

PROCESS DISCERNING GOD'S WILL FOR SOUTH FELLOWSHIP CHURCH CONCERNING ELDERSHIP AND GENDER

INTRODUCTION

As we begin this conversation, we want to start with two words. grace and peace. These are words that have been original to Christian communities as greetings for almost 2,000 years. Of the 13 letters that Paul the Apostle wrote to churches, he started all of them with those words. May you, in the midst of this conversation, experience grace and peace. Paul's letters were pastoral; they often dealt with church governance. In the midst of those conversations, he called for grace and peace, and we ask for the same. Grace because God is infinitely gracious with us and calls us to show that grace to others. Peace because, while important, all of this is overshadowed by God's good work in creation.

As we enter into this time together, we would like to make an invitation to you. One is to ask God for his wisdom as you respond. Two, to choose not to respond instantly but to make God himself your first place of conversation. We will not finish with a Q&A tonight. The elders gathered here are available to you after tonight, so you can ask questions or share thoughts on the process. Three, to listen to this whole conversation ideally in a single setting.

We invite you to take note, especially of our last section, entitled "Why and how this can still be your community if you disagree with our decision."

After much careful consideration, prayer, and discernment, the elders of South Fellowship church have decided unanimously to welcome qualified women to serve on our board of elders. We believe that this outcome is good in the eyes of God. This outcome resulted from intentionally seeking God's will for South Fellowship. We realize this outcome will be viewed positively by some and negatively by others. This address summarizes our view and was written by our Lead Pastor, Alexander Walton, on behalf of our elders; we hope it will help you to understand how we arrived at this point. As an elder board, two of our primary calls are to shepherd and lead. We long to walk alongside you in the coming weeks and months. May God bless you in this conversation.

As Pastor Alex writes with the authority of the board, we must take a moment to recognize his preference for egalitarian leadership within church communities. This was a preference he stated in his interview process and has expressed on the platform and in the course of ministry at South Fellowship. Regardless of that preference, he has personally chosen to take a backseat approach in this process. While sitting in amongst our elder board as an equal, he spoke very little in our sessions and in no way drove this process. As we will share later, we believe this was a God-led conversation.

HISTORY

For almost two millennia, Christian communities have wrestled with the role of men and women in the leadership of those communities. This has never been more true than in the last hundred years. This time period has seen increasing shifts in ecclesiological¹ divides. Some denominations and communities have embraced women at all levels of leadership, including the positions of pastors, elders, priests, overseers, bishops, etc. In contrast, other denominations have maintained that the highest roles of leadership are specifically reserved for men. While it is possible to define the first position under the broad term "egalitarian" and the second under the equally broad term "complementarian," we recognize that there are difficulties inherent to both of these terms. While the term egalitarian is fairly well accepted, different terms have been suggested for the term complementarian. Some on the egalitarian side have suggested the term "Hierarchical" as the position largely allocated all positions of power within the purview of men. Some on the complementarian side have suggested "historical" or "conservative." As all of these have received considerable opposition, we have maintained using "egalitarian" and "complementarian" as the most useful terms. We use them here because they are common terms, not because they are the most accurate terms. On pages 6-7, we will further define our working definition of these terms while also sub-categorizing them further.

The changing role of women in broader society is one of the factors leading to increased conversation around the wider Christian position on female leadership. In particular, it has thrown the position of "complementarian" churches into ever sharper relief. While that relief may cause some level of consternation in the Christian communities themselves and some level of judgment from a broader external society, we recognize that it is not in and of itself a reason for changing the praxis² of a community. American society has many elements that are not the way of Jesus, and our goal as an elder board is to ensure that South Fellowship maintains the principle of living in the way of Jesus, even when it is not popular.

History of South Fellowship Church

In 1979, the newly formed and independent South Fellowship Church was formed following its departure from the United Presbyterian Church following denominational mandates around areas of church governance. These mandates related specifically to the question of eldership. Contrary to the understandings we have heard reflected, the reason for this was not female eldership but a mandate to establish an elder board of men and women that reflected the church's demographic. Female eldership had been permitted in the denomination prior to 1979. In truth, it would be more correct to call the process removal rather than departure. The reason for removal was a refusal to acquiesce to a mandate for a demographically selected

¹ Ecclesiological can be defined as "the study of the church, especially its systems".

² Praxis may be defined as the working belief of the group. It is where understanding of the principles, in this case ecclesiology, meet action.

elder board as opposed to the spiritually driven selection process. It was following this removal that South Evangelical Presbyterian Fellowship was birthed.

Following 1979, the elder board at South Fellowship maintained a male-only policy for both pastors and elders. This is an important part of our heritage and valuing this has been an important part of our investigation alongside the biblical analysis.

In 2014, the then elders, including then Lead Pastor Ryan Paulson, undertook an examination of the scriptures and the issue of women in leadership. This proved to be a challenging task, but the fruit of the study was evident. As a group, they began to see the issue of women teaching and serving in pastoral roles in a different light. They concluded that men and women, being equal image bearers of God, were fully equal in dignity and worth before God and one another. At the same time, they understood that the scriptures teach an authority structure for the guidance and care of his church. Their conviction was that God has chosen to place the authority of elders over his church. In the newly established ecclesiology, women were affirmed as participants in any ministry responsibility except that of elder³. This affirmation of women as pastors and preachers led to South Fellowship hiring Yvonne Biel as our first female pastor. Yvonne was followed by Amy Palma and June Wiegert as pastors of Kids Ministry and Formation, respectively. Jessica Rust and Andrea Jones have been invited onto our platforms as faithful preachers of God's word.

In 2022, the then elder board recognized that a significant number of our group were regularly fielding questions regarding female eldership. These questions came from a broad section of the community and included questions from long-term and newer community members. Those questions were exacerbated and complicated by two factors. The first is the somewhat unorthodox position of the South Fellowship regarding the role of women in leadership. Most churches that have moved towards a more egalitarian position have changed their policy on eldership before changing their policy on preaching. This incongruity meant that we, as elders, were rarely able to define the "why" of our policy. In reading the Paulson Paper of 2014, we recognized a paper that focused more on the "yes" to female pastoring and preaching than the "no" to female eldership. Yet a cursory reading of scripture would not suggest more support for the former than the latter.

Secondly, a number of conversations in the hand-off from one elder group to the next (August 2021) suggested that the female eldership question might be a "question to be answered." While no direct mandate was passed, there was the implication of a significant question that was left unresolved. It is important to note that the view of the board was that this was a question that should not be entered into lightly. We recognized the complicated nature of the question and the frustrations that may be revealed in making a definitive statement in either direction. Our decision was to use a discernment process to help us seek God's will on this topic. The process is outlined below, and our initial use of this process was to ask God whether

³ *Paulson Paper, 2014*

we should proceed with examining the subject of female eldership or whether we should hold on to the status quo.

Our discernment process was described in detail in *Pursuing God's Will Together* by Ruth Haley Barton. Providentially, we began studying this book as an elder board in 2021, and within it, we received tools to bring a discernment question before God. This book does not cover the subject of women in ministry and, therefore, did not create bias in our process. The process of discernment is an ancient practice, one that relies on practicing indifference in order to hear God's voice.

Haley Barton notes,

"Discernment takes place in the context of friendship with God as it is cultivated through prayer. Prayer encompasses all the ways we communicate and commune with God. The further we travel on the spiritual journey, the more we discover that all of life is prayer and holds the potential for deepening our intimacy with God. That said, there are three kinds of prayer that are particularly pertinent to discernment. The first is the prayer of quiet trust described in Psalm 131. Another kind of prayer that is associated specifically with discernment is the prayer for indifference. In this prayer, we ask God to work in our hearts to make us indifferent to anything but the will of God. ...When we have come to a place of indifference, we are ready for the prayer for wisdom:... we often pray for wisdom while we are already attached to some outcome we think is best! Indifference is an important prerequisite to the prayer for wisdom precisely because the wisdom of God is the foolishness of the world. When we have become indifferent to our need to be seen as wise in the eyes of others, then we are ready to receive wisdom from God."⁴

We were determined to pursue God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Amongst the board of Elders were some who, by instinct, love to pursue difficult topics and some who, by nature, do not. It was important that we cast off preference and ask that God make his will known in the group. We formulated this question: "Should we consider the question 'Should women be included, alongside men, as candidates for eldership at South Fellowship?'. During February 2023, our elder board spent most of our annual retreat in prayer and listening around this question, and on the final day, we unanimously agreed that God was inviting and empowering us to begin re-investigating the question of female eldership". It is important to note that this decision was not tied to any potential outcome following a pursuit of that question.

Following our retreat, we developed our methodology for studying this subject in scripture and moved towards a discernment process in 2023-2024. We knew that entering this process would cause consternation in some of our community while also developing some potentially

⁴ Haley Barton, R., *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Page 42-43

unwarranted hopes in others. We received so much grace from you during this process. Thank you.

METHODOLOGY

Following our decision to enter into this conversation, we developed a working methodology that would allow us to study the subject in detail while maintaining a principle of discernment. Our methodology began with two strands, one of which was more significant early in the process; this strand was active listening. We wanted to hear from the community. The second became more dominant after the listening process had ended; this was a robust study of scripture. We wanted to be clear on the multiple readings of this subject that have led to various denominational positions.

In order to enter into this process in a way that honored God and South Fellowship's heritage, we took a bibliocentric approach. We chose to focus on what scripture said rather than on other elements used in a *prima scriptura* approach, such as tradition, reason, and prophetic voices. We made one minor exception, we wanted to pay attention to South Fellowship's particular tradition. In spite of this desire, we also recognized that it was impossible to remove ourselves from the lens through which we see scripture. We made every effort to be indifferent to our personal views and biases and to allow scripture to speak.

While our approach was and is bibliocentric, it is important to note that we did not rely only on exegesis⁵. While exegesis remained an important part of our methodology, we recognized that overemphasizing exegesis has led to limited dialogue on this subject. The "exegesis only" approach has resulted in a theological conversation in which each "camp" invariably chooses a section of scripture considered to be most supportive of their view and demands that potential opponents specifically exegete that text to prove their position. Craig Keener⁶ notes that "sadly, some Christians who start with one group of texts treat with suspicion those who start with another group of texts." We considered this type of argument to provide insufficient evidence from which to draw conclusions. For example, this type of argument might lead to churches demanding that their members kiss in greeting⁷, refrain from eating rare steak⁸, or gouge out their eyes to avoid looking at pornography.⁹ While any specific scripture can bring clarity to a subject, we recognize that many subjects require the "whole counsel of God."

We believe that we, as an elder board comprising of lay elders (chosen from within our community) and staff elders (chosen through diligent search), are called for such a time as this. Our commitment to you is to lead our community and to do so without fear of man but with real reverence and awe of God. We have committed to doing this by discerning how God

⁵ Exegesis, the critical study and explanation of specific texts.

⁶ Keener, C. Et al, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 15

⁷ 2 Corinthians 13:12

⁸ Acts 15:29

⁹ Matthew 18:9

speaks to his community through scripture. That being said, we recognize that we do not have all of the theological answers. We also believe that this issue is separate from "the essentials." A well-known quote in Christian circles, often attributed to Augustine of Hippo, states, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In everything, charity." We believe this statement to be profoundly important to us as a community in this season. We also recognize and acknowledge a spectrum of views from large numbers of theologians who have made the study of God through scripture their practice. One of the central texts of our time of study was *Two Views of Women in Ministry*. This text is highly recommended to you for its presentation of both complementarian and egalitarian ecclesiology, with two scholars representing each of the two views. Even more important is the statement of unity signed by the four authors:

"We believe one can build a credible case, within the bounds of orthodoxy and a commitment to inerrancy, for either one of the two major views we address in this volume. Each of us views our own positions on the matter as stronger and more compelling".¹⁰

Understanding that a broad range of notable and faithful scholars hold opposing positions on this subject, we began our study. To help us, we requested aid from two notable scholars on either side of the divide. Dr. Craig Blomberg and Dr. Richard Hess from Denver Seminary visited with the elders and gave some of their understanding and wisdom. The time with Dr Blomberg and Dr. Hess was invaluable as it allowed us to raise questions and share what we were learning. We were able to refer back to these conversations throughout our process. They also helped us see some of the uncertainty in hoping for a definite answer, and their visit reinforced that this was not an issue to break fellowship over. We were able to see this subject as a part of broader conversations. As we learned, we developed the view that there are not two positions, but rather, we were able to define four positions on the role of women in ministry. These are as follows: Hard Complementarian, Soft Complementarian, Soft Egalitarian, and Hard Egalitarian.

Our definition of these four positions are:

Hard Complementarian

Men and women are different. Leadership in the home and church is specifically the province of men to whom God has granted authority. The instances in which women are seen in authoritative places in scripture are either in direct opposition to the divine command or in moments when men refuse to take leadership. They are descriptive and not prescriptive. Women are permitted to lead other women but never to be in an authoritative relationship over a man. In this subcategory, a complementarian relationship is seen as present in Genesis chapters 1-2, a pre-fall hierarchy, if you will.

Soft Complementarian

¹⁰ Beck, J. (ed.), *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 15

Men and women are different. There are some leadership roles that women are encouraged to enter into. These roles are not high-level leadership and usually see them operating under the final authority of men or a man. The same reading of Genesis 1-2 regarding gender roles applies here too.

Soft Egalitarian

Men and women are different. They, together, are the best representation of the image of God as God in his wisdom has allowed both genders to reflect his image to the world in nuanced ways. In this reading the nuance does not extend to position but simply to general characteristics. While this requires a generalization of the qualities of both men and women this position holds that leadership structures are most reflective of God when shared by men and women.

Hard Egalitarian

Men and women are identical in respect of gifting and role. While they are different in terms of biological sex, they have no characteristics that are inherently different. Such differences, as appear in lived experience, are the result of systemic issues that have relegated women to subservient roles and have reinforced a patriarchal society.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Having gained an understanding of these four positions, we assessed that South Fellowship has historically held a soft complementarian position. Our identification of these four positions allowed us to use our study of scripture to ascertain which view most reflected our understanding of God's plan for his church. This study included three aspects of the scriptural study outlined below. As we continue our examination, we feel that this moment provides a good opportunity to remind ourselves that regardless of who we see as suitable for leadership the "how" of Jesus-like leadership is unquestionable. Jesus himself gives direct command that leadership in his soon-to-be-established church will be qualitatively different than in the world at large.

Matthew 20:25-28

25 But Jesus called them aside and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their superiors exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be this way among you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."¹¹

¹¹ Matthew 20:25-28

Those who aspire to leadership must expect an upside-down hierarchy in which those who lead are lower than those they lead. We are deeply aware that the church has, at times, been infiltrated by a worldly form of leadership that comes with the hope of power and significance.

THREE PILLARS OF BIBLICAL STUDY

PILLAR ONE - NARRATIVE

A biblical study requires that we recognize the scriptures' narrative movements across the whole of the canon. These large narrative sections can be succinctly categorized as Creation, Fall, Law (the old covenant), Redemption (the new covenant), and Future Renewal. We focused the majority of our study within the categories of Creation, Fall, Law, and Redemption. We wanted to see how scripture outlined both our common anthropology (humanness) and our particular genders. Did God make man and woman equal? Did he create men to have authority over women before the Fall? If he didn't, was authority a result of the Fall? If authority resulted from the Fall, was that positional authority negated by the redemption? Or does it remain, awaiting a future renewal? Is authority an aspect of God's creation that will remain in our Future Renewal?

Creation

Genesis chapter one reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" This first chapter describes the creation of Adam and Eve by the term "Adam," used as a generic term for mankind. Theologian Mary L. Conway concludes, "There is nothing in the first creation narrative to indicate that the subordination of women, whether in regard to their nature or function, was part of Yahweh's original intention for humanity." Both are made in his image, and both are the centerpiece of God's creation. It is essential for us to affirm that regardless of our individual understanding of the role of women in leadership, the equal nature of women and men as image-bearers is specific.

In chapter one of Genesis, we understood that there is no differentiation in terms of role.

In chapter two, we read a second account of the creation story that provides more details. Some have referred to chapter one as the view from heaven and chapter two as the view on earth. In chapter two, we read of God's appointment of Adam as a carer for the garden he has placed him in. While creation is "good," in line with Genesis chapter one, we are told that something is lacking. There is no partner or companion suitable for Adam. "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him."¹² This translation is controversial given the general translation of "ezer" (savior) elsewhere in scripture. The term cannot be given a subordinate reading without doing injustice to this consistent usage. Torah expert Nahum

¹² Genesis 2:18

Sarna notes that the term Ezer is most commonly used of God in his relationship to man.¹³ "Savior" would be a more appropriate term than "helper," given the potentially diminishing reading of "helper" in English. Yet "helper" has controversially remained the predominant translation in this important text.

Central to our study, we recognized that God's provision for humanity was a partnership between men and women, both of whom hold status as God's image bearers. While not answering our question about eldership, this text, and our understanding of it, led to a belief that when men and women lead together in partnership with the Holy Spirit, there is a completeness in ministry that is more robust than can be sustained by one gender alone.

According to Nijay Gupta,

"Here [men and women] are not related as differentiated beings in terms of status or function. Both are fashioned in the image of God¹⁴; not Adam, then Eve, but both together reflect God. Both are blessed and are given the responsibility of ruling the earth.¹⁵ Both are given the fruit of the earth for food and enjoyment.¹⁶ While they are distinguished according to two types, male and female, nothing in Genesis 2 distinguishes the two in their God-given identity, calling, and relationship to other parts of creation. If all we knew of creation came from this chapter, we would conceive of man and woman as equals, partners, and co-rulers on earth as the image of God. There is no statement of first-made privilege, headship, or gender roles."¹⁷

While some scholars have seen a leadership role given to Adam in Genesis 2:20 through his naming of the animals, this would be an assumption not backed up in the Old Testament at large. Throughout the Old Testament, women were responsible for the naming of children 27 times, in comparison to 17 times for men. There are 18 maternal naming speeches given as opposed to eight paternal ones. If we were to assume naming as indicative of leadership, we would have more evidence for female leadership.

In chapter two of Genesis we understood no differentiation in terms of role.

Fall

In Genesis chapter three, we read about the Fall of Adam and Eve. Eve is deceived by the serpent, and following her consumption of the fruit, she gives some to Adam, who is with her. Some have seen in this narrative evidence of the damaging nature of female leadership when exercised over men. However, a closer examination suggests this does not scan well and is far from certain. This reading would require Adam and Eve to have miss-aligned leadership in their

¹³ Sarna, Nahum M., *JPS Torah Commentary Series - Genesis*, 21

¹⁴ Genesis 1:26-27

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26, 28

¹⁶ Genesis 1:29-30

¹⁷ Conway, M., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, 35

pre-fall sinless state. The two appear side by side. Adam is described as being "with Eve." It is interesting however that Adam is the first one held to account for Eve's sin. Does this represent an overall authority placed on Adam? Or does it instead relate to Adam receiving a command from God and being responsible for accurately relaying that command to Eve?

This narrative reverberates through our human experience and provides the basis for all human brokenness, particularly that of gender. That gender relationships are damaged by the Fall is evident based on the curse that unfolded in chapter three. In verse 16 of chapter three, we are told that God addresses Eve as follows.

"Your desire shall be for your husband and he will rule over you,".

Importantly, the first suggests that man will seek to rule over woman. As noted earlier, it was not assigned as such in the creation account. In fact (while the specific lack that a companion will fulfill is unstated), God's creation of woman provides the missing piece. Her presence enables the two to "rule and reign" over God's creation. The two are complete together.¹⁸ Richard Hess of Denver Seminary notes, "the emphasis here is on the terrible effects of sin and the destruction of a harmonious relationship that once existed. In its place comes a harmful struggle of wills."¹⁹

The phraseology behind "your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you" has some semantic challenges. The Hebrew word used is "teshuqah," meaning "passions" or "longings," while the word for "rule" is "mashal," meaning rule or have dominion. The same verbiage is used in God's warning to Cain in the following chapter, "...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."²⁰ The desire here is clearly something to be resisted by Cain, not accepted. Whether Eve is supposed to accept these longings is unclear.

Similarly, in chapter four, the term rule is something that sin (here, as is common in Hebrew thought, treated as a "thing," not an action) will not accept but must be enforced by the man. It would be dangerous to make the assumption that the women should accept the "rule" of the man. In chapter four, as in chapter three, we see more effects of the rolling stone of sin set in motion in chapter three. The "terrible effects of sin" evident to Dr Hess are evident for all to see. The curse narrative as a whole reflects a distortion of the "very good" partnership that God created for man and woman. The distortions came after sin, not before. The elevation of men and the subordination of women, in its most vile and most subtle forms, is a deception of the Fall, not a part of God's good plan in creation. The work of Jesus provides the antidote to the work of the Fall in humanity. Uncertain is whether this aspect of the Fall can be healed outside of God's fully realized future Renewal. While a fractured relationship between men and women

¹⁸ Genesis 1:28

¹⁹ Hess, R., *Evidence for Equality in Genesis 1–3*, 8f

²⁰ Genesis 4:7

is evident in these passages, we do not believe they provide clear evidence that either man or woman should submit to the curse.

As we move further into the Old Testament, we see men take a central role in leadership. Men are circumcised as a sign of the covenant. Priesthood is male from its conception in Exodus chapter 28. In the period of the monarchy, Israel was exclusively governed by Kings, and where the Queen dominated Kings, this was entirely negative in its result.

Here, we will focus on two roles in the Old Testament granted to women. Additionally, we can note a shift that will happen in the New Testament regarding the role of priesthood and bearers of the covenant mark. Peter the Apostle, in 1 Peter 2:9, will reference Christians as a "royal priesthood," resulting in a theology of a "priesthood of all believers," and the giving of the Spirit in Acts 2 will be to both men and women.

Prophet

Miriam

In Exodus 15, following the crossing of the sea, Miriam, Moses' sister, leads the people of Israel in a song of celebration. In verse 20, the Torah pronounces Miriam as a prophet, one who authoritatively foretells God's word.

In taking up the Song of the Sea, Miriam does more than simply echo Moses. She provides space for the Israelite women, so often subsumed into the Israelite community, to have their own moment of celebration. In the entire Torah, this is indeed the only place where the Israelite women act as a separate body.

Miriam is celebrated in Micah chapter six for her work alongside Moses and Aaron.

"My people, what have I done to you?

How have I burdened you? Answer me.

I brought you up out of Egypt

and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

I sent Moses to lead you,

also Aaron and Miriam."

Huldah

In 2 Kings 22, King Josiah sends representatives of the priesthood to inquire of the Lord. They visit the Prophet Huldah, who instructs the King and the priests.

Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Akbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the Prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

15 She said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, 16 'This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the King of Judah has read. 17 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.' 18 Tell the King of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: 19 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. 20 Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'"

So they took her answer back to the King.

Huldah speaks not only to the priests who visit her with authority but also to the King of Judah and does so with the authority granted to her by God as a prophet. Like almost all prophets, she has no positional authority but carries divine authority.

Judge

In the period following the death of Joshua, Israel's theocratic government is navigated through a series of judges who act both as leader and as Prophet. This role, too, is granted to women in the person of Deborah. In Judges chapter four, we read:

4 Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. 5 She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. 6 She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. 7 I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

8 Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go, but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

9 "Certainly, I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Deborah's role as judge of Israel is carried with the same authority as Samuel's after her. She speaks authoritatively to Barak, who will not go without Deborah's leadership. She reminds him that his decision will result in Sisera being defeated by a woman in battle, a decisive break from the gender norm of the period.

We would suggest that these instances are more than women filling the role of men in the absence of male leadership but represent the surprising elevation of women in a patriarchal culture. At no point does scripture lament the absence of male leadership or authority in these situations. In fact, the fact that the speaker holding authority is female is rarely commented on, with the exception being the reference specifically to women in battle. While they are not normative, we recognize a deep significance in these roles. We will have more to share in our "Biblical Trajectory" section.

Redemption

In Jesus's work of redemption, we recognize a tension between what has been healed and what will be healed. This tension is present throughout Jesus's post-resurrection conversations with his disciples and also throughout Paul's letters. The tension can be summarized through the useful dyad "already/not yet." Jesus's work is complete and will be completed. We wait for a full renewal, restoration, and redemption.²¹

Given our assessment that Genesis chapters 1 and 2 do not state different roles or authority, yet there is a dramatic change in gender relationships following the curse of Genesis chapter 3, followed by generalized patriarchy in the Old Testament, we are led to ask the important question, "Is this curse and its subsequent effects something the work of Jesus deals with? and if so, does it do so now or later?"

In this instance, Galatians chapter 3 is informative. In Galatians, Paul is dealing with issues of unity. This is the problem he is trying to solve. This potential disunity is on multiple fronts, as Paul articulates in verse 28:

26 "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."

While some theologians have tried to reduce this to a spacial level it is important to remember that Paul's struggle with disunity has been present tense, on-the-ground disunity. He is not teaching specifically on a heavenly unity, nor a "one day soon to be" unity in line with the dyad

²¹ For more on this tension see Acts 3:21 for Peter's expectations of "the restoration of all things", Matthew 19:28 for Matthew quoting Jesus on the "renewal of all things" and Romans 8:20-22 for "the redemption of all things".

of “already/not yet” but with the current disunity in the church in Galatia. He even uses terms most relevant to them. No distinction between Jew/Greek, Slave/Free, Male/Female is to interfere with their worship.

A significant element often ignored in this passage is the way he moves from circumcision to Baptism as a marker of covenant. In the old covenant, only the men were sealed with the sign of the covenant. In the new covenant, all members receive the invisible marker of the Holy Spirit and the visible marker/rite of Baptism.

PILLAR TWO - DIRECTION/TRAJECTORY

In scripture, it is possible to track a trajectory or movement on an issue across scripture. This movement allows us to adapt to the culture around us appropriately while also standing bravely in the face of culture when it is out of line with God's preferred will for humanity. Recognizing that one of the concerns that may be reflected across our community is the "slippery slope" metaphor, we believe this aspect of biblical study can answer that concern by focusing on scripture and its movements. We see this trajectory moving specifically in the post-fall world following Genesis chapter 3.²²

Two examples that allow us to see trajectory moving in different directions would be slavery and sexuality.

Slavery

Slavery was almost ubiquitous in the 2nd Millenia BC (the period in which the early books of the Old Testament almost certainly reflect). The people of Israel found themselves enslaved to the Egyptian empire for 300 years following the death of Joseph in Genesis chapter 50. Slavery is not unique to Egypt, and there is no regulation forbidding members of Abraham's extended family from keeping slaves. Abraham himself had at least one slave, Hagar, with whom he had sexual intercourse at the behest of his wife, Sarah, in order to propagate a family line. Hagar had no choice in the matter, which is reflected in the scriptural narrative. She is at the whim of her master and must show obedience even to this. She remained in this state until she fled.

The beginning of our trajectory chart, therefore begins like this:

Slavery Ubiquitous —>

²² For more information and understanding of biblical trajectory see *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* by Dr. William Webb.

As the Torah system of law is developed in Exodus-Numbers, we see a movement in the trajectory. There is no outright ban on slavery, but there are important laws to provide rights for people in this situation.²³ These rights include the right for a female slave who is given to a master's son to be treated like a daughter. We may be shocked by this system by both our geographical and chronological distance from these events, but these kinds of rights were unheard of at this time. Our graph then looks like this:

Slavery Ubiquitous → Slavery Controlled →

Remarkably, Jesus says nothing about banning slavery on a physical level despite his work to set people free on a spiritual level both through his teaching and earthly ministry and more completely through his death and resurrection.

As Paul unpacks the work of Jesus to the churches he plants and ministers to, he does deal with the subject of slavery. He does encourage slave masters to treat slaves kindly and as Christian brothers²⁴ and encourages slaves to do what they can to become free.²⁵ The emphasis on the treatment of others regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc, in Jesus's teaching and the teaching of Paul, coupled with an understanding of men and women being made in the image of God, would eventually lead to 18th-century evangelicals driving the ban on slavery through the work of William Wilberforce, Hannah More, Thomas Clarkson, Henry Thornton, et al. They saw God's ultimate ethic as "equality for all peoples" and sensed the movement of scripture towards it and did what they could to pursue it. Our community, like all Christian communities, has the duty to do all they can to end slavery today. We do not take passages like Titus 2:9-10 to assume that God is against the continuation of our work. However, there was a season where many churches believed that the opposite was the work of Christians.

The graph now looks like this:

Slavery Ubiquitous → Slavery Controlled → Slavery Discouraged → Our Work → God's Final Renewal

While Dr. Webb acknowledges that it is unhelpful to view them as exact parallels for many reasons, there are similarities between this directional movement and the one that might be followed regarding the place of women in society.

²³ As an example see Exodus chapter 21

²⁴ Philemon 1:16

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:21

Our starting point, as with slavery, is one of unquestioned patriarchy. This was almost exclusively the practice of the Ancient Near East (ANE). In this male-centric society, there is complete control of women by men. A woman may be given in marriage to whoever her father deems best, and that man can divorce her at will with no provocation. There, unless her father receives her into his home again, she would be destitute, often turning to prostitution to support herself and any children.

Our graph begins here.

Unquestioned patriarchy →

In the midst of the giving of the Torah, we see the first surprising elevation of women in the Jewish community. While this elevation of women in comparison to surrounding societies does not rise to the level of equality, it is significant.²⁶ Perhaps most importantly, there are notable protections for women in the case of divorce. Deuteronomy outlines this important law that states that a man must show cause for divorce and provide a certificate of divorce showing she is free to remarry. That this is not God's ultimate ideal is reflected not just in the pre-fall narrative of Genesis 1 but in the words of Malachi, who articulates God's hatred of divorce.²⁷

God's protection of women is a distinct movement in trajectory in the Old Testament. It is surprising in the same way that God's decided rejection of the primogeniture²⁸ custom of the ANE is decisive. It is surprising in the way God's elevation of specific women to the roles of Judge and Prophet is surprising.

Our graph now looks like this:

Unquestioned patriarchy → Surprising elevation of women through moderated patriarchy

Jesus welcoming of women into his circle of disciples is the second trajectory movement in our study. Mary of Bethany is one who sits at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:38f) in the pattern of first-century discipleship. This positional relationship is an important precedent that our geographical and chronological distance once again leads us to ignore.

²⁶ Purity laws remain in place, controlling access to the community and particularly worship during menstruation. Priesthood, as seen above, is created as a male only institution.

²⁷ Malachi 2:16 "I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel."

²⁸ Primogeniture is the preference for the first-born son found in almost all ANE cultures. Through God's choice of Jacob over Esau this law is specifically challenged. This shift is also visible in the choice of David as King in 1 Samuel 16.

So our graph changes to:

Unquestioned patriarchy → Surprising elevation of women through moderated patriarchy →
Surprising Elevation of Women as Disciples of Christ

In the resurrection accounts, the seminal announcement of the Christian faith is first made by women who have found themselves included in the discipleship. A first-century society did not accept women as reliable witnesses and yet the Apostles are first invited to believe because of the testimony of women!

Women are not amongst Jesus' "Twelve" designated later Apostles, a point that, to some, stands out as significant. It is, however, only significant by inference and assumes we are required to determine a reason for this absence. Other readings seem equally, if not more, probable. One such possibility is they may not be received because of hardness of the heart. In his teaching on marriage, Jesus states that the Old Testament marriage laws did not demand permanence but allowed controlled divorce in marriage because of "the hardness of (the people of Israel's) hearts" (Matthew 19:8). This pattern provides an equally acceptable understanding of the "why" of the absence of female apostles. It also better explains the absence of gentile apostles, black apostles, and many other possible demographics. In fact, no Apostle of Jesus comes from outside a very small geographic area.

As the early church grows, it is evident that women are involved in ways that are surprising in the culture of the day. Early Church scholar Gordon Fee, responsible for seminal works on the Spirit and the Early Church, argues persuasively that women played a role equivalent to Church Planter or pastor and that "the householder would naturally serve as the house church leader. That is, by the very sociology of things, it would never have occurred to them that a person from outside the household would come in and lead what was understood as simply an extension of the household. To put it plainly, the church is not likely to gather in a person's house unless the householder functioned also as its natural leader." According to Fee, understanding this movement differently means showing a poor understanding of the first-century Greco-Roman culture. By this metric, a considerable proportion of the early house churches were pastored by women.

In Romans 16 Paul gives "mentions" to his co-workers and names women amongst them they include Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia et al.

Phoebe - Phoebe is of special significance. Paul introduces her as his emissary (carrier of his letter) and as a "diakonon" a term he uses for himself and Apollos in 1 Corinthians and of Jesus in Romans 15:8. In first-century terms this required her to be the first reader of Paul's letter and, almost certainly the first translator and expounder of the letter given her knowledge of the context.

Priscilla - In Acts, we are introduced to Priscilla (she appears in Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19), who is responsible for disciplining a young man called Apollos. She is named with her husband but, significantly for the culture, is named first, suggesting she is the more significant character in this narrative.

Junia - Junia is introduced in verse 7: "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was."

Other female leaders in the early church include:

- Tabitha (Acts 9:36–42)
- Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40)
- Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11)
- Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2–3)
- Nympha (Colossians 4:15)
- Lois and Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5)
- Claudia (2 Timothy 4:21)
- The mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), the "elect lady" (2 John 1:1)
- Philip's four prophet daughters (Acts 21:9)

Our graph would now show:

Unquestioned patriarchy → Surprising elevation of women through moderated patriarchy →
Surprising Elevation of Women as Disciples of Christ → Surprising elevation of women as co-workers
of Paul

As we move towards God's final redemption and follow his trajectory in scripture, we would suggest our trajectory graph looks like this:

Unquestioned patriarchy → Surprising elevation of women through moderated patriarchy →
Surprising Elevation of Women as Disciples of Christ → Surprising elevation of women as co-workers
of Paul → Our Work → God's Final Renewal

Let us return to the 'slippery slope' metaphor for a moment. We might define this as a concern that our movement towards a more egalitarian position is driven by a desire to move towards

culture, not an independent move in line with God's trajectory that happens to move alongside culture, and similar movements will follow that.

We acknowledge the importance of this question and offer this final thought on trajectory as a way of answering it. First, we recognize that women's role in society has shifted, and a move towards a more egalitarian ecclesiology would be a parallel move. Second, and most importantly, we recognize that other societal movements clearly do not move parallel to scripture's trajectory. An example would be the scriptures' understanding of sexuality. South Fellowship seeks to be a welcoming church to those from the LGBTQ community but has chosen not to be an affirming church because of our understanding of sexuality in scripture.

Contrary to our understanding of the trajectory laid out above for both slavery and gender equality, we believe the movement for sexuality is in a different direction. The ANE culture was one of sexual permission with no restraint. In the midst of that, the Torah shows God's preference for marriage that is Heterosexual, Monogamous, Covenantal, and Permanent. While those concepts are clear, he surrenders that preference for two of those, "monogamy and permanence," for two reasons. Monogamy is surrendered in order to protect women with no offspring.²⁹ Permanence is surrendered because of the people's hard hearts.³⁰ Jesus moves the trajectory in a more conservative direction by holding to a strict reading of divorce. There is no surprising elevation of any expression of sexuality outside of the quadrilateral of Heterosexual, Monogamous, Covenantal, and Permanent. A break in any of the four, often contrary to our emotion, is as serious as any other.

As we move to our section on exegesis we recognize that while it is important to accurately exegete scriptural commands around gender roles it is equally important to accurately understand narrative descriptions of biblical gender roles being displayed in the first century.

PILLAR THREE - EXEGESIS

In exegesis, our primary task is to ask what the original listeners would have heard. This is our effort to bridge the gap between our culture and theirs. In the pastoral epistles, our job is to ask what questions the first-century churches were wrestling with and what answers they were given. We need to resist the temptation to use scripture first to ask 19th-century questions or 16th-century questions.

Having spent considerable time on the Old Testament narrative as it relates to women in ministry and, in the midst of that process, having created space for some exegesis, our focus here is primarily on New Testament teachings that reflect the role of men and women. In this, we recognize that the Old Testament primarily instructs through narrative and prophetic word

²⁹ Deuteronomy 25:1f

³⁰ Matthew 19:8

while the New Testament primarily instructs through the teachings of Jesus and the situational/pastoral writings of Paul, Peter, James, et al.

All scripture here is in chronological order:

Romans 16

See Biblical Trajectory for our understanding of the importance of Romans 16 in emphasizing the role of women in the early church.

While there have been suggestions that Junia could be a man, almost all commentators of note suggest that it is almost certain that this is a woman. Douglas Moo, the preeminent scholar in the book of Romans, notes that this scripture has been misused on both sides of the discussion about women in leadership. From the 13th century to the mid-20th century, most commentaries translated the name Ioulian as Junias, believing it to be a contracted form of the name Junianus (masculine). This choice was made in spite of a unanimous translation as Junia (feminine) amongst commentators before the 13th century, the absence of any example of this masculine contraction in literature of the period, and the common nature of the name Junia. Moo suggests that this change was made out of an assumption that a woman could not be an apostle³¹ and is reflective of ways we bring our assumptions to the text.

While recognizing the probability of the feminine translation and supporting the translation 'esteemed amongst the apostles' not "esteemed by the apostles," he also notes that it is not a magic bullet for those holding an egalitarian view. Paul's use of "apostle" does not always suggest equality with the "twelve" or himself. It can, at times, be used in a more generic sense. We can say that Junia was almost certainly a woman, used in some significant capacity, to do the work of the gospel, for which Paul was thankful.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

34 Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

What is the context?

"Proper worship." Paul is giving rules on how Christian worship should be conducted, especially charismatic worship, where the use of spiritual gifts is central.

What is the problem addressed?

"Disorder." The church in Corinth is practicing its gifts in a way that leads to confusion. People are prophesying back and forth against each other. Somebody gives a "message in tongues," and no translation is given. It is a mess. Paul is trying to bring order.

³¹ Moo, D., *Epistle to the Romans, NICNT Commentary series*, 922

What does Paul not mean?

"Women should never speak in church." In Chapter 11, Paul specifically gave instructions for women who were prophesying. This seems to be an accurate reflection of Acts 2:18, which is, in turn, a reflection of Joel 2:28.

What does Paul mean?

First, in ancient Greco-Roman culture, particularly within the less formal setting of a Corinthian house church, questions were a part of the teaching portion of a worship gathering. These were smaller groups gathered in homes, and that meant the entire experience was more like an interactive dialogue. As observed above, women were encouraged to speak in the worship gathering, even given instructions related to public prayer and prophecy earlier in this very letter (1 Cor.11:5). So, if Paul explicitly told men and women to "speak" and "pray" in the church gathering just three chapters earlier, why in this chapter would he restrict not just questions in general, but questions about a prophetic word and specifically from married women?

Two possibilities exist, both offering better context and understanding of these verses: First, perhaps ancient Mediterranean protocol would disapprove of a woman addressing men unrelated to her, hindering the church's external witness about which Paul is concerned. Secondly, the regular denial of education to women in the first century could mean that the questioner lacked a fundamental knowledge of the subject matter being taught, hindering the church's internal edification, which Paul is concerned about. We are fortunate to live in a society and period in which women are regularly more educated than men.

Galatians 3:26-29

26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

See Biblical Trajectory

1 Timothy 2:11-14

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 has been the sheet anchor for people arguing women should not be ordained or hold the position of elder. It is a difficult passage to translate and, because of its translation history over the past 100 years, is overly susceptible to being used as a silver bullet by those who sit on the conservative side of this conversation.

What is the context?

"False Teaching" Paul writes this pastoral epistle to his trusty protege Timothy. He specifically asks Timothy to stay in Ephesus because false teachers are manipulating the community. Ephesus has a very particular religious history. It is the home of Artemis. To give context to this in a way we may understand it today, it would be similar to the effect of living in Salt Lake City, Utah, today, given the influence of the Mormon Church. The influence of this religion was felt everywhere.

In Acts 19:23-28 Paul is at the center of a riot in Ephesus because of the perceived slight towards the Goddess Artemis.

What problem is Paul addressing?

"Female teachers taking over" Paul's direct command in the passage is interesting: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority (authentein) over a man; she must be quiet." The word authentein, translated as "assume authority," is rare. It appears here and here alone in scripture and almost never in other sources from this and the preceding time period. It is these types of translation choices that are most challenging. In 1601, the King James Version writers chose to translate this passage as "usurp authority." Usurp had a concrete aspect to it in the 17th century. It was an unsolicited, unapproved takeover of a position, most often somebody taking the position of a monarch. It is telling that modern translations have often chosen something close to simply "authority." If Paul were speaking of a general sort of exercising authority (such as the authority of exegetically teaching the Bible), he had plenty of more common words to choose from. While translation committees often land on the word "authority," commentators are far clearer on the undertones of the word. This is not somebody being elected to an office but a manipulative, power-hungry, and dysfunctional type of power grab.

Christopher Bryan argues persuasively that context matters in this case. The Artemis cult mentioned above was a female-only cult. The most natural context in which to read this passage is one of a female-only takeover of the church in Ephesus. Having been invited to learn the scriptures as new followers of the way, the women in Ephesus default to the cultural norm, as any of us might. Linda Belleville suggests that "the women at Ephesus (perhaps encouraged by the false teachers) were trying to gain an advantage over the men in the congregation by teaching in a domineering fashion. The men, in response, became angry and disputed what the women were doing."

Why, then, does Paul bring up Adam and Eve from chapter two of Genesis? Doesn't this imply a natural order in creation that cannot be disputed?

Returning to our reading of Genesis 2 in our narrative section, there is nothing about Genesis two that suggests this was the understanding of the writer or the culture of the second millennia BC. Further, if we don't assume that Paul prohibited women from teaching (and there, the weight of his letters suggests he assumed they did teach), then we will not be predisposed

to think that Paul is here depicting women as more gullible than men. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 11:3, Paul uses Genesis 3 as an analogy for how untrustworthy teachers can deceive both men and women, so we know Paul did not think women were more easily deceived than men. In fact, throughout his letters, Paul has repeatedly used Genesis as a way of elevating the marginalized, not of enforcing the social norms.

Here in 1 Timothy 2:13–15 Paul brings up Adam and Eve because they provide a precise analogy to the crisis he's addressing in the Ephesian churches. In Genesis 2:15–17, when God gave a command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he gave the command to Adam before Eve was created. This does not make him superior (remember Genesis is decidedly not supportive of primogeniture, just the opposite) but simply responsible for passing on information. When Eve recites the command given by God to the serpent, she misquotes what God has said. Our inference is that Adam did not teach her correctly. This is what leads to Paul's understanding of Genesis three - "The man actively rebelled and sinned, the woman was genuinely deceived and sinned."

We make an assumption when we use this text to claim that men have a God-ordained teaching authority that women do not have, even though this does not seem to tie in with other instances where women do teach. When we read this text without assumptions, we become open to the possibility that Paul actually acts as an advocate for these Ephesian women, encouraging them to learn as part of the community of Jesus' followers in Ephesus.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

1 Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full[a] respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

What is the context?

Paul is giving advice and commands on how to structure the church

What is the problem?

Who should be picked as an elder?

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul gives instruction on eldership or, more specifically, episkopé (overseer). This is one of two terms often translated as elder in scripture, the other being the term presbuteros. The two terms have become tied together due to the similarity of the

qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, respectively. Paul's list of qualifications includes blamelessness, faithfulness to his wife, children who are following Jesus, hospitality, not being lovers of money, and not being quarrelsome. It is a list that we would do well to follow and, at South Fellowship, actively try to follow in the appointing of elders. To some, the list confirms that women must not hold leadership roles in a church eldership system of government. The primary argument for this has been that a woman can not be a "husband of one wife." Paul's language is certainly male-centric, but we must briefly unpack the reason for this.

Paul's language is typical of the day. Neither Greek nor Hebrew has a word used for spouse. The very writing of an instruction to faithfulness requires choosing, as a language construct, either a man or a woman to be faithful and the other for them to be faithful to. Paul picks the gender normative pattern. This pattern exists in much of scripture. The Ten Commandments are written, semantically, to men. The pastoral epistles are directed to "brothers." Does this mean that women are not bound to obey these scriptures as authoritative words because they are not specifically addressed to their gender? Absolutely not. They are included in the family of faith and bound to obey even when their gender is not specified. To make the assumption, therefore, that Paul excludes women because he uses masculine language is not a good argument for male-only leadership and can only be applied consistently or not at all.

CONCLUSION

PART 1 - DECISION

After concluding our season of study, we returned to our discernment process. We shared our experiences of the study, evaluated what we had heard from the body in the listening circles, and prayed. When we gathered for our annual retreat in February 2024, we spent the majority of time in prayer and listening for God's guidance around two questions.

1. Is it permissible for women to be invited into eldership?
2. Is it the right thing for South Fellowship?

We did not reach any conclusion that weekend but felt strongly that God was in our midst, moving us towards a conclusion. In our following meetings, we focused on sharing where we began individually, where we were now in our understanding of the subjects, and, if there had been movement, "which the pieces of evidence that had been significant in our personal journey of understanding." As a group, we had become clear on the broad range of positions, and at that point, there was increasing unity around the first question recognizing this movement would move South Fellowship from Soft Complementarian to Soft Egalitarian in our ecclesiological praxis. We had read the words of so many experts who displayed incredible learning alongside a clear love of Father, Son, and Spirit and of scripture who came to different conclusions. As noted earlier, our meetings with Dr. Blomberg and Dr. Hess reinforced that this was not a doctrine to break fellowship over.

One of these broad conversations is "assumption vs. commandment." As 21st-century readers, we often read everything written in the pastoral epistles and assume everything is a commandment requiring action, whereas there are times when Paul or other writers are giving advice. We recognize that scripture is authoritative, but we also came to recognize there are times when it is not trying to give followers of Jesus something to do for all time but rather giving reports of how they solved real on-the-ground problems.

A second broader conversation is the rubric through which we decide whether something was cultural or permanent. A good example of this would be 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul teaches on gender roles but also on clothing. Almost every church in the Western world has uniformly decided that whatever he is saying about head coverings no longer applies today. They have done this with no concrete permission in scripture but through analysis of the culture into which the commandment was given and a recognition that we live in a different culture today. Our understanding as to which parts of scripture this should be applied to are different, but we are all doing the same work.

In April 2024, the elder board of South Fellowship Church voted unanimously to approve the addition of women to our elder board as fully equal image bearers and co-laborers.

This vote was unanimous, and in amongst our discernment process, we took comfort in our conviction that both Biblical Narrative and Biblical Trajectory point in this direction. We recognize the mixed evidence in our Biblical Exegesis study. Believing that this movement reflects God's restoration of our original gender relationship, we chose to lean in the direction of the other two categories, given the ambiguity of the scriptures. We reaffirm that either side could take one or two scriptures and critique this decision based solely on those scriptures. We do not acknowledge that any scripture holds full sway over another. We did our best to take scripture as a whole. We did not all arrive at this decision at the same time but each saw the work of God in our fellow elders. Some of us moved small distances in our understanding, and some of us moved large distances. Some of us found ourselves to be surprised at the way God moved in us as individuals.

While this process was one of discernment and listening, we would value addressing three areas:

First, this was a discernment process where we did all we could to listen to God's voice amid our study and conversations. We do not take that lightly. While discernment was our practice we also realize, as elders, we carry the weight of that decision and are called to take ownership of it. We also take ownership of our fallibility. We tried to rightly divide God's word and know that we could be wrong. We believe that the ability to acknowledge your limitations in this area is key to healthy conversation and community.

Secondly, those of you who disagree, whether unknown or known to us, were constantly in our minds and hearts, and we bore the weight of that heavily. Our prayers were and are for you, and we grieve for you. You are our brothers and sisters and our church family. We care for you deeply.

Third, for those of you who have longed for this moment, we rejoice with you, but we ask you to share in the cost with which it comes. We thank you for the grace you have exhibited. We have seen you stay and serve even when you didn't share the church's conviction on that subject. You understand what it is to live in that tension, and now others will be doing the same. We invite you to love well.

PART 2: WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

When will women become elders? What if I disagree?

First, as previously acknowledged, we know some of you will disagree, and we would like to invite you to contemplate for a moment why this can still be your church community. We do not hold to this as a primary issue. We would define a primary position as including God as trinity, the plan of salvation, and Jesus as the Christ who lived in the flesh. We do not hold to this as a secondary issue of which we would ask for agreement from all serving as Elders, Staff, or high-level volunteers. These would include marriage (as covenantal, heterosexual, permanent, and monogamous) or immersion baptism of mature (able to choose) believers. We believe this to be a tertiary issue similar to Paul's reference in Romans 14:1 of "disputable issues." These subjects, he acknowledges, will find a range of viewpoints within the church. Given this position, we do not believe there is any position in this community that demands that you agree with this decision or affirm this position. Our only premise is that you can acquiesce to this decision. While South Fellowship has held a complementarian view of eldership we have, during that time, employed three lead pastors who hold to an egalitarian position. All three have been able to respect that position and ministry here while disagreeing with South Fellowship's ecclesiology. As a community, we have tacitly made this a tertiary issue by that employment policy. We believe it would be disingenuous to demand something more from our wider community than we demand from our lead pastor.

While we recognize that this subject may be more central to your understanding of Christianity than we have made it, we would love to invite you to a period of reflection. We invite you to take some time to pray, listen as we did, and take wise counsel. We highly recommend that you evaluate the importance of community and invite you to value community more highly than a stance on an issue of which four high-level scholars, each with differing views, could say "one can build a credible case for within the bounds of orthodoxy and a commitment to inerrancy for either one of the two major views."

Secondly, in the following weeks, our elder board will continue to process how we begin to make this process real. We recognize that this is a natural follow-up question, we are actively praying and actively considering next steps.

Finally, we would love to end with a word on mission.

Central to South Fellowship is our mission to help people live in "the way of Jesus, with the heart of Jesus." For some time now, we have sensed that our particular calling is to those de-

churched and unchurched around us. Our desire for growth has never been to gain new members from other churches, although we recognize God has gifted us with incredible people through that mechanism. We long to see those in the "far country" return to their Father.

We recognize that public views of the church are at their lowest in history. Not, as it was in the first century because we have demonstrated a holiness that was out of keeping with the world but because of hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is sometimes only imagined but is often perceived accurately. In the last decade, church leader after church leader has brought shame to the name of Christ through inappropriate relationships, both affairs and sexual abuse, verbal and physical abuse of staff, abuse of trust, and theft. We recognize that, more often than not, these abuses are male pastors who have gone unchecked by those around them. We have seen male leader after male leader given pass after pass by boards of other men. We heard some of those stories from you in our listening circles. We are excited to demonstrate a different way to the city of Littleton and the world, one that embraces the beauty of men and women leading together for the ministry of his body. We recognize that making this decision might make South Fellowship a smaller community. We are not interested in the world's standard of success. We choose to fear God and not man.

As we close this session we would like to remind you that we will not be taking questions as a group, but each elder present is available for questions. We remind you that staff, outside of the pastoral elders, were not involved in this process and are not to be approached. We gently suggest that you wait 24 hours before sharing your response.

We look forward to how God works in our community as we lean into his trajectory of redemption.