

INTRODUCTION

As we look at transitioning to elder leadership at First, there are many factors to consider, including the Biblical qualifications for an elder. This leads us to ask one of many questions, “does the Bible communicate a vision of male eldership?” Or said a different way, “can women be elders?”

In response to that question, the Bible is clear that men and women are equal in their worth, value, personhood and dignity. It is also clear that God did not create an undifferentiated humanity, but we exist as male and female. We believe that God has ordained for men and women to be equal in value while also maintaining a distinction in certain roles he calls us to as men and women. We believe that the Bible teaches that God designed the role of elder to be held by men who are servant leaders and meet the qualifications laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

The theological conviction that men and women are equal in nature but also have distinct roles is known as complementarianism, because men and women are meant to complement one another in the home and church. However, these role distinctions are not simply drawn from theological principles but are also clearly taught in the Bible. Two explicit texts on this are 1 Corinthians 14:34-38 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15. These texts show God’s design for men to provide leadership and authority in the church through preaching, teaching, doctrine and serving as elders. It is clear from the Bible that the ministry of women is no less valuable than that of men and that we must empower both men and women to use their gifts in ministry. We believe that complementarianism, when faithfully followed, will help everyone flourish in fulfilling God’s call on their life.

WOMEN IN MINISTRY

In the Bible we see women doing significant ministry, and we must be careful to make clear that affirming the Bible’s vision of male eldership

does not deny the important role of women in the ministry of the local church.

We believe that the Bible clearly encourages and assumes that women will have a significant role in the life of the local church. Jesus welcomed women to be his disciples (Luke 10:39) and they were involved in his ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Phoebe, a significant member of the church of Cenchreae, is commended by Paul and likely was the courier for the letter to the Romans, showing her important contribution to gospel ministry (Romans 16:1-2). Priscilla is described as “explaining the way of God more accurately” to Apollos (Acts 18:26). We could mention even more, but the Biblical picture is clear, and we celebrate the way God has called both men and women to labor together for the sake of the gospel.

However, equal value and involvement in the church does not necessarily mean interchangeable involvement. As we encourage both men and women to be involved in ministry and the life of our church, we will pursue consistency with the Biblical vision of male-eldership.

RESPONDING TO YOUR CONCERNS

In light of what has been written above, our church has affirmed this basic teaching. Even though there would be value in expanding upon this Biblical vision, and exegesis and theological discussion could fill a book on this topic, the primary concerns I have heard are not about agreement with the Biblical vision, but implementation in the life of our church.

The rest of this document will address the most common questions and concerns that have been shared with me. However, if you do have deeper Biblical and theological concerns or questions, please reach out to me, and I would love to talk through this more.



CONCERN ONE: *“I have witnessed, and/or experienced male leadership turn into an oppressive environment for women and I am concerned that will happen here at First Baptist as well.”*

This is a concern that I do not want to dismiss or minimize. It is a concern that resonates with me and one that I am passionate about ensuring we do not see happen here at First. In the age of the #metoo movement and our culture’s increasing awareness of how men have used their power and privilege to abuse women, we will not tolerate behavior or speech which oppresses women. As divine image-bearers, co-heirs in Christ, and vital co-laborers for gospel ministry, any behavior which seeks to degrade the worth, value, and dignity of women is disgusting to God and has no part in the life of our church.

However, complementarianism, as seen in the Scriptures, ought not lead to the oppression of women, and if it does, then it is no longer consistent with the Scriptures. The Biblical vision is that both men and women work together as important partners in gospel ministry. When this is pursued in alignment with the Biblical vision, both men and women flourish, and gospel ministry is well served.

We will be intentional to create pathways where women’s voices are honored and heard rather than stifled and suppressed. This will include being intentional in our consideration of staff dynamics and deacon affirmation/appointment. Elders will be humble listeners who seek out the feedback of women as well as men when making decisions that affect our church. And we will be intentional to train both women and men for leadership both inside and outside our church.

CONCERN TWO: *Having male-only eldership will devalue women.*

It can be difficult to hold in tension the reality that the Bible communicates we can be equal in our

personhood but distinct in our roles. As humans, we drift toward believing that our identity is defined by what we do, and the cultural messages that surround us reinforce this false idea.

However, the Bible does not conflate our personhood with our work. They are distinct. Our value is not in what we do, but in who we are. We are all, both male and female, created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and for those who have trusted in Christ, we are all, both male and female, one in Christ (Gal 3:28). As complementarians, we will not allow or enable behavior that suggests men are better than women or that women are better than men. We are equal. The concern for some is that male-only eldership will devalue women, but if we understand that our value is based on who we are and not what we do, we can understand that equality of person is different than distinction of role.

We may have a hard time holding these two in tension, but the Bible does not. We see the dynamic of equality of person with distinct roles existing in the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all exist in perfect equality with one another. None are more or less God than the others, but are all truly God. And yet, they all have distinct roles and will at times walk in obedience to one another. The distinction of roles does not devalue any of the three, but actually works for the glory of all three.

As we live out the complementarianism that we see in the Bible, we must do so in a way that clearly communicates the value, worth and dignity of all people in our church. Male or female, young or old, white or black, rich or poor – there is no distinction. We are all one in Christ.

CONCERN THREE: *If we affirm that complementarianism is Biblical, and we see that our first two concerns are heard and addressed, how will we be proactive to encourage women to use their gifts in ministry? What steps will we take to*



ensure that it actually happens, and we aren't just paying lip service.

The response to this concern is one that will be worked out over time, and requires consistent intentionality to rightly balance both the organic and organized elements. On the one hand, we could create a lot of organization around this, but if our church does not truly embrace the value of women, then it will only happen via organized structures, which is ultimately not what we want. On the other hand, if we put no organization to it, then it could drift in a direction we don't want and women's voices can get ignored, which we also don't want. Having the right balance of organic and organized elements will create an environment where the spirit and structure of our church both support our affirmation of the value of women.

One principle we will employ is that *if something does not require an elder, then gender is not a determining factor for qualification*. This means outside of elder roles and responsibilities, we will happily encourage, equip and promote both men and women for the work.

We will seek to have both men and women as part of our Deacon Committee, which will be an important voice and expression of service for our church body. We will seek to have a balance of men and women on our staff. We will continue to seek a balance of men and women in our intern cohort. We will try to promote partnerships between men and women to lead community groups. We will encourage both men and women to engage in our leadership development opportunities and help to lead seminars and training events. During our gathered service, we will pursue opportunities for both men and women to lead worship, lead us in times of prayer, give announcements, read Scripture and have a clear presence. Several opportunities have been delineated in this short paragraph, and this list is not exhaustive, but intended to show the type of

opportunities we will intentionally encourage women to pursue.

In addition to these various opportunities for women to use their gifts to serve our church, our elders will be proactive to get feedback and insight from both the women and the men of our congregation. Elders are not here to dominate our church but to serve our church. Good eldering means that our elders will be proactive to invite the input of women and men in our church. As we transition to elder leadership, it is important that we are proactive to ensure that it doesn't result in the silencing and suppression of our women. If you see this happening, please feel empowered to say something and your feedback will be received by listening ears.

CONCERN FOUR: *What are the things that only elders should do?*

We have said that a principle we will employ is that if it does not require an elder, then gender is not a determining factor for qualification. If this is our basic principle, then it might be helpful to outline some of the things that we believe require an elder. This list is not exhaustive but should give a general idea of what we intend by this type of statement.

Elder Board

Only elders will serve on the elder board. This may go without saying, but it is important to note. As a plurality, elders have a responsibility to set doctrine, lead well, preach and teach, shepherd our people, seek the good of our congregation and work toward the advancement of the gospel in and through our church.

Preaching

When the church gathers, and someone stands up to preach from God's Word, this an elder responsibility. The elder is the one who says, "thus saith the Lord" and then exposit the Scriptures. This does not mean non-elders cannot read from Scripture on Sunday, or that non-elders cannot



contribute to the preaching time through testimony or teaching, but that the elders are responsible for the preaching on Sundays.

Ordinances

Elders will lead our church in the ordinances of baptism and communion. In this case, we believe it is important that an elder is present and overseeing the practice of the ordinances, but that doesn't mean they need to be doing every part. This means that a non-elder can be in the water and performing the baptism and a non-elder can be distributing the communion.

Teaching and Discipling Ministries

The teaching and discipling ministries of our church are overseen by the elders. In execution of these duties, elders should seek out and equip gifted and qualified men and women to help lead, shape and teach within these ministries. This means that both men and women can lead community groups. This means that both men and women can lead seminars. This means that both men and women can lead training events.

Staff Positions

There are certain staff positions that may be deemed as positions requiring someone who meets the Biblical qualifications of an elder. The Senior Pastor position will always be a vocational elder at our church and we may at times intentionally hire other staff positions to be able to serve as an elder. Outside of intentional decisions to hire someone who could serve as an elder, all positions will be open to men or women. The responsibilities of helping to provide day-to-day leadership to our Community Groups, our Youth Ministry, our Kids Ministry, our Worship Ministry, our Operations area, and our Outreach Ministries are all areas that do not necessarily require an elder and are therefore open to men or women.

Non-elders doing elder things

It is worth noting that we may at times ask Biblically qualified men who are not elders to perform elder responsibilities. This will happen for

two possible reasons. When these decisions happen it will be thoughtful and intentional.

One reason we may ask a non-elder to perform an elder responsibility is if we do not have one of our own elders available to fulfill that duty. For example, if we have a guest come to preach on a Sunday when we don't have one of our own elders available. On a related note, we may at times have a guest preach because we would value hearing from them (ie. one of our missionaries).

A second reason we may have a non-elder perform an elder responsibility is if we have men who are training to be elders. We are committed to training future elders, both for our church and God's Kingdom more broadly. That means that some of our lay volunteers, staff or interns who aspire to be elders will be invited to engage in some elder duties as a way of helping to train and prepare them for eldership in the future.

If we have a guest or elder-in-training perform an elder duty, it is our elders' responsibility to proactively ensure that godly and qualified men are performing those duties under the oversight of our elders.

FINAL NOTE

This document attempted to answer concerns and questions regarding opportunities for women in ministry at First. At times, practical examples were given and it is important to note that this was not meant to provide an exhaustive list, but communicate some of the basic ways we are trying to intentionally implement complementarianism at First. We will continue to work this out over time, always pursuing God's desire for His Church to be well led and the people of His Church to be equipped and empowered for ministry. To God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Pastor Jeremy Adelman

