

# WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND THE CHURCH

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## Introduction

The bulk of this paper is part of an original I was asked to write for Salt and Light in 1989!

I was asked to present this again to the Salt and Light European Apostolic Team in 2001, which I did with an addendum entitled “ongoing questions”. This section is vital, in my view, to a proper understanding of the subject. I have rewritten “ongoing questions” to include some comments from that EAT discussion and further reflections in the last few years.

This topic has been – and no doubt will continue to be – a contentious topic that has divided churches. My prayer, as we consider this together, is that God will give us graciousness and magnanimity to come to the Scriptures with open hearts, setting aside our prejudices and history.

Over the last 30 years, our churches have come a very long way, since our initial ‘birth’ as new churches looking for a fresh experience of God! We have learnt a lot on that journey, often through making mistakes in many areas of church life! In this area of the role of women, I have no doubt that we have not always got it right.

My appeal is that as we seek to find ‘a better way’ and to see women released fully into all that God has for them, we stay rigorously true to Scripture. It is our plumbline and authority, and however challenging it is to our 21st Century sensibilities, we must still make it our sure foundation in the church.

May God continue to give us all ongoing wisdom as under-shepherds in the Body of Christ!

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## The role of women in the church

Enough has been written and said about this subject in recent years, but not to bring clarity or unanimity. To add to this material is somewhat brave; but we hope nonetheless to bring some illumination to the issues rather than “darken God’s counsel with words without knowledge.”

We propose, then, to examine the following issues:

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## 1. God's creation order (Genesis 1:26 - 3:24)

In Genesis woman is created after man in order both to complete and complement him. She is called by God "a helper suitable for him" and by Adam "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh".

Together they express the image of God; God's image is made up of that which is male and female. They were both created in the image of God; both lived in Eden; both walked with God and both were commanded to "be fruitful ... increase ... fill the earth ... subdue it ... rule it ...". They have a joint mandate to rule! (Genesis 1:26-28)

Although there was equality in their creation – "in the image of God he created *them*" – there were, nevertheless, differences between them – "*male and female* he created them".

This refers not only to physical differences but also to emotional and functional differences and gifting which stemmed from their distinctive sexuality. These differences are not meant to produce conflict and competition but are deliberately created so that a more perfect complementarity can take place. The Apostle Peter calls women the "weaker vessel", to whom the husband should accord all due respect, as "an equal partner in God's gift of life"

So there were differences between male and female in God's creation, and also an order between them. This is clear from the story of creation itself, and is summarised in Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 11:3 "The head of every man is Christ and the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God". The explanation given for this refers back to creation, i.e. in verse 8 which mentions man's prior formation and the fact that woman's origin was from him. The order of creation is a matter of God's choice, and has certain consequences.

This order is also reinforced after the fall, along with other consequences: with trouble and toil man will now work, with increased pain woman will bear children, and, God says to the woman, "your husband will rule over you."

We should emphasise that the consequences of the fall bring corruption to an already existent state of affairs: the curse of the fall is not that man should *work* – that was already his creation destiny – but that he should *work with frustration and trouble*. Equally, the curse of the fall is not that women should bear children with *pain*, but with *increased pain and suffering*. Likewise, the statement "and your husband shall rule over you" does not indicate a *new* order, because the order is already there (as 1 Cor :3 states clearly), but that this order now becomes corrupted and abused. Man's rule often becomes harsh.

To summarise, woman is created equal with man, in terms of her relationship with God. She was made to complete and complement him and can do this by virtue of the differences that exist between the sexes. Nevertheless, although she is called alongside man she is also called to recognise his headship, to work with him supportively, and to be honoured by him. (By and large, this relates to married women; some consideration concerning the role of single women needs to be given later.)

Much fear and misunderstanding has arisen from this submissive and supportive place afforded to woman. But Proverbs 31 dispels any fear that it is synonymous with passivity, inaction and mindlessness. This wife/woman shows initiative, exercises authority in certain areas of responsibility given to her and takes advantage of every opportunity to display excellence. She works with her hands; provides for her family; cares for her husband and engages in trade. She is kind, shrewd, industrious, hospitable, prudent and far-sighted. Supportive is by no means inferior!

## 2. God's redemption order

By the time of the New Testament the place of women in Judaism had slipped and they were downtrodden, as the following indicate:

- “Thank you that I am not a woman” was the prayer of the priest.
- The birth of a daughter was considered a minor tragedy.
- Women were separated in the synagogue and were not allowed to learn. It was thought that they did not have the capacity to understand the concepts of the Law.
- Divorce was easy to obtain if you were a man and on the grounds of the slightest thing that caused offence according to Rabbi Hillel. It was however forbidden for a woman to divorce her husband.

Against this background the New Testament is seen to liberate women and give them a place of honour. Jesus often has them in his company, unlike other teachers of his day, accepts their worship and service, and even reveals himself as the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene in the first instance.

The equality of the sexes regarding salvation is clearly taught by the New Testament. The clearest statement comes in Galatians 3:28 which states “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, the divisions which characterised the ancient world, divisions on the grounds of race, status and gender, are demolished in Christ. We are redeemed irrespective of our nationality, social standing or sex, and brought into a body where there is *no* discrimination on these grounds.

The sexes are also deemed equal in the body of Christ. Women are as much a part of the “royal priesthood” and the “holy nation” as men!

***In summary: Men and women are **equal** before God, but not **equivalent** in function!***

It is worth reflecting that while men and women are equally inheritors of salvation in Christ, Paul stresses that those in Christ should shine through relationships of the highest quality. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church.” The redemptive order in no way abolishes the natural, created order; it enables the created order to function according to God’s design. Christ’s coming and the salvation he brings releases women to a new honour and dignity, therefore, making them recipients and inheritors of salvation right alongside men, and also releases them to fulfil the created order completely. Through redemption in Christ, women are not released from the created order with man’s headship, but enabled to fulfil it.

### 3. Women's ministry in the church

*As we would expect, the body of Christ follows Christ himself in giving a large and positive functioning place for women within the ministry of the church.*

The following points are clear:

1. Women may prophesy. Paul specifically encourages this in 1 Corinthians 11:5, and Philip's four daughters who prophesied are an example of it.
2. Women may pray. They prayed in the Upper Room with the men prior to Pentecost (Acts 1:4); they prayed with other women (Acts 16:13-15), and they prayed with the whole church (1 Corinthians 11:5).
3. Women may teach younger women (Titus 2:3,4). In fact, this work of training young women to be better wives, mothers and homemakers is to be work of older women.
4. Women were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and so were enabled to use the gifts of the Spirit outlined in 1 Corinthians. Paul specifically says that these gifts are available to each and every one of us.
5. Women were part of teams supporting ministry. Jesus was often accompanied by single and married women (unthinkable to a traditional Rabbi) and Paul mentions those women who "contended at his side" (Phil 4:3). He also defended his right to have a wife travelling by his side (1 Cor 9:5) like the other apostles – although no direct mention is made of a wife travelling with him in the book of Acts. It seems, therefore, that women were accepted as an integral part of apostolic teams.
6. Women may serve the body of Christ. Lydia gave Paul hospitality (Acts 16:5); Dorcas endeared herself to many by this practice (Acts 9:39) and Phoebe served the church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1).

This is all very positive and liberating. As we come to look at government within the church, we see other factors that demand consideration, so we look at this separately.

#### 4. Government in the church

*Our view is that the New Testament clearly teaches that overall church eldership is male. Women can and should participate fully in the life of the church, and in ministry and leadership of many sorts, but the final governmental authority in the church is to be by a team of male elders.*

The general word for “men” or “brethren” includes both sexes in Greek. Throughout Acts and the Epistles these words are used to include us all equally in our salvation. However, it is interesting to note that when decisions are being made and leaders are being appointed, the scope is narrowed to the male brothers, e.g.

1. In Acts 1 where a new apostle was being chosen Peter stood up amid a mixed group (1:15) but only men were considered (1:21).
2. In Acts 6 when the seven are chosen to be in charge of serving at tables only the males are addressed and the choice has to be from among them. This does not appear to prevent women from serving in the church but they are not appointed to be in charge.
3. In Acts 15 the Jewish/Gentile controversy was debated before the apostles and elders and the decisions were made by them. Then they, with the whole church, chose men to communicate their decision to the churches.
4. The qualifications for an elder in Timothy and Titus can only be applied to men.
5. Wherever apostles are mentioned and there are 20 named in the New Testament, they are always men. Junias is mentioned as an apostle (Romans 16:7), but it is absolutely impossible to tell whether this is a male or female name.

Government within the church – both in the local church and in the apostolic team - thus seems to have been always exercised by men, both in practice and teaching. We believe this combination of doctrine *and* the practice of the church is unassailable, being both prescriptive for and descriptive of the church's life.

## 5. Ministry, government and leadership

We have stated clearly that women have a large place of ministry within the church, and have also been very definite that eldership within the church is a male role.

We want, however, to qualify further some of these issues, or at least explore some areas that would merit further study.

### a. *Diaconia* or ministry is for all

In the New Testament, the Greek word for ministry is *diaconia* (from which we derive our word 'deacon'). This word is not primarily an office or a function, but an action or attitude of service. *Diaconia* basically means *service*.

In the New Testament church, everyone was seen as having a place of service, e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:5 "There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord."

In Acts 6, the Twelve agree it would not be right for them to neglect the word of God to deacon tables; they appoint others to deacon tables, while they give themselves to prayer and the *deaconing* of the word. In other words, their role was seen as part of the *diaconia* of the church, albeit a different aspect of *diaconia* from waiting on tables. In fact, what is interesting from this passage is that men of spiritual gifting and qualification are not appointed as deacons *per se*, but to deacon tables and thus bring peace to the daily administration.

### b. The recognition of deaconing ministries

In the New Testament two aspects of deaconing ministries run side by side.

- Firstly, there is the 'generic' deaconing ministry, which amounts to *any form of Christian service across a very broad spectrum*. Paul and Barnabas fulfil their *diaconia*; five-fold ministries are given to equip people for *their diaconia*; the house of Stephanas is "addicted to *diaconia* of the saints", Timothy is "to do the work of an evangelist, making full proof of his *diaconia*".
- Secondly, there emerges a *clearly recognised deaconing ministry*:

*Philippians 1:1* "Paul and Timothy ... to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the bishops (overseers/elders) and deacons."

*1 Timothy 3:8* "Deacons, likewise ..."

*1 Tim 3:12* "A deacon must be ..."

In the (first) broader sense of Christian ministry or *diaconia*, women obviously have a clear role. Priscilla, Lydia, Dorcas and Phoebe would presumably all be examples.

But there may also be evidence of a more formal recognised 'deaconess' role. This is somewhat tenuous, but we do see some hints of this, e.g.:

*Romans 16:1* "I commend to you, Phoebe our sister, who is a servant/deacon of the church in Cenchrea ..."

In 1 Timothy 3:11, in the middle of a discussion on the qualification for deacons, Paul says: "Likewise, the women ...". It is possible that he is simply referring to the qualifications for deacons' wives ("Likewise, their wives must be ...") but fascinatingly, in the previous qualifications for elders, no comment on their wives is forthcoming; it is equally possible (and more probable in my view) that the phrase introduces the thought "Likewise, the women deacons must be ...".

No doubt more work needs to be done on the nature of the deaconing role within the church, but we do at least need to open it up here. What is clear is that, whether in the more general serving ministry of the church, or in the more clearly recognised role of deaconing, women have a clear place alongside men, which we believe needs to be seen and honoured.

**c. Government as part of diaconia**

We have already seen that government in the church is carried by men. In the context of the wider diaconia of the saints, both men and women, can we define more clearly what we mean by *government*, or the responsibilities of elders?

Elders have two prime areas of responsibility:

- a) To give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word of God:  
*Acts 6:3-4: "We will turn this responsibility over to them, and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*  
*1 Timothy 3:2: "An elder/overseer must be ... able to teach ... "*  
*Titus 1:7-9: "For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward ... holding firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."*
- b) To exercise the authority inherent in oversight and guiding the church:  
*Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account."*  
*1 Thessalonians 5:12: "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who have charge of you in the Lord, and who instruct you."*

Government embraces, therefore, prayer and authoritative teaching and administration of the word (more on this below) and having charge of the people God has allotted to the elders. They are therefore the ones who have final authority and final accountability. This is an awesome and special diaconia, set apart from other forms of diaconia.

**d. Leadership and diaconia**

All leadership needs to be set within the spirit of diaconia. At the end of the day, none of us, whether men or women, should aspire to *leadership* (for its own sake) but to *service*. Leaders *will* emerge, but our heart is only to serve.

Even the elders, who have the government of the flock, are to exercise their ministry thus – “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3).

We serve alongside one another, elders, deacons, men and women. Women certainly have a very real and full role in the diaconia of the church; many will obviously as they give themselves to serve, find themselves in leading roles. God allots the spheres of our diaconia, and we give ourselves to his service.

## 6. Difficult passages of scripture

### a. 1 Timothy 2:11-15

*“A women should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” (NIV)*

These verses are set in a chapter of instructions concerning prayer and worship. The context gives us few indications as to their meaning, which must be derived from the text alone. The following seem to be Paul's points:

- i) Women are, and should be, included in the learning process of the church. They are not excluded from being taught as they were in Judaism. Christianity liberated them and gave them a place of privilege.
- ii) This learning however must be done “in quietness and full submission”, i.e. without contention and opinionation. They were to assume the place of disciples. (Presumably this injunction is also applied to men.)
- iii) Women were not permitted by Paul to teach authoritatively<sup>1</sup>. The word for “to teach” here is *didaskein*, and is linked immediately with *authentain*, “to have authority over”. This link suggests that the teaching referred to is of an authoritative, systematic or directional nature. The women are excluded from this, since it is tantamount to exercising authority over men. Perhaps Paul is referring to the conveying of what is normally considered to be apostolic doctrine.
- iv) Women were not allowed to exercise authority over men, either by the sort of teaching being thought of here, or by governing them in any way. This teaching conforms, as we have seen in section 4, with New Testament practice of church government.
- v) Paul gives two reasons why these prohibitions are taught:

*Because of the order of creation.* Man was created first. To the Jewish mind the first born in a family had greater responsibilities and greater authority than younger children. The prior creation of Adam, and in addition, his naming of his wife Eve (the naming of a person for a Jew implied authority over them), clearly indicates God's order in creation.

*Because of the way Eve was deceived.* “Paul appears to argue that since the woman was deceived, and then led Adam astray, she is not to be entrusted with the teaching function of an overseer in the public worship services of the assembled church” (NIV note). The following verse appears to teach (but it is notably difficult to interpret) that salvation is manifested in a wife continuing in faith, love and holiness with discretion, through the processes of childbirth (and family life?). To put this in the most general terms: Paul *seems* to be saying that Eve transgressed her limits or boundaries and fell into deception; a woman is therefore (not allowed to teach or have government over men and is) saved through fulfilling her God given destiny and limits with faith, love and holiness.

Our response to this passage will depend on how we view Paul and his teaching; the nature of the inspiration of Scripture; whether we believe this teaching expresses principles which have continued validity, or cultural norms which are no longer valid; and probably many emotional, humanistic and some godly responses!!

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<sup>1</sup> That women were involved in teaching in the church in some way is indisputable: Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos in, and instruct him in the faith, although this was probably done in the privacy of their own home. Equally, Paul himself envisages women ‘prophesying’ in the church (1 Corinthians 11:5), which covers the sharing of a word for edification, exhortation and comfort of a congregation.

**b. 1 Corinthians 14:32-35**

*“The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to enquire about something they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is a disgrace for a woman to speak in church.” (NIV)*

Paul says that women are to keep silent in the churches. One of his main purposes in writing to the Corinthians is to establish decency and order in the operation of gifts in worship. It is clear from his underlying purpose and from the fact that elsewhere in the letter he encourages everyone to prophesy (14:31) and specifically mentions rules which apply when women pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5), that Paul *does not intend women to be absolutely silent*.

In what way does he want them to be silent then? From the context there are two possibilities:

- i) This injunction to silence may be joined logically with what has been discussed immediately *before* it, i.e. the word prophesy (14:29-34). If this is so then Paul is saying let two or three prophets speak and then let other prophets weigh what has been said – but let this weighing be only by the men since it is a function of government. When this is going on let the women be silent, and ask their husbands at home.
- ii) More probably these verses may be joined logically to what is discussed immediately *afterwards*, i.e. the understanding of teaching (14:35). If this is so, then Paul is saying when anyone is expounding the word and an obscure, difficult or controversial point is being raised – it is disgraceful for a woman to interrupt publicly, take issue or ask for clarification. There is a time and a place for such matters. She should ask her husband at home. Not interrupting, it may be assumed, is a rule that also would apply to men, but at Corinth a clear word needed to be brought to the women who were in the practice of breaching the peace in this way.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Paul's primary concern is to establish God's governmental order in the churches as well as decency and propriety. This is not a blanket prohibition to women, but a plea for silence in particular circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> Is it possible that Paul recognised some feminist pressures in Corinth, witness the liberated attitude to headcoverings in 1 Cor 11? This passage: “it is a disgraceful thing for a women to speak in the ecclesia (assembly)” also brings echoes of Aristophanes comedy *Ecclesiazusae*, in which the women of Athens take over the city's ecclesia. Paul is obviously not amused by the thought of such a thing happening in the church.

## 7. Ongoing questions

We are still faced with questions, when all is said and done. Has not God often used women in a role of leadership within the church throughout the centuries? Were not the New Testament statements simply a reflection of the prevailing culture? Does God mean the church forever to be deprived of the rich resources available to us in the women?

These questions will undoubtedly go on being debated. But perhaps we can venture some observations:

### a. Women, leadership and government

On the question of **women in leadership**, there appears to us to be an immense confusion. Clearly, even in the New Testament, women took a place of *leadership* within the church. They often led the way in serving the body of Christ, teaching in houses, acting as deaconesses, etc. If women have a gift to lead, in one way or another, it will probably emerge, and should be allowed to do so!

However, *eldership* (*governmental leadership*) in the church was always by practice and doctrine a male role, and we do not actually see this in any way modelled otherwise in the New Testament. *Leadership and eldership are not the same things, and we should distinguish carefully between them.* There are immense opportunities for women to take *leading* roles within the church, without necessarily having *government*, and this should be encouraged and fostered.

Churches have probably been responsible for some of the confusion on this issue by being 'fuzzy' about use of terminology. It might be more helpful to talk clearly about 'elders' (governmental headship) and 'ministries/deacons' (other leadership).

Another issue this raises is whether, in fact, eldership teams have not been clear about what they do and have confused eldership (primarily spiritual fatherhood) and deaconing (primarily management)? Are elders actually functioning too much as 'deacons'?

### b. Culture and the authority of the Bible

We believe there is also much confusion on the **cultural issue**. The argument of those who include women in government in the church is often that the prohibitions to this in the New Testament reflect a cultural predisposition, which should no longer have any influence on us. We believe this is a dangerous move.

What is at stake in this? Was Christ's birth into the Jewish race, at the time that he was born, a cultural 'accident'? If so, how much else of Christ's teaching is also a reflection of his culture rather than the eternal, abiding word of God? Could he have been born elsewhere in culture, and come up with different answers?

There *are* things that change according to culture, e.g. styles of worship. The *heart* of worship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ does not! Despite modern, more visual forms of communication, the preaching of the word retains its high place. So we could continue.

We believe that the New Testament answer to the question of women in government in the church is not a reflection of prevailing culture, but a reflection of the created order of God. We believe that Christ could well have changed this if he had wished, or even come at a different time to have taken on more godly cultural forms, had there been any. As it is, however, God prepared the Jewish culture with all its understanding of family, covenant, and albeit male headship in order to manifest his Son with an understanding of the Father's heart. This is profound, and must not be discarded lightly.

Ultimately, this issue is a matter of how we see Scripture and its authority. Is what Scripture says, in the various passages we have cited, e.g. Genesis 3; 1 Corinthians 11; 1 Timothy 2, laying down patterns for men and women for all time, or just for the first century? When did these patterns change, if they have? If they are seen as cultural, what other aspects of culture must change now, e.g. restrictions on homosexual relationships? We cannot preach from the Bible in some areas and not this one, or we are as bad as the liberals who will not believe in miracles because of their greater understanding. Nor can we believe one thing and practise another. At best, that is hypocrisy, at worst flagrant disobedience!

### **c. Our pattern for building churches**

There is an *ecclesiological* issue that must be addressed here. If the church is the bride of Christ, that creation of his to be without spot and blemish? Can we afford to see it fashioned in any other way than that taught and practised by Christ and his apostles? It seems to me that we cannot afford to be careless about the order of the church which as the redeemed society of the Lord should most reflect His will and purpose.

Just as we have no doubt that God can and does bless single parent families or divorced people, Scripture, and we, would commend God's pattern of family, husband and wife and children living together in loving and secure relationships, as desirable and the goal we should aim for.

Similarly, God may bless a church fashioned with many irregularities; but we should surely aim to build according to God's highest goals. Questions of pragmatism should never be confused with questions of principle.

So where does this leave us, in the context of UK Anglicans who are ordaining women, and various streams ordaining women elders? It is easy for us to be influenced, not to say intimidated, by the strength of others' convictions, or their aspersions that we are in some way 'primitive'. But the story of where this all leads is not yet complete! In fact, in the majority of Christendom, women are not ordained to governmental ministry; but 'the majority' argument never really works that well, and should not be allowed to impress us.

Looking around at the practices of others get us into the attitude of Peter in John 21: "Lord, what about him?" Jesus' answer effectively focuses Peter back on to his own life and obedience, and indicates that whatever Jesus wants for John, is none of Peter's business.

What other parts of Christ's body are doing in this regard is not our business or concern; we are concerned with how God is telling us to build. "Each one should be careful how he builds" (1 Corinthians 3:10). As an apostolic team in the Salt & Light family, we are charged to be careful how we build in the sphere God has given to us. May God give us grace to do it his way!

### **d. The church as family**

Over recent years, I have found myself increasingly emphasising the importance of understanding the church as family, and feeling that this has a very important bearing on the whole issue of men and women in leadership together.

The church was formed as a result of God's dramatic new redeeming activity through Christ, as he broke into the world with salvation, healing and the power of the Kingdom. This new community of the Holy Spirit now replaces or supplants the 'old' community of Israel. Israel was a 'type' of the church, God's 'gathering' or 'congregation' in Old Testament times. He now calls another *ecclesia* to demonstrate his nature, plan and purpose in the earth, and to be a light to the nations.

Between Israel and the church there is both continuity and discontinuity. We now become God's holy people, his family, his bride; we take on many of the features of

Israel's relationship with the Lord, now enabled to do so by the Holy Spirit working in us and through us. Now also, through the life of the Holy Spirit at work within us, we can manifest God's original intention for family, relationships, agape love, holiness of life and so on. There is a new power, new anointing, new hope, new ability, for an original intention of God's to "fill the earth with his glory" and form "a people for his praise".

So the background for understanding the church is the community of Israel and God's desired relationship with his people Israel, and the church came forth from the root of Israel not by accident but by design, because here over the years God had revealed his heart and invested a knowledge of his ways.

As God's family emerges, cf. Ephesians 3:14-21 – where together we discover corporately the Father's love and the love of Christ – so family values and family relationships become paramount.

At the heart of the community of Israel were the elders of Israel. They were fathers of families, clans and tribes. They sat in the gate of the cities that their people lived in, to agree who entered the city, who went out of the city, and what happened within the city. They agreed policy for the city at the city gates, and each one then returned to his own family where he had the relationships and the fatherhood, the practical and relational influence to make the agreed policy work in his own family.

The elders were not a political appointment, but an overseeing, caring function of fatherhood. This is surely the background to understanding the New Testament church. The apostles appointed elders for the early church so that they could care as fathers, relationally, for the people of God. They are not appointed to perform a task or fulfil a position but to lead as 'fathers'. This is why a major qualification for an elder is: can he manage his own household well? If he cannot 'father' his own, with fruitfulness that is evident to all, how can he 'father' the church?

This is why the New Testament assumes that eldership is male. It is not that women could not in theory have skills to perform the essential tasks of leadership, it is that biblical family would simply not be produced by women elders. Fathers are at the centre of effective families, exercising spiritual care and oversight, and fulfilling the headship responsibility for which God designed them. But the creation story makes crystal clear that they cannot do this alone. Spiritual fathers need spiritual helpmeets/mothers right alongside them to help them fulfil the call and responsibility of God.

"Working together" is not identical to "doing the same thing". Effective partnerships can cover a lot of ground by separating functions, gifting and responsibilities. The Proverbs 31 woman reflects exceedingly well on her husband, who sits as an elder in the gate, while she manages much of the family interests. They are an effective duo!

This sense of *partnership* we clearly need to develop and foster, without blurring the distinctive roles within the partnership. It was inevitable in the 1st century Jewish/Christian world that men should train men for leadership and responsibility (Jesus and his disciples, 2 Timothy 2:2), it was probably not so inevitable that women should be trained, and therefore this was specifically encouraged (1 Timothy 2:11; Titus 2:3-5). It is fascinating that some of the best discipleship models in the church today (Argentina, Columbia etc.) are working through single sex discipleship.

In the context of leadership in our local churches we clearly need to model the sense of spiritual fathers and mothers working together to build church families, into which, as Scripture says, God sets the solitary. Neither men alone nor women alone can build what God wants to build in terms of family. Thus there must be *some* contexts in which men and women sit together, pray together and share joint vision for God's family.

In this context, we surely need to make some context on the role of both single men and single women in leadership. If "God sets the solitary in family", then within the context of family, there is obviously a place for single men and women to exercise their

gifting. It seems to us that even single men and women can exercise a spiritual “parental” care for others in the Body of Christ, and should do so; but the provisions that we have stated above as to the appointment of elders and leaders presumably must apply to single men and women, as they do to married men and women.

**e. Avoiding confusion**

In underlining the need for spiritual fathers and mothers to be working together, we need to avoid any sense of confusion of roles, callings and responsibilities. In some of our churches, undoubtedly, women have not been called into partnership enough; in others, where the principle of partnership may have been applied, there has been insufficient distinction between the call on the men to direct, govern and carry overall spiritual responsibility, and the women to strengthen, support and train up the women.

Let us take the family illustration again. Husbands and fathers are called to manage their own households well, taking spiritual responsibility and initiative; washing their wives with the water of the word, and laying down their lives for them. This is a priestly role the husband carries in the family. With him lie headship and responsibility. When he takes this responsibility properly, his wife and children live in the peace and order of God and enjoy his blessing. If a man abdicates his responsibility, his wife can become burdened and insecure by carrying more weight than she was ever destined or created to carry. This husband is not treating her with respect as “the weaker” vessel. Then, of course, under pressure, other tendencies can rear their heads – fear, control and manipulation. How do we deal with this? We have gently to show the husband that the wife’s problems lie at his door – he has not been exercising responsibility properly; he needs to rise up, take spiritual initiative and surprise and bless his wife by taking a godly lead. We have to help her to see that her strain is due to being beyond her God-appointed sphere. I am trying to illustrate the dangers of confusion of role and responsibilities: it allows men to abdicate their God-given responsibility and opens the door to other ungodly elements creeping into homes and marriages.

I suspect that this is happening in some of our churches. The trouble is, we do not always see the fruit until it is full-grown! But if God has given us a godly pattern for family life, the instruction of our children etc. – should we not do it his way? And if God has given us a godly pattern for the running of church family life, should we not run it his way? Men entrusted with responsibility to lead and guide God’s people as shepherds of the flock need time together to focus clearly on their responsibility before the Lord for the governmental business of that family. They are *fathers*. This focuses their vision, underlines their responsibility, and presses them into God. This is good for elders and, for that matter, apostles, who carry major governmental and directive authority in the body of Christ!

**f. Women on an Ephesians 4 team**

What is the role in all this of apostolic teams? As we have already said, women clearly worked alongside the apostles as part of their team in pioneering new churches and seeing the work of the gospel advance. Their inclusion in the team is first century practice and must be ours.

The nature of apostolic gifting is that it is governmental: discussing the role of elders, leadership, doctrinal issues, etc. Apostles exercise their gift with a team of other ministries alongside them; but the “team” does not exercise government together into local church situations. They bring their gift and influence, and exercise their ministry, women included; while apostles bring theirs, which is more directly governmental.

If we are to multiply such teams (along with the development of apostolic centres), we probably need to get the apostolic team model clearer. If there is an apostolic sphere, then there surely needs to be an apostolic team of some sort, otherwise the apostolic figure becomes a one-man-ministry, not a team ministry.

An important factor here is how we understand the role of the apostle *viz a viz* the local elders?

In the NT Apostles often planted churches and set in elders to father the church. But Paul does not abdicate his responsibility as a father: he calls the elders together and is not afraid to issue correctives, instruct, provoke. This was significant influence. The apostolic gifting is authoritative: In some way, the elders may have seen themselves as serving the apostles. Paul treads a fine line between 'appeal' (2 Corinthians 10:1) and 'authority': the Lord has given him 'charge' over the churches (2 Corinthians 10:13), and he could come and impose his authority, if necessary. Paul sees his relationship to the church, not just to the elders (as seen from his greetings).