

# Women's Ministry in the Local Church | CBMW | The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

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Mary, a college woman in our church, met with fourth- and fifth-grade girls during the summer, discipling them in principles of biblical womanhood. After their first session, ten-year old Rachel said, "I've thought a lot about being a Christian, but I never thought about being a Christian woman."

Our increasingly pagan culture encourages us not to think about distinctions such as male and female. This is why the women's ministry in our church extended our reach to fourth- and fifth-grade girls. By partnering with our Youth Ministry, we began discipling teen girls. Then, by partnering with our Children's Ministry, we are helping Mary disciple pre-teen girls.<sup>2</sup> This is as it should be—one generation telling the next generation the glorious deeds of God, including the fact that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).<sup>3</sup>

Androgyny was not, is not, and will not be God's way. An androgynous approach to ministry in the church is not a biblical approach. It was not good for Adam to be alone in the garden, and a genderless approach to ministry in God's church is not good. God did not give his benediction of "It is very good" until man and woman stood side by side, equal but different.

The crisis of womanhood is too critical for the church to be passive. Scores of evangelical women are functional feminists because the world's paradigm for womanhood is the only one they have heard. The church should lead the way in equipping God's people to think biblically about all of life, including a biblical perspective of gender roles and relationships.

## The Dangerous Silence of the Church

The church must boldly articulate a robustly positive perspective of womanhood and of woman's role in the church. The church must also equip godly older women to disciple younger women to think and live according to this perspective. If a local church remains silent on this issue, women will be unequipped to fulfill their covenantal calling.

It is insufficient for churches that hold to male headship simply to compile a list of things that are *permissible* for women to do. We must go to the Scriptures and determine what is *needful* for women to do. Gender-aloneness was "not good" in the garden and the same is true in the church.

There is no time for a culture of inertia in the church. Feminism is the only paradigm for womanhood that many women and girls have ever considered. It takes a radical paradigm shift to understand the essentials of biblical womanhood. It takes grace-animated obedience to God's Word to live biblical womanhood. Women's ministries are the apparatus the church can utilize to educate and equip women to stand tall and brave in the war for womanhood.

The role of women in God's church is a vital and volatile question in every age, but the increased visibility of this topic in our time demands that the church develop a theology of, and a functioning model for, women's ministry in the local church. Even among evangelicals who hold to male headship, there is

widespread difference in practice regarding women's ministry.

- In some churches the women's ministry is event, task, or personality driven. An inherent danger is that any ministry that is not biblically informed will eventually become competitive and divisive.
- Some churches do not have a women's ministry because of a concern or even experience that if women are organized they will make demands and seek power. In this vacuum of isolation and underutilization of women there is the potential for frustration and anger-birthing leadership to erupt among the women, and the very thing the church attempts to avoid becomes a reality.
- Some churches assert that women can do anything that unordained men can do. Some proponents of this approach say that since women are mainstreamed into the total ministry of the church, a women's ministry is irrelevant or redundant. The vulnerability of this position is that it denies the uniqueness of woman's design and role and leaves men and women susceptible to egalitarianism. Without a biblical apologetic of womanhood, and a mechanism for women to be disciplined by godly women, the church will imbibe the world's apologetic and this distortion will create confusion and conflict among men and women.

A common weakness of these approaches is a failure to affirm and celebrate the *value* of God's creation design and redemptive calling of women and the *necessity* for woman's design and calling to be employed in the life and work of the church. Many approaches to women's ministry are expedient and pragmatic responses to culture rather than thoughtful and intentional applications of Scripture. A biblical apologetic for women's ministry in the local church will include:

- A Biblical Apologetic for Womanhood
- A Biblical Approach to Women's Ministry
- A Biblical Strategy

## **A Biblical Apologetic for Womanhood**

Biblical womanhood and worldly womanhood are radically different, just as many things about the Christian life are counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Without a biblical apologetic for womanhood, individual women and women's ministries will lose their way.

The following is a summary of the apologetic that is developed in the *Biblical Foundations for Womanhood* materials.<sup>4</sup> This apologetic is based on woman's creation design as a helper and her redemptive calling to be a life-giver.

The triune God is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God, so when he created man and woman in his own image, the covenantal imprint was stamped upon them. Biblical manhood and womanhood are a reflection of the nature of God. The personal and relational character of God requires that his image-bearers be personal, relational beings, thus he said, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:8). The equality and diversity of the Trinity are reflected in gender equality and distinctiveness. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "the same in substance, equal in power and glory" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 6) but each Person of the Trinity has a different role. God continued, "I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:8). The man and woman were created equally in God's image but designed for different functions. Even headship and submission are a reflection of the Trinity. "I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor 11:3). Headship and submission are not a result of the curse; headship and submission have always existed in the very nature of God.

Complementarians must not capitulate. We are not anachronistic throwbacks. We must be in the vanguard

of a movement to reclaim the wonder and splendor of gender distinctiveness because this is a reflection of the wonder and splendor of God's plan and purpose. A biblical understanding of woman's helper design is essential.

The Hebrew word translated helper, *ezer*, is frequently used to refer to God as our helper.

These passages give insight into the function of an *ezer*:

- Exodus 18:4: "[Moses named his son] Eliezer, for he said, 'My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.'"
- Psalm 10:14: "But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless."
- Psalm 20:2: "May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion."
- Psalm 33:20: "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield."
- Psalm 70:5: "Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay."
- Psalm 72:12-14: "For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight."
- Psalm 86:17: "You, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me."

When the man and woman sinned, Woman lost her ability to be a true helper. At this point of hopelessness, God gave hope. He promised that the woman's offspring would crush Satan's head (Gen 3:15). Adam affirmed and celebrated his belief in this promise by renaming her: "The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (Gen 3:20). Eve means life-giver. Because of her rebellion the woman became a life-taker, but because of the promise of life she became a life-giver. This is more than biological. Woman's redemptive calling is to be a life-giver in every relationship and circumstance.

The following descriptions (see table below) clarify woman's helper, life-giving ministry. The *ezer* words are strong, compassionate, relational, life-giving words. Biblical womanhood is a covenantal concept. The helper design would be illogical in an autonomous vacuum. This design is nonsensical in a culture of self but is needful in a culture of covenant.

When a church has a biblical apologetic for womanhood, the foundational concepts of woman's helper design and life-giving mission can permeate the women's ministry. Whether that ministry is small and informal or large and well-organized, it can be perpetually and intentionally guided by three questions:

- Are we being helpers or hinderers?
- Are we being life-givers or life-takers?
- Are we equipping women to be helpers and life-givers?

A friend moved to a new city. Her family settled into a church where God's Word was faithfully preached and she began attending a women's Bible study, but after several weeks she emailed me that she had a growing concern. "The church is great and the women's ministry is active, but the more I get to know the women the more I realize that they think like feminists. There is a disconnect between their belief in Scripture and their application of Scripture to their lives as women. How can this be?" I asked where women were learning basic principles of biblical womanhood. Several weeks later she responded, "I've looked and listened and I cannot find any place where women are confronted with these truths."

Unfortunately this is a common problem.

Churches are filled with women who have only heard the world's perspective of womanhood. Even in churches that are complementarian in theory, often women are egalitarian in practice. Many women's ministries have stopped short of true discipleship that moves from knowledge to wisdom—the application of truth into life. They have helped women perfect some Bible study skills, but they have not discipled them to know how to live as godly, chaste single women, or love their husbands, or care for the sick and oppressed, or support the male leadership of the church. They have not taught women all that Jesus commanded in his Word about their design and calling. Women desperately need an apprenticeship with mature Christian women who will train them in the craft of womanhood.

	<b>Helper Life-Giver</b>	<b>Hinderer/Life-Taker</b>
<b>Exod 18:4</b>	<b>Defends</b>	<b>Attacks</b>
<b>Ps 10:14</b>	<b>Sees, cares for oppressed</b>	<b>Indifferent, unconcerned for oppressed</b>
<b>Ps 20:2</b>	<b>Supports</b>	<b>Weakens</b>
<b>Ps 33:20</b>	<b>Shields, protects</b>	<b>Leaves unprotected and defenseless</b>
<b>Ps 70:5</b>	<b>Delivers from distress</b>	<b>Causes distress</b>
<b>Ps 72:12-14</b>	<b>Rescues poor, weak, needy</b>	<b>Ignores poor, weak, needy</b>
<b>Ps 86:17</b>	<b>Comforts</b>	<b>Avoids, causes discomfort</b>

## **A Biblical Approach to Women's Ministry: Covenantal and Complementarian**

The starting point of a biblical approach to women's ministry is not women—it is the church. When we are justified, we are adopted into "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). Gratitude for our adoption in Christ spills over in a love for the particular local church, the covenant family, where God has placed us to grow and to serve.

The covenants of the Bible give the framework to understand Scripture. God's covenant of grace supplies the vital structure, the unifying thread, of his redemptive plan set forth in Scripture. The covenant of grace is the sovereignly initiated arrangement by which the triune God lives in saving favor and merciful relationship with his people. Because we are in union with him, we are united to his other children. So the covenant of grace defines our relationship to God and to one another. It orders a way of life that flows out of a promise of life. To realize this is to think and live covenantally.

A covenantal approach to women's ministry recognizes that the women's ministry is not an entity unto itself. It is a part of the whole. It should be a helping, life-giving ministry. It should be viewed as one component of the Christian education, or discipleship, ministry of the church.

A covenantal approach to a discipleship ministry is theology-driven. What we do, why we do it, and how we do it flows out of a systematic understanding of God's Word. And yet in today's specialized, individualized church culture, too often ministries are personality, program or market driven.

*A personality-driven ministry* revolves around the strength of a leader. The focus is on the leader. The outcome is often akin to hero worship rather than relationships that are covenantal in nature. It is not transferable. It will not work unless that particular personality is driving it. In a women's ministry this model can easily become divisive if the leader disagrees with church leadership and women must choose sides.

*A program-driven ministry* revolves around *happenings*. The focus is on the program. In a women's ministry this model can quickly become performance driven rather than gospel driven. Often women begin to feel territorial about their programs. A *we-they* attitude sets in. Competition rather than complementarity is divisive.

*A market-driven ministry* revolves around the demands of the prospective consumer. The focus is on the participants. Requests for ministry are usually based on felt needs. The outcome results in meeting the needs of individuals and special interests groups. In a women's ministry this model often defines women by their needs and divides them into categories rather than teaching them the splendor of a community united around the common purpose of God's glory.

It is easy for models to become philosophies. It is not that anything is wrong with the personality, the program or meeting needs, but if there is no over-arching purpose the ministry lacks theological integrity.

*A covenantal ministry* involves an intentional decision to make consistent application of God's covenant of grace to what we do and how we do it. The focus is on God. Because it is not personality, program, or participant driven, it will outlive any specific personality, program, project, or need. It is not a structural model. It is a theology of ministry from which various structures may be built.

A biblical view of the church is fundamental to this approach. It recognizes the authority of the church, including male headship. It acknowledges the unity of the body and recognizes that the various parts do not exist in isolation. Each member and each ministry is a part of the whole. The church is to equip each member to use his/her gifts for the common good.

*Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift . . . and he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God . . . speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph 4:7-16).*

Complementarianism gives the relational framework for men and women to live out their covenantal privileges and responsibilities. The complementarian position acknowledges that God created men and women equal in being but assigned different—yet equally valuable—functions in his kingdom and that this gender distinctiveness complements, or harmonizes, to fulfill his purpose. Complementarians believe that the Bible teaches that God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function—with male spiritual leadership in the home and the church as a part of God's design. This means that men and women are both image bearers of the living God. We are each fully human in all that entails. We are equals before the cross, brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ. But God has made us different. He has given certain functions and roles to men and certain functions and roles to women that are distinct.

By contrast, egalitarianism cannot come to grips with the uniqueness of man created distinctly as male and female. It asserts that there is no legitimate difference of role and function between men and women in the home and church, at least not one that allows for unique male leadership. Egalitarianism devalues God's creation design and redemptive calling of women. It fails to do justice to the distinctions that exist between men and women. It wrongly equates role distinctions with inequality and claims distinctions result in discrimination.

I was speaking at a conference, and a college woman's question pierced my heart: "How can I possibly think biblically about womanhood when I am constantly told to be true to myself, to pursue my dreams, and to do what is best for me?" I trembled as I answered, "Become involved in the women's ministry of your church. Ask godly women to speak the truth of womanhood into your life. This is God's provision to equip you to think biblically about your womanhood." I trembled because I wondered if the church she attended was equipping women for the task.

## A Biblical Strategy

J. Ligon Duncan writes, "We ought to have an intentional, deliberate approach to female discipleship because men and women are different, and these differences need to be recognized, taken into account and addressed in the course of Christian discipleship."<sup>5</sup> Scripture gives the strategy for this gender-specific discipleship.

*Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled (Titus 2:3-5).*

In recent years I have observed a troubling phenomenon. Many women of my generation have relinquished this high and holy calling of nurturing younger women. A seeming contradiction to this is the emphasis on mentoring programs in women's ministries. My initial excitement about this flurry of matching older and younger women was dampened when I began asking questions and usually there were no answers:

- What is the purpose of your program?
- What is the content of your program?
- How are mentors selected and trained?
- To whom are mentors accountable?

If these questions are not addressed we risk reducing the Titus mandate to moralistic fluff. Mentoring may be form without substance and little more than a buddy system.

To disconnect Titus 2:3-5 from an understanding of biblical discipleship will reduce this amazing concept to anemic relationships and legalistic behaviorism. We must not take such a minimalist approach to such a magnificent mission. This text is one part of Paul's strategy for the discipleship, or Christian education, of a congregation. He challenges Titus, and the church in all ages, to guard the truth by equipping the people to show and tell truth to the next generation. This is not a new strategy. Throughout the Old Testament God's people were told the same thing.

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should*

*set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments (Ps 78:1-7).*

Jesus confirmed and enlarged this strategy in his final commission to his church:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:18-20).*

Titus 2 shows how a local church is to disciple God's people. The chapter begins and ends with an emphasis on teaching: "You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. . . . These, then, are the things you should teach" (Titus 2:1, 15 NIV).

It is significant that the strategy is given to the pastor. It begins with the pulpit ministry, and then instructions are given for the congregation. Embedded in this amazing chapter is this specific directive regarding women discipling women: "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women" (vv. 3-4). Women who disciple women are to have a holy reverence for God that is reflected in their character and conduct. Godly women who have embraced the truth of God's creation design and redemptive calling are called to train other women to think and live according to biblical principles of womanhood. Functioning under ecclesiastical authority, they are to take the sound doctrine preached from the pulpit and help women apply it into life. This is the kind of life-on-life discipleship that guides and nurtures to maturity. It is a mothering ministry.

Titus 2 gives legitimacy and limitations to a women's ministry. There is an unmistakable mandate for women to train women, but the extent of this training is somewhat limited. There are many times and places in church life where men and women study and serve side by side, but a primary task of the women's ministry is to train women in biblical principles and practices of womanhood. This does not mean that biblical womanhood is the only thing that women study, but it does mean that there should be a resolute commitment to weave these principles throughout the entire women's ministry.

There are costly challenges in Titus 2. Investing in the lives of others costs energy and time. It means taking relational risks. Why should we live so sacrificially?

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-13, NIV).*

Christ came and he is coming back. He appeared in grace as a babe and he will come in glory as the King because he loves us. Our love for Christ is unpredictable; his love for us is unchangeable. It is gospel love that propels our obedience.

Paul concludes this chapter with an electrifying reminder of our unity in Christ: "[Jesus] . . . gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (v. 14). This is not individualistic language. Some discipleship is age and gender specific,

but no discipleship is separate from the whole. It all blends together into a harmonious, interrelated system of educating God's people to obey all that Jesus commanded. This is more than good educational procedure; it is an expression of our redemption in Christ. We are his purified people. Covenant consciousness will protect us from the sin of being territorial about the portion of a ministry entrusted to us. Covenant consciousness will cause us to think about the common good rather than individual preference.

Biblical discipleship is not simply imparting facts or inculcating personal habits of Bible study, prayer, and evangelism, as helpful as those disciplines are. It is transmitting a way of thinking and living that unites all the parts into the glorious whole of glorifying God. It is passing on a legacy of biblical faith and life to the next generation. It is the impulse of our union with Christ. It is part and parcel of the covenant way. It is not optional. Women discipling women is one part of the strategy to equip God's people to think biblically and live covenantally.

## A Biblical Example

The gospel of Luke tells about an unlikely combination of people who accompanied Jesus as he "went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1):

*And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means (vv. 2-3).*

This was not a homogenous group of women. Their backgrounds were radically different. Their commonality was God's grace in their lives. They were covenant sisters. Apparently there was no tension between the disciples and the women. This is remarkable since the disciples were called to the position of apostleship and the women were the ones providing for them out of their own means. This beautiful example of complementarianism freed these women to be the helpers they were created and redeemed to be. And as they walked with Jesus, they grew in grace and love.

This explains how some of these same women could witness the horror of the crucifixion and not be immobilized by despair and grief. Early on Sunday morning, these redeemed helpers gathered to anoint his body. These women did not go alone. They went together. They acted covenantally.

*When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you (Mark 16:1-7).*

Anointing the body was a sign of affection. The women were not oblivious to the obstacle in their way. They knew there was a stone that was too big for them to move, but they went anyway because they loved



Jesus. And because they went, they experienced the reality of his resurrection.

The essence of a women's ministry in the church should be women uniting their hearts and hands to care for the body of Christ because we love him. Serving the body of Christ will always require more strength and grace than we possess. There will always be obstacles that are too big for us to remove. But when we go anyway, because we love Jesus, we will know the reality of our risen Savior removing those obstacles and shining the light of his countenance upon us. We will know the joy of his grace enabling us to minister beyond our own abilities. And we will give the legacy of biblical womanhood to the next generation.

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#### Endnotes

1 Adapted from *The Legacy of Biblical Womanhood* and *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*. Material from *The Legacy of Biblical Womanhood* by Susan Hunt and Barbara Thompson, copyright ©2003, pp.197-199, edited by Susan Hunt. Material from *Women's Ministry in the Local Church* by J. Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, copyright ©2006, pp. 31-35 and 93-94, edited by Susan Hunt. Used by permission of Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL 60187. For more information, visit [www.crossway.com](http://www.crossway.com).

2 Resources to implement a covenantal and complementarian approach to women's ministry: *Biblical Foundations for Womanhood*: A series of books on biblical womanhood, including *Spiritual Mothering: The Titus 2 Model for Women Mentoring Women* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992); *By Design: God's Distinctive Calling for Women* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994); and *The Legacy of Biblical Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). Each book in the series has a leader's guide for group study. These materials are designed to teach women biblical principles of womanhood.

*Women's Ministry Training and Resource Guide*: This includes a leader's guide for *Women's Ministry in the Local Church* and *Leadership for Women in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), as well as strategies and resources for women's ministry. These materials are designed to develop/strengthen a women's ministry and to train leadership for that ministry.

The books and study guides may be ordered from the CE&P Bookstore at: 1-800-283-1357 or [www.cepbookstore.com](http://www.cepbookstore.com). For information on women's ministry, visit [www.pcanet.org/cep/wic](http://www.pcanet.org/cep/wic). For information on a Titus 2 Discipleship ministry, visit <http://www.midwaypca.org/> (go to ministries).

3 Unless noted, Scriptures quotations are from the English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

4 See note 2.

5 Duncan, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*, 40.