

Christian Women's Beliefs on Female Subordination and Male Authority

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While many congregations and individual Christians embrace egalitarian principles, many others remain committed to complementarian ideology, believing that men are to lead within the home and church and that women are to be subordinate. It is easy to blame men for buying into a system that maintains their own power position. However, the fact that many who take a more complementarian view are themselves women seems counter-intuitive: Why would a woman espouse an ideology that consigns her to a *less-than* status?

To help answer this question, we surveyed women who agree with female subordination to learn the rationale behind their beliefs. In this article, we report our findings and explore what they tell us about effectively promoting gender equality.

Method

We recruited participants through social media, asking Christian women to provide their religious views by completing a survey. Although 421 individuals began the survey, only 72 of them were eligible to complete it based on their answers to the first three questions: 1) "Are you a woman?" 2) "Are you a Christian?" and 3) "Do you believe that women should be under male authority?" Those who answered "yes" to each of these questions were routed through our survey, which elicited their beliefs regarding male authority and female subordination along with their rationale for these beliefs.

Results

The Bible passages that respondents cited most frequently as the basis for their beliefs about women were: Eph 5 (35 respondents), 1 Tim 2 (20), Gen 2–3 (18), Gen 1 (12), 1 Cor 11 (10), and Titus 2 (10).

Participants reported that, when interpreting Scripture regarding women, they rely on "praying for guidance" (57%) and "the way verses are translated into English" (46%). A substantial number of respondents (38%) identified reliance on what their "religious leaders say" and "the way women were treated during Bible times" (32%). Other comments related to Scripture (e.g., looking at the original texts and understanding their historical

contexts) were mentioned by several in open responses, indicating the importance of Scripture for participants overall.

All participants except one were aware that some Christians do not believe in female subordination.

Discussion

Identified Scripture Passages

It is not surprising that the passages cited most frequently by participants to support their position are those about which egalitarians and complementarians have traditionally held different interpretations. These passages center on wives submitting to their husbands (Eph 5:22, 24; Titus 2:5); male headship (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23); the order of creation (1 Cor 11:8; 1 Tim 2:13); women not teaching or assuming authority over a man (1 Tim 2:11–12); Eve, not Adam, being deceived (1 Tim 2:14); and the story of creation and the fall (Gen 1–3).

A striking feature of the list of identified passages is the prominence of Eph 5, well-known for its instructions to wives and husbands. It is common for egalitarians, especially egalitarian biblical scholars and theologians, to consider 1 Tim 2 (e.g., "I do not permit a woman to teach. . .") and 1 Cor 14 (e.g., "Women should remain silent in the churches. . .") as the central loadbearing texts of complementarianism. But here we witness Eph 5 receiving considerably more emphasis (with 35 responses) than 1 Tim 2 (with 20 responses). And the identified texts, which reveal the views of several complementarian women, significantly minimize 1 Cor 14 (only 5 responses)!

A corollary observation is that, while Eph 5 is prominent, the similar teachings of Col 3 (4 responses) and 1 Pet 3 (7 responses) are not. Clearly, Eph 5 has overshadowed these parallel texts.

Need for Education

The fact that these controversial passages were identified as foundational, while virtually all participants claimed to be aware of, but not in agreement with, an egalitarian perspective, indicates that whatever exposure they have had to an egalitarian interpretation has not convinced them. In fact, that so many of these women reported depending on Scripture for guidance is commendable and suggests that they might be open to reconsidering the meaning of these verses if they find the evidence compelling.

This observation does not argue that those teaching, preaching, or writing from an egalitarian theology are not already offering compelling evidence. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to ignore the difficulty in changing any belief system, especially those learned at early ages from respected spiritual authorities. From early childhood on, we are taught gendered behavior in a myriad of ways, directly and indirectly, as it relates to our faith and otherwise. Therefore, those beliefs are often tacitly accepted

without a great deal of critical thought. It will typically take more than simply hearing another interpretation to prompt us to question the accuracy of those beliefs.

This observation does, however, emphasize the need for educating current and future religious leaders in careful exegesis and encouraging their boldness in disseminating the same. Persistent teaching, preaching, and writing on these controversial passages remains crucial.

“Subordination” vs. “Submission”

Reactions against the survey’s use of the word “subordinate” were strong. Participants commented that the word implies that women are *less than*, whereas men and women, they maintained, simply have different roles. Many egalitarians, however, assert that any ideology that assigns roles of leadership and authority to men while assigning roles without leadership and authority to women does, indeed, put women in a subordinate position. The fact that many participants indicated a preference for the word “submission” over “subordination,” might be due to the prevalence of the word “submission” in complementarian churches and literature. This preference may also be influenced by the use of “submit” in Eph 5:22 (“Wives, submit to your own husbands. . .”) in translations that are popular among evangelicals in general (NIV) and among complementarians in particular (HCSB, ESV, CSB). In contrast, some older translations (e.g., RSV, NASB) and some translations popular among non-evangelical Christians (e.g., NRSV) instead use the phrase “be subject to” here in Eph 5:22. Frequently encountering the term “submission” in explanations of gender-based roles might have distorted its meaning among some complementarians, or at least desensitized them to its ramifications.

In reality, neither term indicates a mere difference in roles. The Oxford US English Dictionary defines “submission” as “the action or fact of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person.”¹ Rather than a difference in roles, this definition indicates the same level of inequality as does the word “subordinate,” which is defined as “lower in rank or position.”² Given their definitions, the term “submission” is no more equalizing than the term “subordination.”

Importance of Bible Translation

The translation choice between “submit” and “be subject to” is only one of uncountable examples of the importance of the availability of accurate Bible translations in English and other languages. That 46% of participants recognized “the way verses are translated into English” as significant for their understanding of Scripture is encouraging, especially in an era when high-quality gender-accurate Bible translations, such as the NRSV, 2011 NIV, and the CEB, are indeed available.³ Such translations must continue to be produced, updated, and made widely available.

Conclusion

The present study explored the rationale behind women’s beliefs in the subordination of women to the authority of men. Scripture, prayer, and the teaching of religious leaders were identified as the most important determinants of these beliefs. In addition, their belief seems to be related to their rejection of the word “subordination” and preference for the word “submission,” for which they make an unwarranted distinction. We suggest that careful exegesis, particularly for the most controversial passages, coupled with bold, persistent teaching, particularly with current and future religious leaders, is imperative for progress to be made with this population.

Notes

1. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/submission>.
2. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/subordinate>.
3. On gender-accurate Bible translation, see the several articles in *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2015) and in *Mutuality* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2017). See also Jeff Miller, “In Defense of Gender-Accurate Bible Translation,” forthcoming in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 3rd ed., ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity).



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The Experiences of Women in Church and Denominational Leadership

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Women have served in leadership positions in some Christian denominations for decades or even longer. Other denominations have more recently welcomed women into positions such as pastor, elder, or deacon. The egalitarian community encourages men and women to serve based on gifts rather than gender and celebrates when they embrace Paul’s pronouncement that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female . . .” (Gal 3:28 NIV).

However, what are the experiences of women in Christian leadership? Do they have salaries comparable to men? Do they encounter stereotypes based on gender? Do they have the respect of their congregations? This research provides a glimpse into the experiences of these women to inform those who are, or will become, church leaders, and to increase the awareness of congregations and denominational offices as they seek to include women in fulfilling the mission of the church.