

**Theology versus Practice: How Both Impact our Application of Scripture
Regarding Women in Ministry**

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Theology versus Practice: How Both Impact our Application of Scripture Regarding Women in Ministry

Many books and academic papers have been written regarding the appropriateness of women in ministry. Yet First Century historical accounts and advancements in New Testament exegesis have often not been sufficient to swing the pendulum in favor of more women in leadership. The plethora of theological research has not had as much impact on ministry practice as some of us would like. For instance, while more than 79% of all Americans say they are comfortable with a female Priest or Pastor¹, only about 12% of all American churches actually have one in charge.²

After the past 40+ years of debate, it seems complementarians and egalitarians are further entrenched in their respective views with little dialogue taking place. In many ways, this divide is emblematic of a larger one between conservatives and liberals in the political realm. While I would love to add substantially to the biblical research, I am simply not convinced there is much new information to share. So while I will utilize a few of the most recent sources in my argument below, I will also rely heavily on personal experience to make my case. In order for church leaders to “rightly divide the word” in regard to women ministers, they need to examine both their present theology and their past experience(s) in light of the future call of the gospel.

How does theology affect practice?

So which comes first, theology or practice? Can we have one without the other? Does it matter which one is primary and which one secondary? In my own story, theology preceded practice. It was my own biblical study that led me to a more open

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-think-women-power/>

² http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html

view of what women (therefore, I) could do in ministry. As my theology changed, so did my approach to practical application (i.e. “what I was permitted to do”). Subsequently, I assumed that if I could exegete the text accurately in light of historical and literary context, I would be able to convince others when their application of the text (their practice) seemed to contradict their theology of the text.

Where else do we see evidence of “theology affecting practice”? You only have to look as far as a conservative theologian who bases his argument on a phrase like “the text clearly says...” The text says “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority.”³ The text says “Women should keep silent in the churches.”⁴ The text says “the head of the woman is man.”⁵ Plenty of leaders settle policy about church practice based on “what the text clearly says.” At my first ministry job, I had “theoretical” conversations about the ordination of women with one of our senior leaders, who seemed very supportive. But when it came to the point of considering ordination for me, his brief, dismissive answer was “we’re not discussing that because of what the Bible says in 1 Timothy 2.” His *theological* belief in what the limiting text meant drove his *practical* application of that text.

The problem, as my audience of scholars will be well aware, is that the text is often not all that clear.⁶ “Women should keep silent in the churches” is only a short distance behind Paul’s instructions on how women should cover their head when they are praying and prophesying in the assembly. You cannot rightly interpret the verse in chapter fourteen without considering the overarching narrative scripture – or at least

³ 1 Tim 2:11, ESV

⁴ 1 Cor 14:34, ESV

⁵ 1 Cor 11:3, NIV ‘11

⁶ Other examples - “Moabites are bad” (Deut 23 contra story of Ruth); “People from Uz are evil” (Jer 25 contra story of Job); “No Eunuchs allowed” (Deut 23 contra Acts 8).

the rest of the same letter!⁷ Giles calls attention to this need as well, saying of 1 Tim 2 “we must find a way to interpret this prohibition so that it does not deny what is so clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.”⁸

On the 1 Timothy text, scholars still debate numerous specifics, including: the meaning of *authentēin*; the verb tense of “I do not permit”; how women are “saved through childbirth”; and whether Paul has all women, a specific woman, or a wife in mind. In Cynthia Westfall’s recent book *Paul and Gender*, she notes that a wife within her household, and not all women in a church service, are the focus of verses 11-15.⁹ She suggests that “use of the singular signals some private interaction between a woman and a man.”¹⁰ Westfall also calls attention to Paul’s “reference to the foundation of marriage” with his discussion of Adam, Eve, and childbirth.¹¹ Marg Mowczko agrees the text refers to a wife because of the singular verb in verse 15 (“she will be saved through childbirth”).¹² This recent shift in translation is significant because if Paul is writing to one specific wife who is usurping authority or teaching without education, then he most certainly is addressing a specific, limited context and the injunction should not be applied unilaterally to seminary educated women in 2020.

For those who want to form practices based on a theology of “what the text clearly says,” remember that within the last couple of centuries, many conservative Christians

⁷ My views of the Corinthian letter have been significantly shaped by Anthony Thiselton, *I Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁸ Kevin Giles, *What the Bible Teaches on Women*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 121.

⁹ Cynthia Westfall, *Paul & Women: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 305-6. Westfall also suggests 1 Tim 2 does not refer to a “worship service” but rather a lifestyle. If the former, Paul would certainly have reminded the women about wearing veils as in 1 Cor 11, 191. Also note, the 2011 Common English Bible translates verses 11-15 with wife and husband throughout.

¹⁰ Westfall, 289.

¹¹ Westfall notes Paul’s likely connection between this passage and 1 Cor 14 where he tells women to “ask their husbands at home,” suggesting husbands had responsibility for their wife’s education, 305.

¹² Marg Mowczko, <https://margmowczko.com/a-woman-not-all-women-1-timothy-212/>, accessed 3.6.20.

believed slaves should submit to their masters.¹³ Kevin Giles notes that with the household codes, Paul accepts the reality of “the fallen order” of his day, and does not give advice for behavior based on “God’s perfect will.”¹⁴ Rather, the submission of both slaves and women protects a first-century social order so that a Christian’s witness is not compromised. But Paul *subverts* the current reality when he upends “male privilege in the home and the church...promoting a model of servanthood and low status” and expects men who have power and position to lay down their rights for others.¹⁵ If church leaders are committed to a “theology first” approach, they need to rightly interpret the context *behind* “what the text clearly says.”¹⁶ Because ultimately, what we believe has implications for how we behave.¹⁷

How does practice affect our theology?

Most will agree that theology affects our practice, but what about the reverse? Through the centuries, our practices and worldviews have affected our theological belief systems and biblical interpretation. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, male dominated language in both liturgy and many Bible translations shapes what we come to believe.¹⁸ Churches with only men on the platform convince congregations that this is normal and right behavior, without ever saying a word. Two researchers reflect on their own daughters’ experiences, saying “they learned the rules at a very young age by simply

¹³ Southern Baptists only retracted their interpretation on slavery in 1995. See Giles, 43.

¹⁴ Giles, 163.

¹⁵ Westfall, 23.

¹⁶ See also “Christian Women’s Beliefs on Female Subordination and Male Authority,” <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/christian-womens-beliefs-female-subordination>, accessed 9/5/2020.

¹⁷ Regarding Gal 3:28, Giles notes “Paul’s acceptance of the leadership of women in the house churches must be seen as a social implementation [*practice*] of what it means to be ‘one in Christ’ [*theology*] in the new creation,” 111-112.

¹⁸ See also Giles, 153, and Jeff Miller, “A Defense of Gender-Accurate Translation,” presented in truncated form at the Stone-Campbell Journal Conference, April 2017, and forthcoming as a chapter in Ronald Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic).

being present and observing, non-critically, the practices of a religious community in specific instances.”¹⁹ These little girls grew up *seeing* women only serve in preschool classrooms and potlucks and consequently grew up *believing* only boys can pray or preach in church.²⁰ Any of us raised in a singular denomination had our theology shaped, in part, by what we saw and heard in the practice of worship. We saw who was allowed to pray, preach, and read up front. We heard the words of hymns and sermons. We listened to specific versions of the Bible. Our interpretation of what was right and good was based on our lived experience.²¹

This was clarified to me during a staff retreat discussion in 2009. I was speaking about my passion for equipping others to serve based on giftedness and a conversation about women preaching followed. Some comments included “I heard a woman preach once; she was awful,” “One of the best sermons I ever heard was given by a woman,” and “I just don’t think I could be comfortable with a woman preacher.”²² None of them based these comments on biblical texts or theological beliefs; they were experiential. Their theology was based on their praxis. Their embodied reality led to assumptions about how the text should be interpreted and applied.

I mentioned previously how my own theology of “women in ministry” shifted because of personal biblical study, but experience influenced my theology as well.

During my early years, I had no reason to imagine myself preaching – I’d never seen a

¹⁹ Stephen C Johnson and Lynette Sharp Peña, “What the Other Half is Doing: An Analysis of Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations,” *Leaven* (Vol 2, No 2, 2nd Qtr, 2012), 87. Johnson and Peña share personal stories about their own daughters’ similar beliefs, formed at an early age and prior to any “teaching” about theology.

²⁰ On this phenomenon, see also Dawn Gentry, “A Vision of Persistence,” <https://dawnentrycom.wordpress.com/2019/02/25/a-vision-of-persistence/>

²¹ Giles notes this stating, “From...the reality, the belief followed that this is how things should be,”³⁵.

²² I was the only woman in the room. The group included 3 men over 40, and 4 men younger than 40. The experiential comments were made by younger men. Two of the 3 older men had MA degrees in Bible and Ministry; they chose to remain silent during this discussion.

woman on the platform. Then during my years in seminary, I had the opportunity to learn from gifted women in both classrooms and sanctuaries. I had my own teaching and leading gifts affirmed. My beliefs were influenced not only by the text, but also by my environment and experiences. My husband had a similar experience when in 2013, after we moved to Tennessee, he had the opportunity to hear our daughter preach a sermon at Milligan. His experience led to his own epiphany; if God could gift a woman to preach the gospel, maybe women shouldn't remain silent, after all.²³

But changes in practice (what we see) do not always have positive repercussions. While culture forged ahead with women senators, female CEOs, and other leaders who broke through proverbial glass ceilings, evangelical church practice often remained static through the years. Church elders held tight to ideals of “biblical manhood and womanhood,” not only because their experience and theology presumed it, but sometimes in militant pushback against new cultural norms. One example of this is David Lipscomb's *Gospel Advocate* editorials where he spoke out against Silena Holman's “new woman” of the 1890s.²⁴ Indeed, this pendulum swing repeats in later years through new waves of conservatism against cultural change. Michelle Lee-Barnewall reviews this phenomenon in her recent work, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*.²⁵ Women who experienced autonomy and independence in the 1940s wartime workforce became the ideal homemakers of the 50s. Feminists who championed independence in the 60s-70s frightened many evangelical church leaders,

²³ See Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), on the changing view of the “propriety of female public speakers” in the 1800s, 27.

²⁴ Mary Ellen Lantzer, *An Examination of the 1892-93 Christian Standard Controversy Concerning Women's Preaching* (Thesis, Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, TN, 1990).

²⁵ Lee-Barnewall, 47-48.

and empowered others.²⁶ While theologians raced to align with competing camps, many practitioners settled for the status quo, assuming that their congregation's current, familiar practices would be sufficient for future mission. Sometimes cultural practice influenced theology by causing conservative interpretations to become more firmly entrenched.

This may explain why evangelical Christians have been among the slowest to change their practices. A recent Barna study showed that while many Americans welcome women leaders in the workplace or politics, far fewer want women leading their congregations. In fact, of those who are uncomfortable with women leading in church, Evangelical Christians outnumber Catholics by two to one. Regardless of the self-reported data, the actual practice of churches does not reflect reported comfort levels.²⁷

Contrast between Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (acappella)

In the two branches of our movement with which I am most familiar, I've observed an interesting disparity in how change regarding the ministry of women sometimes takes place. Historically in most acappella churches of Christ, women's involvement in ministry was so severely limited that only a deep study of the text could move the needle on practice. Their theological study shifted their practical application, and often significantly. In contrast, within many independent Christian churches, women already serve in more visible roles. But rather than leading to additional, or more widely open doors, these accepted practices tend to inform beliefs about what is

²⁶ The Council for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood was founded in 1987; Christians for Biblical Equality in 1988.

²⁷ <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-think-women-power/>

appropriate and right. That is, if you had only ever seen a woman give announcements or lead a song, but never give a sermon, your assumption was that they couldn't, or shouldn't, preach.²⁸ With the appearance of equality, it's easy to accept the status quo.

The Way Forward

Why does all this matter? If theology and practice affect each other, how should this influence our interpretation and application of the text? If your church or college communities are trying to open doors for women, should your next steps be centered on specific practices for women or on providing theological studies? I believe the answer is both. As Lee-Barnewall notes, “a robust application of God’s purposes for his people as a whole [our *practices*] ...provides a better overall perspective from which to understand how women and men fit into his plans [our *theology*].”²⁹ It is not enough to get our theology right. We must choose to lean into right actions.

We actually see this reality in the Biblical text itself, in how both Jesus and Paul functioned in their first century contexts. Jesus teaches through both story and sermon, and certainly through his embodied example. But we interpret his theology best by observing his practice.³⁰ Similarly, Paul teaches through sermons and letters, often with deep theological reflection. But we understand his beliefs most clearly through the lens of his lifestyle.³¹ Both theology and practice should influence our choices as well.

²⁸ For examples of how this has played out over the last few decades, see “Gender Inclusion in Churches of Christ” <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss2/> and “Gender Inclusion in Christian Churches” <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol22/iss2/> .

²⁹ Lee-Barnewall, 67. See also Giles who describes his own shift in belief through the decades and how both experience [practice] and reflection of scripture [theology] influenced the shift, 155.

³⁰ See for example, women engaged in theological reflection with Jesus in Jn 4, Lk 10, Jn 11, and the women traveling with Jesus as disciples who meet his needs in Lk 8.

³¹ Think of how he describes women as deacons, apostles, and co-workers in Rom 16 as well as his encouragement for women to learn in 1 Tim 2. See also Giles, “Paul affirmed the equality of the sexes as far as he was able in his first century cultural context,” 129.

Rather than focus on one at the exclusion of the other, I implore you to consider both theology and practice as you move forward. Intentionally involve women in practice, in whatever steps are most palatable and expedient for your context. If women currently only teach children, schedule one to share a testimony in worship. If women are allowed to lead worship, invite one to lead a mixed adult small group. Encourage women and men to dialogue about their experiences with ministry roles, listening empathetically to one another. Stories help us understand where our beliefs began and often serve as a catalyst for intentional next steps.

At the same time, don't ignore theological debates or assume everyone has studied the texts for themselves. Have a trusted male leader co-teach a Bible class with a female scholar on the more restrictive texts. Invite a guest lecturer to present some of the historical evidence of female *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*, or more recent scholarly research on various scriptures.³² Examine the text with an open mind and with an eye toward the overarching narrative of scripture. Interpret theology through practices that will build up the body for the "common good" and partner with God on mission who "wants all people to be saved."³³ Don't settle for easy answers about "what the text clearly says." Have hard conversations and lean into the discomfort necessary to create lasting change.³⁴ I join Westfall in making this plea "with the hope that it will advance both the conversation and the kingdom of God."³⁵

³² See *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical & Literary Studies*, Ute E Eisen, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000). Additional recent sources are in the bibliography below.

³³ Note 1 Cor 12:7; 1 Tim 2:3-4, 3:7, 4:15-16, 6:1-2, and Titus 2:6-10, 15. See Lee-Barnewall, 28, noting acceptance of female evangelists because "the need to save souls took precedence," and Westfall, 13, discussing Paul's emphasis on pragmatics and what will best influence the spread of the gospel.

³⁴ See Kadi Cole, *Developing Female Leaders: Navigate the Minefields and Release the Potential of Women in Your Church*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019). She offers many practical next steps for church leaders to consider.

³⁵ Westfall, 315.

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