

GROWING  
WOMEN  
LEADERS

Nurturing women's leadership in the Church

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## INTRODUCTION

*‘Service is the key form of life to any follower of Christ, and one of the many ways to serve is as a leader in the church.’<sup>1</sup>*

For many Christians, having women as church leaders is now the norm. So why a book about women as leaders? Surely there are enough books on leadership around already? Yes, there are many books about leadership—over the last 20 years it has been a growth area—and there are a growing number of books about *Christian* leadership. But there is no avoiding the fact that we still live in a world where to be male has been normative and to be female has been different, derivative, secondary. That is true in society and it is certainly true in the Church. There is an expectation that leadership is male, so to some extent ‘woman leader’ and ‘women in leadership’ are oxymorons. Part of the aim of this book is to explore that paradox, that tension.

Many women find themselves called to lead but also hear competing claims:

- It says in the Bible that women should not be leaders.
- Women should not lead, because they are weaker and more gullible.
- We’ve never had women leaders in the Church, so why start now?
- How would you manage to be a proper wife and look after your children?
- Can women make the hard decisions of leadership? Can they ‘do vision’?

Ever since a fellow student told me he could not be in my Bible study group because ‘it says in the Bible that women can’t lead’, I’ve been passionate about finding out what God really says about women as

leaders. To some people, that issue is yesterday's question; to others, it is very much alive and often painful.

### IS LEADERSHIP MALE?

A couple of years after first hearing that women should not be leaders in the Church, I ran into the issue again. By this time, another woman and I were leading a Christian group for postgraduates in our university. Being forced to step down and allow a man (who thought we were doing a great job!) to take over the leadership was a profoundly painful experience. So we sat riveted to the words of Faith Forster and Pat Cook speaking at Spring Harvest in the early 1980s on women in leadership. At last—someone giving an alternative interpretation of the 'difficult passages' in the Bible and suggesting a whole different way of looking at scripture, tradition and the history of the Church.

When a friend and I went to talk to Faith, she recommended a book by Dorothy Pape, virtually the only book on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Since then, much has been published. By 1990, Gilbert Bilezikian had written *Beyond Sex Roles*, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen had written *Gender and Grace*, and Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve*.

A variety of things warmed up the debate. It was the time when the Church of England was debating whether to open the priesthood to women, and there was a backlash against the emerging egalitarian viewpoint. The claim that women should be leaders was seen as a negative result of feminism—the Church following society. David Pawson wrote a book setting out his view—*Leadership is Male*—and this evoked published responses from Roger and Faith Forster, and Joan Martin. The Forsters published a series of articles, 'Is Leadership Male?' in *Renewal* magazine (1988), and Joan Martin compiled a collection of interviews with male leaders, published as *Is Leadership Male?* (1996).

WOMEN AS LEADERS

Much of the academic debate since then is summarized in Chapter 1 of this book. But while my bookshelves groan under the weight of books on women and ministry, there has been little discussion focusing specifically on leadership. Much of the debate has become focused, in the Church of England, on whether women can be priests or bishops (leaders of a particular kind). Many Christians now take women in leadership for granted, in the Church as in society, while others find themselves in churches that have created tighter rules to define what women can and cannot do. While we might have expected women to be increasingly free to move into leadership, there are churches where both men and women take a definite stance against women in certain leadership roles.

Some may wonder at a book on women in leadership when 'leadership' is not a biblical word. I am writing about leadership because, while it may not be a term found in the Bible, it is a thoroughly biblical concept. Many Christians recognize that leadership is a key to healthy, growing churches, hence the number of books and courses on 'leadership'. Leadership is also key to businesses and organizations. And while the actual words 'leader' and 'leadership' may be rare in the New Testament, an understanding of pastoral ministry as reflected in the life of Jesus and the teaching of Paul clearly includes leadership as part of it.

The Bible often uses the 'shepherd' metaphor for those who are to lead the flock of God's people. This word may imply a ministry of pastoral care but a closer look reveals that shepherd imagery refers to leadership more than to pastoral care. For example, the term 'shepherd' is often used in the Old Testament to refer to the political leaders of Israel. The psalmist tells us that David shepherded Israel with integrity of heart, and, in the parallel statement, 'with skillful hands he led them' (Psalm 78:72). In the New Testament, Jesus uses the same imagery when referring to his own leadership: 'I am the good shepherd... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and

they follow me' (John 10:11, 27). 'Following' implies a leader. While pastoral ministry includes pastoral care, it must surely also include encouraging the mission of the Church, focusing the direction of the Church and developing other leaders, which are prime areas now encompassed by the word 'leadership'.

In addition, in many churches where the 'leader' of a local congregation is ordained or authorized, as 'pastor', 'minister' or 'priest/presbyter', while some pastoral or leadership tasks may be shared or delegated, that minister will be the main pastor, teacher, preacher *and* leader. Audrey Malphurs asserts that 'the congregation looks at the person behind the pulpit as the leader of the church whether or not it is true'.<sup>3</sup> Hence there is some focus in Chapter 1 on the debate about women preaching.

Jenny, a woman in ordained ministry, told me how her daughter, away at university, came home for the weekend with a friend. The daughter's friend belonged to a church where the congregation were taught that women are not permitted to preach or to be overall leaders in the Church. But she went to hear Jenny preach, out of respect for her hostess. Her response later: 'Your mum's a great preacher!' She had never heard a woman preach before, and her experience collided with what she had been taught and the assumptions she had made. While I do not wish to underestimate biblical argument, sometimes those who question women's leadership do so more out of ignorance and prejudice than thought-out conviction.

## WHY THIS BOOK?

For most of recorded history, women have been largely excluded from formal leadership positions. If we think back to famous people in any sphere of life—political leaders, musicians, world rulers, scientists, dramatists, explorers, missionary leaders, religious leaders—the vast majority have been men. And while changes have been made, resulting in more women taking leadership roles in some areas of society, women

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remain dramatically underrepresented in formal leadership positions in politics, management, many professions—and the Church.

Alongside the dramatic changes that have taken place in the last 30 years, resulting in women's acceptance alongside men in almost all jobs and in other spheres—in sports like marathon running, cricket and football, for example—many of the old arguments about women being unfit for certain activities have worn thin. At the same time, there has been a surge in research about women as leaders, of most of which the Church seems unaware. Part of my aim in this book is to connect up Christian thinking about leadership with this research to see where it leads, while also drawing attention to the massive amount of recent research that affects how we think about women as leaders from a theological perspective.

Before women can step forward with confidence as leaders, they often have to navigate their way through all kinds of scepticism or downright opposition. In this book I want to encourage women to step up and lead—but sometimes they are able to do this only when the confusion of opposing voices has been cleared away.

One piece of recent research on women leaders in churches has found that they face a number of challenges that men do not face. For example:

- Women experience less encouragement than men to consider church leadership and often have fewer role models.
- They are more likely than men to choose ordained ministry as a second career, after a lengthy decision-making process.
- Women who start in assistant or associate positions are less likely to 'move up' to more senior church roles than are men (the so-called 'stained-glass ceiling').<sup>4</sup>

While this particular piece of research relates to Canadian churches, where there is in some places more resistance to women leaders than in the UK, it nevertheless resonates with anecdotal evidence from the Anglican Church and other denominations. Only God knows how

many women are called and gifted but find themselves silenced by family, congregations or church leaders. Rachel felt called to ministry at the age of 17. She tried to explore this call within her local church but received no recognition, and she ended up going in a completely different direction. Yet the sense of call never went away. She finally found the courage to pursue it in middle age and started training for ordained ministry, at the same time being an advocate for other women.

### CAREER AND LEARNING STYLES

Another reason for writing this book is to do with women's career development and the way their development needs as leaders are met. Susan Vinnicombe, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Diversity at Cranfield School of Management, has suggested that women's development is different from that of men. She argues that the time when most men do their MBAs, in their 20s and 30s, is when women often have their most demanding responsibilities, so women may miss out. Some Christian leadership programmes are also targeted at this age group, sometimes making it more difficult for women to participate.

Vinnicombe has also noted four areas of tension for women in conventional leadership and management training, which have similar implications for women in church leadership. While I want to avoid gender stereotyping, these different tendencies are worth pondering:

- The centralization of authority and power in the classroom, which sometimes goes against women's preferred styles of learning.
- Reluctance among participants to admit uncertainty and ignorance; some women feel more able to be open in an all-women group.
- Learning by hearing about best practice rather than experientially; many women prefer the latter, although preference depends on personality as well as gender.

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- Knowing through mastering analytical techniques rather than through emotional or intuitive connections; some women come to ‘know’ in more intuitive ways.

Many books and courses on Christian leadership take no special account of women’s experience, or of the fact that men and women vary in learning styles. Most of the books on Christian leadership that I have read recently pay lip service to women in church leadership but include no examples of contemporary women leaders and few references to women in scripture or church history. This book aims to redress the balance.

## READING THIS BOOK

I am convinced that women should step up to leadership in the Church not because of justice or equality, but because the Bible supports women in leadership. For me it is primarily a theological issue, a biblical issue. In addition, many of the challenges that women face as leaders would be solved if the Church was thoroughly convinced that they should take their place in leadership alongside men. Thus Part 1 of this book, ‘Women as leaders’, looks at issues of scripture and history, with chapters on scripture, women leaders in the Bible, and women leaders throughout the history of the Church.

Part 2 focuses on ‘Ways women lead’; Chapter 4 is a brief excursion into the history of leadership and considers how to define leadership, aspects of leadership, and new directions in leadership. A key question, of interest to both men and women, is whether women lead differently from men. Behind this question lie centuries of debate on the ‘nature’ of women, and that is the subject of Chapter 5.

If it’s true that God calls women as well as men to leadership, then how can they overcome some of the barriers they encounter?

There are particular issues that demand attention, and some of these are explored in Part 3: power and service (Chapter 6), confidence and courage (Chapter 7). I long for women whom God calls to be inspired to lead well, to continue to grow as leaders and to grow other women as leaders; Chapter 8 looks at a variety of other issues for women who are stepping up to lead and, in turn, looking to develop others as leaders.

I have not attempted to cover the subject of Christian women as leaders in professional or secular voluntary contexts; I hope, however, that much of this book may be relevant to Christian women wherever God calls them to use their gifts.

The book is designed to be read in order, but I have constructed each part so that it is relatively self-contained, and you could begin reading at any point. Each chapter ends with some questions, which could be used for personal reflection, discussion with a mentor or group discussion. At the end of the book there is a resource section, intended for reference.

Women in leadership is a huge topic. In this one book I cannot possibly cover everything I'd like to say. In particular, there are a vast number of books and scholarly articles relating to the theological debate about women as leaders, including some books that focus on a single verse. Thus my exploration in Chapter 1 is relatively brief but, I hope, gives a good feel for the main issues. Again, the resource section will be helpful; there are also endnotes, and further material is available on the website: [www.cpas.org.uk/womeninleadership](http://www.cpas.org.uk/womeninleadership).

The book's focus on women in leadership is not intended to denigrate women (or men) who do not have this talent or gift and who exercise other ministries in other areas. My concern is that women who do have leadership talent and are called by God should be allowed to exercise their gifts, in a way that accords with the example of Jesus and the teaching of the Bible.

The issue of leadership in the Church—how it is to be done and, implicitly, by whom—is of concern to all Christians. I hope that this book will be of benefit to women who are leaders or aspire to be

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leaders, the women and men who encourage them, and all who are concerned for good leadership in the Church and long to see both men and women exercising their gift of leadership to God's glory and for the extension of his kingdom.

### A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

I am an Anglican, and inevitably know more about the Church of England than other churches, but have tried to embrace some of the debates going on in a variety of denominations and church groupings. Accordingly, I use the word 'minister' to mean clergy and other authorized or ordained leaders.

Discussions about women in leadership often employ terms such as 'egalitarian', 'complementarian' and 'hierarchical'. God created human beings male and female, and I believe that men and women are equal *and* complementary, but not that 'anatomy is destiny' (Freud). Such differences as may exist in physique, genes, hormones or brain anatomy do not necessarily mean that women are 'essentially' different from men in such a way that they are designed to fulfil different roles in society and the Church.

The word 'complementarian' is often used to refer to those who believe that men and women are equal in being but should have different 'roles' in society and the Church. Since this difference means in practice that, for example, men are to lead and women are designed to follow, many people would term this view 'hierarchical'. 'Egalitarian' is used not to imply that men and women are exactly the same in every way except obvious physical differences, but that both should be able to live according to their potential, truly 'complementary' to each other. Men and women are equally saved, equally Spirit-filled and equally sent, and women should not have to live according to rules made up by men, nor should they abdicate their responsibility for recognizing and stating their own needs. To avoid confusion, I have mainly avoided these shorthand terms.

As in social scientific writing, I have used ‘sex’ to refer to what is biologically given, and ‘gender’ when speaking about what seem to be learned or socialized differences between men and women. I use the word ‘patriarchy’ in its usual sense, to refer to a society in which power resides in male hands. It is now commonly acknowledged that patriarchy is deeply entrenched in most societies and pervades all major religions. The question at issue about patriarchy is whether it is ‘inevitable’ and part of God’s design for his world, or whether it is the result of sin—an aspect of human society since the Fall—and therefore part of what should be reversed by the coming of Christ. I discuss this at various points in the book.

—— Part 1 ——

# WOMEN AS LEADERS

Some women leaders wonder ‘Should I be doing this at all?’ Others are told, in one way or another, ‘You may not lead.’ I am convinced that many of the challenges that women face as leaders in the Church stem from the fundamental question of whether women *should* be leaders. Thus, this is the focus of Part 1. Chapter 1 looks at a variety of Bible passages which have been used to bar women from leadership, and the concepts of ‘role’ and ‘headship’, and explores wider issues of biblical interpretation and translation. Chapter 2 considers the question of women as leaders by giving an overview of women leaders in the Old and New Testaments. Many people are unaware of the number of women throughout church history who have been called to leadership roles in the Church, and Chapter 3 tells the stories of some of them.



## Chapter 1

# INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

*‘The heart of the debate pertains to the fundamental mystery of what it means to be a man or a woman.’<sup>1</sup>*

As most readers of this book will know, the question of whether women should be leaders in the Church is a controversial one. Arguments based on scripture about why women should not lead have often held them back from Christian leadership. This is a huge issue and much ink has been spilt over the meaning of individual Greek words. However, little has been published in the last ten years at a popular level—hence this chapter, which draws on a wide range of recent scholarly material to build the case for women being leaders alongside men in the Church.

Anne Townsend, some of whose books I read as a young Christian, has written about the dilemmas of leadership for a woman from an evangelical background. She felt called by God and did what she could do—trained as a doctor and worked as a medical missionary. In her mid-40s she became editor of a Christian magazine and was then headhunted to be the national director of an evangelical charity, at a time when few women held public leadership positions in that constituency of the Church: ‘Female leaders were dangerous, unscriptural creatures, who assumed “headship” over men. They were suspect.’<sup>2</sup>

While that was some years ago, a good many evangelical women still speak of struggles to discern whether their apparent calling to leadership is God’s will or not. Some have the question decided for them: their church will not give them leadership experience, use their gifts fully, encourage them towards further training, or employ them as leaders if they do become accredited or authorized.

## WOMEN PRIESTS, WOMEN PREACHERS?

There are several different but related issues that result in women being denied a variety of leadership roles.

- For some evangelicals, women should not teach or preach (usually, not teach or preach to mixed gatherings of adults) because they believe that this contravenes Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:12. Theoretically such women could be leaders but, where the central event of the gathered church community is preaching, it is difficult for someone who cannot preach to be a leader.
- Others argue that women can teach but cannot be overall leaders: the so-called 'headship' issue. They affirm women's ministry but want to avoid going against this scriptural principle.
- Others argue a variation of this point, that men and women are equal but different, with part of this difference being that they have different God-given roles: 'A man, just by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God. A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood, is called to help for God.'<sup>3</sup> Where the lines are drawn in relation to church leadership varies considerably in practice.
- Some appeal to the Trinity, arguing that women's permanent subordination to men from creation reflects the subordination of Jesus to the Father.
- In churches where tradition carries as much weight as or more than scripture, the fact that there have never been women in leadership positions is given as an argument for not acting differently now.
- In the Catholic wing of the Church, including parts of the Church of England, some believe that a woman cannot represent Christ and so cannot be a priest. Since most priests are leaders of congregations, this effectively bars women from leadership in local churches.

While some of those who see the Bible as placing restrictions on women's leadership argue that women gifted with leadership

ability are encouraged to take on leadership responsibilities within a proper ‘ordering’, or appropriate ‘roles’, this is often difficult to put into practice. All too often, such well-meaning restrictions have the following consequences:

- Able women who are emerging leaders receive mixed messages.
- Language of ‘appropriate difference’ ends up as implying inferiority: women ministers are barred from some areas of ministry, only to be treated more like secretaries or restricted to work with other women.
- Ironically, some women will find that they are more free to minister in other churches without theological objections to their leadership, and may leave in order to use their gifts rather than face the battles in their home churches.

## PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

### How not to decide

How should we decide what is the God-given nature of women, and what God intends for women? The deepest questions of theology and practice are not answered exclusively by exegesis (the interpretation of biblical texts), although most of this chapter looks closely at a number of disputed texts. John Stackhouse has helpfully suggested that the task of theology is to ‘formulate an interpretation that does the best job, relative to other options, of explaining most of the most important data and as much of the remainder as possible’.<sup>4</sup> Anglicans have long employed scripture, tradition and reason; experience, too, must play a part, not in going against scripture but sometimes in helping us to look afresh at what the Bible actually says.

If we are sincerely looking for a biblical perspective on women in leadership, we do not go far before discovering that there are complex matters of language, culture and interpretation involved, a history of

the debate to draw upon—the experience of previous interpreters—and our own prejudices and preconceptions to examine before we can hope to arrive at a decision.

It is worth mentioning a couple of other ways in which people make up their minds about this issue: culture and intuition. Some take today's culture as the norm and support women's leadership in the Church because 'society says' that women can and should lead. But society cannot be assumed to be either right or wrong.

Many women who have felt called to a ministry of preaching or leadership in the Church have relied on their intuition or sense of the Spirit's leading: 'the Spirit says so'. Relying only on intuition can be dangerous; ideally a sense of call combines the subjective inner call and the Church's confirmation of it. In the past, many women did great things for God through obeying what they believed to be his call, despite the Church's attitude to them. Now, however, they should not have to pit their sense of calling against church teaching, when the two should work together. I believe passionately that God's plan has always been for women and men to work together to lead his Church.

### *'Control texts?'*

In the past, some have argued from 'control texts'. For example, one key control text for egalitarians has been Galatians 3:28, used by women and men to defend women's public ministry past and present. The problem with this is that others can pose another control text in response—1 Corinthians 14:34, for example.

Galatians 3:28 suffers badly from mistranslation. We usually read, 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (so TNIV). Paul uses a different word in the third couplet, however, such that it should read 'no male *and* female'. Tom Wright suggests that Paul is quoting Genesis 1:27 ('male and female he created them') as part of his argument in Galatians that males are no longer privileged, thus

circumcision is irrelevant. Thus, Galatians 3:28 emphasizes equality for believers but also challenged the Gnostic propensity to flatten all male–female distinctions by effectively turning women into men.<sup>5</sup> The verse may have long served as a useful shorthand for equality, but we now need to use better arguments than this.

There is a growing consensus that it is important to seek an answer based on the whole trajectory of scripture, and not focus solely on key passages that have resulted in a spiritual slanging match over the last 20–30 years. I want to take a wider view, which includes issues of translation, interpretation and overarching assumptions as much as it concerns individual texts.

### Hermeneutical principles

Although individual texts can only take us so far in establishing the case for women leaders in the Church, it is clearly essential to interpret such verses as fully as possible. As we wrestle with these so-called ‘difficult passages’, it is helpful to keep in mind the following principles for interpretation:

- The Bible is the word of God, and thus we expect to find consistency. One passage of scripture should not be interpreted in such a way as to contradict other passages or the broad sweep of scripture.
- Priority must be given to clear and unambiguous passages over difficult and obscure ones, but the latter must not be ignored.
- Narrative and propositional statements must be interpreted in the light of each other. The type of writing involved must be considered—letters, for example.
- Interpretations must take account of the background and cultural context.
- We need to be aware of our own presuppositions and how they may influence our interpretation.

## Interpreting scripture

- Any interpretation should build on previous work but tradition is not sacrosanct. Any current interpretation may be challenged in the light of new understandings of language, culture or other relevant evidence.
- Application based on any interpretation has to consider how a biblical situation relates to a situation today, and whether a command or practice applied only to its original context or is of permanent and unvarying application.
- We also need to consider whether (in this case) the leadership of women is a doctrine of first order importance or whether it is one where churches may interpret the Bible differently and therefore vary in practice (as in church order, baptism, politics and so on).

## The significance of translation

The Bible translations that we read affect our interpretations (in places, crucially) when they themselves depend on prior theological questions. Languages do not have a one-to-one relationship to another, as most of us discovered at school when trying to translate French or German. Language structures differ, and there are some inadequacies of language; for example, English has ‘his/her’ in the singular but only one plural (‘they’) for men, women or both. Changes have taken place in English usage such that ‘man’ meaning both man and woman is no longer the norm, and ‘men’ is now assumed to mean ‘male people’.

We cannot ignore this shift if we want to communicate meaningfully. For example, if the word ‘brothers’ is used to translate *adelphoi* when, as Howard Marshall has argued,<sup>6</sup> Paul was addressing mixed groups, then we are misleading our readers. The correct translation of *adelphoi* is normally ‘brothers and sisters’, except where the context requires otherwise. To use only ‘brothers’ suggests (unintentionally or perhaps intentionally) that some of Paul’s teaching about discipleship and leadership was addressed only to men.

All biblical translators are influenced not only by their cultural presuppositions but also, often, by theological understanding. This in turn influences the translation of particular words or phrases, which in turn again influences how readers form their theology from what they read. Hence, faulty theology can be based on mistranslation. Here are some examples of how different translations of various words and phrases related to women's ministry have far-reaching implications.

*Was Phoebe a servant or a leader ?*

In Romans 16:1–2, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae. *Diakonos* can mean 'servant' but it is a masculine word not normally applied to female servants. Consider the difference in implication between the word 'servant' (used in NIV and KJV) and 'deaconess' (RSV), 'deacon' (NRSV and TNIV) or one 'who holds office' (NEB).

*Can women pass on Paul's teaching to others?*

2 Timothy 2:2 says, 'The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable *men* who will also be qualified to teach others' (NIV). Paul uses the word *anthropos* here, which could refer to humanity in general, or to a group of men and women, or to a group of men. If Paul clearly intended a group of men, he could have used the word *aner*. Hence NRSV translates, '... entrust to faithful *people*', which leaves it open for this question to be decided on the basis of other texts.

*Women deacons?*

1 Timothy 3:8–12 lists the qualifications for deacons, but who are the 'women' in verse 11? The TNIV reads, 'In the same way the women are to be worthy of respect', with a footnote to *women* which

## Interpreting scripture

reads 'Probably women who are deacons'. There is good linguistic evidence for translating the Greek *gynē* as 'woman' rather than 'wife' here, yet many translations use 'wife', taking it for granted that it is deacons' wives who are referred to.

The rest of this chapter focuses on two passages of scripture commonly used to restrict women's speaking ministry, before going on to look at issues around 'headship' and role subordination, which are held by some to rule out women as leaders.