Men and Women in Christian Ministry:
An Introduction to the "Gender Roles" Question
For Church Leaders

Kenneth G. Radant
Calgary, Alberta
February, 1999

Prepared for the Western Canadian District
Of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada

This material was prepared as a resource for church leaders. You are welcome to make copies as needed for use in your church.

This document is protected by Canadian copyright law, and may not be sold or republished without permission.

INDEX

I. The Question

II. Putting the Issue in Context
   A. Background: where does this question come from?
   B. Significance: Why does this question matter?
   C. Legitimacy: Is it right for us to treat this issue as an "open question," since Scripture appears to answer it directly in several passages?

III. Major Options on the "Gender Roles" Question
   A. Chart 1: Hierarchicalism
   B. Chart 2: Egalitarianism
   D. Chart 4: Evangelistically-Based Role Distinctions
   E. Chart 5: Gender Equality, Family-Based Role Distinctions

IV. Decisive Factors to Consider

V. Conclusion

VI. Some Suggested Sources for Further Study

VII. Footnotes

Men and Women in Christian Ministry:
An Introduction to the "Gender Roles" Question
Does God intend men and women to exercise distinct, different ministry roles in His church?

More specifically: does Scripture limit the kinds of ministry roles exercised by women in the local church (and/or other Christian organizations) on the basis of their gender? In particular, does it restrict them from roles of leadership and authority over men?

I. The Question

_A woman in my church feels the prompting of God to become more involved in active ministry. She asks me what opportunities are open to her. Do I respond that she can serve in any capacity for which she has the skill and spiritual maturity? Or do I steer her toward certain kinds of service and away from others—even before I consider her own personal giftedness and calling—since her womanhood makes her ineligible for some ministry roles in our church?_

This, in very practical terms, is the "gender roles" question. For the sake of clear-headed discussion, I have put it in more abstract language above. But it is not an abstract issue. It is an ever-present, emotionally-charged, passionately debated subject for Evangelical Christians. This week, it will be discussed in Bible studies, board rooms, and seminary classes world-wide. The pool of books and articles on the subject expands every month. Out of all this conversation, a growing number will now say that they have reached a satisfactory conclusion on the matter—or argue that it should never have become an issue in the first place. Still, for many churches and ministry organizations and for the individuals who serve in them, it continues to be one of the most significant theological questions of our generation.

It has certainly been a challenge for the Christian and Missionary Alliance. For some years, we have discussed the question, without arriving at a widespread consensus on it. Recognizing that we cannot leave it unsettled much longer, the C&MA in Canada has resolved to establish a policy on the roles of men and women at its General Assembly in Calgary in the summer of 2000.

But the conclusion reached in 2000 will only be as good as the preparation of the delegates who attend. If we want our denomination to arrive at a solid, biblical position on the roles of men and women, the leaders of our churches must lay a foundation for it in advance with competent biblical study and thoughtful reflection.

This paper is designed to provide church leaders with a brief introduction to the "gender roles" question. It will attempt to clarify the issue, outline some of the most common positions in the debate, and identify some of the decisive factors that must be addressed as we seek an answer together. It is not a full study guide on the subject, and it will make no attempt to convince the reader of the superiority of one view over against the others. It is simply an introduction, and an invitation to a serious study of the "gender roles" question in preparation for the upcoming General Assembly.

II. Putting the issue in context

Why has our generation become so concerned about the "gender roles" question? Is it really that important? If
we expect church leaders to invest time and energy studying this subject, we owe them some explanation of its background and significance.

A. Background: where does this question come from?
   
   Some highlights:

   • For most of history, the formal leaders of God’s people (Israel and the church) have been men. People have often asked why this is so, and whether it is right—especially when confronted by the notable exceptions where women took on highly effective leadership roles. Nevertheless, male leadership has been the normal practice and the general expectation over the centuries.

   • Until recently, the same pattern was predominant in society around us. In the last century, however, questions as to the legitimacy of this tradition have multiplied. Women’s suffrage and equity movements have become a powerful force in the Western world since 1900—especially after the 2nd World War. As egalitarian voices have grown louder, the church has faced more calls for change from its own membership, and has felt more pressure to change from outside.

   • The 20th century has also seen the flowering of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement and the subsequent emphasis on "spiritual gift based ministry." Renewed interest in spiritual gifts has spread far beyond Charismatic circles into every corner of the Evangelical church. It brings with it a valuable stress on the need for every member of the church to be engaged in ministry. This in turn has prompted women to ask why they should be prohibited from certain roles in the church if they seem to have the gifts that correspond to those roles.

   • Increased travel and communication have sensitized the church to the inconsistencies in its practice. With more inter-denominational dialogue and easier access to global information, we have become more aware of the different policies of Christian organizations on the matter of gender roles and church leadership. The fact that church leaders from the non-western world are increasingly studying and traveling abroad has also forced us to think more seriously about the apparent inconsistency of allowing women missionaries to plant and lead churches in other cultures while we restrict their roles in church ministry at home.

   • Intensified study of the "gender roles" question in Scripture has convinced many that this issue is not as simple as has often been thought. The increasing sensitivity to matters of gender equality in our society has prompted biblical scholars to look more closely at the roles of men and women in Scripture. This has led some to reject the traditional approach to gender roles in ministry. It has reinforced the traditional convictions of others. But this very diversity of opinion has alerted the church to the possibility that the issue may not be as simple as it once appeared, and has encouraged further discussion on the topic.

B. Significance: Why does this question matter?

There are at least six reasons why the Christian and Missionary Alliance needs to address the "gender roles" question, and why we must address it to the best of our ability.

1. The women of the C&MA deserve a clear, biblical statement on their roles and responsibilities in the denomination.
Half and more of our constituents are women. Those women are gifted, committed, active contributors to the work of the C&MA. If we do not offer a clear statement on the roles of men and women in ministry now that the issue has been raised, we communicate ambivalence toward their involvement. Whatever conclusion the Alliance reaches on this issue, we owe the women of our churches a clear affirmation of their importance, and a clear explanation for any limitations that might be placed upon their leadership.

2. **We are called to make Jesus Christ relevant to an egalitarian society.**

   If the gospel is to make an impact in the communities where we serve, we must address their concerns and avoid creating unnecessary obstacles to their faith. In many of the cities and towns where we minister, people care deeply about gender equality. If we do not speak relevantly to this concern—either showing that the church shares this value for biblical reasons, or explaining persuasively why it does not—then people will be convinced that the church is irrelevant and our mission will be hindered.

3. **Inconsistency in practice hurts our ministry effectiveness.**

   When women are given a range of responsibilities in one church, district, or mission field, but denied the same range of ministry responsibilities in another setting, we create the potential for confusion ("What do we teach, anyway?") and division ("I like our position better than theirs"). We also undermine our own credibility and the authority of Scripture when both the "freer" and the "more restrictive" positions are presented as being taught by the Bible. To avoid these problems, we must either establish consistent policies for various ministry settings, or else offer a cogent explanation as to why different practices are acceptable in different settings.

4. **People’s feelings on this issue run deep enough to split churches, and perhaps even the denomination.**

   As Protestant Christians, we continually wrestle with the balance between the unity and the purity of the church. We understand that our one-ness is important, but we also believe that some issues are significant enough to make us leave a church or denomination. There are many Evangelicals for whom the "gender roles" question leads us into foundational matters that might justify the splitting of a church. Some believe that any restriction on the roles of women implies that they are inferior to men, potentially justifying a variety of social and marital abuses. Others hold that the authority of Scripture is compromised when restrictions are not placed on women’s roles. If the C&MA discussion of gender roles is allowed to polarize around these positions, it will result in broken churches and a fractured denomination.

5. **The members of our congregations need to see us model good leadership as we handle this issue.**

   We tell our congregations that their lives should be guided by Scripture, that they should accept correction and instruction with humility, that they should show Christlike love and unity of spirit even in disagreement, that they should give their very best to know Christ and to serve His Kingdom. Issues like this one give Alliance church leaders an opportunity to model these qualities for our churches and our neighbors. We must capitalize on such an opportunity—especially when the alternative is to model indifference, divisiveness, and the priority of "pragmatics" over Scripture.

6. **Our commitment to the authority of Scripture requires a thorough study of this issue.**

   As local churches, and as a denomination, we will make decisions on the roles of men and women in ministry. We are already doing so. The question is: what is the basis for those decisions, now and in the future? Will they be firmly rooted in Scripture, or will they be driven by our culture, our Evangelical Protestant traditions, or something else? If we do not have a clear understanding of the teaching of Scripture, and if we do not make a conscious commitment to let it direct our thinking and practice, our conclusions will inevitably be dictated by other factors. The only way for us to establish an enduring biblical decision on a question like this one, where the tensions of universal principle and cultural
application are complex and the opinions of learned students of Scripture are divided, is we give it
careful study. Study will not guarantee a clear, biblical decision; but lack of study will guarantee something
other than a firm, Bible-based decision.

C. Legitimacy: Is it right for us to treat this issue as an "open question," since Scripture
appears to answer it directly in several passages?

As noted above, some participants in this discussion are convinced that the authority of Scripture is tied to a
particular view on the roles of men and women in ministry, because of the forceful limitations Paul placed on
female church involvement in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. That conviction may make some wonder whether it is
even legitimate to treat the matter of gender roles as an open-ended question. This is a valid concern.
Nevertheless, there are several reasons why the C&MA should feel freedom to discuss the matter in this way.

1. It is always legitimate (and generally wise) to review our theological ideas.
   It is an established principle of good scholarship and good leadership that we review our beliefs and
   practices on a regular basis. As Christians we sometimes forget this principle, because we are convinced
   that our ideas rest on timeless truths from God. However, we must always be conscious of the difference
   between God’s revealed truth, which is infallible, and our own fallible attempts to explain and apply those
   truths. If our doctrines and practices reflect the message of God’s Word accurately, regular review will
   only strengthen and enrich them. If we have failed to interpret the Word rightly at some point, it is only
   through renewed study that we will ever notice. Either way, it is always appropriate to revisit longstanding
   beliefs, including our position on the question of male and female roles in the church.

2. Sometimes established ideas are rightly overthrown in light of fresh study.
   With the spread of theological liberalism and moral relativism in our world, Evangelicals are
   understandably hesitant to propose changes in any long-standing doctrinal tradition. However, there have
   been occasions when traditional ideas were rightly set aside in light of a closer study of Scripture. Recall,
   for example, the abandonment of the doctrine that the sun moves around the earth, or the abolition of
   slavery (not to mention the Protestant Reformation’s revolutionary overhaul of the Roman Catholic
   doctrine of salvation). The issue here is not whether departure from tradition is ever allowable, but rather
   whether a particular change is warranted by a careful study of Scripture. So in this case, the question is
   not whether it is legitimate to reconsider the role of women even in the face of a substantial tradition;
   rather, it is whether the biblical data warrants a change in perspective when we review it afresh.

3. It is especially important to review issues where the Bible’s teaching is closely intertwined with
   the culture in which it was given.
   An accurate Evangelical Protestant doctrine of Scripture always affirms that the Bible is God’s Word
given to us through human authors in historical situations. It was written first of all to the readers who
received it direct from the human authors; and though God intended it for the rest of His people in other
places and times as well, we only understand it accurately as we interpret it in light of the language, culture,
and setting to which it was first given. This history-rootedness of Scripture sometimes causes us to struggle
with which biblical commands are universally applicable, and which were designed to be applied in a
direct way only to the first readers in their own setting. These points of tension between the universal and
the cultural are one of the main reasons Christians differ in their interpretation of Scripture. And they have
often played a role in the overthrow of traditional ideas in light of subsequent study. Since the "gender
roles" question centers around Scripture passages where the division of universal principle and limited
-cultural application is widely debated, it is especially important for us to be sure that we are handling this
issue correctly. Some "double-checking" is surely in order.
4. **Certain kinds of theological ideas are naturally susceptible to misunderstanding, requiring special attention and careful review.**

To be more specific, we should always be careful when we develop doctrines or policies: (a) which are based on only a few biblical passages; (b) which are based on biblical passages where the exact meaning of the language is not completely clear; (c) which rest heavily on inferential reasoning that goes beyond the obvious intention of the biblical author; and (d) where different biblical passages appear to present different points of view.

These are simple precautions, designed to help us recognize what is clear in Scripture and what is not. They do not apply to any of the central, essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Note, however, that in one way or another all of them plague the "gender roles" question.

- There are many Bible passages which speak about the roles and activities of men and women. But the vast majority of these merely speak of what men and women did, without making any attempt to say what men and women should do (caution c).
- Several NT passages speak about the roles of women in the church. Of these, however, only 3 place explicit limitations on female leadership (1 Cor 11:2-16, 1 Cor 14:33-36, and 1 Tim 2:8-15). At the same time, there are clear examples of women in leadership in Scripture (especially in the OT, though there are also hints in the NT). But these, too, are relatively few in comparison to the examples of male leadership. So, the number of passages that strongly support either side in the debate is actually relatively small (which should cause us to be careful, remembering caution a).
- Though the general thrust of the discussion in 1 Cor 11, 1 Cor 14, and 1 Tim 2 is quite clear, each passage also contains at least 1 expression or point which is very difficult to understand (caution b)—making the exegete wonder whether there are things in these passages which were evident to their first readers, but which are not so plain to us today.
- The very existence of a debate on the "gender roles" question reminds us that there are biblical passages which seem to promote a great deal of freedom for women in Christian ministry and leadership, and others which appear to place firm restrictions on that ministry. Both perspectives seem to have some basis in Scripture (caution d).

There is no point in reviewing an established doctrine or policy unless we are open to the possibility that we might have been wrong. It is only reasonable, therefore, that the C&MA treat the "gender roles" question as an "open issue." It is also vital that all of us who participate in this study come to the question with open minds, willing to consider that our own personal convictions may not be as well grounded as we think.

Of course, a careful study of the subject may not change our convictions. But at least it should ground those convictions more firmly in the Scripture. And perhaps it will also give us all a greater appreciation for the thinking of those with whom we disagree, even if we disagree all the more firmly in the end.

**III. Major Options on the "Gender Roles" Question**

When a person first encounters a subject like this one, "multiple choice" is always easier to handle than "fill in the blank." Though the C&MA may not align itself completely with any of the most popular options in the Evangelical "marketplace," it is at least helpful to review the main alternatives as we struggle to put together a solution of our own.
There are many points of view on the "gender roles" question. To keep things from becoming too complicated, I have summarized 5 which—I think—represent the field of Evangelical options fairly well. These 5 views form a kind of continuum. The first two mark the most extreme positions commonly held in Evangelical circles: one insisting that there should be firm restrictions governing women’s roles in church leadership, the other affirming that there should be no restrictions whatsoever in the authority a woman may exercise. Between these two outer points, I have described three "mediating views," each arguing that women may take on a wider range of leadership roles than the "hierarchical" alternative would allow, but without stripping boundaries away completely as proposed by the "egalitarian" model.

I have presented all 5 options in the same format, showing how they would respond to several basic questions. In this way, I hope to highlight their similarities (only the first 2 are mutually exclusive) and their differences. Those differences, in turn, will help us to identify the crucial issues that must be resolved in order to reach a conclusion on the roles of men and women in Christian ministry.

Before we begin, however, let me point out several areas in which all 5 positions are in agreement. All would affirm:

- That men and women are equal in value and dignity, sharing fully the image of God and contributing to His plan for history.
- That all Christian men and women have spiritual gifts which empower and qualify them for significant ministry in the church.
- That the Bible is God’s revealed Word to humanity, infallible in all that it affirms (when properly interpreted), and authoritative for all people in all places and times (when correctly applied).
- That the Bible should be interpreted "literally," "grammatically," "historically," with sensitivity to its literary and cultural context.
- That "ordination" is not a conferring of spiritual privilege or power, but rather is a formal expression of the church’s recognition that God has gifted and called an individual for Christian leadership.
- That being a man, in and of itself, does not qualify anyone for spiritual leadership; rather, there are clear guidelines as to the kind of character and ability that an individual must have in order to serve as a leader in the church.

It is important to identify these areas of common ground, because they help us to be clear about what the issue is not. The "gender roles" question is not about whether men and women are equal in dignity as God’s image. It is not about whether women can have significant and fulfilling ministries in the church. Nor is it about whether all men have authority—spiritual or otherwise—over all women. Nor is it about who is and who is not Evangelical, Bible-believing, and hermeneutically literate. As noted at the outset, the question is whether God intends men and women to have different ministry roles in the church, where only men should be given responsibility for certain kinds of spiritual leadership and authority.

The five representative positions I will summarize on this issue are:

- Hierarchicalism
- Egalitarianism
- Equal Nature, "Economic" Hierarchy
- Evangelistically-Based Role Distinctions
A. Hierarchicalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Position:</th>
<th>God made men and women different, and assigned them different roles in human society. It is God’s intention that men should be responsible for leadership/authority roles (in the home, society, and the church), and that women should play a nurturing, supportive, complimentary role.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical implications for church ministry</td>
<td>Some men are given responsibility for spiritual leadership and authority in the church. Women should not exercise roles of spiritual leadership and authority over adult men in the church. Therefore, women should not be ordained, they should not hold pastoral positions which involve broad leadership and authority over the congregation (some limited pastoral staff roles might be allowable), they should not sit on governing (Elders) boards or in other positions of local church or denominational authority, and they should not participate in public teaching or preaching where men are present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorum?</td>
<td>Women should conduct (and dress) themselves in a way that communicates their attitude of modesty and submissiveness. (This may involve wearing of a literal headcovering, as in 1 Cor 11, or may be more culturally adapted.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional cases?</td>
<td>Where no men are available to lead, women may be forced to do so. But this is never ideal; male leadership should be installed as soon as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental logic: why do men and women relate in this way?</td>
<td>The <em>male leadership principle</em> was established by God at creation. It is built into the essential make-up of men and women. It has therefore been the predominant model throughout history (and especially across the history of God’s people–Israel and the church).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key arguments</td>
<td>• The creation-fall narrative (Gen 2-3 especially) places the man first as leader, the woman second as compliment. • Throughout Scripture there is an overwhelming pattern of male leadership. This was true in the NT with the 12 disciples and the other prominent church leaders who are named, just as it was in the OT. • The NT &quot;headship&quot; passages (1 Cor 11, Eph 5) clearly teach the male leadership principle. • The NT &quot;prohibition&quot; passages (1 Cor 14, 1 Tim 2) explicitly restrict women from roles of public leadership and authority over men in the church. • Church tradition reinforces this same pattern.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### How has sin affected male-female relations and roles?

Because of sin, healthy authority and leadership roles often degenerate into oppression and abuse. However, the basic authority relationship between men and women is not a result of sin, but was intended to be a beautiful expression of the loving care of God.

### Interpretation of the "headship" passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:22-33)

These passages clearly teach the male leadership principle, and connect it both to the creation account and to the nature of the God and His church. It should therefore be treated as universally applicable.

### Interpretation of the "prohibition" passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15)

These passages clearly teach that women are not to teach or perform other public ministries which would imply authority over men in the church. This teaching is based in the Law (1 Cor 14:34) and in the creation (1 Tim 2:13-14), so it cannot be taken as a mere cultural application of a larger principle.

If we "culturalize" these passages without exegetical warrant, we undermine the authority of Scripture, because we open the door to "culturalize" any biblical teaching that we do not like.

### Nature of church authority, ministry

The NT clearly teaches that some positions in the church involve responsibility to guard true doctrine and to teach it authoritatively, and also to preside over the life of the church for the good of its members.

It is appropriate for us to identify many of the pastoral, governing, and teaching roles in our churches with these "authoritative" roles described in the NT.

Authority is always to be exercised in a loving and giving spirit, but carries with it the ability to instruct, command, correct, and discipline.

### B. Egalitarianism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Position:</th>
<th>God made men and women equal in all respects.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God gives each individual a unique set of talents, abilities, and gifts—irrespective of their gender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Christians should be allowed to minister in whatever way they are gifted. Ministry roles should be determined <em>entirely</em> by giftedness and personal suitability, <em>without regard to gender</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Practical implications for church ministry

Some people are given responsibility for spiritual leadership and authority in the church.

Such leadership responsibility can be given to any individual who is appropriately gifted and who shows the suitable level of spiritual maturity.
Any church role that a man might have can also be given to an appropriately gifted women. Absolutely no distinction should be made on the basis of gender.

Furthermore, in the interests of balance and equality, the church should seek to encourage women to take positions of leadership, to compensate for the historical tendency to be too male-dominated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decorum?</th>
<th>Generally a non-issue. If asked, the response is that all members of the church should dress in a culturally-appropriate manner to express Christian values.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional cases?</td>
<td>In certain cultures, it may be wise to use more men or women in public leadership to avoid giving offense. This is not ideal. Where possible, the church should model biblical equality and promote it in society at large.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental logic: why do men and women relate in this way?</td>
<td>God made men and women equal in His image. He relates to us all individually, and gifts us all uniquely. And He explicitly promised that a feature of the New Covenant would be the universal work of the Holy Spirit in all believers, so that all can serve freely according to their gifts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Key arguments | - The creation narrative identifies men and women as equal in God’s image (see especially Gen 1:26-30), and shows them exercising an identical range of roles. The fall narrative indicates that gender hierarchy is a result of sin (Gen 3:16).
  - In spite of a predominantly male-centered social setting, the Bible identifies a number of prominent women leaders who were approved by God (Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, Huldah, several "wise women" and prophetesses, women who followed Jesus, Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, etc.).
  - The NT proclaims that sources of division and inequality which are the result of sin are no longer applicable in the church, and should be left behind (Gal 3:28).
  - The NT illustrates this renewed equality in Jesus’ positive attitude toward women and in many references to prominent women in ministry (see for eg Rom 16 and Phil 4:2-3).
  - Male-centered church tradition proves nothing except that the church sometimes fails to live up to its calling, and has only recently come to a widespread appreciation of the true equality of men and women in Christ. |
| How has sin affected male-female relations and roles? | Sin is the reason for hierarchy in male-female relationships. As sin’s effects are overturned in the gospel, we should begin to experience true equality again. |
| Interpretation of the "headship" passages | The Greek word "head" (kephale) was normally used for other concepts such as "source" rather than for "leader." (Other terms were used for authority figures.) These passages are therefore better interpreted as meaning that the man was
| Interpretation of the "prohibition" passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15) | (1 Cor 11-14 says that women can pray and prophesy in public before it commands that they be "quiet" (14:34). Thus, this command cannot be an absolute restriction on women speaking, but must rather be an issue of preserving order in a church where the women were creating confusion by their public outbursts (cf verses 33 and 35).

1 Timothy warns repeatedly of false teaching. We know from various sources that there were many problems with false teaching in Ephesus, where Timothy was–some of which were likely connected with the behavior of loose or domineering women. As a result, this prohibition is best interpreted as a command to a particular cultural/historical situation.

The fact that there are only a few of these passages, that they appear in books which address church problems, and that they seem to contradict other principles of equality, are ample reason for us to treat them as cultural/historical applications of larger principles. |
| --- | --- |
| Nature of church authority, ministry | The primary point of ministry is service. Good Christian leadership always follows the example of Christ, who gave Himself for His people.

There is a place in the Body for instruction and correction. However, these are functions performed by the Body, following the lead of those who are gifted to offer guidance. And they are done in the name of Christ and under the authority of His Word, not by virtue of the authority of individuals within the church. |
| C. Equal Nature, "Economic" Hierarchy | Men and women are fundamentally equal in nature and value. However, God has assigned them different roles in order to accomplish His purpose in the world.

It is God’s intention that men be responsible for ultimate leadership and authority in the God-ordained institutions of home and church (not necessarily in society).

Women should not be placed in roles of ultimate church authority: senior pastor, preaching/teaching pastor, board of Elders (if that board has responsibility for direct spiritual leadership in the church).³

However, women can perform a wide variety of public ministries, including teaching mixed groups (where it is understood that this teaching is explaining the authoritative Word), so long as those ministries are under the umbrella of ultimate male authority. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decorum?</th>
<th>Generally a non-issue, except that one’s appearance should express Christian values in a culturally-appropriate way.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional cases?</td>
<td>Where no men are available, women may take leadership roles. But it is best if this is done under the auspices of a larger ministry organization with male leadership. And local male leadership should be installed when possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental logic: why do men and women relate in this way?</td>
<td>The basic issue is not the essential nature of men and women, nor even their make-up (though that does lend itself to role diversity).&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;The basic issue is one of God-ordained order: He has clearly commanded men to take leadership responsibility and women to cooperate with this arrangement. To diverge from this pattern without clear warrant in Scripture is to undermine biblical authority and depart from God’s best intention for us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key arguments</td>
<td>• The creation-fall narrative suggests <em>ontological</em> equality and <em>functional</em> hierarchy between men and women.(^4)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;• Throughout Scripture we see the tension between equality and subordination at work. Men and women are treated as equals before God. Yet the predominant model was male leadership (with some exceptions).&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;• In the NT, we see more emphasis on women in ministry than in the OT, but do not have clear examples of women in positions of <em>ultimate</em> leadership. (The women named in Rom 16, etc., were &quot;co-workers&quot; and ministers; but there are no clear examples of women serving as &quot;ruling elders&quot; or apostles on par with Peter and Paul.)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;• The NT &quot;headship&quot; and &quot;prohibition&quot; passages explicitly teach the male leadership principle, though they also suggest that this principle operates in a climate of equal value and mutual service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has sin affected male-female relations and roles?</td>
<td>Because of sin, healthy authority and leadership roles often degenerate into oppression and abuse. However, the basic authority relationship between men and women is <em>not</em> a result of sin, but was intended to be a beautiful expression of the loving care of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of the &quot;headship&quot; passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:22-33).</td>
<td>These passages clearly teach the male leadership principle in the home and in the church, and connect it to the creation account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of the &quot;prohibition&quot; passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15)</td>
<td>There are certainly cultural factors at work in these passages (eg: the reference to braided hair, etc., in 1 Tim 2 and the need for wives to be instructed by husbands at home in 1 Cor 14), but the fact that they are connected to male &quot;headship&quot; and to the creation narrative suggest that the general prohibitions given here should be treated as universally applicable. There is no clear warrant in the text to treat them any other way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of church authority, ministry</td>
<td>The NT teaches that there is a need in the church for leaders to guard and teach true doctrine, and to preside over the affairs of the Body. However, much that is done by way of ministry in our churches (including some of the public &quot;teaching,&quot; and even many of the roles assigned to Elders and Deacons boards) does not carry that kind of ultimate authority, but simply serves others under the authority of Scripture. Apart from certain foundational leadership roles, the NT says little about the day-to-day ministry of the church. Its primary emphasis is on Christ-like service in ministry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D. Evangelistically-Based Role Distinctions

| Basic Position | It was Paul’s conviction that the Christian minister should always avoid creating unnecessary barriers to faith among those to whom the gospel is preached. We should therefore be willing to set aside our own personal rights, and "let go" of non-essential concerns, if this will help us to present the gospel message to our society more effectively. Since the question of male/female roles is not at the core of the gospel, and since it is a debatable issue, our practice should be determined by what will aid the proclamation of the gospel to our neighbors most effectively. |

| Practical implications for church ministry | If the social expectations around us dictate that leadership be male, our women must be willing to set aside their equal rights in the church (if indeed that is what Scripture teaches) and submit to male leadership in order to avoid creating unnecessary offense. If the social expectations around us urge that there should be gender equality in church leadership, then those who are convinced that the best interpretation of Scripture is a "male-leadership" model ought to be willing to acknowledge that their position is not a clear, universally held, essential doctrine of Scripture, and they should tolerate a more egalitarian practice in their churches for the sake of the gospel and the lost. |

| Decorum? | Christians (both sexes) should dress and conduct themselves in ways that harmonize biblical principles of godliness and relevance to the culture. |

| Exceptional cases? | These are a non-issue. We adopt whatever form of leadership is necessary in order to make an impact for the gospel. |

| Fundamental logic: why do men and women? | The biblical evidence for gender roles in the church is unclear. However, our mandate to make disciples is very clear in Scripture—as is Paul’s teaching that we create no unnecessary offense. This must therefore be the primary... |
women relate in this way? | basis for our practice. This is a life-and-death matter, which is not true of the "gender question."
---|---
### Key arguments
- The creation narrative clearly shows that men and women are equal before God (Gen 1:26-30). Whether the more detailed account in Gen 2 also teaches a distinction in their roles (including a male leadership principle) prior to the fall is debated.
- Scripture depicts a predominantly male leadership model, but with prominent exceptions. It does not tell us how to interpret these examples in a direct way, and so we debate their significance.
- The NT shows many women in ministry, but the possible examples of women in roles of ultimate authority are debatable and unclear.
- Intelligent, informed Christian thinkers continue to debate the meaning and significance of the "headship" and "prohibition" passages, suggesting that they are not as clear as either side often suggest.
- However, there is no debate over the meaning of the Great Commission (Mat 28:18-20) or Paul’s discussion of his own missionary principles (Rom 14-15, 1 Cor 8-10).

### How has sin affected male-female relations and roles?
Sin certainly results in the abuse of authority. Whether it was the source of authority relationships is debatable.

### Interpretation of the "headship" passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:22-33)
The term "head" (`kephale`) was not the word most often used for "authority" or "leader" in Greek, but it was sometimes used with this meaning. In these passages, "head" could refer to male leadership, or it could simply refer to the fact that Adam was created first and that the husband is the one who cares for his wife. We should be careful about dogmatism on this point.

### Interpretation of the "prohibition" passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15)
Arguments that there were cultural reasons for the "prohibitions" of 1 Cor and 1 Tim are plausible though not conclusive.

We must be careful not to use "culture" to rob Scripture of its authority. However, in practice we do sometimes treat NT instructions as culturally limited even though the text of Scripture does not explicitly say that this is so. (Example: we do not give "holy kisses" in our churches, nor do most churches practice head covering, though Paul does not say that these commands were only to be taken literally in the NT setting.)

### Nature of church authority, ministry
Focus is generally placed on the spiritual dimension of ministry rather than on positions and structures involving formal authority. Ministry is service in Christ’s name.

There is a need for preservation and teaching of the true gospel. But what is most important is not who preserves it, but that it be preserved and taught.
### E. Gender Equality, Family-Based Role Distinctions

| Basic Position: | Men and women are fundamentally equal before God. And each individual has a unique set of talents, abilities, and gifts. Church ministry roles should therefore be dictated by giftedness and suitability, not by gender.  
  
  However, in the family, God has assigned spiritual leadership to parents, and to husbands/fathers in particular.  
  
  The church must support this family structure and not undermine it. It may sometimes be necessary, therefore, to limit a woman’s involvement in church leadership in order to promote healthy spiritual leadership in the families that comprise the church. |
|---|---|
| Practical implications for church ministry | A woman should not be barred from any ministry role for which she is personally gifted and qualified simply because she is a woman.  
  
  However, a married woman should not be put in a position of spiritual leadership in the church which undermines her husband’s spiritual leadership in the home, or which creates the impression that family leadership roles are unimportant in the minds of other church members.  
  
  In concrete terms, this means that ordinarily a married woman would not be a senior pastor or a member of an Elders board (if board members’ responsibilities included direct spiritual leadership for families in the church). A single woman might play either of these roles, unless there were grounds to believe that this would communicate the wrong message about family relationships to other church members. |
| Decorum? | Generally a non-issue, except that one’s appearance should express Christian values in a culturally-appropriate way. |
| Exceptional cases? | Women married to unbelieving men are the spiritual leaders in their homes—of necessity. But special care must be taken not to allow their leadership in the church to hinder their witness to their husbands or convey an inappropriate message to other members of the church. |
| Fundamental logic: why do men and women relate in this way? | The basic issue is not the essential nature of men and women, nor is it a God-ordained order in which one gender has authority over the other in the church and society.  
  
  Rather, the primary concern is two-fold: (a) God’s design for the family, in which spiritual leadership is entrusted to parents for their children, and ultimately to the father for the family as a whole. (b) God’s design for the church as a body that builds whole people and whole, healthy families. |
For the church to accomplish its mission, it must respect principles of spiritual leadership in the family as it appoints its own leaders.

| Key arguments | • The creation-fall narrative suggests ontological equality between men and women, and functional role diversity between husbands and wives in the marriage relationship. (Adam and Eve were husband and wife as well as prototypical man and woman; and at least in the case of Eve, the unique responsibilities she had for child-bearing were understood to be exercised in the context of marriage.)

• Throughout Scripture, husbands are expected to assume responsibility for spiritual leadership in their families. This principle is generally extended to society at large, since society is made up of families. There are exceptional examples of female leadership in society, but no clear examples of female spiritual leadership in the home where the husband is also a mature and competent believer.

• There is one Greek term for our English words "man" and "husband" (aner), and one term for our English words "woman" and "wife" (gyne). The only way to know which meaning is in view in the "prohibition" passages is by considering the context.

• Context tells us that at least 2 of the 4 pivotal NT passages on this issue are clearly directed to the husband/wife relationship (1 Cor 14, Eph 5). There is good exegetical reason to believe the other 2 passages (1 Cor 11, 1 Tim 2) are also speaking about how husbands and wives should relate to one another in the context of the church meeting. If so, then the apparent tension between NT passages teaching equality and NT prohibitions is resolved. |

| How has sin affected male-female relations and roles? | Because of sin, healthy authority and leadership roles often degenerate into oppression and abuse. However, the basic spiritual leadership role of the husband in the marriage is not a result of sin, but was intended to be a beautiful expression of the loving care of God. |

| Interpretation of the "headship" passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:22-33). | Ephesians 5 clearly teaches that the husband ought to image Christ in his spiritual leadership in the home.

1 Cor 11 speaks in more general terms of a relationship between "men" and "women"; but elements in the passage (v. 5,9), in the larger context in the book (discussion of sexuality and marriage in ch 6-7, instruction to wives to be quiet in 14:34-35), and the parallel with Eph 5 all suggest that this "headship" applies primarily to husbands and wives.6 |

| Interpretation of 1 Cor 14 | 1 Cor 14 is clearly speaking about wives keeping silent in church and asking... |
the "prohibition" passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15)

Paul's prohibition in 1 Tim 2 would make sense if applied to "women" or to "wives." However, the predominance of "family" themes throughout 1 Timothy, the metaphor of the church as "household of God" (3:15), and the parallel with Eph 5 (Timothy is in Ephesus) all suggest that prohibition has more to do with husband/wife relationships than with the general roles of men and women. (Paul would have no reason to distinguish these more clearly, since all women but the widows and young girls would normally be married in that time and culture. It would be assumed that speaking to "women" was the same as speaking to "wives.")

Nature of church authority, ministry

Though there is a need to preserve good teaching and to provide direction, spiritual leadership is fundamentally about Christlike service, not domination (Eph 5). This is true in the family, and also in the church.

The church is not identical to the family. But there are many analogies between the two, since churches are comprised of families, and are themselves the "family of God." Thus, church leaders must also be capable family leaders (1 Tim 3), and must work to promote strong families in their churches.

Like families, every church is unique—though all should reflect certain basic principles established by God.

IV. Decisive Factors to Consider

When we compare the main options on the "gender roles" debate, a number of "critical decision factors" begin to emerge. If we are to reach an effective conclusion on the larger question of men’s and women’s roles in the church, we must first come to grips with at least the following issues.

1. Interpretation and application of Scripture

- How do we distinguish the universal principles from the specific applications of those principles which were only intended for a particular historical and cultural setting? What kinds of clues must there be before we agree that a scriptural command was not intended to be applied literally everywhere and at all times? (Must it be stated in the text? Implied by the context of the chapter or book? Can information about the historical setting of the book decide it for us? Etc.)

2. Concept of church leadership and authority

- In our understanding of the nature of the church, where do we put more emphasis: on the concept of leadership as "servanthood" or on the idea of leadership as "authority" to preserve and teach the truth, guide the actions of the church, etc?
- What is "authority" in the local church and in our denomination? What is authority for? How
does it work?

- What is the role of church Elders and other formal leaders in the Alliance? Are these people servants who empower the Body? Are they instructors and directors who command it? Are they ministry specialists who perform administrative and organizational tasks which help to coordinate the work of others? Is their spiritual leadership a matter of example, expertise, or vested authority? (For that matter, is the role of "Elder" or executive board member the same in every church? Should it be?)

- What is "teaching"? What is "preaching"? What kind of authority do these activities carry in our churches?

3. Spiritual gifts

- What is our understanding of the NT teaching about "giftedness"? Do we believe that men and women have different gifts, with some gifts only available to men or to women? What is the basis for this conviction? Or, if gifts are given regardless of gender, does this imply that anyone who has a gift, man or woman, could hold any ministry role? If not, why not?

4. Creation narrative

- Does the creation narrative teach that God intended a leadership-supportive relationship between men and women (or husbands and wives) prior to the Fall? Or does Gen 2-3 teach us that role distinctions between men and women (or husbands and wives) are entirely the result of sin?

5. Biblical examples and precedents

- The Jewish and pagan cultures which we encounter in the Bible were clearly structured around male leadership in the home, the society, and the temple/church. Does Scripture endorse this structure, or simply record it as a historical fact?

- What is implied by the exceptional examples of female ministry and/or leadership which we find in the Bible, especially in the NT? How do we know?

6. NT celebration of equality in Christ

- What is the intention of Gal 3:28? Is the purpose of this passage to give instruction on the way ministry is done in the local church, or is it an affirmation of a new principle of "equal access to God for all people" in the NT era? Does it teach the removal of all male/female distinctions? How does this passage fit in with the larger message of the NT about salvation and ministry?

7. "Headship" passages (1 Cor 11:2-16, Eph 5:22-33)

- Do the NT "headship" passages teach leadership and/or authority of men over women? Of husbands with respect to their wives? If so, what kind of leadership and/or authority? If not, what is the relationship of men/women (or husbands/wives) to be like?
8. "Prohibition" passages (1 Cor 14:33-36, 1 Tim 2:8-15)

- Which elements, if any, in the "prohibition" passages can be shown to be specific to the culture and historical setting of the Corinthians and the Ephesians, and not directly applicable to us today? On what basis?

- If we believe that these passages were specific to the cultural and historical setting of the first readers, how do we explain the appeals to the Law (1 Cor 14:34) and to the creation account (1 Tim 2:13-15)?

- If these commands are directly applicable to all churches today, should we also apply Paul’s instructions about braided hair, gold, pearls, and costly garments (1 Tim 2:9), or his teaching about head coverings and long/short hair (1 Cor 11:2-15) literally in our setting? Why or why not?

9. Significance of family relationships to the "gender roles" question

- Is "headship" in 1 Cor 11 about maleness and femaleness, or about the relationship between men and women who are husbands and wives? Why?

- Is the principle behind Paul’s comments about female submission in 1 Tim 2 the idea that men should have authority over women, or is it that wives should respect the leadership of husbands? Which line of reasoning makes better sense of the flow of thought in the book of 1 Timothy? Which fits better with the overall shape of Paul’s theology and the teaching of Scripture at large?

10. Clarity, status, and practical implications of the "gender roles" question

- How essential is the "gender roles" question to the Christian faith? Is this a core doctrine or a "debatable" matter where it is acceptable to let individuals and/or churches follow their own conscience? On what basis do we decide this?

- How will our decision on this issue affect our ability to present the gospel effectively in our own North American context? How will it affect our involvement in the church’s global mission—both in our own sending of missionaries and in our relationship with our sister churches in other lands?

V. Conclusion

As leaders of Canada’s Alliance churches, we all want to know God’s will and to do it. Every one of us desires to honor His Word, to follow His leading, and to reflect His perfect plan—in our own lives, and in our areas of ministry.

Sometimes, though, we struggle to know what our Lord wants. In the past, we have certainly found it difficult in the matter of the roles of men and women in the church.

In a little over a year, we will meet to discuss this matter again, this time with a mandate to draw up conclusions that will guide our denomination into the next century. May God grant us grace to study well as we prepare.
He keep our minds sharp and our spirits gentle as we deliberate. May He lead us together to conclusions which will be best for every member of the Body, empowering us for even more effective service.

God grant that we may be
of the same mind,
maintaining the same love,
united in spirit,
intent on one purpose,
doing nothing from selfishness or empty conceit,
with humility of mind regarding others as more important than ourselves,
not looking out merely for our own interests, but also the interests of
others,

having the same attitude as Christ Jesus.

*(See Phil 2:2-5)*

VI. Some Suggested Sources for Further Study

Bloesch, Donald G. *Is the Bible Sexist: Beyond Feminism and Patriarchalism*. Westchester IL: Crossway, 1982.


VII. Footnotes

1. Those who have done so often compare the "gender question" to the issue of slavery. In the 18th and 19th centuries, growing social sensitivity drove Protestant scholars to a more careful study of the biblical teaching, which overturned the common belief of earlier generations that Scripture endorsed the practice of owning slaves.

2. I have attached a brief bibliography to this paper, for those who wish to "shop the marketplace" more carefully. The reader who wants to get a "feel" for different positions and their arguments will probably find that the most helpful introductory source is Bonnidell Clouse and Robert Clouse, ed., *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989. Though I have made modifications and additions of my own, the summary of options which follows is heavily indebted to *Women in Ministry*, particularly for the first 3 options presented.

3. Individuals who hold this position will sometimes point out that the NT does not give a precise description of the roles and responsibilities of elders, deacons, etc., suggesting that the church has some freedom to develop these offices in different ways. If the responsibilities of a church board member are more administrative or supportive, rather than involving direct spiritual leadership over the members of the church, then supporters of this position may allow for women to hold such a position.

4. The parallel is sometimes drawn here with the doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal in divine nature, but also recognizes that--for the sake of accomplishing God's plan of salvation--they have voluntarily adopted an "economy" in which the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit glorifies the Son. Since humanity is created in God's image, it is argued that it is reasonable for us also to live in essential equality but also in relationships marked by functional or "economic" subordination.

5. Note that Paul's insistence that the minister set aside his/her own rights for the sake of the gospel in 1 Cor. 8-10 comes immediately before the passages on "headship" and "quietness" in 1 Cor. 11-14, perhaps setting the context in which they should be understood.

6. It is also sometimes noted that 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus, which adds to the likelihood that Paul would have similar issues in view when he wrote instructions on headship and male/female behavior in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Timothy.