

4 Ways Churches Can Support Women in Leadership

I often talk to women and men in leadership positions in the Church concerned for a third way of talking about gender. The issue is that each side seems to co-opt half the verses on gender for themselves, using the ones they consider theirs to write off the ones they don't. The liberal microphone gets "submit to one another."

The conservative one gets "wives submit." The liberal one gets Euodia and Syntyche who labored beside Paul in gospel ministry. The conservative one gets Paul's instructions for women keeping silent in the church. The liberal microphone likes Phoebe and Junia. The conservative one 1 Peter 3 and 1 Timothy 2. Liberals get the women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11. Conservatives get the instructions for women to learn in silence in 1 Corinthians 14.

Deborah judged in the Old Testament. Junia was well known among the apostles. Priscilla disciplined church leaders. Phoebe was a deacon who likely carried the book of Romans to the Roman church. Euodia and Syntyche labored beside Paul in gospel ministry. Which side of the microphone do these women fall? The liberal microphone wants these women. The conservative microphone seems to ignore them altogether. But what if all the verses on women actually work together in conjunction? And what if they work in conjunction with everything else in Scripture as well?

There is a third way on gender, and I'd argue it's actually the Biblical way—the way that keeps all the verses, reading them all in light of the redemption story. It starts with creation, men and women as image bearers of God. It understands the fall and the impact of sin on both genders. And it capitalizes on redemption, Jesus' atonement for our sin

that equips us to once again be image bearers of God. I envision a third way that centers around redemptive image bearing.

As a woman, I've thought long and hard about what God created me to be, and what particular giftings I have as a woman that reflect His character. Before the fall, God called the first woman an *ezer*, which is a word with deep meaning. We should all understand the meaning of this word and value it as we should the first mention of anything in Scripture. My heart swells to think of what it would do for women's discipleship and general gospel ministry in the church if pastors and lay leaders grasped the beauty of what God puts forward when He calls the first woman *ezer*.

I've expounded on *ezer* many times over the years, so I'm rehashing old stuff, but here goes:

The Hebrew word *ezer* means to help, nourish, sustain or strengthen. *Ezer* is used 21 times in the Old Testament, **16 of which are descriptions of God himself**, reflecting the fact that the woman was created to bear the image of God. Consider the use of *ezer* in Deuteronomy 33: 29.

Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places. NIV

God himself is called our helper, our *ezer*, the same word used of the first woman in Genesis 2:18. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is also called our Helper, Counselor, and Comforter (depending on which translation of the Bible you use. These are all translations of the Holy Spirit's role of *paraklete*, or one who comes alongside in aid). God is our Help. The Holy Spirit is our Helper. When we understand God's role as *ezer*, it gives us needed perspective. God, Sovereign Lord of the Universe, is our helper, and we, as women, are

created in His image.

Hebrews 13:6 So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

Consider God's example on this issue of help. In Exodus 18: 4, God our help "delivered ... from the sword," defending His own in contrast to attacking or ignoring the fight altogether. In Psalm 10:14, God our help sees and cares for the oppressed. Rather than being indifferent or unconcerned, He is the "helper of the fatherless." In Psalm 20:2 and 33:20, God our help supports, shields and protects.

In Psalm 70:5, God our help delivers from distress. In Psalm 72:12-14, God our help rescues the poor, weak, and needy. All of these verses use the same word God used of the first woman! God Himself is our example on what it means for a woman to be a helper suitable to the needs of her male counterpart. God designed us to reflect His compassion, support, protection, comfort, and deliverance of those in His care from distress. We are called to be conduits of God's grace in our homes, churches, and communities. We are called to be like Christ.

Now think of the names I listed earlier – Phoebe, Priscilla, Eudodia, Syntyche ... In light of this exposition of *ezer*, their work in the early church makes sense to me. Each gives a brief glimpse of early church *ezers*, redeemed to be image bearers of God once more. Helping Paul, discipling Apollos, serving the Roman church.

I am complementarian, and I am particularly burdened for those listening to the conservative end of the microphone because that is my tribe. I believe that the office of elder in a church is limited to men. I believe that there is order in God's authority structure, and wives are to submit to their husbands (who should submit to their authorities as well). I believe that God created the genders with different but

overlapping roles. In light of where I find myself, I will offer these suggestions to those on the conservative end:

1. Avoid referring negatively to discussion on how we involve women in gospel ministry as a slippery slope. Even if there is a slope, not all slippery slopes land in liberalism. Perhaps this one slides down into Biblical obedience! Until we can point to the Phoebes, Euodias, Syntyches, and Priscillas that we have discipled into gospel ministry in our own congregations, we are likely not reflecting a New Testament model of women in our churches, in which case, there is something worth slipping toward.

2. Support women deacons. If you have a Biblical model of plurality of elders (see Alexander Strauch's Biblical Eldership), there should be no problem putting women in official roles as deacons in the church. In fact, **it should deeply grieve you anytime you see women denied this role that was available to them in the New Testament and throughout the history of the Church.** See this post for a more thorough treatment of the subject.

3. Value women as helpers, and not just in the "running the nursery" sense of the word. Put away suspicion of women leaders in the church and cultivate their voices. Invite them to offer their opinion and value their feedback. My church is building a women's advisory session to come alongside the elder session to give important feedback from a woman's perspective. Why? Because they VALUE women's voices rather than being suspicious of them.

4. Disciple women to come alongside leaders in gospel ministry. What does this look like? Well, I can't tell you exactly, but it's worth trying to figure out! Read through the account of Priscilla. Think about Junia and Phoebe. Consider Paul's brief description of Euodia and Syntyche. Then prayerfully consider how we can cultivate female co-laborers with us in gospel ministry as Paul did.

Here's the key to all of this—putting away knee jerk suspicions of women that have often characterized our tribe. Are some women gossips? Yes. But redemption gives us hope for discipling women to confess and forsake gossip and instead use their voices to speak truth in helpful ways for flourishing gospel ministry in our churches.

I hope pastors and lay leaders will look at the women in their churches and ask, “Do I actually value their help? Do I respect what God created them to be in my life, strong ezers reflecting God's own help of His children?” Leaders, are you perplexed by gossips in your church? Have you considered discipling them to use their voice in better ways and then given them a way to do it?

I hope these questions are helpful points of reflections as we think of how redemption equips us to reclaim the power of ezers in gospel ministry and the life of the Church.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*