

Advocating for Women's Equality in Your Complementarian Church



By Ariel
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As a woman who periodically preaches and teaches in a “soft complementarian” church, one that allows women to teach but not be an elder or be in positions that have authority over the pastoral staff, I’ve often thought about how we can better advocate for women’s acceptance in

all areas of the church, including the positions of pastors and elders. Over the years, as I’ve gravitated towards the idea of mutuality, I’ve implemented ideas about how to continue advocating for women’s equality in a complementarian church.

Study Church History and Scripture

The notion of “biblical womanhood” is a cultural construct built mainly on a specific interpretation of New Testament texts. In order to combat this notion of “biblical womanhood,” we need to examine history to see what women were doing during the early church. Ask, what were women doing in Scripture? How did their presence, gifts, and talents benefit the church? What did Jesus say and do for women? Women were patrons, house managers, married or single, and financial benefactors. Once we study women in an early church historical context, both from Scripture and historical references, our cultural blinders begin to shift as our ideas about how women contributed to the early church reshape and revitalize our pragmatic approaches in the modern church era.

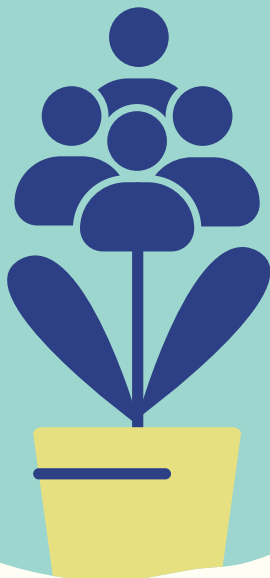
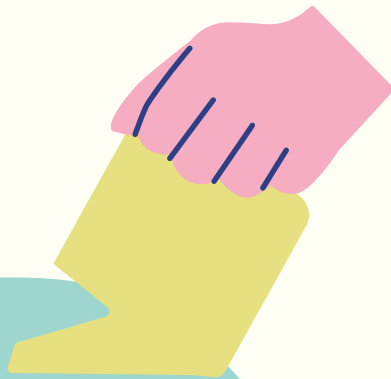
The Bible doesn’t contradict itself. Studying women across all Scripture helps to gain a broader view of what women were doing throughout Israel’s history. If we see women like Deborah and Hulda teaching and leading in the Hebrew Bible with no negative connotations, how does that translate to women teaching and leading now?

Steward Women’s Gifting

Romans 12:3–8 implies gifting is not gendered. God gives gifts to whomever he wills. However, when the doors are closed to women in certain areas of ministry or when women are limited to specific areas (like women’s ministry, for example), they cannot flourish fully in their gifting and the entire church suffers. Many complementarian or hierarchical churches allow women to only teach other women, if at all. What are men missing when the church prevents women from teaching and leading them?

In order to nurture women’s gifting, whatever it may be, we should create spaces or ministries where women can freely be discipled and discern their gifting by those who are already leading and serving there. When energy and resources are poured into women, the entire church benefits. When people witness women using their gifts, this is when the work of the Holy Spirit can intercede instead of their having to merely rely on theoretical texts to interpret what complementarians think is a universal reality.

Begin having conversations with other women and men to hear their thoughts about women in ministry and spur dialogue.



Engage with Other Church Members

As I began reading and reflecting more on mutuality, it felt very lonely. I wondered, “Do other women feel this way? Are they curious about women’s roles in the church? How do men feel about women’s leadership?”

Begin having conversations with other women and men to hear their thoughts about women in ministry and spur dialogue. Be sure to listen to objections and convictions with humility and gentleness. Each church member is unique, bringing insights and introspection to the table.

One person’s convictions about mutuality are unlikely to cause a major shift in church governance. However, thoughtful conversations with other members may create waves and lead to action. Having other church members in your corner who can advocate with you dispels the loneliness and increases the chances of reform.

Meet With Church Leaders

In Numbers 27:1–5, the five daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses, Eleazer, the High Priest, and the other leaders. Tradition held that because Zelophehad had no sons, his land and line would be lost since he had died. They proposed that they should inherit the land instead, and when Moses sought God on the question, God said, they are right, and the land was now theirs. The daughters are even named—all five of them, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—which is a big deal in Scripture!

Zelophehad's daughters were not afraid to approach Moses to save their father's line and confront what many theologians think is an act of injustice. They did not sit back in silence and accept the status quo by looking for other men to marry. Instead, they spoke up, preserved their father's line, and continued contributing to their tribe and nation. Thanks to them, instruction was even added to the Torah: that if a man has no sons, the inheritance shall pass to his daughters. The boldness of the five daughters amended the Torah and offered future daughters protection (Num. 27:6-11).

Changing perspectives on gender roles and understanding biblical equality in the church doesn't happen overnight. While not everyone will feel comfortable meeting with



their leaders to discuss mutuality in the church, it's absolutely essential. Jesus' claim to keep the peace may often come with the discomfort of bringing up issues like biblical equality in the church. Church leaders like elders and pastors should be approachable and humble enough to listen to your thoughts and questions. Even if you have questions about how the church operates from a leadership standpoint, they should freely answer your questions. Any closed doors to the discussion are a red flag.

We must keep trying to open the heavy door that's closed to opportunities for women.

Conclusion

Sadly, many women who wish to preach or teach God's word may need to exit their complementation churches gracefully. At our local church, women are encouraged to use their gifts in many ways: they are deacons, ministry leaders, and potentially pastors, with the exception of the lead pastor. However, the decision-making ability

lies with the all-male elder board. Women leaders in the church are on the threshold because we're not just fighting for ourselves, but for the generations that follow. Our daughters and sisters whom God has gifted need a space to use their gifts for the good of the church. We must keep trying to open the heavy door that's closed to opportunities for women, not as a fight for power, but for a place where women can serve beside their brothers in all areas of service to Christ our Lord.



Ariel Stephens enjoys teaching at her local church and reading theology books. She is a wife of one and a homeschooling mother of four.