

WHY ARE ALL THE ELDERS MALE?

Stan Fowler (on behalf of the elders)

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Evangelical Christians are united in the gospel, but divided on some other questions. Perhaps the most painful division currently is the question of male-female order. The current terms are egalitarian (no gender-based limits distinctions) and complementarian (equal in value, distinct in role). Given the realities in both society and church, it is understandable that there are questions about our commitment to male-only eldership, and those honest questions deserve honest answers. So here is my attempt to explain the biblically grounded rationale for that commitment. We need to admit that there is no explicit biblical text that answers this question, but instead a pattern of male leadership that is deeply embedded in Scripture. The basic point is that men are called to give leadership to the family, both the family related by blood and the family related by grace, the church.

The biblical pattern

Genesis 1:26-28

- Male and female jointly are the image of God.
- Male and female share dominion over the created order.

Genesis 2

- This joint dominion is carried out via male leadership and female support, indicated by the unexpected order of the creation of Adam and Eve.
- Adam was formed first and existed alone for some time. (7)
- Adam was given responsibility to tend the garden (15).
- Adam was called to obey the divine commands, and implicitly the responsibility to transmit those to others. (16-17).
- Eve was created to help Adam in fulfilling these responsibilities. (18-20)
- Adam named the woman, even as he named the animals. (23)

Genesis 3 (the Fall)

- God confronts Adam as responsible head. (9-12)
- The original leadership/support pattern becomes a power struggle. (16)

- God banishes “the man” from the garden (22-23), indicating his special responsibility.

Mosaic Law

- Only men are appointed as priests, which is counter-cultural in the ancient world.
- But women do serve sometimes as prophets and judges.

Proverbs 31:10-31 (the excellent wife)

- The traditional order is still in place, but the wife is honoured.
- The husband is among the elders/governors of the community. (23)
- But the wife is active, industrious, and wise. (11-22)
- The wife is active in speaking words of wisdom and instructing the family. (26; cf. Prov 1:8)

Ephesians 5:22-33 (Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7)

- Wives are called to submit, to defer to their husbands’ headship. (22-24)
- Husbands are called to love their wives sacrificially. (25-28)
- This order is designed to be like the order of Christ and the church.
- This pattern of love and respect reverses Genesis 3 and recovers Genesis 2.

1 Timothy

- The church is a family, the family/household of God. (3:15)
- Family relations define relations within the church. (5:1-2)
- Those who lead the church must first demonstrate that they lead their family well (3:4-5), i.e., that they must be men who are faithful husbands/fathers.
- Men serve as overseers/elders, but women have significant roles and apparently are described as deacons. (3:11)
- What about 1 Timothy 2:11-15? Most complementarians see this as perhaps the most crucial text. It does not use the language of church office, but if it denies women the right to teach men or to exercise authority over men, then it denies women the right to do what elders do. But there is ongoing

debate about the details of this text, especially the meaning of the Greek word for authority, which may actually have negative connotations. However we read this text, the truth that the church is God's extended family provides a solid basis for appointing godly men to teach and govern the church.

Some objections

Doesn't subordination imply inferiority?

- Of course not. Christ is the God-Man, and he is honoured as God even though he submits to the will of the Father (John 5:19-23). In human experience, the leader of a team provides order without reducing the other team members to inferior status.

Isn't egalitarianism simply a matter of justice?

- No. Justice demands that we give to everyone what they are due, but God defines what we are due.

Aren't the biblical limits on women just a temporary accommodation to culture, just as the apostles accepted slavery but pointed toward eliminating it?

- Family is a timeless structure grounded in creation, but slavery is not.
- The apostles never argue that slavery ought to exist or extol its virtues, but they do argue that male-female order ought to exist.

Doesn't Galatians 3:28 ("neither male nor female") nullify gender-based limits?

- No. Galatians 3 is about the identity of "Abraham's seed," i.e., the covenant people. It is not about functions within the covenant people.

Doesn't complementarianism lead to toxic masculinity and the abuse of women?

- The idea of male headship can obviously be used to support abusive behaviour, but that is not the biblical sense of headship,

and experience actually shows that thoughtful complementarian men are less prone to abusive behaviour.

This does not answer all the questions about the application of male headship, but we can accept the structure and pursue together the answers to those questions. But remember that this male-female order is not the ultimate point. The order is designed to serve our mission to be growing disciples of Christ and to influence others into such discipleship. You don't have to be an elder to have a vital ministry in that mission.

Discussion questions

1. Are you convinced that male eldership is the right application of biblical teaching about men and women? If not, why not? What other questions might need to be addressed?
2. How have you seen male leadership work well?
3. How have you seen male leadership fail to work well?
4. How can we prevent abuse of male leadership?
5. Do you think that this restriction on the role of women in the church is a barrier to faith for people in your circles?
6. Someone may say, "How can your church possibly restrict women in this way, when we all know that women are just as capable as men?" How might you respond to this criticism?