Throughout the course of its history, the Christian community has gradually developed in its view of the relationship between men and women. While the biblical distinctions between men and women have always been clearly defined and acknowledged as inherent and absolute, the church’s understanding of the relationship between men and women has developed over the centuries, and especially over the last few decades. This development is based primarily upon further inspection of the biblical data (whose inspiration and authority is never questioned or compromised by the evangelical Christian community); but it also takes into account the developments in society in general, and society’s attitudes toward women in particular.

INTERPRETATION, APPLICATION AND CULTURAL CONTEXT (HEAD COVERINGS AND PUBLIC SILENCE)

As women’s roles in society change, the evangelical Christian community acknowledges its responsibility to revisit and, perhaps, revise its interpretation and application of the biblical text with respect to women in ministry and church leadership. This does not mean that we rewrite the text in order to accommodate the changes in general society; it means that, in humility, we reread the text—allowing for the divine condescension and biblical accommodation to the cultures in which it was written. That is, we remind ourselves that while the Bible reveals eternal truths to us, it reveals those truths in human history. And while the prophets and apostles who wrote the Scriptures were inspired and kept from error as they wrote, they also were engaging real issues, real situations and real cultures. As issues, situations and cultures change, eternal truths remain the same, but their applications will certainly differ from those, for instance, of two thousand years ago.
“HEAD COVERINGS” SEEN IN CULTURAL CONTEXT  
(1 CORINTHIANS 11:1–15)
The issue of head coverings for women is no longer a point of contention or controversy for most Christian denominations. However, the issue of mutual respect between husbands and wives remains. And it’s this deeper and essential truth that is at the heart of the head covering issue. In that culture, a head covering would have been a sign of the distinctions between male and female. Thus, the lack of a head covering would have been a confusing statement. While it may have signaled liberty for the woman, it would have shamed her husband; and in an honor/shame culture, that would have been a poor testimony to the liberty found in Christ Jesus. As the covering of the head lost its significance in society, the issue of whether or not women should wear covers became less significant. However, the issue of mutual respect remains in full effect in every culture at all times.

So, in order to interpret the Bible accurately, we must consider the cultural context in which it was written. And in order to apply it correctly, we must consider the changes in culture. However, we must persist in addressing the culture with the eternal, essential, objective and absolute truth of Scripture.

“PROHIBITION AGAINST WOMEN TEACHERS” 
SEEN IN CULTURAL CONTEXT (1 TIMOTHY 2:8–15; 5:9–15)
When Paul asserted in a letter to Timothy that he did not allow women to teach, was that a general statement? Was it particular to the circumstance within Timothy’s jurisdiction? This, of course, leads to the broader question of “occasional” letters. How important is the question of the occasion under which an inspired letter is written? It also leads to the question of Paul’s general practice regarding women teachers and leaders.

Evidence of Women Co-Workers
When Paul writes to Timothy saying that he is “not allowing a woman to teach,” he is making this statement under a particular set of circumstances. The fact of this is made clear by the general practice of Paul of working alongside woman teachers. It was a woman who was entrusted to deliver Paul’s great letter to the Roman Christian community. Phoebe was a deacon in the church at Cenchrea and was commissioned by Paul as one to be properly received and supported in any way by the Christians in Rome. He further acknowledged her as a benefactor to many, including himself (Romans 16:1–2). Moreover, Paul greets nine women in the final portion of his Roman letter, five of whom are addressed as co-workers (Romans 16:3, 6, 7, 12). Further, Paul addresses a woman named Junia as an apostle who was in Christ before him. Much more may be said (and will be said below) in this regard, but suffice it to say that Paul had no general prohibitions against women in the ministry or in ministry leadership.

Prohibition against Unorthodox Teachers
Therefore, if we are to understand Paul’s apparent prohibition against women in ministry in his letter to Timothy, we must understand the cultural climate in general, and the church situation in particular. In the time in which Paul’s letter was written, women had limited access to theological training. So, unless
a woman’s circumstance was unique, she was more susceptible to theological error than most men who had been theologically trained. Also, it must be understood that women who had been widowed would often find themselves the head of the household. Now, if a house-church (and most, if not all, churches were house-churches) was located in a home where a woman was the head of the household, she would, by default, become the head of the house-church. Unfortunately, there were some false doctrines circulating among certain of the women who had this influence in the church. These doctrines were being perpetuated “from house to house [house-church to house-church]” by these particular women leaders and teachers in Ephesus. This was the situation into which Paul was speaking. It is in this context that Paul said, “I am not allowing”—not “I never allow”—a woman to teach (1 Timothy 2:12). He called such misled and misleading teachers “gossips” and “busybodies” which may be understood as speakers of foolish and foreign stories (1 Timothy 5:13).

ETERNAL TRUTH, CULTURAL SHIFTS AND CHURCH GROWTH (EQUALITY, DIGNITY AND MINISTRY)

The developments in the church’s application of biblical truths regarding women may be seen, for instance, in its views on the issues of equality, dignity, ministry and leadership. The first three issues, for the most part, have been seriously addressed, and in most cases, settled. It is the fourth issue, women in church leadership—particularly pastoral ministry and eldership—which is the point of controversy in our generation and, therefore, the main topic of this essay. But in order to adequately discuss the point of women in leadership, we must consider certain developments in the church’s traditional understanding of women in particular.

THE ISSUE OF EQUALITY

The Insufficient Arguments for Essential Inequality

Women are no longer seen as inferior to men. For many years it was held that women were essentially inferior to men. The perceived biblical justification for this view included (1) the order of creation as well as (2) the post-fall pronouncements of God regarding the hierarchical (relative position) as well as the ontological (essential being) relationship between man and woman. However, because the Bible does not explicitly apply any significance to the order of creation (clearly the animals were created before the human persons, yet dominion was given to the humans), the first argument stumbles. Also, because the fallen state is not the natural state or intended design, and the second argument seems to apply little significance to the redemptive work of Jesus, it also falters under the scrutiny of sound biblical interpretation.

Egalitarians and Complementarians Agree on Equality

The view that suggests the inherent inferiority of women has very few supporters left. It is a view largely rejected by egalitarians (a view that espouses full equality for women in all spheres of life) as well as complementarians (a view that—in most cases—asserts functional hierarchy but denies the essential
inferiority of women). And most holders of that aspect of the complementarian view which suggests marital or ministerial subordination would reject the idea of the essential inferiority of women.

**The Image of God and the Rib of Man**

The Bible makes it clear that both women and men were created in the image of God and, as such, both men and women were given equal dominion over the creation (Genesis 1:27–28). So we see that the woman was formed from the rib of the man as his equal. We must not place undue weight upon the translation “helper” (Genesis 2:18), expecting that the term incorporates the idea of an underling. A better way to understand the terms used in the original language, based upon the literary context, is “a companion of the same kind and degree (literally: ‘opposite’ as in ‘reflection’)” or “one compatible and supportive.” The word for “help” that is used there is also used with regard to God (Psalm 46:1) and is never seen as an indication of inferiority.

**THE ISSUE OF DIGNITY**

**The Dignity of Women in the Bible: A Perspective Ahead of Its Time**

Upon perusing the pages of the Bible, one is immediately taken with the high value and dignity afforded women in its pages. And considering that these pages were written thousands of years ago, it is that much more enlightening. How must the original readers have perceived its message? For its message regarding women was in stark contrast to philosophies of the times in which it was written (1,400BC—100AD). It was a perspective well ahead of its time. Therefore, when one considers the nature of the relationship between men and women in the days in which the Bible was written, one is allowed to share the awe with which it must have been received by its original readers and contemporaries.

**The Dignity of Women in Perspective of the Old Testament**

The Old Testament has been accused by some as promoting an unhealthy attitude toward women. However, when read carefully and in its historical context, the Hebrew Scriptures is clearly far and away ahead of its contemporaries. From the prominence of Eve to the political power of Esther; from the prophecies of Deborah and Huldah to the prayers of Hannah; and to the patience of the Matriarchs, the Old Testament stands head and shoulders above any book of its time or claiming to be of its kind.

**Divine Design in Human History**

The perspective of women as dignified and valuable is seen throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The Old Testament speaks not only of the high esteem in which women are held in the covenant community, but also of the great contribution of women throughout the history of Israel. Of course, the Bible was written in a real, historical context and certain unfortunate and inexcusable circumstances have been recorded. Some of the recorded relationships between men and women are not always consistent with the idea of women’s dignity and value. But these kinds of relationships are a result of the fall and not of God’s design. Jesus relegated divorce, and by extension, polygamy, to human sin, rather than divine design. Even though the Bible faithfully reports some incidences of unfaithful behavior, it acknowledges such behavior as dysfunctional
and dangerous. And even though it records the behavior of fallen people in a covenant community, it also tells of God’s design and, as such, it is clearly more representative of the dignity of all persons than the cultural and societal environment in which its pages were formed.

**Mothers in Israel**

In the Hebrew Scriptures, women are seen clinging to hope, nurturing lives, developing ministers and preserving communities. Godly women are seen providing environments, encouragement and examples for some the Bible’s most significant figures—whether it’s Rebecca with Jacob or Naomi with Ruth.

**The Mother of All Living**

From the earliest stages, women were expected to be co-laborers, co-regents and joint-heirs with men. Eve had as much responsibility to guard and cultivate the Garden of Eden as Adam (Genesis 1:27–31). They were both expected to be fruitful and multiply. They each embodied a mantle of God’s image and, as such, were expected to have dominion over the creation. As surely as woman came from man, man came through woman. There is, by design, a happy and healthy balance. The fall may have disrupted the balance, but Christ’s cross has restored it (Ephesians 5:22–27).

**The Matriarchs**

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, sometimes known as the Mothers or Matriarchs, knew what it was like to travel as pilgrims in strange lands. Sarah and Rebecca knew what it was to have their lives and dignity threatened (Genesis 12:13; 20:3; 26:7) only to see God overturn the results of the doubts and fears of their husbands (Genesis 12:17; 20:3; 26:10). Rachel and Leah understood what it was to be devalued by their biological father (Genesis 31:14–15) only to be received as mothers of the covenant community (Genesis 33:1–3). These women patiently traveled with their husbands through untamed wilderness and unfriendly nations, often as the sole means of community and support for the Patriarchs. They waited in hope as they went from barrenness to fruitfulness. As they bore the children of miraculous grace, they became vessels of the covenant promise—nurturing their children in the worship of God and the hope of His faithfulness.

**A Virtuous Woman**

As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews said, “Time will not permit” us to acknowledge and extol all of the women mentioned in the Old Testament who personify God’s perspective of the value and dignity of women. From Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:16–22), to Deborah and Jael (Judges 5:1–27); from Miriam (Exodus 15) to Abigail (1 Samuel 25) and Esther to Huldah (2 Kings 22:13–14) we can cover the gamut of women who have recognized and realized God’s
estimation of their dignity. We could mention Hannah and her example to Samuel (1 Samuel 1) as well as Samson’s mother, who was told directly by God how she was to raise her son (Judges 13:2–7). We could cite the wife of Isaiah or the ideal wife of Proverbs 31. We could mention the Shulamite in the Song of Songs. We should also mention the Shunammite woman in the days of Elisha (2 Kings 4), and the widow in the days of Elijah. This widow was mentioned by Jesus as having been preferred over the house of Israel (1 Kings 17:9–16; Luke 4:26). And this leads us to consider the perspective of Jesus regarding women.

The Dignity of Women in the Perspective of Jesus
As certainly as the Bible is inspired by God and gives us inerrant insight into the heart of God, so likewise, when one looks into the words, works, person and perspective of Jesus, one looks into the face of God. If we are to understand God’s perspective of women, we must evaluate Christ’s interactions with women as seen in the Gospel narratives.

Unlikely Mention (Matthew 1)
Any study of Jesus’ perspective on and interaction with women must begin at the beginning—the genealogy. In this long list of men, four women are mentioned. In Matthew’s genealogy, Tamar, Ruth and Rahab are explicitly named and Bathsheba is directly alluded to. The irony is that they all had suffered indignity of one form or another. Notwithstanding, their mention in the genealogy accords them a dignity that was usually reserved for men. The lives of these women speak of God’s elevation over and against the devaluing impact of a society that persistsently resists God.

Unlikely Interaction
There were many occasions in which Jesus interacted with people who were unlikely candidates for the attention and approbation of a Jewish spiritual leader. Among these are many women, including the following:

The “Sinner” at Simon the Pharisee’s House (Luke 7:36–50)
From the Pharisee’s perspective, she was simply “a sinner.” However, we see Jesus showing mercy to the woman identified only as “a sinner.” She is an uninvited “guest” at Simon’s dinner party. Jesus is an invited but unwanted “guest” in the house of Simon the Pharisee. In this case, Jesus allows the “sinner” to acknowledge his majesty. He further uses her humility and love as an example in contrast to Simon’s smugness and inhospitality. And in the presence of the self-righteous, Jesus pronounces peace and salvation over her. He sets her on a higher plane than the Pharisee because of her contrition, humility and love. He affords her the dignity with which she had been created, irrespective of her prior life choices or society’s anathema.
The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1–42)
At another point we see Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. This woman came to Jesus in a condition of social immorality and theological confusion. She had long lost any semblance of virtue or dignity. But Jesus, even to the surprise of his returning students, spoke with her, taught her and gave her instruction in salvation. She heeded his words and her dignity, value and virtue were restored.

Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9–13)
We also learn that one of the women of his company had been freed from demonic possession. Mary Magdalene had been possessed by seven devils before Jesus restored her honor and her life. Eventually she became one Jesus’ disciples, ministers and friends, as well as one of the first witnesses to the resurrection.

The Woman with the Hemorrhage (Luke 8:43–48)
Another woman touched the hem of his garment and was physically healed. But Jesus knew that she needed a deeper healing. She had suffered a hemorrhage for twelve years and, as such, had been categorized by the society with adulteresses or prostitutes. And because she had been considered unclean prior to her healing, it was a daring decision to enter a large crowd to make contact with Jesus. But Jesus saw the greater need. He verbally restored her dignity among the people and spoke wholeness back into her life.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman (Matthew 15:22–28)
One woman of the Gentiles asked for healing for her daughter, recognizing that she was an outsider (“little dog”), but in her humility she found mercy. She actually had her dignity challenged in order to have it restored. She put his honor above her own, and her daughter above herself. As a result, she received a commendation that was reserved for very few: “O woman, great is your faith!”

The Adulterous Woman (John 8:3–11)
Another woman was thrown at Jesus’ feet. Her accusers were basically demanding that Jesus add to her self-inflicted and society-exacerbated indignity. Jesus, however, condescended to where she was. He bent down and wrote. The Bible doesn’t say what he wrote, but it is likely that his stooping meant the world to the woman. His bending down would ultimately eventuate in her rising up.

Unlikely Disciple (Luke 10:38–42)
Mary of Bethany was seated at the feet of Jesus along with his male disciples. She had assumed the privilege and position of a full disciple. Oddly, it was her sister Martha who objected. Martha
had evidently seen Mary’s position as presumptuous. This was likely based upon her upbringing. It is strange how oppression seems to sink deep into the psyche of the oppressed. But Jesus said that Mary’s status as a disciple would not be taken from her, and he even intimated that there was a place for Martha in the company of students. Mary chose to listen to Jesus, and it is likely that she heard him more than all of his other disciples, for she alone was reconciled to his sacrifice (John 12:3–8).

**Unlikely Evangelism**

The woman at the well that we mentioned above was also one of a very few people to whom he revealed his identity in a clear manner (John 4:25–26). She became a witness to his prophetic gifts and messianic ministry. In that sense she became an evangelist. But she was not the only woman evangelist in the gospel narratives. Later, after Jesus’ resurrection, it was through women that he made his resurrection first known. These women became evangelists and witnesses in an era when a woman’s testimony held little or no weight in the courts or opinions of most men (Luke 24:1–11).

**The Dignity of Women in the Perspective of the First Century Church**

From the earliest stages of the first century church, we see women prominently involved in the Christian community. On the day of Pentecost, at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, there were women at the prayer meeting in the upper room (Acts 1:12, 14). Immediately after the outpouring, the apostle Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, made clear the fact that this fulfillment of God’s promise would not be limited by gender, age or nationality. The Spirit would be poured out upon all people who would receive, irrespective of social status (Acts 2:16–18). Paul later reiterates this by stating that in Jesus Christ, there is no place of prominence given based upon social standing, ethnicity or gender. Men and woman, slave and free, Jew and Gentile were of equal value to Christ, his kingdom and the ministry—equal heirs to the promise made to Abraham (Galatians 3:26–29).

At the dawn of the New Covenant, women prayed alongside men. Women prophesied along with men. Women were also counted worthy of suffering for Jesus with men and of being persecuted for God’s glory with men (Acts 9:1–2). Moreover, God apparently made no distinction between men and women with regard to grace or judgment. As certainly as Aquila and Priscilla were equally accepted (Acts 18), Ananias and Sapphira were equally rejected (Acts 5:1–10). Each was held according to his or her own person, choices and actions. Neither woman was given merit or demerit based upon her husband’s choices or actions.

**THE ISSUE OF MINISTRY**

**The Essence of Ministry**

Ensnched in the question of women in ministry is the question of the nature of ministry. When ministry is seen as an administrative or vocational “job description,” it is significantly removed from the biblical meaning. The biblical idea incorporates the concept of “office,” but it is so much more than that. Jesus’
definition of himself as a minister was that of one who serves, rather than being served (Matthew 20:28). Jesus said this in contrast to his disciples’ idea of greatness (Matthew 20:20–28). For Jesus, greatness is service. However, it seems that many ministers have unfortunately seen “service” as a stepping-stone to greatness. Thus, doors have been closed to certain people who are called to serve in order to reduce the competition. Ironically, this kind of attitude knows no gender limitations, for it was the mother of James and John who sought to establish her sons and limit the competition. When men or women misunderstand the concept of ministry, no one is well served.

Ministry as Service

Ministry, then, begins with the idea of service and nowhere is that concept more elegantly illustrated than in Rebecca’s introduction to Isaac (Genesis 24:15). Here we see a person whose sole objective at that moment was to serve. In serving Isaac, she was serving all of Israel, she just didn’t know it. She didn’t have to. Hannah is another example of service. She truly wanted a child, but she wanted to serve God and his house more (1 Samuel 1, 2). When God gave her and her husband a son, she gave him to God’s house and to God’s service. Esther is yet another example. She had a comfortable life, but when her people were threatened, she was awakened out of her slumber (Esther 4:13–17). She was reminded that it was her responsibility to serve her people, even if it cost her own life. And then there was an unnamed servant girl in Syria, a prisoner of war, but when she saw an opportunity to remind her captors that the God of Israel was still firmly seated upon his throne, she did not hesitate to boast of God’s faithfulness in the hearing of his enemies (2 Kings 5:1–5).

The Bible has many such stories of men and women who understood the true meaning of ministry and acted in wonderful ways as a result. Having considered the essence of ministry as service, let us now consider the vocational calling of women to spiritual and administrative church leadership. In doing so, we will attempt to remind ourselves that ministry is a calling that invites both men and women to take the lowest seat, and in doing so, to enjoy and perpetuate the dignity of the image of God that is found in Jesus Christ and formed by the Holy Spirit to the glory of God, our Father.

WOMEN IN SPIRITUAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

The Bible speaks clearly and favorably to the issue of women in the context of ministry as they nurture spiritual champions or as they prophesy to nations and everything in between. But the issue of women in ministry (or shall we say “in the ministry” in order to distinguish it from ordinary acts of Christian service—if such a distinction actually exists) enconces a more much controversial issue—the issue of women in church leadership. For, while the above-mentioned questions of equality, dignity and ministry are still issues for further discussion and development, some ethical and exegetical advances in the church have made them much less controversial. However, the question of women in leadership is still a very relevant and current debate. And while it is a derivative of the question of women in the ministry, it is more specific and much more likely to be a point of contention. The
issue must be considered from many perspectives and through many disciplines, but it must not be ignored, nor lightly addressed, as equity, equality and truth are on the line. This essay has been limited to hermeneutical, exegetical and biblical-theological questions, and so will conclude with a biblical history of women in administrative and spiritual leadership.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

As far as the text of Scripture is concerned, women have been seen as leaders in the church from the days of Miriam straight through to John’s elect lady. And while there are some texts that speak to specific situations in the church where women are discouraged from leading (i.e., certain susceptible widows in Ephesus who hosted house-churches and had fallen victim to the influence of heretics—see discussion above), the preponderance of the biblical data regarding women in leadership is overwhelmingly favorable.

Miriam: Prophetess, Liberator

When she was a young girl, Miriam watched over an infant Moses as he sailed down the Nile. She rejoined him with his mother so that he might be weaned in Israel (Exodus 2:4–7). Later, when Moses began his ministry of liberty, Miriam the prophetess was seen on par with her brothers Moses and Aaron. The responsibilities varied among the three, but each was seen as a leader among the people. Miriam led the women in song at the great deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 15). Micah the prophet reminds Israel, on God’s behalf, that God used Moses, Aaron and Miriam to deliver Israel out of slavery (Micah 6:4). When Miriam began to confuse her office and overstep her bounds, she was penalized, but her presumption had nothing to do with gender equality; she and Aaron made the same ill-advised coup attempt. Notwithstanding, her influence upon Israel was such that the people would not move until her sentence was served and she was restored to the community (Numbers 12).

Deborah: Judge, Prophetess and Mother in Israel

Deborah’s leadership in the community came at a crucial time in the history of Israel (Judges 4:4–7). She was used by the Lord to bring Israel out of a dangerous and dry season into one of safety, liberty and prosperity. At a time when few were willing to take a stand, she, along with Barak and Jael, brought down a mighty enemy (Judge 5:7). She spoke to Barak, the General of the Army, in the name of the God of Israel and stirred up his courage. In war, she served as Commander-in Chief. In peace, she sat and held court under the “palm of Deborah.”

Huldah: The Prophetess

Huldah (2 Kings 22) prophesied during the reign of King Josiah, among the ranks of such luminaries as Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. Josiah was a godly king, known for his reverence and reforms. When he realized how far Israel had strayed from God’s word, he tore his garments in contrition and sent dignitaries for advice from the prophetess Huldah. These very exalted personages included the High Priest, the Secretary of State, the King’s Officer, the father of a future governor, and the son of a prophet. When they came to her, she spoke on God’s behalf. She acknowledged that the
judgments that Josiah had read in the Scriptures would come to pass, but Josiah would not be under this judgement because his heart was turned to God. Israel would see reform and revival in his time, but the damage that had been done for so many years was foundational and would ultimately bring ruin upon the community after he had died. This was in keeping with the prophecies of Jeremiah and the other true prophets contemporary with Huldah. Because Josiah heeded her counsel, he was encouraged to do all that he could to save as many as he could. Other prophetesses and wise women include the prophet Isaiah’s wife, who was called a prophetess. The Bible also points out “wise women” who provided political advice (2 Samuel 14:1–2; 20:16–22).

**Women Leaders in Tabernacle and Temple Worship**

While women did not serve as Levitical priests, their presence in Tabernacle and Temple worship was evident and influential. They gave of their goods to furnish the tabernacle (Exodus 35:22–26). They stood watch at the entrance of the Tabernacle (Exodus 38:8). Women played music at the processions (Psalm 68:25), leading into spiritual battle, in essence, as well as facilitating worship in a weary and embattled community. Also, women sang and danced at the festivals and celebrations (Judges 21:19–23, Exodus 15), providing a morally healthy and balanced atmosphere in the restoration and recreational times in Israel. This would have established a clear line of distinction between Israel and the ritual celebration of the nations around them. And most importantly, while women were not Levitical priests, they clearly heard directly from God (Judges 13:2–7)—even in times when Levites did not, as in the case of Hannah in the days of Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 2). In this chapter, we see Hannah uttering inspired praise and prophecy (1 Samuel 2:1–10), as well as proclamations of the nature and character of God.

In the New Testament, Jesus, as our High Priest, provides a better priesthood (Hebrews 8:1–11). The Letter to the Hebrews expresses a more excellent covenant with better promises. In the context of its statement of better promises, it makes clear that the promises are greater in that (1) they are based upon Christ’s ministry, which is greater than that of the Levitical Priesthood or the Aaronic high-priestly line; and (2) the promises regarding the impact of God’s covenant community applies equally to the entire community, male and female (Galatians 3:24–29). In the New Covenant community of God, the actual and original intent of the Creator and Redeemer is more clearly seen. There would be no need of a Levitical priesthood. Christ alone would stand as Mediator between God and human persons (1 Timothy 2:5). And as God’s New Covenant people, the better promise from God is that we would all be filled with his Presence, as well as the ability to know, and the desire to love him (Hebrews 8:11). This, then, is New Covenant priesthood: the capacity to offer ourselves to the Person; that is, the prerogative (Romans 12:1), proclamation (Philippians 2:17) and praise (Hebrews 3:15) of God. In this New Covenant expression of priesthood, all of God’s people, men and women, are a holy and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5–9). But let us further consider God’s expression through women in the New Covenant or Testament.
WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Book of Acts (Priscilla and the Daughters of Phillip)

Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, is mentioned as a co-worker (Romans 16:3–5; 2 Timothy 4:19). Before they met Paul, the couple had been Jewish members of the Roman Christian community. They were expelled from Rome with the entire Jewish community by Claudius Caesar. Because they shared a trade with Paul, they served together in the ministry and supported themselves in the craft of tentmaking. When Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned with regard to ministry, Priscilla’s name is first in prominence. When reference is made to their trade, or home, Aquila’s name is first (Acts 18:18; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19). Priscilla’s name also comes first when they are instructing Apollos in the New Covenant (Acts 18:26). With her husband, Priscilla planted churches alongside Paul and taught men as well as women.

The Bible goes on in its witness to women in leadership by telling us of the four daughters of the evangelist Phillip. These four women did prophesy (Acts 21:8–9). This suggests the office of prophet rather than the gift of prophecy or periodic prophetic utterances, since the gift of prophetic utterance was expected to be desired by and accessible to most Christians (1 Corinthians 14:1).

The Church in Rome

Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians was delivered by Phoebe, who was a deaconess. She was to be regarded as a church leader and supported as such, in any way that she needed. She came to Rome, from Paul, with full credentials and honor (Roman 16:1–2). In Paul’s letter to the Roman Christian community, he saluted other co-workers, many of whom were women. Among these was Junia, whom Paul called an apostle (Romans 16:7). And while some continue to contend that the name “Junia” should be “Junias” (masculine), or that Junia is a man’s name, because there is no instance of a masculine version of the name in antiquity, nor of a man being called “Junia,” the argument for “Junias” or a male Junia cannot been founded in biblical exegesis or antiquity.

The Church in Philippi

In the New Testament, the Church at Philippi is a prime example of women in leadership. It is clearly one of the more mature churches that Paul founded. Very likely, it was originally hosted by Lydia, a dealer in expensive purple dye, and probably a gentile convert to Judaism. She was converted under Paul’s preaching, and she hosted his missionary company while he was in Philippi. Her role is uncertain in the beginnings of the church there, but her influence is made apparent by Luke’s mention of her in Acts (16:14–15). She is not mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, but two other women are. Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2) are called Paul’s “co-workers in the preaching of the Gospel.” Many commentators recognize these women as elders in the Philippian church. The rift between them is not personal or petty; it is a church matter—one that could eventuate in a church split. For this reason Paul pleads for humility and unity, reminding the church of the threat of the legalists on the horizon and how they cannot afford disunity and arrogance.
The Elect Lady of John’s Second Letter
The Bible speaks of an elect lady to whom the apostle John wrote. And while some see this as a title for the church to which John writes, it is likely that this is a woman leader in the church (probably its pastor), and her “children” are her congregation.

The Church at Ephesus
As Paul gives instructions for the qualifications and behavior of deacons in his letter to Timothy at Ephesus, he mentions the “women” in concert with his broader instructions. This seems to suggest that the women mentioned in this context are deaconesses (1 Timothy 3:11). This should stand in stark contrast to the women with whom Paul had the concern that was discussed above—that is, “gossips” and “busybodies.”

LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS

Many books have been written and many words spoken in regard to the issue of woman in leadership and it is very likely that there is more debate to come. But the issue is basically broader than that. It is one of justice, equality, dignity and service. It is an anthropological, theological, sociological and psychological question. But more than that, it is ultimately a biblical question, because it asks, “How does God see women in particular, and humankind in general?” It asks for a revelation of the nature of God, remembering that we, men and women alike, were created in God’s image, for his glory. And so, while monikers and categories often seem presumptuous and stifling, it seems safe to suggest that the position commonly known as egalitarianism, with particular regard to church leadership roles for women, has a solid biblical foundation. Others who hold to the views stated above would espouse the nomenclature of “complementarianism without hierarchy” or “biblical equality.” There is some difference between the two categories, but for our purposes, we shall forego the nuances. Both schools hold to equality and justice, and both smile upon women in church leadership—as does the Bible and, as do we.

However one chooses to develop, categorize, propagate and live out his or her ideas, everyone should strive toward a biblical understanding of humanity, equity, equality, dignity and liberty. If we do so, then we will see ministry and leadership from God’s perspective—the God who created man and woman in his image and after his likeness that we may exercise authority in his Holy Name. In short, let our prayer and perspective be: “Let justice run like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24).

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