 1 Corinthians 11:3–16. In this context, Paul confronts certain women who apparently had mistakenly concluded that “freedom in Christ” meant freedom to do away with the functional difference between men and women. The proof of this, for Paul, was that Corinthian women were praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered (1 Cor. 11:5). To counter this, Paul appeals to God’s pre-fallen, creational design.

I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. . . . For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:3–5, 7–10a

We may agree that the issue of covering or not covering one’s head is cultural. An uncovered head is no longer a sign of headship for men, nor is a covered head a sign of submission for women. But the teaching that men are to be spiritual leaders and that women are to submit to their leadership is not cultural in this passage, for Paul grounds it in how God originally created men and women. “Man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.” He concludes, “For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.” How female submission is expressed is cultural. That it needs to be expressed, however, is not.

Several chapters later Paul makes another application of this same principle when he instructs the Corinthians that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34). Whatever else Paul meant in this passage, it cannot be denied that he explicitly validates the teaching of the Old Testament that men alone are to be spiritual teachers. He makes this very connection when he adds, “as the law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34).

This teaching is repeated, just as explicitly, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. As in Corinthians, it seems that certain women in Timothy’s congregation were mistakenly drawing the conclusion that freedom in Christ meant overturning the functional differentiation between men and woman concerning spiritual headship. As a result, Paul writes:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

1 TIMOTHY 2:11–14

Again, it is clear that Paul is not giving a culturally relative teaching in this passage, for he appeals to God’s creational design to ground his teaching. “Adam was formed first.” This implies that his instruction was intended for all Christians, in all cultures, at all times.

The sum of the matter is that while men and women are equal in terms of their worth and dignity, they are gifted and called by God to carry out different roles. Men are called to be spiritual leaders; women are not. There is no value judgment in this differentiation. Men are in no respect superior because they are called to be spiritual leaders, any more than women are superior because they are able to bear children. The different roles are to complement, not compete with, one another. Nevertheless, the differentiation is important, as is evidenced by the fact that Scripture reiterates it frequently and in strong terms.

Supporting Arguments

1. The Trinity. The concept of complementary differences between equals is rooted in God himself. The Bible teaches that God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is eternally distinct from the others but equal to the others, for each is fully God. Yet there is a natural hierarchy within the Godhead. The Father commands the Son and the Spirit (e.g., John 5:19; 30:16; 13:3). The Father sends the Son and the Spirit (e.g., John 7:28–29; 14:16–17, 26). They willingly and lovingly submit to the Father’s will (e.g., Matt. 26:39–42). Never does the Father receive commands from the Son or the Spirit. Never is the Father sent by the Son or the Spirit. And never does the Father submit to the will of the Son or the Spirit. Still, the Father is not better than the Son or the Spirit, for each is fully and completely God. The Father is simply different. The three work in perfect harmony with each other, because their roles are complementary.

2. Church History. The complementarian view has been the dominant view throughout church history. The church has always encouraged and valued the significant contributions of women in many areas of ministry, but the church has almost always forbidden women leaders until recent times.

3. Social Disorder. One contributing factor to the problems our society presently faces is the loss of traditional male and female roles. Both in families and in churches, order and stability are compromised when God’s design for the different roles for men and women is tossed aside for the sake of a more “modern” egalitarian perspective.

Responding to Objections

1. This view is culturally conditioned. The most frequent objection to the view that males alone should be spiritual heads is that the New Testament texts that sup-
port this view are culturally conditioned. It is argued that Paul was dealing with new female converts, most of whom were Gentiles, who lacked formal education. Indeed, it seems evident that some of these women were coming directly out of pagan contexts (including temple prostitution in Ephesus, where Timothy was pastor). Therefore, it makes sense for Paul to forbid women teachers in these contexts. But his words should not be universally applied to all times and places.

Admittedly, there are culturally specific elements in Paul's teaching. The issue of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 and the issue of women wearing jewelry or braided hair in 1 Timothy 2:9 are obviously culturally relative. However, every culturally specific issue has an underlying universally relevant principle. In both passages, the underlying principle concerns women forsaking their God-given place. Evidence of this is that in both passages Paul grounds his teaching in God's design for creation (Adam was created first) and in historical fact (Eve was deceived first) (1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:13-14). Neither God's design nor historical facts are culturally conditioned.

2. Women make effective leaders. While it cannot be denied that at times God has used women to preach the gospel and even to pastor churches, three considerations caution against interpreting this fact as evidence that the biblical ideal for male headship has been overturned.

First, experience should never be used to override the teachings of Scripture. Scripture must be used to interpret experience, not vice versa. Therefore, the fact that women have at times been used by God in positions of spiritual authority over men should not alter the meaning of biblical texts that clearly teach this is not God's ideal will.

Second, and closely related to this, throughout biblical history God has demonstrated his willingness to accommodate his will to imperfect circumstances when necessary. God was at times willing to use pagan kings, false prophets, even donkeys to speak his Word and further his purposes when other more appropriate means were not available. So, too, God has at times acquiesced to using women as spiritual leaders when men were unwilling to fulfill the task.

Finally, while there is a diversity of opinion about this matter, many complementarians interpret the New Testament prohibitions regarding women in leadership to mean only that women should not function as the top spiritual leader and teacher of a congregation. There are many other contexts in which they can teach, preach, or evangelize. Many of the outstanding achievements of women throughout church history fall within what many complementarians consider to be biblical parameters.

The Irrelevance of Gender for Spiritual Authority
(The Egalitarian View)

Like a missionary going to a foreign culture, God must temporarily acquiesce to many things he does not approve of in order to gradually move the world in a direction he does approve of. For example, God's ideal from the moment of creation was monogamy. But throughout history, God has tolerated and worked with polygamous cultures to transform them over time (e.g., Genesis 29). Similarly, God's ideal has always been freedom for all people made in his image. Yet for centuries God tolerated and worked within systems of slavery in order to eventually overthrow them (e.g., Eph. 6:5-9).

The servile role of women to men, especially in regard to spiritual leadership, is another aspect of fallen culture that God wants to overthrow. God tolerated and worked within the patriarchal cultures of both the Old and the New Testaments, but his ideal—and thus the ideal the church should be striving for—is for leadership to be based on gifts, not gender.

The Biblical Argument

Admittedly, some verses teach that women are to submit to men and expressly forbid women to exercise spiritual authority over men (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:11-14). But these passages do not express God's will for all time. If this teaching constituted part of the created order and God's ideal, the Bible would not contain counterexamples. As matters stand, however, the Bible contains many examples of women exercising spiritual authority over men. Following are ten such examples.

1. It often goes unnoticed, but God incorporated the songs and statements of a number of women into his inspired authoritative Scripture (e.g., Exod. 15:21; Judges 5: Luke 1:46-55; etc.). In as much as the whole Word of God has authority over believers, these passages constitute examples of women having spiritual authority over all (including men) who read them.

2. Women were given the same command to "rule" over creation as were men. "So God created humankind in his image, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen. 1:27-28, emphasis added).

3. God commanded Abraham to obey his wife, Sarah (Gen. 21:12). If female submission was part of God's creational design, this command would constitute a violation of authority.

4. Miriam is mentioned as a leader of Israel alongside Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4). Miriam was also a noted worship leader (Exod. 15:20-21).

5. Deborah served as an admirable judge and leader over Israel (Judges 4-5). This example shows that it is acceptable for a woman who is so gifted to exercise strong leadership over men and women alike.

6. Huldah was a prophetess consulted by both men and women (2 Kings 22:14). Noadiah and Anna are also depicted as prophetesses who could teach (Neh. 6:14; Luke 2:36-38). Indeed, a portion of Anna's teaching about Christ is found in Scripture (hence, it has authority over all who read it). More generally, one evidence of the outpouring of the Spirit was that "your sons and daughters [would] prophesy... Even... slaves, both men and women..."
shall prophecy” (Acts 2:16–18). It is not surprising, therefore, that Philip’s four daughters each possessed the “gift of prophecy” (Acts 21:8–9). Nor is it surprising to find that Paul allowed women to prophesy in church, as long as they kept their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:4–5).

7. God used women as the first Christian evangelists, proclaiming (to the male apostles) the truth that Jesus had risen from the tomb (John 20:16–18).


9. In Romans 16:1–12, Paul lists a number of women involved in Christian service. Phoebe is called a “deacon” (vv. 1–2); Priscilla is given equal status to her husband, Aquila, in their kingdom work (vv. 3–4); Mary is described as a hard worker among believers (v. 6); Andronicus and Junia are said to be “prominent among the apostles” (v. 7); and Tryphosa and Persis are described as “workers” in the Lord (v. 12).

10. Paul refers to Euodia and Syntyche as coworkers—as much so as Clement or any man (Phil. 4:2–3).

Again, if it were part of God’s redemptive ideal that women never exercise spiritual authority over men, Scripture would not contain these counterexamples. The wealth of examples proves that the prohibition against women serving as spiritual leaders is cultural, not timeless.

While God’s willingness to accommodate himself temporarily to fallen culture is expressed in the prohibition passages, God’s ideal will be expressed in passages such as Galatians 3:28. Here Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It seems evident that restricting roles on the basis of gender is no more justified in the body of Christ than restricting roles on the basis of race or class. There are cultural situations—the first century, for example—in which such restrictions must be fact, but they need not always be the church works against as it strives to realize God’s ideal in the world.

Related to this, it is important to note that whenever Paul or anyone else discusses ministry in the church, he speaks of gift-based roles, not gender-based roles. Indeed, the New Testament passages that list gifts do not imply that certain gifts are inextricably connected to a person’s gender—including the gifts of pastoring, teaching, and evangelizing (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:4–31; Eph. 4:11). This absence of gender specificity is hardly what one would expect if indeed the leadership gifts were restricted to men, for the issue of women in leadership was certainly present in New Testament churches (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:1–16; 1 Tim. 2:11–14). Instead, there is the straightforward declaration that “there are varieties of gifts . . . varieties of services . . . activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4–6, emphasis added). Again, the Spirit “allots [gifts] to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor. 12:11). There is no hint that gender has anything to do with the Spirit’s choosing.

While fallen cultures have consistently pigeonholed people according to gender, race, or class, the Spirit of God frees people from these arbitrary restrictions and liberates people to exercise their God-given gifts. As Peter declared so powerfully on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is now being poured out on “all flesh”—with the result that surprising people are going to be used by God in surprising ways. Women and even slave girls, among others, will be used to declare authoritatively and prophetically the wonders of God (Acts 2:16–18).

We are guilty of idolizing fallen culture and quenching the Spirit if we cannot recognize first-century restrictions against women and construe them as part of God’s ideal for all time. It is no different than certain Christians in the past trying to use the Bible’s acceptance of slavery as a justification for its ongoing practice.

Supporting Arguments

1. Reason and experience. Neither reason nor experience support the notion that women cannot be gifted to exercise the highest levels of spiritual authority. There is simply no rationally discernable connection between a person’s gender and his or her natural ability to preach, teach, or lead others. Indeed, the last 150 years have indisputably demonstrated that women can be used by God as outstanding preachers, teachers, evangelists, and pastors.

2. Subordinate by nature? Despite claims to the contrary by complementarians, denying that women have the capacity to exercise spiritual headship presupposes a view of women as essentially inferior to men. A male, by virtue of being female, is deemed to be incapable of carrying out a role that men can carry out. This is not functional subordination but subordination rooted in nature.

Responding to Objections

1. Jesus selected male disciples. Opponents of the egalitarian view often cite Jesus’ selection of twelve men as evidence that the highest level of spiritual authority belongs to men. In response, Jesus’ choice of twelve men was based on cultural expediency and religious symbolism, not a deficiency in the nature of females. That is, in first-century Jewish culture, a woman would have found it impossible to gain widespread respect as a spiritual authority. Not only this, but Jesus was reconstituting the “New Israel” and as such would naturally have chosen twelve men to represent the twelve sons of Jacob (viz., the twelve tribes of Israel). Hence, Jesus’ choice says nothing about his views of the inherent capacities of women.

2. What about Paul’s prohibitions? The main objection against the egalitarian position is that Paul explicitly prohibits women to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:11–14) or even to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34). Since Scripture provides examples of women violating these prohibitions (see above), there must be cultural reasons why Paul made these statements.

Concerning the Corinthian passage, Paul’s prohibition against women speaking in church cannot be taken as absolute for the simple reason that Paul earlier taught that women could pray and prophesy in church, as long as they covered their heads (1 Cor. 11:5). How do we reconcile these statements? It is significant
that immediately after instructing women to keep silent, Paul adds, "If there is anything they [women] desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home" (1 Cor. 14:35). While at the synagogue, women (who were usually denied an education) would have questions about the message. They would disrupt services by asking their more educated husbands (usually sitting across the aisle, as was the custom) what the teacher meant. It seems likely that Paul is addressing this problem at Corinth. His instruction has no application in a cultural situation in which women have the same educational opportunities as men.

Regarding the Timothy passage, two things need be said. First, the context of this instruction offers clues that it is culturally conditioned. Paul says that women should "dress themselves modestly . . . not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes" (1 Tim. 2:9). Few today consider these instructions to be timeless commands. Why then do some assume he is speaking timeless truth in the next sentence when he says women should "learn with full submission" (1 Tim. 2:11)?

Second, the context in which Timothy is pastoring his new church gives further clues to the culturally conditioned nature of Paul's prohibition. We know that women had prominent leadership roles in a religious cult that permeated Ephesus. The center of this cult was the temple of Diana, an enormous structure that was considered one of the seven wonders of the world. Part of the religious function of some of these female spiritual leaders was to engage in ritualistic prostitution. In this context, having newly converted pagan women in leadership positions would have been unwise and would have formed a barrier to the furthering of the gospel. (This is also why Paul restricts the offices of overseers and deacons to men [1 Tim. 3:2, 4, 12].)

But doesn't Paul base his teaching on the fact that "Adam was formed first, then Eve" as well as on the fact that "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived" (1 Tim. 2:14)? On the surface, this instruction is puzzling. What difference does it make that Adam came before Eve? Wouldn't this same logic require that the animals have authority over humans, since they were created before us? And wasn't Adam deceived as much as the woman? Indeed, doesn't Paul elsewhere place the onus of responsibility for the deception on Adam (Rom. 5:12, 17–19)?

The puzzle is removed when Paul's instruction is seen in the light of a common rabbinic understanding of what happened in the Garden. According to this tradition, Adam was at fault for not properly instructing Eve about the dangers and consequences of eating from the forbidden tree. Adam had been created first and had received instruction directly from God. Eve had been created second and was dependent on Adam for this information. This is why she was more vulnerable and also why Adam bore the brunt of responsibility for the fall.

If read in this light, Paul's instruction to Timothy begins to make sense. Paul is appealing to this rabbinic understanding as a rationale for telling Timothy not to allow women in his church to teach. They are in the same position as Eve was and are therefore vulnerable (cf. 1 Tim. 5:11–15, where Paul expands on this vulnerability). This warning would have no application in cultural contexts in which women are afforded as much opportunity to learn as men are and in which there are no negative religious connotations associated with women in leadership.

Further Reading


