

White Paper: Church Leadership

Arise Church

I. Mere Christianity Preamble

Scripture was written in and for diverse contexts and situations. Accordingly, within the New Testament there exist affirmations of “mere Christianity”— a focus on the core proclamation of the Risen Jesus while simultaneously allowing for freedom when it comes to non-essential beliefs and practices.¹ We see this applied to various issues, including baptism, communion, eschatology, leadership structures, how to interpret the Old Testament, and the like. In each of these areas, there is a core idea that allows for a relatively diverse expression of practice. Following the New Testament model for the Church today, then, is not so much about discerning *the* single way to understand what Scripture says, so much as discerning what is core to faith in the Lord Jesus. Put another way, gospel freedom, when properly focused on the Good News of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of creation, allows for a certain amount of diversity on non-essential issues. Thus, an appropriate guiding principle for Christians is, “In necessary things, unity; in unnecessary things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

II. Principles for Church Leadership

Because of our belief in biblical and historical mere Christianity as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed, we understand that Scripture provides instruction on the issue of Church leadership. Key principles are as follows.

First, the purpose of the Church—to spread the Good News of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection by making disciples of all nations—must dictate the form and function of all leadership in the Church.² The disciple-making mission of the Church—not tradition or preference—serves as the starting point for considerations of Church leadership.

Second, Scripture serves as the authority on all matters of life and faith.³ In the words of the Protestant Reformation, Scripture is the *norma normans*, the rule that rules, that guides Christian belief and practice. Christian leadership structures and practices must abide by the clear teachings and principles of Scripture.

Third, Christian ethics speaks to the importance of sacrificial love and submission to others.⁴ In the words of the Apostle Paul, those who follow Jesus should “submit to one

¹ [1 Corinthians 15.1-34](#); [Romans 14.1-23](#). See also C.S. Lewis, [Mere Christianity](#).

² [Matthew 28.19-20](#).

³ [2 Timothy 3.14-17](#); [Matthew 5.17-19](#).

⁴ [John 13.34-35](#); [Luke 22.25-26](#); [Philippians 2.3](#).

another out of reverence for Christ” ([Ephesians 5.21](#)). Christian leadership should thus be servant leadership, leadership that focuses first on the well-being of the community to which Christians belong.

Finally, Christian leadership must reckon with the equality of every individual before God because of their personhood (the *imago Dei*) and because of the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ on the cross.⁵ As the Apostle Peter says to the Church, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” ([1 Peter 2.9](#)). Every person—not just leaders—possess dignity, value, and gifts for the benefit of the Kingdom of God.

While specific churches and institutions continue to debate the finer points of leadership, these principles serve as the basis for establishing, vetting, and confirming leadership structures and persons in the Church of Jesus Christ. In addition to these general principles, several specific questions about leadership in the Church call for comment.

III. Women in Church Leadership

The question of women in Church leadership has often been asked in the history of Christianity. Much has been written by a variety of perspectives on this often-contentious issue. The mere Christian approach suggests trajectories for the issue of women in leadership, but nothing clear and concrete enough to render a non-tentative conclusion. That is, we fully recognize that our viewpoint may be wrong, and we commit to holding it lovingly, in a spirit of dialogue, and with the desire to continually grow and learn more. Additionally, we recognize that both the complementarian⁶ and the egalitarian⁷ viewpoints are plausible and legitimate interpretations of Scripture.

From a desire to properly interpret Scripture while also taking seriously the Great Tradition of Christianity and the contemporary mission field to which we have been called, on the question of women in Church leadership we take a *soft egalitarian*

⁵ [Genesis 1.27](#); [Galatians 3.24-28](#).

⁶ The complementarian view holds that male and female were created by God as equal in dignity, value, essence and human nature, but also distinct in role whereby the male was given the responsibility of loving authority over the female, and the female was to offer willing and submissive assistance to the man.

⁷ The egalitarian view holds that God created male and female as equal in all respects. Biblical evidence expresses the grand truth that in Christ, the false and sinful basis of male/female hierarchy has been abolished, so there is no legitimate distinction, in God’s kingdom, between female and male.

perspective. This means that all Church offices and roles are open to any Christian—male or female—who meets the character and competency qualifications of Scripture,⁸ save the office of lead pastor, who should be male.

While we are not the first to adopt the *soft egalitarian* view, this is an admittedly minority position, both in terms of historic Christianity and the conventions of the contemporary Church. From our similarly uncommon position as a mere Christian, twenty-first century, American church, however, this view is appropriate for several reasons.

First, it is necessary to come to principled compromise on controversial issues when adopting a mere Christian approach. Both complementarian and egalitarian views have scriptural, historical, and contemporary arguments in their favor.⁹ Within a mere Christian context, the difficulty is coming to a position that does justice to both viewpoints without violating or otherwise superseding the clear teachings of Scripture on this issue. Is the middle ground of a *soft egalitarian* view one that complementarians and egalitarians can both wholeheartedly sign off on? Perhaps; perhaps not. But our hope is that this view allows people who hold both views to cooperate and work alongside one another.

Second, Scripture seems to allow, if not outright model this perspective.¹⁰ As numerous scholars have pointed out, women fulfill a variety of roles in the New Testament, including that of deacon ([Romans 16.1-2](#)), prophetess ([Acts 21.9](#)), teacher ([Acts 18.24-26](#)), patron ([1 Corinthians 16.19](#)), and (although at times disputed) elder ([1 Timothy 5.2](#)) and apostle ([Romans 16.7](#)).¹¹ At no point, however, is a woman named as the primary or solo leader of a local church.¹² While we must not blur the lines of prescription and description in Scripture, a wholistic approach to what women do in Scripture commends our view.

⁸ [Titus 1.5-11](#); [Hebrews 13.17](#); [James 5.14](#); [1 Peter 5.1-4](#); and [1 Timothy 3.1-7](#). See the Arise Church Bylaws for further explanation of the character and competency requirements for church offices.

⁹ James R. Beck, "Introduction," 15-17 in [Two Views on Women in Ministry: Revised Edition](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Scot McKnight helpfully outlines the contrast between "What Did Women Do" passages and "Women Keep Silence Passages" in scripture. See Scot McKnight, [The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 153-207.

¹⁰ Evangelical scholars who have interpreted scripture to affirm women serving as teachers and leaders in the Church include such luminaries as F.F. Bruce, Gordon Fee, Craig Keener, I. Howard Marshall, John Stott, Ben Witherington III, Scot McKnight, Michael Bird, Craig Evans, Richard Hays, and N.T. Wright. For a summary of these scholars' positions, see Marg Mowczko's ["Prominent Biblical Scholars on Women in Ministry."](#)

¹¹ For additional insights, see Bonnie Thurston, [Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998).

¹² Although we note that Priscilla seems to be listed as a co-leader with Aquila in [Romans 16.3-5](#).

Third, the *soft egalitarian* view serves as one possible interpretation of [1 Timothy 2.12](#), a verse understood by numerous theologians as the crux of the women-in-leadership debate.¹³ What the New International Version renders as “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man,” has numerous contested interpretations, many of which are faithful and credible readings of this passage.¹⁴ Although an egalitarian interpretation (such as this verse prohibiting women from domineering over men) is possible, the Church’s long history of interpretation in a complementarian manner (that women should not teach or instruct men) cautions us from interpreting too freely.¹⁵ Thus, an interpretation of this verse that women should not hold “preeminent authority” seems a fitting middle road to take.¹⁶

Finally (and somewhat less importantly), the history of the term *episkopos* (often translated overseer or bishop) proves insightful on this topic, as women fill every other named office in the New Testament except this one.¹⁷ This suggests that it may be appropriate to draw parallels to similar offices of chief overseer today.

Applied to Arise, the *soft egalitarian* position means that while the lead pastor is male, all other Church offices—including those of pastor, elder, deacon, teacher, missionary, and staff—are open to all Christian men and women who meet the Scriptural character and competency requirements for those offices.

IV. Church Offices

Similar to the question of women in leadership, the mere Christian approach suggests trajectories for the question of which offices are appropriate in the Church, but nothing clear and concrete enough to render a non-tentative conclusion. Thus, we again fully

¹³ See the literature review in Matt Herndon, “Female Eldership: The Contemporary Debate Over 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and What It Means for One Local Church” (St. Louis: Covenant Theological Seminary, 2004), 4-6.

¹⁴ For helpful overviews of the variety of interpretations of this passage, consider Linda Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 205-223 in [Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005) and Craig Keener, [Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101-132.

¹⁵ See Andreas Kostenberger and Thomas Schreiner, eds., [Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: Third Edition](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016). See also Peter Gorday, ed., [Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IX: Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 161-167.

¹⁶ As Keener summarizes, “First Timothy 2:11-12 clearly forbids women to teach in some sense, although most scholars, including those who think the passage allows women elders, agree that it forbids them only to teach in such a way as to hold authority in some form. Probably it only forbids them to teach in a way that usurps authority, and so seeks to domineer, although this is not absolutely clear” (109).

¹⁷ Note Craig Blomberg’s articulation of this perspective in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 181-182. See also Marg Mowczko’s overview, [“Women Church Leaders in the New Testament.”](#)

recognize that our viewpoint may be wrong, and we commit to holding it lovingly, in a spirit of dialogue, and with the desire to continually grow and learn more.

From a desire to properly interpret Scripture while also taking seriously the Great Tradition of Christianity and the contemporary mission field to which we have been called, on the question of Church offices we conclude that the offices of Elder, Pastor, and Deacon are appropriate for the Church. Furthermore, additional authority should be invested in both the vocational staff and the membership of our congregation.

Applied to Arise, this means that the membership of the congregation confirms or rejects the Church's bylaws, budget, and election of Elders.¹⁸ Elders provide oversight, vision, spiritual leadership, and Church discipline. Furthermore, the Elder Team is composed of a plurality of persons, the majority of whom are lay people. Pastors implement the Church's vision, lead ministry, equip the saints, and provide pastoral care, under the leadership of the Elders. Finally, deacons serve as ministry leaders, working alongside staff and elders to lead the work of the church.¹⁹

V. Summary Statement

Recognizing the scriptural and historic complexity of Church leadership, and operating within the parameters of Christian humility, ongoing conversation, and mere Christianity, Arise functions as an elder-led, staff-implemented, congregation-approved, soft egalitarian church, wherein qualified men and women can serve in every leadership capacity, save that of lead pastor. This position seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us as a way to appropriately reflect the intersection of Scripture, Church history, experience, and culture on the question of Church leadership.

¹⁸ [1 Corinthians 12.12-31](#).

¹⁹ For other specifics on church offices, see the Arise Church Bylaws.