

## **Biblical Eldership Study Sheet #2 - The Gender Question**

As we pursue the question of biblical eldership here at Felton Bible Church, one of the key objections we have encountered, and will encounter, centers on gender roles. It is my conviction, based on Scripture, that Jesus intends for qualified men in the body of Christ to fill the office of elder. To say this is not to make a value statement with regard to men and women in the church, nor is it to major on a minor issue. Rather, it is to say that Jesus is the head of the church, his bride, and that he works all things together for the good of his bride. If we are concerned to flourish as his bride, then we must pay careful attention to how he intends for us to live. *I am deeply concerned that the women and men of Felton Bible Church enjoy all the privileges of living as ambassador-disciples in the growing Gospel kingdom of God. I am convinced that experiencing such joy to its fullest necessitates a body that is ordered and living according to our Shepherd's design for his people.*

In order to situate what follows appropriately, let me note that I consider the issue of gender roles in the body of Christ - especially with respect to the office of biblical elder and the preaching/teaching ministry - a "second order" question. If you recall from my discussion of theological triage, my definition of a "second order" issue includes the following language:

*Issues of Secondary Importance (Important and Central)* - These are beliefs both *important* to the Gospel (though perhaps not essential to salvation) and to the right worship of God in the church or an individual life. An anemic or sub-biblical understanding in these areas may hamstring the life of a congregation or cause an individual's faith to be less than what it should be...

To say "second order" is *not* to imply that this question is unimportant, especially when it comes to the life of God's people in community. But, it is to make some distinction between this question and questions about, for instance, the deity of Christ.

### **I. Equality with Distinction**

One of the key, and even "revolutionary," themes that runs through Scripture is the truth of "equality with distinction"; the idea that two or more entities can exist in essential equality, and yet do so distinguished by equally essential aspects of personality, character, roles, responsibilities, functions, etc. When I use the phrase "equality with distinction," I mean the sort of equality that encompasses godly submission (i.e. Jesus to the Father, wives to their husbands) and Spirit-powered loving headship (i.e. Jesus to the church, husbands to their wives).

#### *Equality with Distinction in the Godhead*

1. How does the Nicene Creed - a foundational expression of the Christian faith - reflect equality with distinction as an aspect of God himself:

*"I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, come down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."*

2. Where might you go in Scripture to see the principle of "equality with distinction" at work within the Godhead (consider Genesis 1:1-2, 26; Psalm 45:6-7; Psalm 110; John 1:1-18, 10:27-28; 14:8-14; John 17; Philippians 2:5-6; Colossians 1:15-19; Colossians 2:8-10; Hebrews 1:1-4)? What did it look like (what does it look like even now) for Jesus to be equal with the Father, and yet distinct from him and even submitted to him? What did living that distinctiveness mean for Jesus?

3. If the principle of "equality with distinction" springs from the nature of God himself, should it surprise us that we, who are created in his image, reflect the same principle in our lives and relationships as people?

#### *Equality with Distinction in the Ministry of Jesus*

1. How did Jesus reflect the principle of "equality with distinction" in his earthly ministry? In this regard let me point back to Luke 6:12-16 and the sermon from July 8, 2018 (see [www.feltonbiblechurch.org/sermons](http://www.feltonbiblechurch.org/sermons)).

#### *Equality with Distinction in the Marriage Relationship*

1. How does the principle of "equality with distinction" appear in the marriage relationship between husband and wife? Consider: Genesis 1:27, 2:18-25; Proverbs 12:4, 18:22, 19:14, 31:10; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, 10-11, 11:2-16; Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

2. How do the concepts of love, honor, and submission in the marriage relationship inform our view (i.e. flesh out, add substance to) of "equality with distinction"? Consider: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; Titus 2:4-5.

## Equality with Distinction in the Church

1. How do we see the reality of “equality with distinction” at work in the life of the church beyond the question of biblical eldership? Consider: 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 4:1-16, 6:1-9; Colossians 3:20-4:1; 1 Timothy 3:3-16; Titus 2:2-6; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

### Related Thoughts

1. Notice the intentional parallel that Paul makes between the relationship of a husband and wife, and Jesus with his church (Ephesians 5:23-24, 32). The lesser picture (husband-wife) is meant to inform our understanding of the greater (Jesus-church). Therefore, we should probably suppose that dynamics of the lesser entity (marital union) will also reflect in the greater entity (church communion), including dynamics of gender equality and gender distinctions.

2. Consider that “family” is another key New Testament picture of life in the body of Christ. Since God-ordained “family” rests on the principle of “equality with distinction” (husband-wife, parent-child), including gender-based distinction, then we should expect the same to appear in the life of Jesus’ “family.”

3. Because Jesus clearly demonstrated, taught, and lived the principle of “equality with distinction,” then we can rest assured this is *not* a question of essential value.

4. Because God does all things for his glory in the flourishing of his people, then we *must* conclude that gender distinctions in the body of Christ are not only necessary but *essential* for our true well-being. We will not be the people Jesus intends us to be if we push against God’s design for the body of Christ.

5. It is essential that the church learn to welcome, embrace, live, *enjoy*, and *celebrate* who God has made us to be as men and women in the body of Christ - essentially equal, and fundamentally distinct.

## **II. The Clear Teaching of the Text**

Beyond the general principle of “equality with distinction” at work in the body of Christ, we also need to recognize that God *specifically* entrusts the role of “elder” to men in Jesus’ church.

1. Consider that Jesus called and sent out only male apostles (though he certainly had many female disciples). How does this fact inform our understanding of pastoral (elder) leadership within the fledgling church of Christ?

2. Consider 1 Timothy 2:8-15. How does Paul’s instruction regarding life in the body of Christ (2 Timothy 3:14-15) reflect a principle of “equality with distinction”? In what sense does

Paul limit the *functional* role of a woman in the church? What is Paul's "justification" for doing so?

3. Looking at the requirements for an overseer (elder) in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, do we see a gender component? How about as reflected in Titus 1:5-9?

4. Consider 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35. In what sense does this passage limit the role of women in the body of Christ?

### **III. The Power to Live Well**

As redeemed followers of Jesus who wrestle yet with sin, living gender distinctions well is likely to be one of the more difficult aspects of our life together. Therefore, we need to know how, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do this!

1. How do the following passages inform our understanding of what it means to live out gender distinctions in the body of Christ: Philippians 2:1-18; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 3:8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; 5:5-11; 1 John 3:23, 4:7-12?

### **IV. Acknowledging the Hard Points**

1. We come from a multiplicity of backgrounds that inform our approach to Scripture. Some of those backgrounds are more helpful than others in terms of easily accepting God's revelation of himself, his plans, and his purposes in the church. Some of us even come from past experiences that make welcoming gender roles in the body of Christ downright difficult. Therefore, we ought to be patient with one another, circumspect in what we say, quick to listen, and eager for humility.

2. We should note that Paul occasionally warns his readers about arguing with, or setting aside, the content of his letters. See for instance: 2 Thessalonians 3:12-15; 1 Timothy 6:3-5.

3. Next to questions of human sexuality, there are few aspects of the church's bible-based self-understanding that are more offensive to our culture than gender "equality with distinction" in the body of Christ. To what degree have we imbibed a cultural view that makes us defensive to what we read in God's Word?

4. There is, I think, a definite correlation between churches who leave aside the Bible's teaching about gender roles in the church and those who leave aside the Bible's teaching about human sexuality. The two issues seem closely related.

5. This short study lands on one primary point, namely the fact that Jesus has entrusted the role of "elder" in his church to the men of his body. To assert this truth is to make an important but *only foundational* statement about gender roles in the body of Christ. In other words, from this *foundation* there is much to explore about men and women working in and

for the kingdom of our Savior. The role of qualified male elders in the body of Christ is a starting point from which to embark on the profound study of all Jesus wants to do in and through the women of his church (see for instance: Philippians 4:2-3; Colossians 4:15; 2 Timothy 1:5, 2 Timothy 4:19, Philemon 1-3, etc.).

## **V. Types of Arguments Against Gender Distinctions**

In some cases, arguments against gender distinctions in terms of role and function in the body of Christ come from other believers (churches or individuals) who legitimately love Jesus and can otherwise affirm our statement of faith. In this case, I consider such persons as true brothers and sisters who are wrong on an important (and even fundamental) point of church life.

In other instances, objections come from those who claim the title “Christian,” and yet deny much that is essential to the faith. Inasmuch as I understand the church in America today, many “mainline” Protestant denomination congregations would fall in this camp. All too often such churches (or even persons) look more like the false prophets of 2 Peter and Jude, or the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” of Acts 20:29-30 (even if they are unknowing wolves).

While I cannot do justice to all of the arguments against making gender distinctions in the church, let me describe some broad types of arguments other legitimate Christians may present with respect to this issue:

1. *Interpretative Arguments* - Some disagree with long-standing (and sound) interpretations of key texts like 1 Timothy 2 (especially verse 10), 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, or 1 Corinthians 14.

2. *Text Critical Arguments* - Some argue against specific passages by suggesting they are not a part of the original text of Scripture, or that they reflect scribal error in one fashion or another. Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is a particular object of such arguments.

3. *Cultural Arguments* - Some limit the application of specific texts by arguing that they are culturally conditioned. Therefore, the historic “orthodox” interpretations of these texts are inappropriate to the culture of our day.

4. *Boundary Arguments* - Some churches agree with distinct gender roles in the body of Christ, but then caveat those distinctions in the way they employ the title “pastor” or allow women to preach and teach in an authoritative, public, and mixed setting. For instance, I know of one EFCA congregation in our district that concurs with Paul’s limitations on women serving as elders but otherwise allows women to carry the title “pastor” and to teach and preach in a public, mixed-gender service (which is, I believe, inconsistent with Scripture).

## VI. Other Resources

Beyond the Scripture listed above, I'd like to recommend three additional resources that may prove helpful as we consider the question of biblical eldership and gender roles. As you review these, you may be helped by the following definitions:

- *Evangelicalism* - Refers to Protestant churches and individuals who affirm the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who hold a high view of Scripture (it is inerrant and authoritative), and who pursue an active Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- *Hermeneutic* - Hermeneutics is the "science" and art of interpreting Scripture. It is the process we follow whereby we understand the meaning of a text, and then discern its application in our lives today.
- *Complementarianism* - A term that describes the view which affirms distinct biblical roles given by God to men and women, especially in the family and the church. The complementarian view is one of "equality with distinction" that, among other things, incorporates roles of headship and submission.
- *Egalitarianism* - A term that describes the view which denies distinct biblical roles given by God to men and women, including in the church and in the family.

1. The first is a panel conversation between two men and three women, recorded at The Gospel Coalition conference in 2017. It is a well-rounded and challenging consideration by five people committed to the Bible's teaching on gender roles in the body of Christ: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/pastors-and-women-in-ministry/>.

2. The second is also a panel conversation, this time between four evangelical leaders/pastors who participated in the "Together for the Gospel" Conference in 2012 (Note: You can read their bio's at the bottom of the page): <http://t4g.org/media/2012/05/complementarianism-essential-or-expendable-2/>. Fair warning...Depending on where you stand on this issue at present you may find this conversation challenging at points, though I hope still helpful.

3. Finally, I *highly encourage* you to listen to a sermon given by John Piper in 1989, titled "Manhood, Womanhood, and the Freedom to Minister," at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/manhood-womanhood-and-the-freedom-to-minister> (Note: You can also read it if you prefer to do so instead). It is a wonderful exposition of 1 Timothy 2:8-15.