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Enjoying God Ministries  
Romans #62  
July 10, 2022

**Women in the Life of the Church**  
**Romans 16:1-5a**

Today, as we inch ever closer to the conclusion of our time in Romans, I want to address an issue that I've rarely mentioned on Sunday mornings. It seems only wise that before I step down as Lead Pastor that I articulate as best I can what we believe the Bible says about women in the life of the church, and more specifically, women in the life and ministry of Bridgeway. So, buckle your seat belts, and let's see what Romans 16 and the rest of the NT have to say on this topic.

There's simply no way to escape the fact that the question of women in ministry and leadership and the way male and female relate to each other in both the home and church is an issue of considerable controversy and importance. Bridgeway's position on this issue is known as *Complementarianism*. It is briefly summarized in article 12 of our Statement of Faith.

12. We believe that both men and women are together created in the divine image and are therefore equal before God as persons, possessing the same moral dignity and value, and have equal access to God through faith in Christ. We also believe that men and women are together the recipients of spiritual gifts designed to equip and empower them for ministry in the local church and beyond. We also believe that God has ordained the principle of male headship in both the home and in the local church and that certain governing and teaching roles are restricted to men (primarily the office of Elder) (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 3:1-7; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

The alternative position is known as *Egalitarianism*. Egalitarians agree with Complementarians that all men and women are created equal in the sight of God, together being formed in his image, and of identical value and worth in the kingdom. But Egalitarians then conclude from this that women are free to exercise governmental authority in the church as Elders and are to be promoted as senior pastors who regularly preach and exposit and apply the Scriptures to all the people of God.

*Foundational Principles*

Let me begin by articulating five foundational principles that must govern all dialogue on this topic, and then provide a brief summary of Complementarian beliefs.

(1) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equally created in the image of God, and that neither is more or less the image of God than the other.

(2) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equal in personal dignity, that neither is more or less worthy or of more or less value as human beings.

(3) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women should treat each other with kindness and compassion and love, and that any and all forms of abuse or disrespect or dishonor must be denounced as sin and resisted.

(4) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians believe that women should be actively involved in ministry. Complementarians agree with Egalitarians and celebrate the fact that women, for example, served as “co-workers” with Paul and held the office of deacon.

(5) Where Complementarians and Egalitarians disagree is whether women can serve as the Senior Pastor or as a Ruling Elder in the local church, what I call senior governmental authority. Egalitarians believe the Bible permits women to hold such positions of leadership, while Complementarians do not.

I should point out that some would broaden this debate to whether or not women should be involved in any form of ministry, whether that be the leading of worship or personal evangelism or church planting or celebrating the sacraments. You should know from the start where we stand on such matters.

We are extremely reluctant to place restrictions on anyone of either gender or any age in the absence of explicit biblical instruction to that effect. In other words, if I am going to err, it is on the side of freedom. In my opinion, the only restrictions placed on women concern what I call *senior governmental authority in the local church*. I have in mind, as noted above, (1) the primary authority to expound the Scriptures and enforce their doctrinal and ethical truths on the conscience of all God’s people, and (2) the authority to exercise final governmental oversight of the body of Christ.

Therefore, unlike a number of other Complementarians, as long as the principle of male headship is honored in the above two respects, I believe women can lead worship, can co-lead small groups with their husbands or another man, can assist in the celebration of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, can serve as deacons, can chair church committees, can lead in evangelistic and church planting outreach, can (and should) be consulted by the church Eldership when decisions are being made, and can contribute to virtually every other capacity of local church life. Women should be encouraged to pray and prophesy in corporate church meetings (1 Cor. 11) and should be given every opportunity to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts.

As you probably know, here at Bridgeway we also believe that qualified and called women can serve as *Pastors*. This may strike some of you as inconsistent with our complementarian beliefs, but I assure you it is not. Here is why. After considerable study and examination of the Scriptures, I have come to the conclusion that *pastoring* is a spiritual gift, not an authoritative office (see Eph. 4:11). The only authoritative office in the local church is that of Elder. It is true that in the NT all Elders are to be pastors (see 1 Peter 5:5; Acts 20:28). All Elders are to exercise the gift of pastoring God’s people. But the reverse is not true. Nowhere does the NT say that that all pastors are Elders.

There are currently three women on our staff at Bridgeway who carry the title of Pastor, but none of them are Elders. They serve to lead, shepherd, encourage, pray for, build up, and hold accountable those entrusted to their care. But they do not hold the authoritative office of Elder. If this catches any of you by surprise and you want more information in defense of this position, I have written a paper on it and actually preached an entire sermon on the subject a few years ago.

### *What do Complementarians believe?*

Complementarianism asserts that God has created both men and women (1) in his image, of equal value and dignity as human persons, but (2) with a distinction in the roles and responsibilities each is to fulfill in both church and home.

Complementarianism asserts that (1) and (2) above are perfectly and practically compatible with each other. Complementarianism asserts that *functional differences* between men and women in church and home, as expressed in the biblical terms, “headship” and “submission”, do not diminish or jeopardize their *ontological equality*. Complementarianism believes that submission to rightful authority, whether wives to husbands or children to parents or Christians to elders in the church or all citizens to the state is a noble and virtuous thing, that it is a privilege, a joy, something good and desirable and consistent with true freedom, and above all honoring and glorifying to God.

### *Should Women Serve as Elders in the Local Church?*

The immediate problem we face in trying to answer this question is the fact that many churches and denominations today fail to reproduce the New Testament pattern for local church government. I realize that many will object to this and argue that the NT doesn't present us with an explicit ecclesiology. I happen to disagree. I believe the NT portrays for us a consistent pattern of governance by a plurality of Elders. However, it is important to realize that even if this is not the case, we can still determine whether or not women should be appointed to positions of senior governmental authority.

Let me explain. I was raised a Southern Baptist. In the great majority of such churches the Board of Deacons functions in the way a Board of Elders would in another denomination. Whereas the Senior Pastor is often viewed as the sole Elder, thus exercising primary authority, the Deacons exercise a governmental role that *in practical effect* is equivalent to a Board of Elders. So, my position is that whereas women can be Deacons at Bridgeway, they are not permitted to hold the office of Deacon in Southern Baptist Churches. In a number of other denominational settings, such as Presbyterianism, I would happily endorse the presence of female deacons given the fact that they do not exercise final spiritual authority over the body as a whole. The issue, then, is less on the name or title of the office and more on the actual, functional authority invested in each office.

But why do I believe that this ruling or governmental office is restricted to men? I would appeal to three arguments in defense of a male eldership.

**First**, I appeal to the NT two-fold description of the *function* of elders. (1) They are those who *govern* or *rule* the church (1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17). (2) They are those who are primarily (but not exclusively) responsible for *teaching* the body of Christ (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Since I have determined from 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that Paul restricted teaching and exercising authority to men, it follows that the office of Elder or Bishop is restricted to men.

**Second**, I would appeal to the qualifications for the office of Elder that are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. An Elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6). An elder must also “manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

**Third**, there is no reference anywhere in the New Testament to a female elder. You may wish to object by pointing out that this is an argument from silence. Yes, it is. But it is a deafening silence, especially when taken in conjunction with the two previous points. The bottom line is that we simply have no biblical precedent for female elders nor anything in the text that describes their nature, function, and qualifications that would lead us to believe that this could ever be a possibility.

Some egalitarians have argued that since Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3) and Prisca (Rom. 16:3) were “co-workers” with Paul, women were in positions of leadership and should thus be considered as viable candidates for the office of Elder. But the Greek word *sunergos* (“co-worker” or “fellow-worker”) is used of numerous individuals (e.g., Romans 16:9; Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:10-11; Philemon 24; etc.), as well as anyone who supports traveling missionaries (3 John 8). But this in no way implies that such people exercised ruling authority in the local church. ***Whereas all Elders would certainly qualify as “co-workers,” not all “co-workers” would qualify as Elders.*** Their “work” in support of the gospel, whether as those who provide financial aid, or those who evangelize, or those who intercede in prayer, or those who serve in any number of capacities, does not in and of itself indicate they were invested with governmental authority or were even qualified to serve in such a capacity (cf. Romans 16:1-2).

In sum, let me say this with as much energy and sincerity as I can. I don’t want the women of Bridgeway to walk around worried about what they *can’t* do. I don’t want any of you ladies living in anxiety and fear that if you’re not careful you’re going to cross a line and get called out and rebuked. Unless the NT explicitly tells us that a woman can’t do something, you won’t hear us say it. We want to encourage, equip, and release you into whatever ministries the Lord has laid on your heart. If there is ever any doubt or question about whether or not some activity or position is gender specific, we will address it in love and gentleness and with our Bibles open.

### *The Women of Romans 16*

There are nine women mentioned in Romans 16, eight by name and one who is called the “sister” of Nereus. We will talk about seven of the nine next week. Today we will focus on what Paul has to say about Phoebe and Prisca. But the mere fact that Paul lists so many women in this passage testifies to the vital role that women play in the life and ministries of the local church.

*Phoebe*

Several things are said about Phoebe that I want to highlight.

**First**, Paul considers her a person worthy of commendation and deserving of loving acceptance by the church in Rome. Virtually every scholar that I have consulted believes that Paul's language here is an indication that *it is Phoebe who is carrying the letter of Romans from Paul to the church in that city*. She is the only person in this long list that wasn't already living in Rome. She is a native of Cenchreae, a port city on the eastern side of Corinth. This is most likely where Paul was living when he wrote Romans. She is the only person commended by Paul, and there is no indication she is coming to Rome after the letter had already arrived. Rather, the most likely explanation is that she arrives at the same time as the letter and that is carrying it with her.

I'm now going to say something that I'll probably later regret, but I can't restrain myself.

It is a significant display of Paul's unwavering confidence in the sovereignty and providence of God that he would entrust the most important piece of literature ever written to a woman's purse!

There, I said it. Now let's move on before I get in any more trouble!

**Second**, Phoebe is a "servant" of the church at Cenchreae. The word "servant" is the standard NT word for "deacon." This is only one line of evidence that women can serve as deacons in the local church. Whereas the NT is quite clear that the office of Elder is restricted to qualified men, there is considerable and on-going dispute among evangelicals on the question of whether women can serve in the office of Deacon. Here are my reasons for saying Yes to this question.

(1) When the generic meaning of *diakonos* (i.e., "servant") is intended, the text usually reads, "servant of the Lord" or something similar. This is the only place where Paul speaks of someone being a *diakonos* of a local church. Tychicus is called a "minister [or servant] in the Lord" (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras is named a "minister [servant] of Christ" (Col. 1:7), and Timothy is labeled a "servant of Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 4:6). Because only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a local congregation (the church at Cenchreae), it is likely that she was a "deacon" of her church.

(2) Several scholars have pointed out that when this particular Greek construction is used ("who is" / "being" / *ousan*-feminine accusative present participle) it identifies a person's performance of office in the New Testament. Examples of this usage are found in John 11:49 ('Caiaphas, *being* high priest that year'), Acts 18:12 ('Gallio, *being* the proconsul of Achaia'), and Acts 24:10 ('Felix, *being* a judge to this nation').

(3) In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 the question is whether Paul is referring to the "wives" of deacons or to "women" as those who, much like men, can be appointed to this office. The evidence seems to be evenly weighted in this debate, but I find the arguments for women as deacons to be persuasive. Among the several considerations are these.

First, contrary to the ESV translation, the possessive pronoun “their” at the start of v. 11 does not appear in the Greek text. The insertion of this word reflects the view of the translators that the females in view here are the “wives” of the male deacons. In fact, if Paul had wanted to speak unmistakably of the wives of deacons it seems reasonable to think he would have included the possessive pronoun. It speaks loudly to me that he didn’t.

Second, Paul introduces the office of Elder and their qualifications in vv. 1-7. He then introduces the office of deacon in v. 8 with the phrase, “Deacons *likewise* . . .” He begins v. 11 in much the same way, suggesting that he is introducing yet another office, namely, deaconess. He writes in v. 11, “Women *likewise* . . .”

Third, although there is evidence for both sides, the word translated “women” in v. 11 (or “wives” in the ESV) can refer either to females generally or to wives in particular. The word itself does not provide decisive proof of either position.

Fourth, an argument that carries much weight with me is the fact that Paul says nothing about the qualifications of Elders’ wives. Why would he list qualifications for the wives of deacons but say nothing at all about the wives of Elders, especially given the fact that being an Elder carried far more spiritual authority and responsibility than being a Deacon? Why would Paul hold the wives of deacons to a higher standard than the wives of Elders?

Therefore, I conclude that there are two offices in the NT: that of Elder and that of Deacon, and that whereas the former office is restricted to men, the latter may be filled by both qualified men and women. The primary differences between Elders and Deacons include the following:

(1) The Elder has ruling authority. He holds the office of “overseer” (1 Tim. 3:1). Other texts point to the governing authority of Elders (1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17-18; Titus 1:5-9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Deacons, on the other hand, are never described as exercising this sort of ruling or governing authority. They are servants.

(2) Whereas Elders must be able “to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) and “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9), Deacons are never said to be people who are able to teach. Although “they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9), nowhere does the NT say they must be able or gifted or qualified to teach doctrine.

A comparison of the qualifications for both the office of Elder and Deacon indicates that the latter must meet virtually the same moral and spiritual standards as the former. In other words, the “bar” is set just as high for Deacons as for Elders when it comes to spiritual maturity in Christ.

Nowhere outside of the book of Acts are the duties and responsibilities of a deacon mentioned. Twice Paul describes them as “serving”, but never provides content or structure to what this means. Most believe this is because the early church looked to the portrayal of deacons in Acts 6 as providing the nature of this office and the sort of “service” or “ministry” they would provide. The most that we might say with

confidence is that deacons provide logistical and material support so that the elders can concentrate their efforts on the Word of God and prayer.

Given the lack of specified content as to the duties of a deacon, it seems to me that each church should retain the freedom to determine the extent of responsibility delegated to those who are appointed to this office. In other words, each church must decide for itself what are the needs that require the input and oversight of deacons. This will likely vary from church to church.

One final question is whether we should refer to a female deacon as a *deaconess*. Although it is surely permissible, I don't think it is helpful. In fact, in the one text where a woman is specifically said to be a deacon (Rom. 16:1), the masculine form of the noun is used, not the feminine form. So, there are not three offices in the local church: Elder, Deacon, and Deaconess, but only two.

**Third**, Paul refers to her as "our sister" (v. 1). Notice: "our" sister, not "my" sister. This is Paul's way of saying that she is part of our spiritual family. She and I and all of us have the same spiritual Father. So take care of her. Provide her with whatever she needs, probably a reference to housing and food and perhaps connections with people who will assist her in whatever ministry she undertakes.

Men, listen to me. Every female in this church family is your sister. Treat them accordingly. Treat them with love and kindness. Don't ever make any of them the focus of some joke or off-handed comment. And ladies, the men here are your brothers.

**Fourth**, she was evidently quite wealthy. We don't know if this is because of her success in business or by means of inheritance. But she is described as being a "patron of many," including Paul. So here is a woman, most likely either single or a widow, who is wealthy enough that she has taken it upon herself to financially support not only the apostle Paul but many others in the church at Cenchreae. Women have been absolutely crucial partners with men in ministry from the very beginning of the Christian church. They are never relegated to the sidelines. Phoebe is a perfect example of this, as are the other women mentioned in Romans 16.

**Fifth**, although I deduce this by implication, it appears to me that Phoebe was an incredibly brave and out-going woman. Her courage and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and his people is evident from the fact that she willingly took on the arduous task of traveling all the way from eastern Corinth to Rome. We don't know if she traveled alone or in the company of others, but she apparently was asked by Paul to carry this epistle to Rome and she happily took on the task.

### *Prisca / Priscilla*

Prisca, also known as Priscilla (see Acts 18:2, 18, 26), was married to Aquila. Of course, what I say about Prisca can also be said about Aquila. But let's focus on the lady today. Several things are said of her.

**First**, although Paul doesn't say anything about it here, we know from elsewhere in the NT that she and her husband moved often. They willingly understood the challenges that came with constant travel. They first lived together in Rome until they were driven out of the city by the Emperor Claudius in 49 a.d., together with all the Jews who resided there. In other words, they were not strangers to persecution. We read about this in Acts 18:1-2,

“After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:1-2).

They then traveled to Ephesus where they hosted a church in their house (Acts 18:26; 1 Cor. 16:19). They evidently returned to live in Rome and once again hosted a church in their home (see Rom. 16:5a). We later read in 2 Timothy 4:19 that they finally settled in Ephesus. So, this couple lived in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, back in Rome, then back again in Ephesus. And everywhere they went they opened their home for the church! That's quite an example for us to follow!

**Second**, evidently Prisca was quite well educated in the Scriptures and could articulate and teach biblical truth to others. We see this in Acts 18,

“Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:24-26).

Apollos was eloquent, competent, highly instructed, accurate in his teaching, and yet both Priscilla and Aquila were more skilled and more knowledgeable! As accurate as Apollos was in teaching the things concerning Jesus, both Priscilla and Aquila were more accurate! Ladies and gentlemen: take heed and follow their example. If any of you men, specifically husbands, are intimidated by the fact that your wives know the Bible better than you do and can explain it to others more accurately than you do, get over it! Better still, start studying and become a good Bible expositor.

**Third**, she, along with her husband, was a “fellow-worker” alongside Paul. More than that, they were “fellow-workers in Christ Jesus,” which is to say that she and Aquila expended their labors on behalf of the gospel and for the glory of Jesus. All their travels and all their labors and every sacrifice they made was for Jesus!

**Fourth**, she and Aquila were risk takers. They “risked their necks for my life,” says Paul (v.3b). Prisca laid it all on the line for the gospel and to protect Paul and his ministry. We don't know precisely how, but Paul considered it significant and appeals for all to express their profound gratitude to this lady and her husband. I'm alive today, says Paul, because of this woman and her husband.

*Conclusion*



Simply put, would that God might raise up at Bridgeway a multitude of Phoebe's and Prisca's who give all they have, financially and physically and in every other respect, for the sake of the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In that light, let me say Thank you to all the women of Bridgeway who have been so incredibly faithful to me, praying for me, supporting and encouraging and love me. I can honestly say, ladies, that these past 14 years of ministry at Bridgeway would never have proven fruitful had it not been for you. Thank you!