



Complementarianism in the Church

The Role of Women in the Church

THE AUSTIN STONE COMMUNITY CHURCH

has long valued and sought to empower women in ministry and mission. From the earliest days of the church, our elders have sought to wisely cultivate the flourishing of God's daughters in the context of the local church, in light of the full counsel of His Word. Over the past few years, our elders have had many conversations with female leaders and other women in our church about their experiences, and the common request has been for clarity on our perspectives about roles in the church. Our desire is to provide that clarity, because it encourages the flourishing of women and, as a result, the rest of the church.

This article addresses specific questions our elders have received about the ways that women can serve and lead in the context of a complementarian church. Before answering these important and practical questions, we would like to establish shared definitions to develop a common understanding of God's Word applied in our context. We urge you to read this paper in full with the Bible in front of you, prayerfully seeking understanding.

In this discussion, we think it is important to begin specifically with the Bible's emphasis on the worth and value of women. Throughout the ancient world, women were seen as inferior and subservient to men. They possessed the least status in society, had limited opportunities for education, had no bearing in a court of law, and due to their perceived weakness and inferiority, they were generally confined to the domestic sphere of the home. Though Genesis unambiguously contends that God made both male and female in His image and that each is

equal in dignity, value, and worth, this is not how women were viewed or treated throughout the ancient world (Genesis 1:27-28).

We point this out to show how radical and countercultural the Bible is in its view of women, particularly in the ministry of Jesus and in the early church. Consider how Jesus treated women. He healed them. He spoke with them. He let them touch Him (which would have been unthinkable for a rabbi in that time). The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus' interactions with women, many of whom had been marginalized by society (Matthew 9:18-20, Luke 7:36-50). Luke tells us that women not only followed Jesus, but they also helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Additionally, women were the first ones to discover the empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8). It should come as no surprise then to see women as full participants in the church from the beginning of its existence. In Acts, women were often among the first converts as the gospel spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Luke identifies women in certain key stages of his narrative as he shows the gospel moving from Jerusalem into Samaria, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth (Acts 5:14; 8:12; 16:13-15; 17:4, 34; 18:2).

The apostle Paul continues this emphasis on women in his writings and ministry. He mentions several women who were co-laborers with him in the gospel, most notably Euodia and Syntyche who labored side-by-side with Paul (Philippians 4:2-3). In addition, of the 27 individuals Paul mentions in Romans 16, at least six are women. Paul and the early Christians understood that through the gospel, God was removing barriers, reversing the curse, and putting back together all that was broken and fractured by sin. They understood that the gospel offers a radi-

cally different view of the world, which included a radically different view of women who were made in God's image, loved and honored by Jesus, and now equally indwelt by the Holy Spirit to carry out the work of the gospel in the world. Paul makes this clear in his statement to the Galatians: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). Now, because of what Christ had done, God's vision for women could be restored to what He intended. As a result, women were functioning in roles that would have never been accepted in other cultures or religions. For instance, though women were forbidden by Jews to enter the synagogue, women prayed and prophesied in the public assembly of the church (1 Corinthians 11:1-5). Women taught in particular settings (Titus 2:3; Acts 21:9). Women [served as deacons in the church](#) (1 Timothy 3:11). Women were so vital in the early church that Saul saw fit to persecute both men and women in order to stop the spread of the gospel (Acts 9:1-2).

No religion from the ancient world viewed women in this way! In addition, scholars point out that no other document from the ancient world commands men to love and honor their wives; to see other women as sisters and mothers; to consider women as their equal in value, dignity, and worth; or to conduct themselves in a submissive posture toward their sisters in Christ (Ephesians 5:21, 25-27; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Timothy 5:2; Galatians 3:27-28). Only the New Testament offers such a perspective on women, and we want to labor in celebrating and maintaining this same posture toward women in our church. **Though a distinction in the roles between men and women should be upheld, we also believe that our church cannot become all that God intends without the voice, leadership, and gifts of the women in our body. It is our hope that the women of The Austin Stone have the freedom, resources, and support they need in order to fulfill the ministry to which they have been called, so that together we can "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).**

The Austin Stone's Definitions

ANY DISCUSSION on complementarianism—the distinctness of the roles that God has appointed to men and women—must start at the beginning of the Bible and consider the story through the end of Scripture. The discussion includes several difficult texts throughout the Old and New Testaments which have been debated for millennia. Finally, the conversation must recognize the situational and contextual circumstances of both the local church and the surrounding culture. We hope to develop this holistic approach throughout this paper. With

God's help and with a keen awareness of our limitations, we define the key biblical teachings in the following sentence:

God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, yet different and complementary in function, both in the marriage relationship and in the church.

In our Affirmation of Faith, we have formally stated our position this way:

Regarding gender, we believe that God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two, distinct, complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God.

While the definition from our Affirmation of Faith is sufficient for theological clarity, to demonstrate functional complementarianism, we desire to emphasize that men and women are **equal in dignity and distinct in role**.

Equal in Dignity

When we consider how men and women are equal in dignity, three primary, biblical truths construct a shared framework for The Austin Stone: men and women are equally created by God, redeemed by Christ, and indwelt and empowered by the Spirit.

Men and Women Are Equally Created by God

From the outset of Scripture, we see God create the genders of male and female. He certainly created gender in the animals He created, and yet He created and bestowed upon humanity a special kind of relationship: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). In this creation account, God clearly creates both Adam and Eve, and crucially, both Adam and Eve reflect His glory as image-bearers. Before any other differences are introduced, the emphasis of this text is equality in God’s image with respect to gender.

Men and Women Are Equally Redeemed by Christ

Not only are men and women created in the image of God, but both are also enslaved to sin and in need of redemption. Genesis 3 recounts the tragic fall of both Adam and Eve into sin. After the fall, neither Adam nor Eve could be in the presence of God in the garden any longer due to their rebellion against His commands. And consequently, now all of humanity is under sin and needs to be reconciled back to God. When we repent of sin and believe in Christ, we receive a new nature and a new status with respect to sin: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

By faith, men and women are both united with Christ and counted righteous before God. This is not on account of gender, but on account of Christ. Both men and women are regenerated by the Spirit, repentant of sin, trusting in Christ, and adopted into God’s family. We are equal in standing before God through Christ and His saving work!

Men and Women Are Equally Indwelt and Empowered by the Spirit

With redemption in Christ comes the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead now dwells in men and women equally. This is the fulfillment of God’s promise to the prophet Joel: “It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28 NASB).

The Spirit has been poured out into the hearts of Christian men and Christian women alike. He has distributed to each one of us a gift for the building

up of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7). The Spirit apportions those gifts differently and empowers them in every believer.

In summary, men and women are equal in the image of God, in the redemption in Christ, and in the indwelling and empowerment of the Spirit. The triune God of the Bible works equally in men and women in these areas. While there is significantly more historical and theological development for all three points, these truths lay the foundation for the equality of dignity afforded to every man and woman in the church.

Distinct in Roles

Like the persons of the Trinity, though we are equal in dignity, men and women play distinct roles. Within the coequal, coeternal Godhead, the Father, Son, and Spirit share the exact same divine attributes and yet operate in unique roles. Though sometimes within their roles the members of the Trinity operate in the categories of authority and submission (e.g. the Son submits to the Father, the Spirit is sent at the will of the Father and the Son), this in no way diminishes any divine person's attributes, glory, or status. In Genesis 1, we see that both male and female are given the mandate, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). It is clear that God intends both men and women to take part in fulfilling this command.

It is also crucial to understand that God's original design of men and women (who are both—together—created with equal glory, dignity, and in the image of God) includes some of the unique role distinctions of men and women. Some are evident even in the pre-fall, Edenic, "very good," state of creation (Genesis 1:31). For example, the apostle

Paul in 1 Timothy 2:13 references God's order of creation ("For Adam was formed first, then Eve ...") to determine proper gender roles within the church. Additionally, before the curse in Genesis 3, God provides the man a wife to be his "helper" as he exercises dominion over the earth. This provision is not because Adam was superior, but because he lacked a suitable companion to fulfill God's design and purpose. Genesis 2:18 is clear that it was not good for Adam to be alone, because God had made him for companionship. "Not good" cannot mean there was sin or dysfunction in Adam that produced lack; instead, it reveals God's good design to make him in need of another person. God had made him for connection with someone who was like him, yet different from him. In using the term "helper" for Eve, God is not being derogatory toward or belittling her, but rather, He is signifying Adam's lack without her (not his superiority over her). The varying roles between them is a statement on function and order—not value and worth.

Divine being and Edenic creation give witness to the goodness of rightly-ordered roles. These distinctions are not comprehensive to all spheres of life, but the Bible is quite clear about the functional distinction in two particular spheres of life relevant to men and women: within marriage and in the local church.

Marriage

Paul teaches on the clear and distinct roles of men and women in the context of marriage in Ephesians 5. These comments on marriage roles are part of Paul's outworking of the command to "be filled with the Spirit," with the result that believers are "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:18-21). Properly "submitting to one another" does not entail flattening out authority, but rather, actively leading and submitting within appropriate, God-given roles. To illustrate mutu-

al submission, Paul delineates and defines three non-interchangeable, rightly-ordered relationships wherein believers can fulfill this command to “submit to one another”: wives and husbands, children and parents, and masters and slaves.

Regarding wives and husbands, Paul wrote:

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

(Ephesians 5:22-33)

In marriage, the husband is to lovingly lead like Christ leads the church, and the wife is to graciously submit as the church submits to Christ. This leadership and submission relationship is presented as eternally good. The roles outlined above in marriage are a reflection of the gospel! The husband is to love his wife and sacrificially lead her through joy-

ful service. His leadership carries the recognition that he and his wife serve the same Lord. He does not demand or enforce her submission, rather he treats his wife with the same care, affection, and grace that Jesus shows toward the church. Wives are to submit to their husbands in the manner that the church submits to Christ. A wife’s submission is to her husband, and not to all men in general. Marriage is a joyful submission by an equal partner out of respect for her husband and the recognition that her ultimate Lord is Jesus. Both husbands and wives loving and serving in these roles testify to the glory of God. This complementary relationship, in mutual submission to Christ, is expressed through different roles in the relationship.

Church

Additionally, men and women have unique roles in the church:

⁹ Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, ¹⁰ but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. ¹¹ A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. ¹² But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. ¹³ For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. ¹⁴ And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.

(1 Timothy 2:9-14 NASB)

Please note that the nuances of this text and additional texts from 1 Timothy will be addressed with clarity later in this paper. What is clear from this passage is the unique role of men in teaching and exercising authority in the church. This text also highlights that women receive instruction in the

church in a unique way: “with entire submissiveness.” Again, we will address this more fully later, but we see in this passage that Paul emphasizes some distinction in the roles of men and women with respect to teaching.

There are several other passages in the New Testament that highlight a particular leadership of called and qualified men in the church and a particular female submission in the church. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, alongside other texts on eldership, reserve the role or office of elder for qualified and called men only. Eldership is limited to such men as prescribed by Scripture where there is a clear teaching and oversight function in the church. (Elder authority and teaching is described more fully later in this paper, and you can also see an overview of elders and deacons at The Austin Stone [here](#).)

As previously affirmed, both men and women are gifted for service in the church, yet there is New Testament precedent for the office of elder to be stewarded by qualified and called men in the local church in order to teach and govern the church.

For further development of these statements biblically and theologically, we recommend the following books and articles:

1. [God’s Design for Man and Woman](#) by Andreas and Margaret Elizabeth Köstenberger
2. [The Meaning of Marriage](#) by Tim Keller
3. [This Momentary Marriage](#) by John Piper

Summary and Primary Question to Answer

MEN AND WOMEN are equal in the image of God, salvation, and the indwelling of the Spirit, yet have distinct roles in marriage and in the church. With this key complementarian statement established, we now progress to answer the question *How should complementarianism function at The Austin Stone?*

Rather than tackle every complementarian issue, this paper aims to answer a question we are often asked: *What can men and women do (and not do) in the context of the church?* As important as gender roles within marriage may be, this paper seeks to clarify and illustrate the distinction of gender roles solely within The Austin Stone as a local church.

The Nature of Governance in the Church

ANSWERING THE QUESTION *What can men and women do (and not do) in the context of the church?* requires us to set some additional biblical foundation, as the distinction of roles for men and women must also include an understanding of church governance.

We believe that a biblically-governed church will emphasize the role of elders, the role of deacons, and the role of local church members (partners) as ordained in the New Testament. In doing so, we obey God in appointing a plurality of called and qualified men to eldership. Furthermore, we are committed to appointing qualified men and women to the diaconate. Although our ultimate authority on the issue of leadership is Scripture, we have been helped by the great counsel and example of other churches and leaders who are seeking to follow God's commands in Scripture regarding leadership. With respect to our view on deacons, we are in agreement with [Dr. John Piper](#) of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN and [Dr. Timothy Keller](#) of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. We are thankful for their help and work on this issue.

The primary passage for consideration in this discussion is Paul's list of deacon qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all

dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

(1 Timothy 3:1-13)

The Greek term *gynē* in 1 Timothy 3:11 can be equally translated here as "women" or "their wives." The English Standard Version Bible has chosen the translation "their wives," which applies the qualifications to the wives of male deacons. The elders at The Austin Stone are persuaded that *gynē* here is more likely translated in this context as "women," and that the ensuing qualifications apply to female deacons. We base our interpretation on the fact that earlier in the same paragraph, elders (whose

authority and visibility is greater than deacons) have no such similar requirements for their wives. We believe deaconship is identified with women elsewhere in the Bible as well, such as Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 and the clear deacon role given to older women by Paul in 1 Timothy 5.

Ordaining women deacons is not our response to some kind of cultural pressure, but is born out of our conviction to rightly interpret and apply God's inerrant Word. While we understand the case for interpreting the text of 1 Timothy 3:11 to exclude women from the diaconate, we believe that God's

explicit desire is for qualified men and women to serve His church as deacons and for a plurality of men to lead His church. This is what our King commands and what we affirm.

For more information on this topic, the biblical case is very well presented by John Piper and Bethlehem Baptist Church, and we recommend that you refer to [this article](#) for a more expanded discussion and biblical exegesis. Additional reading on the biblical and theological development of this approach can also be found in the bibliography below.

What Is Elder Authority?

THE ELDERS OF THE AUSTIN STONE have been entrusted by God with the responsibility of watching over the souls of the people in our church (Hebrews 13:17). As elders, Scripture tells us that we will have to give an account to God one day on how faithful we were to the people He entrusted to us. Within the church, if the office of elder is reserved for men and there is a unique role of teaching and exercising authority, we must then answer the questions *What is elder authority?* and *What constitutes authoritative teaching?*

At The Austin Stone, elder authority is mediated, plural authority, meaning that it is limited by God and delineated in God's Word. Elder authority is constrained, yet real; the elders are neither unlimited tyrants nor passive figureheads. God has empowered the elder body to determine and enforce the doctrinal boundaries, ethical norms, and contextual practices within the covenant community. Elders

are leaders who admit or dismiss people from the church, and they ensure "quality control" of members' doctrine and growth into Christlikeness.

The elders are charged with the following primary tasks at The Austin Stone:

- Guard the doctrine and teaching of the church to ensure alignment with our Affirmation of Faith
- Shepherd the body of The Austin Stone through serving, equipping, and caring for the flock
- Exercise church discipline according to Matthew 18:15-20 and other Scriptures
- Intercede for the body

Elders authoritatively lead the church primarily through the exercise of the three tasks outlined above: teaching, shepherding, and discipline.

Elder Authority and Teaching

With respect to teaching, elders have the right and power to define, promote, and enforce our doctrinal boundaries. This includes overseeing our pulpit in plurality (choosing the texts of Scripture that we will preach; authorizing the interpretation, study, and preparation for each sermon; and providing feedback on sermons that are preached at The Austin Stone). The elders also oversee the content being delivered in our equipping classes, training environments (through both content development and the ongoing formation of teachers), and the curriculum utilized in KIDS Ministry and STUDENTS Ministry. When the Word of God is being brought to bear in Missional Community groups, our elders are eager to serve where there may be confusion or disagreement. The elders will proactively pursue communities when there is doctrinal division, confusion, or error, and engage them to restore unity, clarity, and truth.

Elder Authority and Shepherd

Shepherd is the elders' call to intimately and regularly draw near to their people with an eye to help and form the local church according to the church's

beliefs and norms. In this context, elders model godly, repentant lives and provide counsel from the Scriptures in line with our Affirmation of Faith.

Another aspect of our shepherding is ensuring the leadership and oversight of the organization consistent with our bylaws and the state of Texas. We are exercising the ordained authority in matters of civic and legal responsibility on behalf of the church.

Elder Authority and Church Discipline

With respect to church discipline, the elders are formally involved in the protection of the flock in exercising the final stages of the principles laid out in Matthew 18:15-20. In additional circumstances where we see tremendous danger or risk to the body, as Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, the elders have the right and power to remove someone from our fellowship for the safety of the flock.

For more on how church discipline functions at The Austin Stone, please see our [Primer on Church Discipline](#).

What Constitutes Authoritative Teaching?

ELDERS UNIQUELY CARRY the responsibility of *authoritative teaching*, which occurs in two main areas. First, elders oversee and guard the doctrinal beliefs of a church. Elders are entrusted with this authority,

which Paul refers to as “guard[ing] the good deposit” (2 Timothy 1:14). Elders are responsible for all that is taught in the church and for upholding sound

doctrine. Additionally, elders have the authority to withhold partnership/membership from someone in the church regarding doctrinal matters.

Secondly, authoritative teaching (that is restricted to elders) is a specific kind of teaching which involves defining doctrine for the church through doctrinal statements, position papers, affirmations of faith, and preaching sermons during the Sunday gathering. Scriptures call only the elders to steward this kind of teaching office (1 Corinthians 14:33-36, 1 Timothy 2:11-15). But Scripture says with equal plainness that women are not excluded from what might be called *general teaching*. All believers, male and female, can and should teach one another in this general way. However, authoritative teaching (overseeing and defining doctrine) is restricted to elders.

The biblical arguments in support of this position hinge on the role of elders being exercised in authoritative teaching and preaching. Textually, the argument centers on 1 Timothy 2:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul provides direct and explicit instruction for the role of men and women in the assembled church: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:12-14).

Here we see that women are not permitted to speak or exercise authority in this context. The silence is not unilateral, comprehensive silence, but silence in the role of authoritative teaching, which would be an appropriate conclusion of Paul’s instruction about the ordering of the church in worship and leadership. Paul is not forbidding two actions here (teaching and authority); rather, he is restricting one function, which we refer to as *authoritative teaching*.

What needs to be pointed out is that the Bible only restricts one of the speaking activities in the church to elders (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The women of the New Testament were not restricted from praying, from prophesying, from reading Scripture, or from giving an exhortation. Priscilla and Aquila each participated in instructing Apollos, women prayed and prophesied in the assembly, and both men and women were expected to be “speaking the truth in love” to each other (Acts 18, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Ephesians 4:15). And the command for the gospel of the kingdom to be proclaimed throughout the whole world is for both men and women (Matthew 24:14). Again, we believe that the teaching Paul has in mind in 1 Timothy 2:12 is a special kind of teaching that requires the authority and responsibility only given to elders. Additionally, a similar case can be found in 1 Corinthians 14:

³³ As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

(1 Corinthians 14:33-35)

Here again, Paul prohibits women from speaking in the context of the church assembled, and he adds that it is shameful for this to be done. However, praying and prophesying seem to be permitted earlier for women in 1 Corinthians 11, and the teaching of chapters 12–14 assume that various members will participate in the church gatherings. Therefore, it is difficult to see how Paul would be requiring absolute silence of women in all church contexts. Paul is likely forbidding women to speak up and judge prophecies, which would constitute authoritative teaching that is only reserved for elders.

Given its unique role throughout church history, the fullness of the church body present, and the special weight of the content delivered, the Sunday sermon is where we believe authoritative teaching happens most visibly and most regularly at The Austin Stone. And therefore, this function in our church is restricted to the elders and only occasionally to men in the process of elder affirmation for the purpose of testing. While we do not believe the Bible precludes women and non-elder men from teaching the Bible in other public settings, the primary way that the elders of The Austin Stone have chosen to express authoritative teaching is through preaching at Sunday gatherings.

However, since authoritative/special teaching is not the only speaking activity in the church, we believe women and non-elder men with the gift of teaching

should be teaching in other environments, which we refer to as general teaching. These environments include equipping classes, Missional Community groups, ASDP, development programs, conferences, KIDS, STUDENTS, seminars, workshops, and connecting environments.

In summary, we are making a distinction between teaching with authority—which is a special kind of teaching—and teaching in general. Teaching with authority is restricted to elders, while teaching, in general, is permissible for all believers. This practically means that The Austin Stone permits public teaching by both women (even to men) and non-elder men in various settings, except for the sermon in our Sunday gatherings.

Specific Questions and Responses

GIVEN THE FOUNDATION laid out above, we will now endeavor to succinctly answer several questions we have received in past and current discussions.

Roles and Responsibilities Within the Church

Can women be elders? Can women be pastors?

Women cannot be elders, and we believe the title pastor and elder are synonyms in the New Testament. Therefore a woman would not have

the title of pastor in our church family. Women can certainly serve in the office and function of deacon, as outlined above.

Can women be deacons?

Yes. Both men and women who have been tested and found to fulfill the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 may serve in the office of deacon.

How do you think about female staff members in the church?

Each and every staff member, man or woman, is called to serve the church in a deacon-like way, so all staff members are either deacons or on the path to becoming deacons, with all the qualifications, responsibilities, respect, and rewards. “Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 3:13).

What roles are distinct for women in the church?

While women can do anything and everything that a non-elder can do within the church, women are distinctly needed to disciple other women. In Titus 2:3-5, we see a particular instruction for more mature women in the faith to instruct younger women in the faith.

What roles are unavailable to women in our church?

The only roles in our church that are unavailable for women are the roles that require eldership. Eldership as an occupational qualification is assessed on a role-by-role basis, according to the convictions put forth in this paper. Currently these staff roles include Central Elder roles (Lead Pastor, Executive Pastor of Gathering Ministries, Executive Pastor of Ministry Strategies, Executive Pastor of Ministry Operations, Pastor of Worship, Pastor of Preaching, Pastor of Teaching and Theology, Congregation Pastor), and Congregation Executive Pastor.

Are there any distinct roles for single women?

A single woman is entrusted with the role of displaying the complete sufficiency of Christ and Christ alone to be her head and true husband. Whether through particular teaching or through the display of her joyful and content life, she is able to provide a gospel witness for the church that no other gender nor marriage status can quite fulfill, demonstrating the complete sufficiency of Christ. Another powerful and distinct role that single women can play within the church is displayed by the prophetess Anna in Luke 2:36-38. Having lost her husband after only seven years of marriage, until the age of 84, she remained single. And not being bound to any duties as a wife or a mother, Luke tells us that she never left the temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayer. Anna was entrusted with the ministry of serving, fasting, and praying at a level that could not be fulfilled if she was bound to a husband and children.

Can women lead men in our church as long as male elders are ultimately exercising authority in some degree (in classes, small groups, or teaching environments)?

Yes. While the degree of supervision may differ among congregations and ministries, we do think women can exercise their spiritual gifts, including leadership, in the environments outlined above. The goal of clearly outlining the space that is reserved for elder authoritative teaching (primarily the sermon on Sundays) and demonstrating the particular role of the elder in governing the church in matters of doctrine and church discipline is not to hinder women in ministry, but to free and unleash gifted and called women of God into every other space and role of ministry.

Questions Specific to Teaching

In what contexts can women teach and/or lead men in our body?

Currently, we have had women teach men in prayer gatherings, equipping classes, Missional Community groups, and ASDP. Biblically speaking, the prohibitive texts on women authoritatively preaching on Sundays and our understanding are laid out above. Contextually speaking, we have a broad diversity of individuals who gather on a Sunday morning, some of whom would affirm this expression of ministry, and others who would object. We still continue to wrestle with the permissibility and beneficiality of this practice for our church, and we pray for wisdom from the Spirit and the Word often. Women do play other significant roles within Sunday worship gatherings by leading in worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and serving communion.

Do the elders think it is more preferable for women to teach women than for men to teach women?

Titus 2:3-4 does give a clear admonition for older women to teach younger women regarding character in the household so that the Word of God may not be reviled. Therefore, we conclude as elders that there is a great deal of benefit for women to teach women, because the Bible instructs us to. In matters of preference for teaching, we see the benefit in both women and men teaching women, and we consider spiritual gifting, natural ability, training, context, and a variety of other matters to determine what is most beneficial. Additionally, in our section above, we make a distinction between authoritative teaching and general teaching. Authoritative teaching is limited to elders, while general teaching is something all believers are called to practice, especially

those with specific teaching gifts. Therefore, it is beneficial in various settings for the entire church to hear the Word taught from both men and women.

What opportunities do non-staff women have for leadership or for exercising their spiritual gifts?

Non-staff women have access to participate in ASI seminars, equipping classes, ASDP, development programs, and other training environments. We have both staff and non-staff women serving and leading together in teaching environments, MC groups, and many other areas of service and ministry leadership.

Interpretation of Difficult Verses

What does it mean that women should be silent in the church?

See the discussion above regarding 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, and see Halim Suh's sermon on the topic: "[Displaying Jesus Through Silence.](#)"

What does it mean that women will be saved through childbearing?

1 Timothy 2:13-15 is a difficult passage of Scripture! We will allow for the ESV Study Bible to summarize:

This is a notoriously difficult-to-understand verse. Paul clearly does not believe people can be saved in the sense of earning justification through childbearing or any other means (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9). But the NT can also use the term "saved" (Gk. *sōzō*) in the sense of progressively coming to experience all the aspects of salvation. In that sense, "salvation" is ongoing.

ing (see note on Phil. 2:12-13). A similar view is that “saved” can be understood as referring especially to the endurance and perseverance in faith that is necessary for eternal salvation (cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13; etc.). People are saved as they persevere (continue) in the faith to carry out the Lord’s calling in their life, one example being the unique role of women in childbearing.

What about head coverings?

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is also a difficult passage of Scripture. We would recommend listening to Matt Carter’s exposition of this passage in two sermons: [“Don’t Be the Donkey”](#) and [“Understanding Biblical Submission and Headship.”](#) We also recommend Halim Suh’s sermon: [“Husbands, Honor Your Wives.”](#)

Questions Regarding Ministry Training

Is it just as important for women to pursue seminary and theological education? Why or why not?

2 Timothy 3:14-15 says, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” It is a calling on both men and women of God to “continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed.” And in doing so, we will become “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

What level of doctrinal training does every staff member need to have, and when do we require staff members to have more training than that?

Staff members should have enough doctrinal training to “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” as is required of deacons (1 Timothy 3:9). They should know and believe more than is required of a regular partner, in terms of a deeper understanding of and agreement with important Christian doctrines and The Austin Stone’s doctrinal distinctives. ASDP is a great place to acquire this training.

Can a non-elder man or a woman from The Austin Stone teach/preach in contexts outside of The Austin Stone (conference, church, youth camp, etc.)?

Yes. Each church and organization determines their own understanding of what we have referred to as authoritative teaching. In this paper, we have outlined the position for our context. We are not attempting to determine what every church and organization should believe about these issues, nor how they should apply those beliefs.

Can a non-elder man or woman lead communion in a Sunday gathering?

Yes. There is nothing in Scripture that explicitly states who should administer the Lord’s Supper, though it is safe to assume that elders and deacons would have been directly involved in this practice in the early church. Our general practice is to have a Congregation Pastor, Executive Pastor, or congregation elder lead in communion during our Sunday services. However, we are open to other leaders in our church, both male and female, having the opportunity to lead out occasionally in this area.

A Prayer for Our Church

Father, Thank You for the dignity and diversity that You placed in each of us, Your image-bearers, whether we are male or female. Thank You that You gifted society and Your church this equal dignity and displayed diversity for Your glory and fame. Forgive us for the ways that we have failed to create environments where men and women can display both Your wisdom in creation and the empowering of the Spirit to the fullest extent. Help us, Father, to be a community that is free of sexism, bigotry, and sinful prejudice. Give us the wisdom and boldness to be a community that displays biblical order and the beauty of Your designed complementarity. Give us the gifts that we need in this church by empowering men and women by Your Spirit to do the work of the ministry in a way that honors You and reaches many. Equip the elders of this church to lead with humility and gentleness, but also with wisdom and boldness, so that they may help to foster an environment of safety, love, and ongoing flourishing for the women and men of The Austin Stone. Keep us faithful, God. Correct us where we need it, and grant us perseverance and patience to follow You in all that You have called us to. Amen.

A Bibliography for Further Study

The following resources have proven helpful in our study:

Complementarian Position

- [Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#) by Wayne Grudem and John Piper
- [50 Crucial Questions: An Overview of Central Concerns About Manhood and Womanhood](#) by John Piper and Wayne Grudem
- [Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15](#) by Andreas Kostenberger and Thomas Schreiner
- [Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism](#) by Wayne Grudem
- [Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles](#) by Kathy Keller
- [Designed for Joy: How the Gospel Impacts Men and Woman, Identity and Practice](#) edited by Jonathan Parnell and Owen Strachan
- [The Grand Design: Male and Female He Made Them](#) by Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock
- [Recovering From Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: How the Church Needs to Rediscover Her Purpose](#) by Aimee Byrd (May 2020)
- [Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective](#) by James Hurley
- [No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God](#) by Aimee Byrd
- [Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach](#) by John Dickson
- [Women, Sermons and the Bible: Essays interacting with John Dickson's Hearing Her Voice](#) by Matthias Media
- [9 Marks Journal: The Role of Women in Teaching](#) by Jonathan Leeman
- [Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women](#) by Elyse Fitzpatrick (Feb 2020)

- [Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian on Female Deacons](#)
- [John Piper and Bethlehem Baptist on Female Deacons](#)

Egalitarian Position

- [Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ](#) by Cynithia Westphal
- [Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church, and Society](#) by Rachel Green Miller
- [Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate](#) by Michelle Lee-Barnewall
- [Gender Rolitis: Redeem Unhealthy Gender Roles](#) by Kirk Farnsworth
- [Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry](#) by Stanley Grenz
- [Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts: A Case for Gender Equality in Ministry](#) by Michael Bird
- [Discovering Biblical Equality Complementarity Without Hierarchy](#) edited by Ronald Pierce (response book to Piper and Grudem)
- [How I Changed My Mind About Women in Leadership: Compelling Stories from Prominent Evangelicals](#) edited by Alan Johnson

Spectrum Books

- [Two Views of Women in Ministry](#) by James Beck and Stanley Gundry
- [Women in Ministry: Four Views](#) edited by Bonnidell and Robert Clouse