

Life Course

10/15/23

## Why Are Our Elders All Men?

[Pray]

Questions: 224-300-0240!

No shift: just teaching on where we've been and where we continue to be.

### Our Cultural Framework

Ours is a pretty wild leadership structure in 2023 (at least in America). Imagine a corporation announcing a policy that they will now restrict their board to men!

But it's not just strange to non-Christians, it's strange to many Christians! Plenty of churches in our area have female elders.

To clarify, not just strange to super liberal Christians who are LGBTQ-affirming and don't believe in hell; it's strange to many Christians *who believe the Bible and study it and cherish it!* Several of the churches we pray for on Sunday mornings have female elders; many Trinity professors believe women should be able to be elders; many of you love God's word but would have no problem if we added a female elder.

So why hasn't North Sub joined all these sincere folks in opening up our eldership to godly, wise, gifted women?

And there are many such women in our church, by the way. Women of character, who meet requirement after requirement for the role. Doctrinally sound, active in shepherding the younger women of the church. It's not like we wouldn't have options if we opened up eldership to women! We've got some stalwart women of God!

And as we look around at churches who have female elders and even female senior pastors, we see them being used by God! How could God use them so powerfully if what they're doing is wrong?

So **what's the deal?** Those who advocate for female eldership have suggested what might be the problem with churches like ours. Maybe our problem is one of these they've suggested:

**Is the problem that we're guilty of refusing to adapt the words of the New Testament to a new context?**

**Is the problem that we're guilty of being blinded by a theological system such that it obscures our view of the Word?**

**Is the problem that that we're guilty of failing to detect progress God's Spirit has intended to bring about in the generations since the New Testament canon was closed?**

Where have we gone wrong? Why did we just revise our constitution and by-laws only to continue to make no provision for female elders at North Sub?

## Our Answer

The short answer is that **we can't find a way to justify female eldership biblically**. And since we believe the Bible has to supersede our instincts, male eldership is a line we've chosen to hold until we're convinced otherwise *from scripture*.

## Where This Ranks

Now to clarify: while our church and our denomination DOES have a position on this that I'm about to articulate, this issue needs to be kept in its proper place.

Some issues are **first order** (creeds) – the faith hangs on these. I can't affirm you as a brother or sister in the Lord if we can't agree on these.

Some issues are **second order** – while genuine Christians disagree on these, the differences are significant enough that it's really tough to have both side-by-side together in the same congregation, practically speaking. So denominations get created based on differences at this second-order level – we'll pray for you on Sunday morning, but it's probably best that you do your thing across town and we'll do our thing over here.

Other issues are **third order** – there's no problem with Christians in the same congregation disagreeing on these issues. Not insignificant, but not significant enough that we can't gladly worship and serve together and pull together in the same direction.

This question of female eldership is second or third order. We don't question the salvation of Christians who disagree with what I'm about to present! We have happily received many as members of our church who would be fine with us having female elders... as long as those folks have affirmed our statement of faith regarding scripture! People have taught and preached in our pulpit who weren't lockstep with us on this; surely plenty of you disagree with what I'm about to present, yet we've partnered together fruitfully and hope to continue to do so for years to come. So this is not "if you're part of this church, you have to believe this!" This is not a Tier 1 question, which is why we don't often make a fuss about it.

Yet... for the next 45 minutes, I'm going to try to persuade you! That's because of what we saw in 1 Cor 1 – agree to agree! Let's seek to think the same on this!

Now, there are at least **two axes** of "thinking the same" on this. We all want to be aiming for the bullseye here.

There's an axis **from too restrictive of women in the church to not taking seriously enough biblical restrictions on women in the church**. Wherever we're supposed to land on that axis, I want our church there.

But there's another axis, too. **Up here is "treating this issue as way more important than it is," and down here is "not taking this issue seriously enough."** Wherever we're supposed to land on that axis, I want our church there!

And so we're all struggling together to try and get right there. I don't know for sure I've got it just right. Even if you disagree with the church's position, I imagine you think you're right, too, as you should.

Here's the thing, though, that we need to acknowledge but hopefully doesn't feel relationally threatening: If we disagree on an issue as binary as "should qualified females be eligible for eldership at North Sub or not?" we can't both be right! Either God wants those women to be eligible or he doesn't. So either I'm off base or you're off base or we're both off base, but let's not pretend like we might both be right.

It shouldn't threaten us, though, to know that some other Christians think we're wrong on this. My deeply held belief is that, by going at it together within the framework of glad fellowship as sisters and brothers, we'll all come out on the other side of this having looked more closely at the scriptures than ever, which hopefully will result in our convergence toward a particular point on this graph. I've moved here over the last 10 years! I imagine there may be more movement over my next 10 years on this issues. I hope we're all open to moving, but only on this basis: "convince me *from scripture*, and I'll be convinced."

### Why a Scripture-First Approach?

Why the Bible before experience or instincts?

We can think of times in history when people started rereading the Bible to be culturally acceptable. Somehow in the 1860s, pastors in Alabama were finding all sorts of ways to use this Bible to justify their continued possession of stolen, involuntary slaves. Folks in the early 1900s found ways to read the Curse of Ham as justifying a hierarchy of the races. We can see in hindsight: it's not that they were taking the Bible too seriously and should have loosened up and realized the Bible's a product of its times – no, they weren't taking the Bible seriously *enough*! But they were convinced they were reading it right, because they had a vested interest in finding a way to read it that would make them culturally acceptable and justify their sin.

We don't want to do that! Now, it's not that the correct interpretation of scripture is always going to be the opposite of whatever the culture thinks – every culture stumbles on some good and true things by God's common grace. But every generation is tempted to reread and re-interpret scripture to make it a little more palatable for their own culture and to excuse the key sins of our age, and we do well to be cognizant of that danger.

That's why our threshold when we approach scripture to answer a question like this is not just "can some Jesus-loving person smarter than me defend this? Then it's okay if it's my position!" This is huge, because I can't tell you how many people I've talked to about this who have articulated some version of **this approach:**

- Smart, godly scholars disagree on this
- Therefore, any of these positions are within the realm of legitimate orthodoxy
- Therefore, I choose the one I like best

This approach has caused so much damage! Martin Luther is antisemitic, therefore antisemitism is legitimate, and his antisemitism resounds with me, so I choose that. John Calvin advocated the death penalty for church discipline, therefore a church-administered death penalty is legitimate, and that resounds with me, so I choose that. Jonathan Edwards defended American slavery, and his conclusions resound with me, so I'm on that team. John Stott said hell doesn't last forever, therefore that position is legitimate, and I would love to believe that hell will eventually end, so I choose that. Do you see why that's such a problematic approach? Luther, Calvin,

Edwards, Stott: they were all probably better pray-ers than I am, closer to God than I am, better interpreters of scripture than I am. Yet they got some things very wrong! Every doctrine was at some point debated, including those first-order ones in our creeds! Our approach can't be "what's my personal favorite of the legitimate positions," but rather, "what do I believe this text is most likely saying?"

"Well I'm going to err on the side of grace." We're going to see in our sermon today that that's what the Corinthians were saying! But Paul rebukes them firmly for that. To be willing to "Err on the side of..." anything is a thin understanding of how harmful ALL error can be. We're inevitably going to err along the way, but every error is dangerous! Let's aim not to err at all!

## **Our Methodology**

So two questions are:

- (1) what is the most plausible reading of the scriptures relevant to this question?
- (2) how do we apply these scriptures in a new time and place? Two different questions.

(1) what is the most plausible reading of the scriptures relevant to this question? (Here we're asking how the original authors intended the original readers to understand and apply these texts.)

Quick defining of terms: egalitarian and complementarian. Here's **our denomination's affirmations and denials**.

**Egalitarian = no roles restricted to males today. Complementarian = some roles restricted to qualified males.**  
Will be helpful shorthand.

Bibliography at your table. Happy to start **where egalitarians want to start this conversation**.

- **The resurrection** – women are the first witnesses and proclaimers. The gospel is entrusted to them (Jn 20:17), first heard on their lips. That's a big responsibility! And has to factor into this conversation.
- Many old **boundary markers broken down in Christ**. Gal 3:27-28 – no more male and female! As soon as we make any distinction between male and female, we have to answer how we're not guilty of violating Gal 3:27-28.
- There seems to have been at least one **apostle** with a female name (Junia, Rom 16:7). Almost certainly **deacons** (Phoebe, Rom 16:1). Why not elders?

Any complementarian understanding of the scriptures has to be able to account for these realities. That said:

- If Jesus appeared to women first because he was so pro-women in leadership, we're left with a challenging question of **why didn't he pick any male apostles** to be part of the 12? Would that have just required a level of bravery he didn't quite have? He was willing to upend people's expectations about just about everything else, but when it came to a new 12 to start a new 12 tribes of Israel, women leaders was just a bridge too far – it would have been too unpopular or culturally unacceptable? Some say so – like "Jesus really wanted to; it's just his hands were tied." But for somebody who refused to let his hands get tied on so many unpopular decisions, why this one?
- If Paul's "no male and female in Christ" means the dissolution of all gender roles, **why can he still so often give specific instructions to men and women as though the distinction remains meaningful?** Same

with Jew and Gentile – in Christ there is no Jew and Gentile! – yet (Rom 2) here’s what needs to be said about the Jew, here’s what needs to be said about the Gentile. All that makes you wonder – what if these Galatians 3 pairings need to be balanced with the rest of scripture for us to understand in what ways distinctions remain and in which ways distinctions have been obliterated?

So we need more than just general principles and narrative examples (as helpful as those may be). We’re in need of some specific guidance on eldership or at least local church leadership. So we go to the texts that speak to it (still asking about original authors and original readers).

- **1 Corinthians 11:3-6** – Distinctions in dress (head coverings). Women praying and prophesying in church! Prophesying would have been short (according to chapter 14), but still an apt word from the Lord to a particular group at a particular moment. Foretelling or forth-telling. Women are doing it in mixed company, and Paul doesn’t bat an eye – just make sure your head is covered while you do.
- **1 Corinthians 14:29-36** – just 3 chapters later, women are to be silent. Can’t be silence for the whole service! Not just because we can’t stomach that, but because *in the same letter*, women were already praying and prophesying. So whatever “be silent” means, it can’t mean “keep your mouth shut all service long and don’t say anything from up front.” That said, “be silent” has to mean *something*. There was some part of the service the Corinthians were supposed to restrict to qualified men, with the women keeping quiet during it. Cross-gender questioning? Maybe. Most likely: weighing of prophecy. Whatever it is, clear limitation to “no male or female” in Corinth – there was some part of the service in which Corinthian women were to remain silent while men spoke.
- **1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9** – written as though these elders are men. Female deacons get their own section! But for elders, seems like just men. Early church didn’t even have a question that this was supposed to be just men – that’s how they practiced eldership. Probably because of...
- **1 Timothy 2:11-15**. “don’t teach a man” can’t mean “never teach a man in any setting,” because Priscilla is teaching Apollos! “Don’t exercise authority over a man” can’t mean “don’t exercise authority over a man in any setting,” because I have yet to meet any church who lives by that. As soon as you introduce one male volunteer into your kids’ ministry, that male volunteer is under the authority of your female kids’ director! So whatever kind of exercising authority (or usurping authority) is prohibited, it’s not a universal sweep. That said, once we’ve inserted all the caveats and qualifications that appropriately give context that soften these words, the words are still there! They’re prohibiting *something*. Timothy’s pastoring in Ephesus, and Paul is telling him *something* the women in his church were not supposed to do.
- And I want to pause there, because these debates go around and around arguing over what “exercise authority” means, or what kind of teaching, and what’s the cultural situation in Ephesus. All important questions, and I’m happy to spend time with anyone going down any of those roads, because there’s no topic I’ve read more on. But at the end of the day, after we’ve given all the reasons why this prohibition may not be as stark or sweeping as it seems, the bottom line is that Paul was restricting *something* from all the women of the church at Ephesus! Whatever he had in mind, Paul was saying “don’t let any women in your church do THAT. Men can do it; women can’t.”
- So to me, it’s essential that we stop right there at that point and clarify before moving any further: what’s the source of my discomfort? Do I have problems with complementarians? Totally get that. There have been some ugly things done and said under that banner. If you’ve got problems with women being unnecessarily kept on the sidelines from valuable ministry, amen. That has been a

problem in the church. But any of us who chafe at eldership today being reserved for males need to ask ourselves: do I *also* honestly have a problem with the apostle Paul? At the end of the day, here he is in 1 Timothy 2 AND 1 Corinthians 14 restricting a whole gender of gifted believers in the church from some ministry he allowed the other gender to do. Whatever was being restricted, whatever reasons he may have had... can I really get on board with someone who would restrict ANYTHING from a whole gender? And say “that is a good word from the Lord”?

- Because if we’re honest, I think a lot of us can take this conversation into the weeds when our problem is really right here, that no explanation can get Paul out of his apparent “sexism.” **Either it’s inherently sexist to say “no women allowed in this ministry” or that’s not inherently sexist.**
  - o Most of the egalitarian writers today, even the ones that want to privilege scripture, argue that any such distinction *inherently* devalues women. But if keeping women from something as a blanket policy inherently devalues women and treats them as unequal, then our disagreement isn’t really what *authentically* means or whether there were female false teachers in Ephesus. Our disagreement back a step from all that - on this question! Because your answer is, “It’s inherently inappropriate” while my answer is, “It’s appropriate if God says it’s appropriate.” See what I mean? If you’ve *predetermined* God *couldn’t* possibly be restricting a whole gender from some ministry, because that would violate what you believe equality to mean, then our difference is really over our doctrine of scripture, not on our doctrine of women in ministry.
  - o If on the other hand, you agree with me that “It could be appropriate if God says it’s appropriate; it’s not *inherently* sexist,” then you’ve reserved the right to say, “It was okay for Paul to do that in his day but wouldn’t be okay today.” But in the meanwhile, all the egalitarian arguments about how we’re violating Galatians 3 “no male or female in Christ” just became irrelevant. Because you just acknowledged it *is* possible to say “no women allowed in X role” *while* honoring Galatians 3 “no male or female in Christ.” Which of course is what complementarians have been saying.
- Personally, I think the most compelling arguments regarding what’s restricted to men **here**: some sort of authoritative teaching. Not that women can never teach men, but he throws the “authority” in here to clarify that it’s the most authoritative teaching of the church that should be handled by qualified men.
- But you don’t have to agree with that interpretation of “teach and exercise authority” – however you understand those words, we all have to answer: even if Paul wrote these words in response to a flurry of female false teachers in Ephesus, let’s grant that for the sake of argument. Does the egalitarian argument really sit any better with us, that Paul responded to *some* problem that only *some* women in the church were causing by stating that *ALL* women in the church should no longer be able to teach? As DA Carson points out, if (as Christian egalitarians claim) Paul responds to *some* women in the church teaching lies by saying, “That’s it, no more women teachers!” THAT is what would be insufferably sexist. A whole gender having to go to time-out because a few members of the gender messed up?
- It seems more likely that a whole-gender restriction isn’t because a few were messing up but because it’s an enduring command across churches.
  - o And that would make sense of what we saw in Corinth – remember that was restrictive too, though it was a different church, different country, different situation. In **1 Cor 14:33-34** Paul

said “this is the way it is in all the churches,” as if to anticipate the question of whether this prohibition was just for this church in their particular circumstance.

- And so, for the first few years I was studying this in depth, I was trying so hard to get cute and reserve a spot for “maybe female eldership, maybe females in the Sunday morning pulpit.” But the bottom line is: yes, it’s hard to know where Paul would have drawn the line.
  - Our Life Courses, our Life Groups: we can debate those questions. We’ve landed on full embrace of female teachers for our Life Courses and Life Groups. Maybe we’re right on that; maybe we’re wrong. That’s another lecture for another day.
  - But if the *highest* authority in the church (eldership) isn’t reserved for qualified males, what authority *is* reserved for males? And if no leadership is reserved for males, didn’t we just effectively erase these chunks of Paul’s teaching?
  - And if the *most* authoritative teaching in the church (the Sunday morning pulpit) isn’t reserved for qualified males, what teaching *is* reserved for males? And if no teaching is reserved for males, didn’t we just turn “I do not permit a woman to teach” into “I always permit a woman to teach”?

But that’s Paul IN HIS CONTEXT.

(2) **What about today?** You say, “I agree that’s what Paul was teaching *for Ephesus*. But that doesn’t mean it’s still supposed to work out that way today!”

After all, it’s not inherently illegitimate to say **“yes NT said X, but today, that shouldn’t be the case.”** Don’t we do that with:

- Holy kiss
- Head coverings
- **No command for slave masters to immediately release their slaves**

So given that starting point that Paul did restrict eldership to males in his time, is male eldership in that **“for all times in all places”** bucket or in the **“holy kiss/head coverings/slavery”** bucket?

- Obviously, one danger is that we’d take anything we don’t like or that doesn’t fit our cultural moment and throw it in the “holy kiss/head coverings/slavery” bucket.
  - That’s why some fundamentalists feel safer pretending that bucket doesn’t exist – because once we acknowledge it’s there, it’s really tempting to throw all sorts of things in there.
  - LGBTQ – would be nice to throw that in there. Hell – I know people who’d be fine identifying with Christianity if it wasn’t for that. Maybe we can just throw it in that bucket!
  - But there has to be some reason for throwing into that bucket besides, “I don’t like that,” or else we’re just acting as our own gods, standing over scripture in judgment instead of letting scripture stand over us.
- The reason I’m not going to greet any of you with a kiss this Sunday is because to do so would actually violate the intent of that command! In our culture, a kiss wouldn’t communicate brotherly affection like it would in these NT churches; it would risk communicating something else. So in order to keep the

command to greet with a holy kiss, I'm gonna give you a hearty handshake! Now you and I have achieved the brotherly affection Paul is after in a way that makes sense in our culture. The handshake is in our culture what the kiss was then.

- Same with head coverings. In a culture in which it was normal for women to wear head coverings and only the women who were really pushing boundaries left the head coverings off in public, Paul's like "leave the head coverings on! don't be the ones throwing off gender distinction or risking communicating sexual availability!" So while some Christian women wear head coverings today, many have determined that to wear a head covering today wouldn't actually achieve what Paul was after in the command. To achieve that same end, women wear wedding rings or take their husband's last name or dress modestly, etc.
- See what's happening when we apply an old command in a new cultural situation? We're effectively asking: what's the enduring thing that's critical no matter what time and place? Once we identify that, now let's think together about the best cultural expression to achieve that timeless, enduring goal.
- Again, we've gotta be disciplined/controlled in that. With sexuality, some have proposed, "Paul's controlling timeless, enduring goal is monogamy, and the modern-day cultural expression of that can be heterosexual or homosexual."
  - o If monogamy *is* Paul's timeless, enduring desire, okay! Let's have that conversation.
  - o But *is* that Paul's controlling timeless, enduring goal in his teachings on sexuality? Or is it something like that sexuality is meant to be an expression of the sort of union across difference inherent to Christ's relationship with the church?
  - o See how we have to be really careful about identifying and asserting these timeless, enduring goals?
- So what about the teachings about male leadership? Granting the egalitarian conviction that the timeless, enduring goal isn't just that males should hold the highest leadership positions... **what's the timeless, enduring goal of those?**
  - o Some egalitarians will say it's something like **"don't disrupt the status quo."** Christianity is going to be perceived as crazy because of our belief in a crucified, resurrected Messiah; don't add to the crazy by disobeying the governing authorities or overturning predominant social structures... just lay low so you won't hurt the witness of the gospel. As such, we're in a new day, it wouldn't disrupt the status quo to have women in leadership anymore, so to keep the enduring principle, we actually NEED to have women elders.
  - o Another possibility presented by egalitarians: **"protect sound doctrine."** Women didn't have access to education, they're then teaching heresies; by shutting them down from teaching, Paul preserves the doctrinal purity of the church. But now in a new day in which we have so many educated women, there's no reason to think that reserving eldership for men would be any advantage in protecting sound doctrine! So the way to keep the underlying principle today is to choose as elders the most doctrinally sound folks, whether men or women.

And of course, we haven't spent any time engaging with the majority of egalitarians who just say "Paul was a sinful man of his times, bound by the cultural prejudices of his day; the Bible is a human book, so of course the ideas of its authors are going to reflect some of the lack of enlightenment inherent in their societies." We're not spending time on that version of egalitarianism because that's a non-starter for North Sub because of the

doctrine of scripture all of our members have signed onto. That since it claims to be God-breathed, since Jesus says every pen stroke on these pages is exactly what God wanted to be there, there can't be any sin in it. Because if God breathes sin, God's guilty of sin. If God breathes bigoted ideas, then God is bigoted. So if that's your hang-up, I'm sorry we're not engaging with that more; would love to do so with you. Our doctrine of scripture is that the human authors were kept from sexism and every other prejudice because they weren't the only authors – God was writing these texts.

And along those lines, it's worth noting that Christian conservative readers of scripture and secular liberal readers of scripture understand these texts the same way.

If you listen in on a lecture on 1 Timothy 2 at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and at the University of Chicago, they'll both be in 100% agreement on what Paul meant, practically speaking – that at minimum Paul meant that women can't preach the sermon or be pastors/elders. Now at Southern they cheer for that; at Chicago, they boo that. But they agree on what the text meant.

It's this third group of Christians that has developed critical mass in the last 50 years in the west that doesn't like the conclusions reached at Southern but isn't happy joining Chicago in booing the apostle Paul (because these folks are Christians). So this third group has been trying to find a way to show that Paul wasn't really saying what it seems he was saying, even though it's how none of us (theologically conservative or theologically liberal) naturally read 1 Timothy 2 the first time we picked it up and read it.

Let's keep engaging with the most thoughtful proposals of that third middle group of egalitarian Christians, though. Maybe we can find an enduring principle that allows us to have female elders now – that would be great news on many levels. Let's evaluate the primary two candidates we talked about.

- *Don't disrupt the status quo.* Here's the thing about that: it's gotten awkward to uphold this one in a world in which we've come to cultural agreement (even outside the church) about the importance of standing up for what's right in society whether it agrees with the status quo or not.
  - o Even in the past 7 years, how many times have we been reminded about being on the right side of history, about MLK's letter from a Birmingham Jail in which he rightly pointed out that white moderates WERE the problem – those who agreed with him privately but weren't willing to disrupt the status quo because it wasn't time yet or was too messy.
  - o We know that's wrong – be brave! Be courageous! We want to have been the Bonhoeffers who stood up to Hitler despite everybody drinking the Kool-Aid! We want to have been the Wilberforces who fought slavery despite everybody working to preserve it!
  - o And MLK and Wilberforce drew their inspiration from these scriptures, that call us in no uncertain terms to be willing to disrupt the status quo when we're on the side of what's right! To be the John the Baptists calling out Herod, to be Jesus calling the Pharisees whitewashed tombs, to be Paul telling Philemon I'm sure you're going to take Onesimus back as a brother not as a slave.
  - o So I'm not convinced that “don't disrupt the status quo” is all that high of a priority in the mind of Paul, definitely not so much that he would rule out a whole gender from doing something there was inherently no problem with them doing.
  
- *Protect sound doctrine.* Paul gives reasons for his commands. “because time is short, everyone should remain as they are.” “because of rampant sexual immorality, everyone should have his own spouse.” He could so easily have said, “because of the current false teaching situation, no women should teach!”

instead he says “because of the creation order and the overturning of that creation order in Genesis 1-3, no women should teach.”

- Besides, there were plenty of *men* in Corinth and Ephesus causing problems – we can see it in the letters! If there are problematic men and problematic women, how is it not sexist for Paul to say “that’s it. no more women leading or teaching for awhile. **Men continue**, just get rid of the problematic ones.”?
- There are messy questions about this – again, happy to get into them – but there’s no way around that Paul is explicitly grounding his restriction not in some belief that the uneducated women in Ephesus were going to be a false doctrine problem but rather in Genesis 1-3.

No, on further analysis, we haven’t been compelled by any of the proposed underlying principles that would have made Paul restrict certain roles from women in his day but that would allow us to open all roles to women in our own day.

Now at that point, some say, “You’re just using one or two hotly disputed texts and creating a whole theology around that! **If this was what God wanted, he would have said it a lot more than once or twice!**” But we don’t feel like we can just throw out the restrictions because they’re just a handful of scriptures.

if just about everybody was on the same page regarding male eldership, why would the authors of scripture need to clarify it over and over again?

There are plenty of things that are only said once or twice but that we treat as indisputably true. Scripture isn’t only God-breathed in the cases in which we can find 7 different passages that say the same thing!

To call 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy anomalies or “blue parakeets” and thus functionally dismiss them because they’re debated or confusing – that would be like if you wanted to confront a friend who seemed caught up in greed. So you read him the biblical passages about money and greed, but he said, “Why are you just focused on the passages about money and greed? Zoom out to the whole picture of the Bible, all it says about blessing and happiness and joy! I know God wants me to be joyful. Don’t weaponize those clobber texts against me.” See how flawed that methodology is?

By all means, let’s understand the big picture! But if our questions are about money, then when the text explicitly speaks to money, those specific passages should carry a lot of weight!

Same with women teaching and leading in the church: sure big sweep! But God did provide scriptures that specifically address our question! To say “let’s try to figure this out while ignoring the scriptures that specifically speak to this” seems like a convenient way out of what for many centuries of church life (and even to non-Christian scholars today who just pick up the text and study it in its original languages) was not that difficult to understand.

This summer we revisited this as elders – hey are we still on the same page about this? And I put in front of the elders some of what I consider to be the BEST arguments for an egalitarian position. If I was gonna be swayed, these are the people whose arguments would sway me. You can see them on the bibliography in front of you. These authors/pastors/scholars love the Lord, really smart, really high view of scripture. Let’s consider their *best* arguments – what made them believe women should be able to be elders!

But time after time, what we kept coming back to in reading and rereading these arguments was: “Yes! All you’re wanting to preserve by opening up eldership to women, we at North Sub want to preserve, too! Female

voices in the direction of the church – yes! More of that! Female perspectives teaching and nurturing our congregants – amen! Women in the game instead of on the sidelines – come on! But we’re doing all that! The grim picture these scholars are painting of complementarian life doesn’t look like our church at all!” In other words, rightly or wrongly, we feel like our longstanding position on this actually points a way forward for us to not waver an inch on the scriptures but also to treasure so much of what our egalitarian friends want to see (and that they say they *aren’t* seeing in most complementarian churches).

When they say, “How can it be God’s will to silence half the church?” We don’t want to silence half the church. We want women teaching and leading. I love sitting under a woman leading me in worship every Sunday; I want to hear more and more prophetic challenges and encouragements from women in our congregation during testimonies and open mic times and Life Courses and in Life Groups and videos we share with the congregation. I recommend books written by women all the time. Give me more of that, not less! We elders are consistently cheering on female teachers and leaders in our church, the way we see Paul do by name with so many women in his letters! Yes! But just like his refusal to appoint any of them as elders didn’t diminish his enthusiasm for their ministries, neither do we believe it diminishes our enthusiasm for women to minister in any number of ways to our church family.

When they say, “Why are complementarians so scared of women when Jesus treated them with such dignity?” We are aiming to treat women with *all* that dignity! Women aren’t just on the sidelines watching the men do the work at North Sub; women are right in the mix of it. We call the WLT into every other elder meeting to say, “We respect you immensely. We need to hear what you’re seeing.” And they say to us, “We don’t think you understand how it is likely to be received by some of the congregation when you say X.” They say to us, “We sense that our congregation has an unmet need for Y.” And we almost always say, “You are exactly right. Thank you so much for showing us something we were missing.” And we lift up this congregation together in prayer and move forward as a team. We don’t mandate a Billy Graham rule here – men and women relate to each other out in the open in sisterhood and brotherhood as friends and companions, and that’s not threatening. Jesus treated women with that dignity, despite being criticized for it – so will we. But just like Jesus’ refusal to invite any of them to be part of the 12 didn’t diminish the dignity with which he treated them, we don’t believe reserving these 7-9 elder spots for men diminishes the dignity with which we treat women.

When they say, “God wouldn’t have given them the gifts if he didn’t want them to use them!” Amen! Our elders consider a man or woman who has gifts that aren’t being put to use to be an urgent situation! We don’t see any gifting that scripture says is reserved for men, including teaching and leading. And so we’re convinced God’s Spirit has provided means for all of the women of our church to use their gifts.

Now, none of us – men or women – get to dictate how and when and where our gifts get used. Once we start doing that, now we become Jonah, refusing the Lord’s calling because we had in mind for ourselves a different calling. I know plenty of male pastors who feel like they deserve to be using their gifts in the context of a megachurch, but they’re stuck at some small, insignificant church. Are they right to say “I’ve got big gifts; I deserve a bigger platform than the puny one you’ve given me”? Absolutely not. We don’t know what’s big or small in God’s eyes; he doesn’t need any of us or our gifts; he sets the parameters on where and when we use our gifts, and we submit to him, believing he’ll use it. The sin of Adam and Eve in the garden started by ignoring the vast world of blessing available to them to fixate their attention on the one thing that was off-limits. And that’s what Satan is trying to do with so many women (and men) in the church today. We have so many places to teach and lead, places to use our gifts. But Satan shows us the one place God hasn’t given us the green light to teach and lead, and says either, “What kind of God would keep you from that? He must be a nasty, withholding God”

OR “God would never want you to be kept from that! Those who said he *would* keep you from that must not really understand his heart.” And he gets us to go after that fruit, the one seemingly arbitrary forbidden thing that God put there to say “are you going to submit to my Word even when you don’t understand why the command exists? Or are you going to evaluate what’s right and wrong for yourself and call your own shots?”

In defiance of that voice of the enemy, here at North Sub we’ve said “Hey. Here at North Sub, as much as many of us would love for this to read differently, as much as we don’t fully understand what possible reason God could have for authoring these restrictions, they’re there! And he didn’t promise us we’d always understand it. So we’re going to let him be God and enjoy the bountiful fullness of male-female teamwork in the church *within the parameters he has set.*”

Now, I’m under no illusion that over the course of 45 minutes I spend talking at you, you’d be swayed to our position. Some of you still aren’t convinced. That’s okay. Whether you agreed with every word I said, disagreed vehemently, or anything in between, the win is if this conversation pushes us forward together by driving us to put our nose in the text once again. Clarifying why we interpret these texts the way we interpret them. And conversing with one another in such a way that sharpens each of us regarding where we stand.

The elders are on a journey with this too. I told you we spent several meetings this summer reading and discussing and debating various aspects of this. I imagine we’ll probably do it all over again in a few years – “is this still where we stand? Let’s look at the most recent, most convincing arguments for female eldership – are we sure we’re still not swayed by this?” And in doing so, we’re going to be moved closer to the bullseye on this, too.

Q&R

ELIZABETH CLOSE IN PRAYER

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