



# One in Christ Jesus: The Role of Women at The Summit Church

## I. Introduction

The Bible teaches that God created men and women in order that they would both reflect the beauty, goodness, and creativity of his image (Genesis 1:27). Throughout the New Testament, men and women are referred to as brothers and sisters in Christ, since they are both meant to engage in God's mission as a united siblinghood. In the church, men and women are expected both to serve and to lead, submitting to the lordship of Christ (James 4:7–10) and exercising their gifts for the edification of the body (1 Peter 4:10).

The beauty of the church is best seen when every member is on mission. While every member of the church bears the responsibility of engaging in God's mission, we do so according to the pattern given by Scripture. The Bible portrays men and women as equal and complementary partners in God's mission.

We believe complementarianism is a good doctrine given by a good God with his glory and human flourishing in mind. The home and the church thrive when men and women play their respective roles, reflecting and re-enacting the gospel as they do so. When both men and women are given room to flourish, the entire church will be built up.

What follows is our summary of the complementarian position and our application in ministry at The Summit Church.

## II. Women in Scripture

Our desire to see both men and women flourish within the church arises from Scripture, which guides us in all that we say and do. The need for such a biblical grounding is always relevant, but is particularly pressing regarding gender, an area of discussion in which our society is currently plagued by confusion and hostility.

### A. Women Are Equal Partners

The testimony of Scripture shows that women are equal partners in **salvation**, in **theology**, and in **mission**.

Regarding salvation, Scripture teaches that the household of faith which Christ is building is one composed of both men and women (Galatians 3:28). Jesus interacted directly with women all throughout his ministry, extending to them the unprecedented privilege of sitting at his feet, indicative of his regard for them as disciples of equal status (Luke 10:38–41). The longest recorded conversation Jesus has in the Bible is with a woman (John 4:1–26), and women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ (Matthew 28:1–10, et al.). And Jesus even created a new phrase, "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16), to indicate that the promises made to the "sons of Abraham" extended directly to women, too.

Regarding theology, women are expected to learn and teach deep, rich theology. When Jesus' mother, Mary, was told of his promised birth, she responded by composing a song of praise, revealing an intimate familiarity with the promises of the Old Testament (Luke 1:46–55). Later, another woman—a different Mary—sat at Jesus' feet to receive his teaching, for which she was commended (Luke 10:38–42). Even Priscilla knew Scripture well enough that she could teach "the way of God" to a well-known leader, Apollos, so that his theology would become more accurate (Acts 18:26). The women commended in Scripture were those who recognized that every word from God was for them, and that they had a responsibility to know every one.

In Romans 16, we read that Junia was "highly esteemed among the apostles" (Romans 16:7), which means, at the very least, that she was a woman highly respected by the apostles. In Acts we learn that Lydia hosted a church in her home (Acts 16:11–40). In Titus, the Apostle Paul commends the importance of spiritual mothers in the life of the church, indicating that women in the church were expected to reproduce their theological knowledge and wisdom in the lives of others, nurturing and mentoring them in the faith, whether they had biological children or not (Titus 2:3–6).

Regarding mission, examples of women in ministry abound throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Deborah rose up to lead Israel during the period of the judges, providing wisdom and courage for the entire nation (Judges 4). Miriam, the sister of Moses, composed a psalm for Israel to commemorate their escape from Egypt (Exodus 15:20–21). Esther saved the nation of Israel through her bold faithfulness inside a foreign palace.

In the New Testament, we see this pattern continue. Women are the first ones Jesus charges to testify to his resurrection (Matthew 28:9–10; John 20:11–15). During the outpouring of the Spirit that signified the birth of the church, the Apostle Peter quotes a prophecy of Joel which promises both “sons and daughters” would rise up to prophesy (Acts 2:17). Many of Jesus’ ministry partners were women (Luke 8:1–3; cf. Luke 23:55–56; 24:1–10). The Apostle Paul mentions, among his various ministry co-laborers, several women—Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Euodia, and Syntyche (Romans 16:1, 3, 7; Philippians 4:1–2). Women in the body of Christ were (and still are) expected to use their spiritual gifts, to their full potential, as equal partners in the mission of God.

## **B. Women Are Complementary Partners**

While Scripture makes it plain that women are equal partners with men in God’s mission, it also teaches that God made men and women with gender distinctives. God created the woman as an *ezer kenegdo*, which means she is equal in essence to the man without being identical in function (Gen 2:18).

God created men and women to reflect his image *together*, which means that the two genders reflect the image of God more fully than one gender would alone. By God’s design, men and women complement each other in his mission, providing unique ministry value. In fact, had God designed men and women to be completely interchangeable—the position known as egalitarianism—we would have *less* motivation (not more) for encouraging women to be involved in the life of the church. The complementarian position recognizes that women offer value to the church that men, by themselves, never can. The focus of Scripture, after all, is not on what women cannot do, but on what they can, and must, do.

As complementary partners in mission, men and women flourish best when aligning with God’s prescribed order. Scripture teaches that God has established certain positions that he reserves only for qualified men. In the Old Testament, the primary role that was limited to certain men was that of the priest (Leviticus 21). In the New Testament, the role limited to certain men is that of the pastor-elder (1 Timothy 2:12–3:1). We no longer abide by the Old Testament system of worship, but we do follow the example of leadership outlined in the New Testament, reserving the title of “pastor” or “elder” for those men that meet the qualifications of Scripture.

Recognizing these roles, however, does not lead us to believe that women can only serve in a secondary or diminutive capacity in the church. Nor do the distinct ministry roles that God outlines need create a dichotomy between those who do “real ministry” (the men) and those who merely support the ministry (the women). Women are expected to exercise the spiritual gifts of teaching, leading, and prophecy, just as men are. Often those gifts will be exercised in the single-gender environment we call “women’s discipleship,” but not always.

When both men and women exercise their spiritual gifts, they fulfill rather than subvert God’s order. The body of Christ thrives only when both our sons and daughters thrive. We believe that women can exercise all of the gifts mentioned in Scripture while still honoring the biblical pattern of complementarity. Moreover, we believe that women can exercise these gifts while still reserving the distinct role of pastor-elder for qualified men.

## **III. Women in The Church Today**

### **A. What Is “Women’s Discipleship?”**

Beyond their paramount identity as daughters of God, there are a number of more specific roles that women in the church fulfill. Our women’s discipleship ministry aims to equip women in those roles, whether those women are unmarried or married, with children or without, employed by the church or not. We desire to celebrate the specific seasons that our women are experiencing, including (but not limited to) marriage and motherhood, knowing that our society often disparages the less visible ministry of home life.

Our women’s discipleship ministry, however, is not simply about equipping women to fulfill only those roles. It is about unleashing women to leverage their complete complement of gifts for the kingdom of God. We want women to live out their identity as daughters of God—growing deeper as disciples of Christ and multiplying themselves in the lives of others as disciple-makers. This is one reason we use the term “Women’s Discipleship” rather than “Women’s Ministry” at the Summit: We want to make it clear that our ministry among women is one founded on raising up and multiplying more faithful disciples.

Thus, while we do have unique environments and events geared only for women, the purpose of women’s discipleship is not to place a limit on the involvement of women within the church. It is meant for women to encourage one another and spur one another on in gospel mission. Women of the Summit should be involved and valued in every ministry of the

church, serving where there are needs, and leading where God has gifted them. Their wisdom is crucial at every level of decision-making.

## **B. Submission in the Church**

As we equip women for ministry in our complementarian context, it is important to address two common misconceptions regarding the role of women in relationship to men.

First, while Scripture makes it clear that men and women fulfill distinct roles in marriage (document to come) and in church leadership (more on that in a moment), Scripture does not indicate that women, as a group, are to submit to men.

Second, biblically speaking, submission is something all believers are called to practice. Christians are called to submit to the leadership of the church, to governing authorities, to other believers, and most importantly, to God (Romans 13:1, Ephesians 5:21, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13–14, Hebrews 3:17, James 4:7). In so doing, they reflect the Lord Jesus, who though he was God, did not cling to his authority but gladly became a servant of all for the sake of their salvation. The circumstances in which we are called to submit differ, but we all must exhibit the humility required to submit to God's order. In other words, submission is not a virtue for women, but for all disciples of Jesus.

In light of the overarching need for all believers to submit—both to God and to others—we recognize that there will be overlapping and varying systems of submission and leadership within the church. Furthermore, what is appropriate in a marriage relationship differs from what is appropriate in a work relationship, which differs also from what is appropriate in an elder-congregation relationship. We must remain cognizant of these differing types of relationships as we consider the exercise of authority.

## **C. The Office of Elder**

In his design, God has reserved the office of elder for qualified men. Beyond that, we believe that Scripture teaches that God intends for both women and men to be equally involved and engaged in ministry within the church. Because the office of elder is the only office in the church that is reserved to one particular gender, it is important to clarify the distinguishing responsibilities of the office:

In Scripture, elders—also called pastors or overseers—are called to lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1–2), teach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teaching (Acts 20:17, 28–31; Titus 1:9), pray for the sick (James 5:14), equip the saints (Ephesians 4:11–13), and use proper judgment in theological and doctrinal matters (Acts 15).

The qualifications for the office of elder are given primarily in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:6–9, and 1 Peter 5:1–5.

In these passages, elders are expected to exhibit exemplary spiritual, moral, and social character. They are to live sincere, generous, faithful, self-controlled lives. They are students of Scripture, holding to sound theology and able to teach others. They are to be husbands of one wife, with home lives that prove that they apply the truth of Scripture not only in public, but also in private.

We believe that Paul's requirements for elders preclude women from serving in that role. Scripture provides no examples of women who served the church in this capacity, and the consensus from church history corroborates this perspective. More pointedly, the Apostle Paul forbids women from teaching with the authority of an elder and exercising spiritual authority over men in the church (1 Timothy 2:12).

To be clear, women should be exercising all of the same spiritual gifts as men, including teaching—explaining the truth of Scripture—and preaching—proclaiming the truth of Scripture (cf. Acts 2:17–18; Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 4:10–11). But in our efforts to promote more women in leadership, we seek to draw the same lines that Scripture does—no more, but also no less.

Most everything that an elder is charged to do, ordinary believers are charged to do as well. Every member of the church, for example, bears the responsibility to care about doctrinal purity, to teach others the Word of God, and to pray for others. Elders, however, perform these functions in the local church with a unique spiritual authority. Their authority, vested in them by God and recognized by the congregation, allows them to speak for the church in ways that the average church member cannot and should not. Only elders bear the responsibility of officially holding the church accountable to the truths of Scripture.

For example, when an elder of the church identifies the teaching of an individual as “false doctrine,” such a declaration carries the authoritative weight of the church. The elders have the authority to correct, rebuke, and even silence the offender (in the context of the church). In contrast, when a man (who is not an elder) or woman in the congregation believes they have encountered a false teacher, their approach is different. They still have a responsibility to call out and correct the falsehood, but because they do not speak with the authority of the covenant community, they would have to bring the matter to the elders.

## D. What “Teaching” Is Paul Referring to in 1 Timothy 2:12?

In 1 Timothy 2:12, the Apostle Paul commands that a woman is forbidden to “teach or to exercise authority over a man” in the church. Since Paul bases his command in the created order (1 Timothy 2:13–14), we cannot dismiss his limitation as a command specific to one particular cultural setting.

Paul’s prohibition helps color our understanding of complementarianism and the office of elder. We take the position that in 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul is addressing two distinct ideas—teaching and exercising authority, though it is not accidental he puts them together. “Exercising authority” relates rather clearly to the office of elder, as the broader context of 1 Timothy 2:8–3:13 makes clear (and as we have discussed above). Beyond the exercise of authority, however, Paul seems to forbid a certain kind of teaching of the woman over the man as well.

It is clear that Paul’s prohibition on teaching is not total, since women are equipped to teach in God’s covenant community. As in some of the examples already given (e.g. Miriam, Deborah, Priscilla), Scripture commends women who taught audiences of both men and women. In another of his letters, Paul commands the congregation to admonish and teach one another, and these “one another” commands are given without gender distinction (Ephesians 5:19–20, Colossians 3:16). We know that women prayed and prophesied in the early church (Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 11:3–16), and it is likely that during these prayers and prophesies, the men listening learned about God and Scripture. This would not, we believe, have violated Paul’s injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12. In other words, explaining Scripture and exhorting others to believe it and obey it in a church context does not, in itself, violate Paul’s prohibition on women teaching in the church.

So, while we believe that “teach” and “have authority” are two separate ideas for Paul, the context of Paul’s statement shows that the *kind* of teaching Paul forbids to women in the church is the teaching that most naturally accords with the office of elder. Women are not permitted to teach as elders or with the authority accorded to the elders of the church, whether that authority is explicitly stated or merely implied.

## E. “Elder Teaching” Is “Special Teaching”

What does it look like to “teach with the authority of the elders”? We will address some practical considerations below, but it may be helpful here to introduce another set of clarifying theological terms.

Theologians John Frame and Vern Poythress recognize two types of teaching in the church implied in the Pauline literature—“general” and “special.” “General” teaching includes explanation of content and exhortations to obey, which women can—and should—do, even during formal, public worship services or in mixed audiences of the church (cf. Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 4:11). “Special” teaching is that teaching in a local church that bears the authority of the elders, fulfilling their responsibility to preserve the faith, and through which God calls people to submit to or be removed from that church (Hebrews 3:7, 17).

We understand that an argument can be made that a woman standing to address the congregation during the sermon time would not necessarily imply elder authority, but for most churches, particularly in North America, the sermon acts as the most obvious example of “special” teaching at the local church level.

Women are not to occupy that special, authoritative role of teacher in the church, *either formally or functionally*. We believe that to teach with the authority of an elder, even if not officially given the title of “elder,” is to go against the spirit of the order Paul expounds in 1 Timothy 2:12–14.

This nuanced approach accords with historical Baptist practice, in which complementarianism has been applied to different situations. The Danvers Statement itself was written with this kind of ambiguity in mind, and many women in Baptist history have exercised general teaching within a complementarian framework. For example, W.A. Criswell’s wife, Betty, consistently taught large Sunday School classes of men and women. Bertha Smith, an important woman in Baptist life from the previous generation (and revered by Adrian Rogers, Charles Stanley, Jerry Vines and many others) often spoke during the sermon time in numerous Baptist churches. And none other than Lottie Moon taught in mixed gender settings. As she wrote of her mission work in China, “I hope you won’t think me desperately unfeminine but I spoke to them all, men, women and children, pleading with them to turn ... to the true and living God.”

## IV. Practical Considerations at the Summit

Based on the conclusions given above, several practical questions present themselves:

### A. Can a Woman Teach During the “Weekend Sermon”?

At *The Summit Church*, we do not believe so. While we recognize that the “weekend sermon” is not a category used in Scripture, we believe our weekend sermon is a contemporary expression of the church’s authority. Thus, those who stand and deliver it do so with the authority of an elder. To use the terms above, the weekend sermon is the most formal example of “special teaching” in the local church. As such, we believe wisdom demands that the weekend sermons be delivered only by elders.

We have had (and will continue to have) women explain truth and admonish the congregation during our weekend services. They offer spiritual instruction in the form of testimonies, words of prophecy, admonitions, and insights during worship, as well as scriptural insights shared in the midst of a sermon delivered by an elder (as in the form of an interview or shared insight hosted by an elder). We intentionally set the context in those situations to avoid the implication that the women speaking carry pastoral authority.

## **B. Can a Woman Teach in Other Mixed Gender Church Settings, Such as Bible Studies or Summit Institute Forums?**

Yes, provided the woman teaching does not functionally act with the authority of an elder. Women in the church can and must teach the Bible in all of its depth and with all of its potential applications. That will happen in both informal contexts (mostly relational discipleship) and formal contexts (worship services, small groups, Summit Institute forums, staff trainings, etc.). However, if those being taught conclude that their female teacher is functioning as an elder, we have misstepped.

For this reason, men should lead mixed gender small groups, as our small group leaders function as the first line of pastoring in our church.

Admittedly, there is some ambiguity in determining when a person is exercising “elder authority.” This is not intended to provoke our people to search out and squash women teachers they consider too vocal. Rather, we hope that this frames the way that our small groups and other events are structured; when the function of these groups is more patently authoritative, we believe these groups should be led by men and women together.

## **C. Can a Woman Supervise a Man Within the Church Staff?**

Yes. As stated above, when the Bible speaks of a woman not exercising authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12), we believe this is specifically referring to carrying the authority of an elder over men in the church. All of our staff work under the authority of the directional elders, and these elders bear the responsibilities of pastoral authority in those departments. We do not think it is a problem for a woman to lead under that authority. Positions in the church that inherently require pastoral authority (such as campus pastor, lead pastor, teaching pastor) are reserved for men only.

## **D. Which Ministry Roles Are Available for Women, and Which Are Reserved Only for Elders?**

In determining which ministry roles are reserved for elders alone, we ask three questions:

1. Are there responsibilities of the position such that, *by definition*, they must be fulfilled by an elder?
2. Does the nature of the position require someone to *function* as an elder or *be perceived* as an elder?
3. Could a man—who is not an elder—hold this position? (If so, a qualified woman could as well.)

If the ministry role bears the weight and authority of an elder—by definition, by function, or by perception—then we give that ministry role the title “pastor” or (less common) “elder.” One of the most common examples of this is our “campus pastor” position. Roles with this terminology are the only ones limited to elders.

Not all of the men on staff, however, are automatically given the title “pastor,” nor do they assume the title upon completing seminary. The title is reserved not for all men, but for those ministry positions in which the work itself is inherently elder-related.

Beyond the ministry positions labeled “pastor” or “elder,” any other staff position may be occupied by either a man or a woman. The following (while not an exhaustive list) includes some of the more common titles used to identify roles without implication of gender:

- Minister
- Manager
- Leader
- Executive
- Deacon (or “Servant Leader”)
- Director
- Coordinator

- Assistant

Furthermore, in disciple-making relationships which require a high level of intimacy or are composed of a single gender, it is best for all parties to be of the same gender.

## V. Conclusion

At the Summit, we believe that the primary way men and women interact and flourish is by loving each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. God's renewed people, the church, should be a place where relationships between all men and women portray a vision of God's kingdom, in which we are known by the way we love one another (John 13:35). In any of the important conversations regarding the role of women in ministry, it must be remembered that the most important role the women in our churches fulfill is that of daughter and sister—daughters of God the Father and sisters in Christ. (For more on how we apply this among our staff, see "Brothers and Sisters, Love One Another.")

As daughters of God and sisters in Christ, women bear the honor and responsibility of sharing in the Great Commission. As they exercise their gifts, they should be visible to our congregation. They should have a multitude of leadership pathways open before them—both through volunteer positions and through paid staff positions—in which to develop their gifts and grow. They must be given a formative voice in the direction of the church, helping in the shared mission that God has entrusted to us. Because every Christian woman is called by God to engage in God's mission, we want to equip every one of them for the task.

The more we see women taking on visible and influential roles in our church, the more other women and girls will be encouraged to engage in ministry as well. We long to see women raised up to serve in the body of Christ and unleashed in the mission of God to their full potential.

The Summit Church is unashamedly and uncompromisingly complementarian. We affirm the Danvers Statement on gender roles in the church and cherish the varied callings that God has placed on our lives. It is, in fact, precisely our complementarian convictions that compel us to engage the entire body of Christ for the mission of Christ.

We recognize that other Bible-believing Christians will apply these principles differently. We will continue to encourage them in their ministry and partner with them in mission, holding our views with humility and praying that others extend to us the same grace. We are always willing to hear those who come to us with an open Bible and an open mind.

Equipping and platforming women to thrive in ministry is not a passion we share because of personal opinion or preference. We are convinced that there is no such thing as a healthy church in which the men flourish and the women do not. Thus, by cultivating an atmosphere where our sisters can thrive, we cultivate an atmosphere in which our brothers will thrive as well.

Above all, we believe that God's Word is good and trustworthy, and that his design for the church will stand throughout time and prosper the church, now and always. In Christ's service, every brother and sister finds unimaginable grace, inestimable value, and eternal purpose.