

Women in the Church: All Our Gifts Are Valuable

I've always been interested in issues surrounding gender. As an English major in college, I devoured feminist literary theory. I still remember the first time I heard of the concept of feminist theory—and something just clicked for me. I wanted more. I read every piece of literature through my feminist bent, and it all seemed to make sense to me. After I became a Christian, my fascination with gender issues transformed into understanding how women fit into the church and life. Can they preach? Can they work in a corporate setting? Can they lead men? Because of the nature of my upbringing, I did not have a hard time coming to the conclusion that the Bible has a design for us as male and female, but I know (and respect) a lot of women who do.

As I grew as a believer, my love for all things gender-related led me to study people who thought like me as well as people who thought differently. I attended lectures, gatherings, and debates in my city that brought to light the very questions I was pondering and did so from a biblical point of view. It was here that I came face to face with the struggle many earnest women have with a particular topic in God's Word: the role of women in the church. What can they do? What can't they do?

I was confronted head-on with these very questions years ago during an egalitarian roundtable discussion at a local Christian university in Minneapolis. As the lone complementarian, I felt out of place, but very welcomed. I wanted to hear the other side of this issue. I didn't want to be at the mercy of other people's definitions of egalitarianism and feminism. I wanted to understand those definitions from a firsthand encounter. As the young women talked about their strong desires for ministry in the local church, a common theme kept emerging.

They didn't so much like the apostle Paul.

These women loved God's Word and wanted to believe it was true, but they struggled over the frequency and strength of Paul's qualifications for pastors/elders in the church. When they read 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet," they felt slighted. When they saw that Paul restricted the office of elder/pastor to qualified men, their spirits were crushed. They felt this strong urge to serve God in a leadership capacity, but couldn't see where they could fit in a local church.

I've also known women who don't feel called to teach the Bible. They possess useful gifts of service, administration, and mercy. With all of the pressure and emphasis on teaching, however, sometimes they feel out of place. Do their gifts matter, too?

Feminism promised to give women options that were better than what they had been previously offered. This has led to women believing they should be able to do anything they want in the local church. And when confronted with the biblical pattern for church leadership or service in the church, feminism pushes women to do more and assert their rights. But the biblical pattern for the local church is not about any person's rights.

The Purpose of the Church

Before we go any further in our discussion of the local church, we need to get clear on something vitally important.

God has a purpose for the local church. And we don't get to change that purpose.

True, there are many good, smaller purposes for a local congregation, and they look different in each context. But God has set forth one overarching purpose of the church.

Mark Dever defines the purpose of the local church in this way:

The end and purpose of all of this [leadership in the church] is the glory of God as we make Him known. Throughout history, God has desired to make Himself known. This is why He delivered Israel from Egypt in the Exodus, and why He delivered them again from the Babylonian Exile. It was for His own glory, to make Himself known . . . He has created the world and has done all that He has done for His own praise. And it is right and good that He should do so. . . . All who read these words—those who are church leaders and those who are not— are made in the image of God. We are to be walking pictures of the moral nature and righteous character of God, reflecting it around the universe for all to see— especially in our union with God through Christ. This, therefore is what God calls us to and why He calls us to it. He calls us to join together with Him, and together in our congregations, not for our glory but for His own.¹

God cares about what story we tell with our lives. We are his image-bearers. Our very lives, for better or worse, tell a story of him—and this carries over into how we act in the local church. The local church images God collectively as we image him individually. And the world is watching.

As Dever said, every facet of this universe is God's to claim and to direct. Psalm 24:1–2 says, "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers." He created all things, sustains all things, and owns all things. This even has implications for how we function within his church.

God created us, and we belong to him. We do not dictate how we are to live, God does. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:13–14 that Adam and Eve were created. By whom? The Lord God himself.

Again, in 1 Corinthians 11:11, we see that even though a woman is made from man and a man is born of a woman—they both come from God. The entire Bible is God's overarching directive for us— beginning with the first command in Genesis to the last in Revelation. God has created us for his glory—and there is a way in which we are to live.

¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2004), 31-32.

Not only did God create us for his glory, but he is also sovereign over every inch of his creation (Psalm 104). Everything that God has created is rightfully his and he rules it—including us. With his sovereignty comes his authority over his creation (Col. 1:16). It is this power to create and rule perfectly that gives him authority over us (James 1:18). Our understanding of all other authority comes from our understanding of God’s authority. If we do not believe that he has the authority to prescribe boundaries for us, then we will have a hard time making sense of the commands that we are about to study regarding our involvement in the local church.

But he is not sitting back and directing us like pawns. He is lovingly guiding us to delight in living for his glory. All of his commands are not burdensome for the one who is in Christ. They are life and joy (Ps. 119:40, 93). Our reaction to his authority in our lives should be one of gratitude and willing service for the glory of his name (Luke 1:38).

As Dever said, one of the means God uses to manifest his glory is through the local church. We should see it as an immense privilege to be among God’s people in service, worship, and fellowship. Paul explains to Timothy why he gives his commands: “So that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). This is you and me. We are a part of the church of the living God. We are to be a pillar and buttress of truth when we gather with God’s people. When we gather together to worship with other believers, we are a living, breathing testimony of the absolute goodness, authority, and sovereignty of our creator, God.

To further understand the purpose of the local church, let me bring in some more reinforcements. Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt give three qualities of the local church as seen in 1 Timothy 3:15:²

1. The local church is the household of God—the family of God.
2. The local church is the church of the living God—he assembles among us.
3. The local church is the pillar and buttress of truth—we are to be the vehicle for evangelism and discipleship, and the defender of the faith. Both 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians were written to churches.

Paul knew how important the church was for the gospel and for Christians. The health and life of the local church was, and still is, vital for gospel ministry—and this includes how men and women relate to one another. Paul regularly brings up gender in his letters to local churches because how we understand our manhood and womanhood matters in even the seemingly insignificant details that pertain to a local church. How we relate to one another in the local church speaks volumes about the gospel and about God’s Word. Paul is speaking as an authoritative voice on behalf of God, showing that our design as male and female is crucial not only in the home, but also in the church.

² Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 48-49.

Wayne Grudem states it this way:

Leadership patterns in the family will reflect leadership patterns in the church, and vice versa. . . . As godly men fulfill their leadership responsibilities in the family, they should also fulfill leadership responsibilities in the church. Conversely, if patterns of female leadership are established in the church, it will inevitably bring pressure toward greater female leadership, and toward abdication of male leadership, within the family.³

Just as God's glory can be seen in his design for the family and marriage, his glory is revealed in how men and women respond to each other in the local church. Men and women in marriage reflect God's covenant love between Christ and his bride, the church.

Within the walls of your local congregation, this metaphor is further realized in how leadership is ordered and functions. God is telling a story about himself through two earthly realities, marriage and the local church. And he is the one who decides how the story goes.

My Purpose in the Local Church

There is one overarching purpose for women in the local church: we are to use the gifts God has given us. I often hear that the Bible's teaching on women in the church banishes women to the nurseries and kitchens and prevents them from *truly* using their gifts. Friends, this is a dangerous attitude. Just as feminism has told women that anything a man can do women can do just the same, it has encouraged women to clamor *only* for what men do, and to belittle "traditional" women's activities. In the church, women often conclude that the gifts of service are not as important as the gifts of teaching. In the same way that the message of feminism sometimes maligns motherhood and marriage, the message of feminism in the church sometimes maligns the gifts of service that so many of God's people joyfully possess. If someone says that women are "just" relegated to rocking babies and making casseroles for a potluck, then what does that communicate to the woman who truly is gifted in those very needed ministries in the church? Does she feel as valued as the woman who teaches? She should, my friends. She absolutely should.

The Bible has a better way for us to think about women in the church. According to God's Word, there is room in the church for all of us to use our gifts—and they all have value. The Corinthian church had the same faulty attitude toward gifts in the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40, Paul corrects their thinking that one gift is better than another. By using the human body as his example, he shows that, like every part of our physical bodies, all spiritual gifts are necessary for the local church to truly flourish. We need our heart and brain just as much as our mouth and hands. Without both the visible and less visible members of our physical bodies, we function at a lesser capacity. The same is true for the local church. We need the teaching gifts *and* the gifts of service and administration.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 940.

So what does this mean for you? It means you serve a vital purpose in your local church.

The church where my husband and I serve is a young church plant. At the time when I'm writing this book, we have only been in existence for three years. So you can imagine that there are a lot of needs to be met. Many spiritual gifts line up with the everyday needs in our church. We have members who serve in the nursery. We have members who bring food for our hospitality table. We have members who greet people as they arrive on Sunday morning. A pastor's wife prints the bulletins and works on a myriad of administrative needs. Members meet together for discipleship (Matt. 28:19). Older women help younger women grow in godliness (Titus 2:3-5). Others open their homes for Bible study and informal gatherings (Heb. 10:25). One of our members cleans the church every week. Sure, our pastors preach and are men, but do you see how that is only one piece of the puzzle of our local church? Without members meeting together, the Bible would not be applied as deeply. Without faithful volunteers in the nursery, moms and dads might miss the service regularly and be unable to take in the preached Word. Without someone coordinating the details of our church events (like picnics and nursery schedules), we would experience chaos and important things would be missed. Our hospitality table brings people together at the end of the service. Without the people who bring food every week, a vital component of fellowship would be missed on Sunday mornings.

The local church exists to make God known to a watching world. And we get to be part of that unfolding plan. Our purpose in the local church is not to strive for the greatest amount of power or authority, but to excel in service to God and to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10). In God's economy every last one of us is useful and important. Every last one of us has been given gifts and abilities. God gave you gifts and abilities to be utilized in your local congregation. Do you always find yourself organizing things? Perhaps your gift of administration could be used to serve in your church's office. Are you always looking for ways to alleviate the needs of others? Your gift of mercy can be used to make God known to "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40). Maybe you really enjoy serving people. From helping a new mom by bringing her a meal to cleaning the apartment of an elderly member, gifts of service make the love of God tangible to those in need.

The debate surrounding the teaching gifts can make them seem like the ultimate gifts, but the reality is that we are all needed in our local churches. Every single gift we possess is given to us by God to serve his people and bring him glory. The teaching gifts might be more visible, but in God's economy, every gift matters.

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