**Man and Woman in Christ Core Seminar**

**Week 9 – Church (Part 1): Life and Leadership in God’s Family**

**Introduction**

Today we begin a two-part study of how sexual difference affects the life of the church. This morning we’ll focus on the church as a family. For all who are in Christ, God is our Father, Jesus is our elder brother, and we are all brothers and sisters. The better we understand the church as a family, the better we’ll understand the role that sexual difference plays in the life of the church.

So we’ll focus on two main realities: life in the family of God, and leadership in the family of God. First, life in the family of God.

**I. Life in the Family of God**

Throughout this core seminar we’ve seen that the family is instituted by God as part of the fabric of creation. One of the chief reasons God created us male and female is so that we would form marriages, procreate children, and raise them to know and serve God. But we’ve also seen that the family is not ultimate. Jesus’ and the apostle Paul’s examples and teaching on singleness for the kingdom has shown us that there are ways of living as Christians that point not back to creation, but forward to the new creation. Jesus’s teaching about the family of God does the same thing: it shows that the way we as Christians live is not limited to natural realities but rooted in supernatural realities.

For instance, early in his ministry, during one crowded teaching session, Jesus’s mother and brothers were standing outside, trying to get in to see him. But then Jesus says, in Mark 3:33–35, “‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’

Here Jesus redefines his own family and ours. He’s not denying the family relationships he already has; instead, he’s pointing to a new, spiritual reality. He’s saying that everyone who trusts in him and obeys God’s commands is his family, and therefore one family with each other. The loyalty, obligation, care, and affection we have for our natural families now extends to every member of Jesus’s spiritual family.

And, as Jesus frequently teaches throughout the Gospels, sometimes loyalty to Christ and his spiritual family will conflict with loyalty to your natural family. If your natural family commands you to do something Christ prohibits, or prohibits you from doing something Christ commands, you must obey Christ rather than your family. This potential conflict accounts for why Jesus frequently speaks about his disciples having to “hate” our own families. Luke 14:26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Jesus doesn’t mean *hate* literally, as in despise or mistreat. Instead, he means, *give lesser loyalty than you give to me*. He means that we are to be *even more committed* to him than to our natural families. And our families will sometimes *consider* that to be hatred.

Which means that sometimes following Jesus faithfully will cost you dearly with your natural family, whether their approval, affection, support, or resources. Consider Mark 10:28 to 30,

Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Here Jesus contemplates a wide range of sacrifices his followers will make because they place loyalty to him above loyalty to their natural families. And notice what Jesus says we receive in response. He doesn’t *merely* say that we will be rewarded with eternal life in the age to come. Though, he does say that, and that reward is our ultimate hope. In addition, he also says, *of this present time*, that we will receive *a hundredfold* in houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions.

Jesus is talking about the local church as the family of God. Your own mother may reject and cast you out, but in the local church you get a hundred spiritual mothers. You may never have children of your own, but in the local church you can have hundreds of spiritual children. You may suffer hardship because your family’s rejection cuts you off from resources and a financial future, but in the local church you will receive abundant provision and support.

That the church is a family is also evident in the apostle Paul’s constant references to Christians as brothers and sisters. In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul even calls the local church the “household of God”: the local church is, as it were, the *place* where we live out our family relationships together. Not the building, but the people. And our differences, including our sexual differences and differing natural family relationships, influence how we relate to one another in church.

Consider 1 Timothy 5, verses 1 through 8:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

And then Paul gives further qualifications for widows who should be provided for by the church, and concludes in verse 16, “If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.”

We can draw several principles from this passage for how our sexual difference, and differences of natural family resources and obligations, should impact the life of the church.

*First, natural family relationships are a model for relationships in Christ’s spiritual family.* That’s the point of verses 1 and 2. We learn how to treat older and younger men, older and younger women *in the church* from how we should already relate to them *as members of families*. Distinctions that pertain to the natural family aren’t *erased* in the church, but *extended* into the church. This brings both gifts and obligations.

Second, the church should *supply what is lacking* in people’s natural families. Paul is careful to insist that believers *provide for the members of their own households*. He says so strongly in verse 8. And he is equally careful to insist that *believers in need be appropriately provided for by their natural families*. In caring for widows, Paul insists that the church shouldn’t supplant or displace the natural family. If a widow has surviving relatives outside the church, *they should care for her*. But where someone is genuinely left without support or resources, the church should provide all that they need. In other words, the church does not *take the place* of individual natural households.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, the church *supplies what is lacking* in the support that our households are willing or able to give.

What does it look like in practice for the church to live as God’s family? We could spend hours applying this point. Here are just a few sketches of application, in terms of *how we can provide for each other.*

* As members of a local church, we should provide for each other’s physical needs, including financial needs.
* We should provide hospitality, welcome into each other’s homes, shared meals, a shared *life*.
* We should all provide for each other counsel and wisdom, as Paul assumes we will in Romans 15:14, and instructs us to in Ephesians 4:15–16.
* We should share with each other the *competence* that the Lord has given us in different areas of life. Maybe you grew up without a father to teach you how to navigate the world. Or your family was so broken that it left you with all kinds of disorienting scars and struggles. For those of us who struggle with some of the daily tasks of life, or struggle to sustain and support ourselves, the church should provide a “community of abundant competence,” as Jake Meador puts it.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* As members of the same church, we should provide care in trials, suffering, illness, and even death. Visiting those who are sick. Caring and consoling and encouraging those whose health is declining. Helping each other prepare for death and dying well.
* Older men in the church should provide fatherly protection and provision, counsel and care, especially for single women, and especially for single women who do not have a father who is actively involved in their life.
* All of us can serve as “other-parents” for children in the church. For parents, one of the most challenging, discouraging aspects of life in the modern West is the glaring lack of what anthropologists call “alloparents,” or “other-parents.” In traditional societies, children are cared for by siblings, cousins, aunts, grandmothers, neighbors, and many others, providing regular relief for parents, especially for mothers. But the structures of modern life have isolated us from each other. They’ve sent most of us into schools and offices for most of the day. This has rendered parents—especially mothers, especially stay-at-home moms—radically lonely and spread thin. The need for *other-parents* is great and constant. It makes a huge difference to a family’s life when a church member proactively finds ways to care for their children.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* And we can all be not only *alloparents* but *spiritual parents*. Through discipling less mature believers, men serve as spiritual fathers and women as spiritual mothers. Fulfilling Jesus’s great commission, where we teach *all* his followers to obey *everything* he commanded, requires every believer to become a spiritual father or mother to others.

***Any questions about what we’ve covered so far?***

**II. Leadership in the Family of God**

Now we’ll consider how sexual difference, and the backdrop of the natural family, inform the question of *leadership* in the family of God. First, let’s consider Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11 to 15. This passage raises more questions than we have time to answer here, but the main thrust of its teaching is plain. We’ll address some key points now, then others after we consider some of Paul’s other teaching on eldership. For more in-depth studies, you can see the resources we’ve recommended on the back of the handout.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

We’ll make four brief points to unfold the passage.

*First, Paul explicitly prohibits women from teaching men in the corporate gatherings of the church, and, by implication, limits the office of elder to men.* Here in verse 12 Paul does *not* prohibit women from teaching men in every context or setting. We know that because, in Ephesians 4:15-16, he commands *all believers* to speak truth in love to each other. In Colossians 3:16, he instructs all believers, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” So there’s a sense in which *all believers* are to teach *all other believers*. And Paul worked closely with Priscilla and Aquila, about whom we learn in Acts 18:26, “He [that is, Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” In other words, Paul knew of women believers *privately* teaching men, and did not object but endorsed that ministry.

Paul’s prohibition pertains to *public, authoritative* teaching, not *private, informal* teaching.

This helps make sense of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

As we’ll see shortly, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul permits women to pray and prophesy in church. How then are they here prohibited from speaking? That seems to be because the speaking in view is *the authoritative evaluation of what has been said by prophets*. This evaluation is a form of authoritative public teaching. In other words, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul does not prohibit women from *all speech in church*, but from authoritative instruction.

And, since Paul explicitly prohibits women from publicly teaching men, he *implicitly* but necessarily prohibits them from serving as elders. That’s because one of the key roles of elders is publicly teaching God’s word, as we see from the requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9 that elders must be “able to teach.”

Before getting to our second point, here’s a quick sidebar on some prudent principles for applying this restriction, and an account of how we try to do this at CHBC.

First principle, when in doubt or in a gray area, recognize the wisdom and value of creating a counter-culture. On the one hand, we want to avoid being stricter than Scripture and needlessly restricting our sisters from roles they are permitted to serve in. On the other hand, we want to develop a church culture that helps us all see and feel Scripture’s teaching as good and normal rather than weird and harmful.

Second principle, the more a form of teaching resembles a Sunday sermon, the more we should restrict it to men.

Third principle, the more a context for teaching *resembles* or *is connected to* a church gathering, the more we should restrict it to men.

So, very practically, at CHBC, this means that we have only men preach from the pulpit on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. We have only men teach Core Seminars, since they represent the church’s official teaching ministry and are closely connected to the church’s gathering. And we have only men lead mixed-gender small groups, since they are an official teaching ministry of the church and can involve an element of spiritual authority and oversight.

*Second, Paul prohibits women from exercising spiritual authority over men in the church.* We should understand this to exclude women from providing the kind of authoritative spiritual oversight and direction in the church that is an aspect of elders’ ministry. In other words, “exercising authority” is distinct from, but closely related to, publicly teaching God’s word. And this kind of spiritual authority is inherent to the pastoral office.

*Third, Paul grounds this limitation in the order of creation.* Some scholars have argued that Paul was only making a temporary concession to cultural norms. Others argue that his prohibition of women teaching was rooted in a temporary, local circumstance of widespread false teaching. In other words, both of those views hold that Paul’s prohibition is limited and relative, not absolute and binding on all Christians everywhere. But those arguments run aground on the fact that Paul roots his prohibition in the created order. Paul does this in two ways.

First, he appeals to Adam having been created first, in verse 13, as a witness to a relational order between men and women. This reflects the logic of Genesis itself, as we saw in Week 1.

Second, Paul’s reference to Eve being deceived *does not* imply that Eve was, or all women are, are intrinsically more able to be deceived. After all, in the Garden, neither Adam nor Eve yet possessed any inclination to evil. And in several places, like 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:15, and Titus 2:3–4, Paul commends women’s teaching of women and children. It would be hard to understand Paul’s confidence in women in those places if he thought women were by nature more prone to being deceived. Instead, Paul’s point is that, in Satan’s deceiving Eve, the order of creation was overturned. Instead of Adam and Eve ruling over the serpent, they were subverted by it. Instead of Adam instructing and leading Eve, he was passively misled by her. Instead of Eve helping and following her husband, she became the occasion of his temptation and fall. Instead of Adam leading Eve to rule the creature, the creature deceived Eve into instigating her husband’s disobedience.

*Fourth, Paul points to women’s distinct vocation in the natural family as a pathway for sanctification.* Verse 15 has been interpreted in many ways, and it’s certainly a difficult passage to pin down. But we think the most likely meaning is that Paul is referring to women’s typical, characteristic calling within the natural family: bearing and raising children. He’s not saying that all women are mothers, or that mothering is women’s only calling. Nor is he saying that motherhood is itself saving. Instead, he’s pointing to childbearing as a key venue for the good works that prove and demonstrate a believer’s salvation.

To continue unfolding Scripture’s teaching on how sexual difference bears on leadership in the church, let’s look at two aspects of the qualifications for elders, in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:4–5:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, *the husband of one wife*, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.

He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?

First, in verse 2, notice that Paul assumes elders will be male, and he assumes they will be married. This is not an absolute requirement that elders be married, since Paul commends the advantages of singleness for the kingdom in 1 Corinthians 7. But his assumption that elders are male does seem to be absolute. After all, he gives no instruction for an elder to be *the wife of one husband*.

Second, Paul treats a man’s leadership of his family as a formative context and proving ground of his leadership in the church. This assumes a strong analogy between the natural family and the church as family. The kind of leadership that will enable a family to flourish is the kind of leadership that will enable a church to flourish. Here’s how one pastor-theologian helpfully put it,

Such a norm is valuable in part because it proves that a man has the proper affections, habits, and experience of male leadership in his own family – and these same things are necessary for holding the office of *[elder]* in the church. In the Pastoral epistles, the marriage of a Christian pastor is . . . an aspect of his male existence within the context of the family. By his work, his marital and paternal relationships, and his experience as an authority within the gendered sphere of the natural family, a man is shaped into a leader fit for the church. He has a demonstrated ability to take care of others, including his wife.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In other words, one reason why only men may be elders is that elders are *spiritual fathers for the whole church*.

Here we begin to move from “what” to “why.” The “what” is clear enough: Scripture permits only men to serve as elders. Why? Because the office is intrinsically masculine and male. Because the office is a spiritual form of *fathering*. It is not a genderless professional role. Instead, it has distinctively *fatherly* characteristics. Consider three: elders provide for the whole church, elders protect the whole church, and, like heads of households, elders *represent* the whole church.

First, elders provide for the whole church through teaching God’s word and setting a godly example. In Acts 20:28, Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to “care for” the church of God. The verb he uses is literally “shepherd.” Shepherds provide for their sheep in a comprehensive way: food, direction, nurture, protection. The chief way that elders do this is through teaching. Like in Titus 1:9, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Elders also *provide* for the whole church by setting a godly example to follow. 1 Peter 5:2-3, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, *but being examples to the flock.*”

Second, elders protect. That is, through their teaching and oversight and example, elders protect the whole church from false teaching. Acts 20:29–31, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”

This is dangerous, difficult, demanding work. In necessarily involves confrontation and conflict. In requires martial virtues of spiritual strength and courage. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:14 to “guard the good deposit,” which implies defending it against attacks. In 2 Timothy 2:3 Paul tells him, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” Elders are men because elders are protectors and defenders, spiritual soldiers and warriors who sacrifice themselves for the safety of all of God’s people.

Third, elders represent the whole church. Not in the sense of making legislative decisions on behalf of the church, as in a representative civil government. Instead, elders represent the whole church through their teaching and public leadership. Elders represent the whole church in the sense of being its public spokesmen. Elders represent the whole church in the sense of being more *publicly identified with the church* than every other member is. This means that elders are at greater risk of persecution than rank-and-file members are, a pattern we see play out throughout church history and around the world today. And that seems to be deliberate on God’s part. For instance, consider how Acts 14:23 follows 14:22.

In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas went through Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*”

And then Acts 14:23, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

The appointment of elders seems to be *informed by* the fact that believers will face tribulations, including persecutions. Elders bear a special brunt of trials and persecutions on behalf of the church, for the good of the church.

Provide, protect, represent. These are all roles Adam had in the Garden. They are all roles that fathers of families have. And they are all roles that elders have in the local church.

Now, to balance out our perspective on leadership within the church, and on public contributions to the church’s assemblies, we want to briefly consider another passage in which Paul addresses how sexual difference should inform our participation in the church, namely 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. Please turn there.

It appears that in Corinth, the culturally acceptable thing for women to do to honor their husbands was to wear some type of head covering or veil in public. Going without a head covering may have signaled a subversive or rebellious posture against a woman’s husband. In this section Paul calls women not to abandon this “symbol of [her husband’s] authority” (v. 10) but to maintain it. He says, starting in verse 3:

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

As with 1 Timtohy 2, we’re not going to answer every possible question about this passage, but instead make three basic points.

*First, God expects women to pray (and prophecy) in church.* The question of what he means by prophecy is complex and disputed. Personally, my understanding is that it was a unique, authoritative gift tied up with the founding era of the church, so that Paul’s teaching on women prophesying is no longer directly relevant to the church today. But however you understand it, we see that Paul has a category for women publicly participating in, and publicly contributing to, the gatherings of the whole church.

And we can also apply Paul’s principle from 1 Corinthians 14 here. While women in Corinth were permitted to prophesy, the role of authoritative evaluation of prophesy was reserved for men. So for us here at CHBC, you’ll frequently hear women and men alike pray in our evening service; share testimonies of grace on Sunday nights; share testimonies of salvation when they get baptized; and speak up to edify the body in Wednesday night Bible study. But when they do, Mark or another pastor is standing there on behalf of the all the elders to “weigh” what has been said.

*Second, God calls men and women to serve in the church in a way that honors sexual difference in a culturally fitting manner.*

This is the whole point of the head-coverings, and really the whole section of verses 3-16. Paul is calling women to present themselves in a way that makes it clear that they are submitting to God’s design of honoring male leadership in the home and church. When Paul says in verses 14-15 that “nature” teaches the Corinthians that long hair is a disgrace for a man but glory for a woman, he’s not claiming that certain hair lengths or styles are essential to being masculine or feminine. He’s saying that nature teaches you that men and women are different, and we should live consistently with those differences in culturally fitting ways.

So, should Christian women wear head coverings today? Some believers think so. But in our culture, women generally don’t wear head coverings, so to wear one wouldn’t necessarily communicate submission, which is the point of what Paul’s saying here. The challenge is that in our culture, we don’t have a garment that says, “I’m happy to be a woman who accepts the authority of my husband and of the elders according to God’s design.” For us, a woman might show respect to her husband and to the other men of the church by intentionally building up her husband with her speech if she does testify publicly. Or, if she has concerns about the teaching she’s hearing, bringing those concerns to her husband first if she’s married. And, if she’s single, bringing those concerns privately to an elder.

*Third, male leadership in the church does not compete with or contradict men and women’s interdependence. Equality and complementarity are friends, not enemies.*

As Paul says in verses 8 through 12,

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

In this passage Paul beautifully braids together equality and complementarity, distinction and interdependence. Men and women are equally created in God’s image, but we relate to one another asymmetrically. There is an order in how men and women relate, but there are arrows pointing between us in multiple directions. By carrying him in her womb and conducting him into life itself, every mother does more for a male child than any man does for any woman!

Equality does not mean that men and women are the same or interchangeable. In God’s family, our differences do not give us different worth or standing, but they do matter for how we live together and serve one another. ***Any questions?***

1. For a nuanced exegetical discussion of this point with reference to 1 Timothy 5:3–16, see John M. G. Barclay, “Household Networks and Early Christian Economics: A Fresh Study of 1 Timothy 5.3–16,” *New Testament Studies* 66 (2020): 268–87, esp. 275–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jake Meador, “Preaching in a Disorienting, Low-Competence Society,” Mere Orthodoxy, February 15, 2022, at <https://mereorthodoxy.com/jake/preaching-in-a-disorienting-low-competence-society> (citing Ivan Illich). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an illuminating study of the modern lack of “alloparents,” and an insightful critique of modern society through that lens, see Andrew Skabelund, “Modernity Is a Dirty Diaper,” *Front Porch Republic*, November 1, 2023, at <https://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2023/11/modernity-is-a-dirty-diaper/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew Colvin, “Review of *Icons of Christ*: Plausibility Structures,” *The North American Anglican*, February 22, 2021, at <https://northamanglican.online/review-of-icons-of-christ-plausibility-structures/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)