

**Series:** Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

**Sermon:** What is the Role of Women in the Church?

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:34, 35; 1 Tim 2:8-15

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A language instructor was explaining to her class that Latin or French nouns, unlike their English counterparts, are grammatically designated as masculine or feminine. Things like “chalk” or “pencil” have a gender association, although in English these words are all neutral. Puzzled, one student raised his hand and asked, “What gender is ‘computer’?” The teacher wasn’t certain and so divided the class into two groups (male and female) and asked them to decide if the term “computer” should be masculine or feminine. Both groups were asked to give four reasons for their recommendation. The group of women concluded that computers should be referred to in the masculine gender for the following four reasons:

1. They store a lot of data, but are still clueless.
2. They are supposed to help you solve your problems, but half the time they ARE the problem.
3. As soon as you commit to one, you realize that if you had waited a little longer you could have had a better model.
4. And in order to get anything out of them, you have to turn them on.

The group of men, on the other hand, decided computers should definitely be referred to in the feminine gender because:

1. No one but their Creator understands their internal logic.
2. The native language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else.
3. Even your smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for later retrieval.
4. As soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

Now I thought, given my topic today, it might help to start with a little humor. You see, the topic of gender roles is a minefield many pastors consider too risky to cross, and I understand their hesitancy. It’s not without good reason that I am starting my study month tomorrow!

It should be obvious that we cannot look to society for help in resolving the gender controversy, for the positions staked out there are pretty extreme. On the one side we have the women’s liberation movements like NOW, the National Organization of Women, NARAL, the National Abortion Rights Action League, and WITCH, the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (I hope we don’t have too many charter members of *that* one in our congregation

today).

Some of the rhetoric erupting from these groups today evidences absolute insanity (if I may share my humble opinion). And the fact that these groups are fighting not only for legitimate rights of equal pay and equal opportunity for women, but also for abortion rights, gay rights, transgender rights, and animal rights, shows that the women's movement as a whole has gone ballistic on rights, and has lost sight of meaningful goals to correct the wrongs perpetrated upon women, of which there have certainly been many.

On the other extreme, however, there are those who are completely indifferent to the tremendous inequities in our society and don't seem to care that qualified women are often not allowed to advance in the business world, are not paid the same as men who do the same job, and do not get equal protection under the law, and that doesn't even touch the way women are treated in Islam or in the Third World.

Nor do we find much help in the church in resolving the gender controversy, for the same extremes are often found there. In some denominations biblical teaching is flat-out dismissed as chauvinistic discrimination, and women are eligible to hold every position from pastor to elder to denominational executive. This summer a woman was elected as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States (in effect, the Archbishop), sticking a finger in the eye of the worldwide Anglican movement. In some mainline denominations local churches are actually *required* to elect a certain quota of women as elders under threat of church discipline or legal action.

On the other hand, there are some conservative churches where women are not allowed to speak publicly, to pray in mixed audiences, or to exercise their spiritual gifts except in the nursery, children's programs, or women's ministries. Men hold every office and every committee chairmanship, and they make every decision. In some, women are required to wear a head covering when they come to worship to signify their submission to their husbands.

I would argue that if there is any hope of coming to grips with this hot topic, that hope lies in God's Word, not in social customs or even in church tradition. But even the Bible is not easy to understand on this topic. There are statements in Scripture that seem to be totally liberating to women, like Galatians 3:28, where it says that in the church "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." But in other places we read that "it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:35). How do those two fit together? In 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul says that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." And yet the same writer, Paul, validates women praying and prophesying in the church, so long as they wear a head covering: "Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head . . .", but clearly he doesn't object to them praying or proclaiming truth.

In my library I have a dozen books by evangelical authors who differ radically from one another on their interpretation of these passages. Even in our own seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where every professor believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, there are widely

differing views on the role of women in the church and even on women's ordination. And I acknowledge that there is a difference in opinion also among the leaders of this church. Thus I suggest that this is one area of doctrine where all of us could use a large dose of humility and caution. Anyone who speaks with strong dogmatism on the topic is actually demonstrating his ignorance.

With that as background, allow me to start our study by asking us to honestly look at the dilemma godly women face.

### **Godly women face a difficult dilemma in the area of church leadership.**

That dilemma can be expressed by two presuppositions and a question:

1. God has given women all the spiritual gifts He has given men.
2. God has called women to be in submission in the home and in the church.
3. So how is a godly woman to exercise her gifts while living in obedience to God's Word?

**1. God has given women all the spiritual gifts He has given men.** I believe strongly that God has distributed the spiritual gifts without regard to gender. Furthermore, when I look out over the audience in this or any evangelical church, I find virtually no distinction between men and women in regard to leadership, teaching ability, evangelism, mercy, encouragement, etc. And that should not surprise us, for we see the same thing in the story line of Scripture. I have always found it fascinating how many women were among the valued fellow-workers of the two most prominent figures in the NT—Jesus and Paul.

**2. God has called women to be in submission in the home and in the church.** I'm aware, of course, that this is not a popular concept in the world today and, in fact, is not even very popular in the church. But I don't know how a person can deny it on any biblical basis. I've read some of the attempts to explain submission away but remain unconvinced. Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 speak to submission in the home, while 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 speak to submission in the church.

But while I don't see how one can deny the biblical notion of submission, I do see how one can easily misunderstand it. The traditional concept of submission has too often been that women are to be seen and not heard. The husband is to make all the decisions for his family and determine its direction, while the male leaders of the church are to do the same for the spiritual family. Women can care for the home and the children and can teach children or other women, but they are not to be involved in leadership. That's pretty much the long and short of what submission has meant to many.

However, I believe true biblical submission means simply that God has assigned the *ultimate* responsibility for leadership in the home to the husband, and the *ultimate* responsibility for leadership in the church to male elders. I purposely call it responsibility rather than privilege because that is exactly what it is. Many men do not like the responsibility they are given at

home or at church, because it is at times a heavy burden to carry. But God has not given us the option of surrendering that responsibility, and if men do so, they do it to their own harm, as well as the harm of their family and church.

Now you can argue that it isn't fair (there's that powerful modern argument again) that God should assign the ultimate responsibility for leadership in the home and church to one gender, without any consideration of the particular leadership ability of the individuals involved. But I do not believe this was an arbitrary decision by God. Being our Creator He knows better than we who is constitutionally better equipped for ultimate responsibility and authority in the home and church.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there are creative ways for gifted women to use their leadership without usurping the ultimate authority of their husbands or the elders. I preached a message during a series on the life of David that showed how Abigail did this so creatively. The sermon was entitled, "*How to Lead When You're Not the Leader.*"<sup>2</sup>

Now if I am correct that God has gifted women the same way He has men, but also correct that God has called women to be in submission in the home and in the church, what are they to do with the resulting dilemma?

**3. So what is a godly woman to do who wants to exercise her gifts and still live in obedience to God's Word?** Some women have resolved the dilemma by squelching their spiritual giftedness (or having it squelched by men). Others have resolved it by ignoring the biblical teaching on submission and headship. Both of these approaches are harmful to the church, and I think there is a better way. But before sharing that, I would like to observe that a Christian woman's struggle has been complicated by the fact that western society has changed dramatically in its attitude toward women in the last three or four decades. Much of that change has been positive, as women have made great progress toward gaining equal treatment before the law, equal opportunity in business, and equal wages for the same work. Some of the changes have not been healthy, as women have been pressured to enter the work world in record numbers, leaving child rearing to institutions.

But the progress women have achieved in society at large has been used to put tremendous pressure on the Christian home and Christian church to adopt a whole new paradigm for the woman's role. The argument is being made, "Since women's absolute equality of role has been accepted (at least in theory) in business, in government, in the military, in academia, and virtually everywhere else, it ought to be accepted in the home and in the church."

The problem with such reasoning is that God hasn't put any restrictions that I know of on the role of women in the work world or the military or academia; but it does appear that He *has* put certain restrictions on her role in the home and church.<sup>3</sup> The ideal approach at this point would be, of course, to examine all the relevant Scripture passages and demonstrate where and to what extent those restrictions apply. The problem is that these are very difficult passages which would probably take a sermon each to deal with them adequately. So instead I want to take a more theological approach (there will be lots of footnotes on the website for the sake of those who want to really delve into the details!).

Within evangelicalism there are two principal theological answers as to what a godly woman is

to do who wants to exercise her gifts and still live in obedience to God's Word regarding the woman's role in the church. There is the egalitarian answer and the complementarian answer. Egalitarians believe in total equality for women, including ordination to pastoral ministry. The complementarians believe the Bible teaches that women are fundamentally different from men (not inferior, but different) and that they should not hold the ultimate position of authority in the church or home.

### **The egalitarian answer to the Christian woman's dilemma**

Their basic response is that there really is no dilemma because God puts no restrictions on the woman's role. The creation story in Genesis 1 makes no distinction between woman and man insofar as both are equally made in His image (which they call ontological equality), and both are given the responsibility to rule over His creation (functional equality). They claim it is sin that introduced hierarchy into the relationship between woman and man. Because of the Fall, woman developed a disposition of subservience to the man, and the man developed a disposition of supremacy over the woman. But Galatians 3:28 expresses the grand truth that in Christ the false and sinful history of male-female hierarchy has been abolished, so there is no legitimate distinction in God's kingdom between female and male. Full equality is restored, dignity is given back to women, and servant attitudes are called for in men and women alike.

Egalitarians focus on many examples of apparent male/female equality in the Bible. In ancient Israel there were female leaders, like Miriam, Huldah, and Deborah. The Proverbs 31 woman seems to be the equal of any man in her faithful service to the Lord and provision for her home. In the NT we find many women as partners in ministry with Jesus and Paul. In Acts 18:26 Priscilla (named first) and her husband Aquila took Apollos aside "and explained to him the way of God more accurately." Paul commends two other women: Phoebe, who seems to be a deacon in the church, and Junia who is named as "outstanding among the apostles" (not one of the Twelve, but apparently gifted as an apostle). Lydia was apparently a church planter.

I personally, however, remain unconvinced by the egalitarian position and am much more comfortable in the complementarian camp.<sup>4</sup>

### **The complementarian answer to the Christian woman's dilemma**

The complementarian believes that male and female were created by God as equal in dignity, value, essence and human nature, but distinct in role, whereby the male is given the responsibility of loving authority over the female in the home and in the church, and the female is to offer willing and submissive assistance to the man. In other words, they have a complementary relationship; i.e. they complement one another.

The complementarian believes that Genesis 3, rather than presenting hierarchy itself as sinful, teaches that God established the order of male headship and female submission, but that sin produced disruption in it, whereby (1) the woman became inclined to usurp the man's rightful

place of authority over her, and (2) the man became inclined to misuse his rights of headship, either by sinful abdication of them, or by abusing his right to rule through harsh, cruel and exploitative domination of the woman.

Galatians 3:28 is obviously a key verse for both camps (“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”). The complementarian understands it to say that God’s plan of redemption involves no distinction between male and female. Gender is absolutely irrelevant regarding who may or may not be saved or sanctified, but not necessarily in regard to roles. The complementarian takes the restrictions put on women (1 Cor. 11, 14, and 1 Tim 2) with more seriousness than the egalitarian and refuses to dispense with them as merely culturally conditioned.

This issue of cultural interpretation is such an important concept in this discussion that I feel the need to focus our attention on it for a few moments.

### **We must distinguish between what is timeless and what is merely cultural.**

Let me explain, first of all, the difference between timeless or “normative” truth and “cultural” truth.

**Timeless (normative) truth is for the whole church for all time.** An example would be the command “love one another.” That is applicable to men and women, Jew or Gentile, white or black, 1st or 21st century. It is truth for everybody, everywhere, and always.

**Cultural Truth is for certain people at certain times, but not for all people at all times.** An example of a cultural truth might be Paul’s exhortation about braided hair in 1 Timothy 2:9: “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.” Apparently there was something about braided hair in the first century that was culturally significant and negative. But I don’t know anyone who would suggest that such a prohibition should apply today. In fact, in the extremely conservative churches in which I grew up, it was normal for the godliest of women to braid their hair and wear it in a bun on the top of their heads.

The task of the Bible student when he comes to a passage that has heavy cultural aspects is to get beyond what is merely cultural to the normative principle behind it. The braiding of hair was merely cultural, but the principle of modesty, which braided hair apparently violated in the first century, is normative and timeless. Consider the teaching of 1 Cor. 11, where it tells women to wear a head covering when they are praying or prophesying in church. What is normative and what is cultural? Well, when women go out in public today in Wichita without wearing a head covering, is that a sign of rebellion against their husbands? Hardly, except for the strictest Muslims. I suggest that the head covering is merely cultural, while respect and submission is the normative principle.

In all of these passages on the woman's role there seem to be both cultural issues and timeless, normative principles. I would like to share three of the normative principles that I think are the most important.

### **Normative truths about male/female roles.**

**1. Men and women are equal in dignity, worth and spiritual usefulness.** I see no hint in any biblical passage that a woman is a second-class citizen in God's kingdom. If Paul is seen against the background of the sexist society he lived in, he comes off as a courageous liberationist, not a chauvinist or anti-feminist. The very fact that he mentions women praying and prophesying in the church shows that he is breaking with the traditions of both Judaism and paganism. Clearly the gifts of the Spirit are not limited to men. Men and women are spiritual equals.

But you may ask, "How can men and women be equal in value if the husband is viewed as the head or if the elders have to be men?" The mere fact of male headship in no way signifies inequality or inferiority for women, and the best way to demonstrate that is by appeal to the Trinity. God the Father is in a position of headship over Christ, but Jesus is in no way inferior to His Father. In fact, in two of Paul's letters, Philippians and Colossians, he tells us that Jesus Christ was "in very nature God."

In reality, headship and submission never imply superiority or inferiority. Think about all the examples of submission mentioned in Scripture: citizens subject to civil authorities, employees to employers, church members to the elders, children to their parents, the church to Christ, wives to their husbands, and Christians to one another. And *in no case* is inferiority even hinted at.<sup>5</sup> These examples should suffice to show us that women are equal to men in God's eyes—in dignity, worth, and spiritual usefulness.

**2. Men and women are not functionally equal.** Perhaps we could relate these two truths in the following way: "In Christ there is no male or female, but in the home and in the church, there *is* male and female." What we are saying here is that it is possible to have equality of being and equality of spirituality while maintaining a certain distinctiveness in roles.

The fact is that women who took leadership over men in the OT did so rarely, and always in response to a lack of male leadership. Jesus chose Twelve Apostles and all of them were men. The Holy Spirit used over forty writers to convey God's Word to us in the Scriptures, and everyone of them was a man. These facts, along with specific teaching in several NT passages, seem to convey that the role of ultimate spiritual leadership in the family of God is most suitable for men, even though women play a very strong supporting role (and even on occasion are raised up by God to take the man's role when no man is willing to do it).

**3. The Church should not violate cultural norms needlessly.** This is a very important point that Paul makes in 1 Cor. 11, but to communicate it effectively I need to set the historical

landscape for you. In the first century women were generally viewed as inferior to men and often treated no better than property. They were not esteemed highly enough to take an active part in religious activities, except, of course, as sacred prostitutes. This was a dreadful situation, but that's how it was. Into this world came Christianity, announcing to women that God loved them and Christ died for them, just as much as for their husbands and brothers. When women repent of their sins and trust Christ as their Savior, they become joint heirs with men. And husbands are to treat them with honor; in fact, if they fail to do so, God won't hear their prayers (1 Peter 3:7).

This new taste of spiritual freedom was a sweet wine to the Christian women of Corinth. But some were immature, and they allowed their freedom to be carried to unfortunate extremes. They decided they had been downtrodden long enough and began a miniature social revolution of their own. (Some of you thought that the feminist movement began in October, 1968 with Betty Friedan, but as a matter of fact it actually began 1900 years earlier in the city of Corinth). The motto of these ladies was, "Burn your veil!" They were not so much concerned with getting the Lord's work done as with the heady possibility of becoming "liberated women." Paul knew that if these women continued to push the envelope, it would wreak havoc on the church's reputation, and he didn't want to give unnecessary offense to outsiders. So he told them to stop pushing.

Many mainline churches feel they should be on the cutting edge of the rights movements—civil rights, women's rights, worker's rights, homosexual rights, native American rights, animal rights, etc. But Paul didn't think so. Certainly the Church should not drag its feet on basic human freedoms, but its primary function is never political or social or economic, but spiritual. Any other approach would make it that much more difficult to accomplish its essential tasks.

But I have a probing question to ask: is it possible that some conservative churches today are just as guilty as the liberal ones when it comes to violating cultural norms needlessly—only in the opposite direction? When churches use only men as ushers or to serve communion or to chair committees or to teach Bible classes (but without a clear biblical basis for these restrictions), does that not amount to unnecessary offense to women in our culture?

Let me conclude this morning with the following proposition:

**Christianity is the greatest liberating force for women in history, but God has nevertheless assigned headship to men in the home and church.**

I call Christianity a liberating force for women despite the recent allegation of a leading feminist that "Religion in general and Christianity in particular has been for women the single most iniquitous force in history." The basis for my dispute with her lies in the understanding of liberation. If liberation means the removal of all restraints so that a person can do whatever she wants, whether or not it is moral or beneficial, then she is right. But if liberation means the ability to become all God intended, and to reach the highest achievements consistent with one's

own good and what is morally right, then I am right.<sup>6</sup>

**Conclusion:** Now my time is up, but I cannot close without mentioning that in the church today there are two basic approaches to this issue of the woman's role. Some churches tell women they cannot do anything God doesn't specifically assign to them. Others tell women they can minister in any way God doesn't specifically forbid. The latter is the right approach in my estimation. That would leave out only serving as an elder (which includes the role of preaching pastor).

Now I'm sure that doesn't answer all your questions, so I will address some of the practical questions that may arise in the web copy of this sermon,<sup>7</sup> but I trust it does establish a frame of mind (and heart) that allows us to affirm the godly, gifted women in this church. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. We want to unleash our women under the loving, servant-leadership of elders and husbands who are willing to empower their wives and daughters to "be and to become all they can be in Christ."

Friends, there are women all over this country who ache in their deepest core to serve God with all their gifts and all their abilities, but without violating God's Word. They trust and risk and sacrifice in places near and far, and we all owe them a great deal of humble gratitude. At the same time, I wish things weren't so hard for women who feel called to ministry. I wish the Bible had clearer guidelines and I wish churches, both liberal and conservative, were less hardened in their positions. It would avoid a lot of hurt and confusion. But wishing can't make it so—so we carry on in faith, learning to listen and love and include whenever possible, *as Jesus did*, those who are outside the established rhythms of power and influence.

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i. I suspect one of His reasons for assigning leadership in the home and church to the male gender was to avoid bloodshed. Instead of both people in every marriage relationship slugging it out to see who is going to be the Chairman of the Board, God settled it in advance by assigning that role to the husband. And instead of men and women fighting over who is going to have the principal public role of leadership in the church, God settled it in advance by assigning that to the Elders, who, according to Scripture, should be men.

2. Sermon preached August 15, 2004 and available at [www.firstfreewichita.org/sermondetail.asp?ID=40](http://www.firstfreewichita.org/sermondetail.asp?ID=40).

3. When I say He has restricted the woman's role, I do not mean that He has declared her inferior; on the contrary, I think He has actually elevated her. The true Biblical concept of submission has provided women the best of two worlds—the opportunity to exercise leadership *without* the excessive responsibility that goes with ultimate authority. God has also restricted men's roles to mutual submission and sacrificial service as the means of fulfilling the

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responsibilities God has given them. The jobs are different, but the means and heart and mind of Christ are the same.

4. Egalitarians are certainly not biblical illiterates, and they have a rational response to every objection that is raised to their position of total equality. Let me share just one example of an objection, along with their response:

Objection: You say that Jesus broke with cultural expectations and norms in permitting women participation with Him in ministry and witness to the Gospel. Why, then, did He not break with those same conventions and choose some women apostles? His choice of all male apostles suggests that He endorsed the tradition of male leadership.

Response: Jesus *began* the process of restoration of women to their place of full equality, a process seen continuing in the early church. Jesus knew that only a certain degree of break with tradition would be tolerated by first-century culture, and if He went too far in pressing for change he would lose the opportunity to teach and travel freely as He did. A parallel case can be seen in that Paul fails to denounce slavery, although clearly he sees it to be at odds with the freedom of the gospel.

5. Jesus was a revolutionary in the way He related to women. He treated them with great respect, and no word of depreciation or chauvinistic humor about women ever fell from his lips. Some of the women closely associated with him in His ministry were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Mary the mother of James, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, plus many unnamed women, like the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, and the Syro-Phoenician woman. He also frequently used women as positive examples in His parables. When we turn from Jesus to the rest of the NT, we again see women making key contributions in the early church. In the 16th chapter of Romans Paul salutes 25 church members, a third of whom are women, and he praises them for their labor in the Lord. Other important women include Tabitha, Lydia, Elizabeth, Priscilla, and of course, Mary the Mother of Jesus, the noblest woman of all.

6. An analogy may help. We hear a great deal today about sexual liberation. No longer is society arbitrarily limiting sexual expression to marriage, or to heterosexual relationships, or even to other humans. But friends, is this liberation? No? This so-called freedom can only lead to moral enslavement in the chains of sin. The same concept applies to the liberation of women. Women may succeed in getting not only equal pay, equal job opportunities, and equal protection under the law (which I believe they deserve), but they may also achieve functional equality in the home and in the church, but they will do so to their own detriment. That is, they may succeed in throwing off the headship principle which God has instituted for the home and the church, but all of us will suffer if that happens.

7. Practical issues: I personally have no problem with any involvement by women in the music ministry of the church (in our Venezuelan Free churches the song-leaders are almost always

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women, and can those people sing!). I see nothing objectionable to women's involvement in Sunday School, children's clubs, prayer meetings, home Bible studies, or church committees. I believe there were women deacons in the NT and that is why First Free allows women on the Deaconate. (When we adopted a new set of By-Laws in 2005 an amendment from the floor was moved, seconded and passed to restrict women from the position of Trustee. As the Pastor of the church I respect the congregational decision-making process and agree to support the decisions, but I believe this was a mistake).

I personally believe a woman could legitimately fill any position on staff other than preaching pastor. They can legitimately sit on any committee, and even serve as chairperson of that committee. I believe they can fill any area of service, including jobs generally filled by men—like ushering or serving communion. We have always had men serve communion, but that is because we have generally asked the Elders to serve in this capacity, but I know of no biblical reason why that task should be restricted to Elders.

The question of women teaching an adult class of both men and women often comes up. Frankly, I think the restrictions on women teaching are for the church at worship, not necessarily for all of its meetings. To my knowledge there was nothing quite like an Adult Bible Fellowship or LBI class in the Apostolic Church, so we cannot know for certain how Paul would have handled such a question. Our Elders have permitted women to teach under their authority, and I am comfortable with that. If a woman's teaching is challenged by a man in the class, I would expect the Elders to resolve the matter so as not to force her into a position of final authority.

In each area of service I think the church should simply find the best qualified person who is available for the job. There are multitudinous opportunities of service for women in this Church, not to mention those areas where only a woman can serve, such as in Women's Ministry leadership. Yet at the same time God has given us excellent leadership among the men of the church, and I think we should capitalize on that. If I were in a church in which male leadership was lacking or non-existent, I would not hesitate to call upon qualified women to fill the gaps, except for elder.