

christian women and corporate leadership

“Does Genesis 1-3 have implications for the corporate workplace?” seminar
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If we accept that the Bible teaches male headship, then should Christian women accept positions in the corporate workplace where they will be leading men?²

This is an irksome question to raise in our post-feminist, industrial world³. So it is important to affirm right from the beginning:

- a) The *capabilities* of women are not on view here. The answer to the question will never be a ‘no’ simply because men have a superior skill set that makes them more effective as leaders.
- b) The *value* of women is not being assessed here. Even if the answer was a ‘no’, this does not imply that the value and worth of women is somehow diminished, based on the understanding that role does not entail value.

A serious question

One could simply argue for a ‘yes’ - women can accept such corporate leadership positions if they so desire - because the Bible is silent, making this an area of Christian freedom. The question then is: how satisfactory is this answer? A young female lawyer, for whom the question is especially relevant, writes:⁴

‘I’m not sure what the answer is [to the question: should women accept positions in the corporate workplace where they will be leading men]. When my pastor gave a sermon on 1 Timothy 2 recently he said he was reluctant to apply the bible’s teaching to spheres beyond the church because the bible didn’t go there. I kept thinking: is it really that simple? If we’re going to take Genesis 1-3 seriously then shouldn’t that play out into all spheres of life because God’s design is good and right? *I guess I need more than a one sentence answer* [my italics].’

A complex issue

In the pursuit of more than a ‘one sentence answer’, different conclusions have been reached.

For example, based on what John Piper writes, we would have to conclude a ‘no’⁵.

¹ The author, Caroline Spencer, would especially like to thank Claire Smith, Peter Bolt, Janet Hohne, Ian Powell, Benjamin Ho and Alan Stewart for their contributions in various ways. You can contact the author at City Bible Forum on caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org.

² Arguing that the Bible teaches male headship in the church and marriage is outside the scope of this paper. This position is simply assumed, and the focus of the paper is whether this teaching applies also to the corporate world.

³ Interestingly, it is a question that arises precisely because of our post-feminist industrial world! Industrialisation created the workplace in the first place and feminism pushed for equal opportunities for women. It could also be argued that feminism makes the question more controversial, since opportunity for women is often understood to be a measure of equality for women.

⁴ Written in an email to the author. Used with permission. Identity withheld.

⁵ Piper and Grudem, ‘Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’ (Illinois: Crossway), 1991, p45.

‘We must reckon with the possibility that in various spheres of life it is possible that role relationships emerge for men and women that *so deeply compromise what a man or a woman senses is appropriate for their masculine or feminine personhood* [my italics] that they have to seek a different position. ...’

‘... This is what J.I Packer implies when he makes the following perceptive observation:

While I am not keen on hierarchy and patriarchy [male headship] as terms describing the man-woman relationship in Scripture, Genesis 2:18-23...and Ephesians 5:21-33...continue to convince me that the man-woman relationship is intrinsically non-reversible. By this I mean that, other things being equal, a situation in which a *female boss has a male secretary*, or a marriage in which a woman (as we say) wears the trousers, *will put more strain on the humanity of both parties* [my italics] than if it were the other way around. This is part of the reality of creation, a given fact that nothing will change.’

In contrast, this paper will examine the same Biblical material and reach a different conclusion – that yes, women can accept such positions – but it is a *qualified* yes.

That such different conclusions can be drawn when it comes to male headship in the corporate world highlights just how complex the issue is. Disagreement should not be a cause for disunity amongst those who accept the Bible’s teaching on male headship. There needs to be room for freedom of conscience on this issue. Carefully thinking through the Biblical material is a positive exercise as it does justice to a serious question that especially women in the corporate sphere would like to see addressed.

Approaching the issue

In thinking through the Biblical material, this paper will:

1. Explore the Bible’s explicit teaching on gender and roles;
2. Show why it would be difficult to apply this to the corporate workplace;
3. Show why this is a qualified answer.

Answering the question

1. Exploring the Bible’s explicit teaching on gender and roles

a) Genesis

In Genesis 1-2, God sets up the pattern for *all* society. While marriage might be the clearest and most intimate relationship model on view in Genesis, it is not independent of the more generalised relationships between male and female. Claire Smith makes the helpful observation that ‘marriage is the basis for understanding the more diffuse relationships in society’⁶. And Peter Bolt points out that for any individual to understand what it means to be male and female they need to turn to the creational pattern of the marriage relationship. This contradicts our western individualism that says that life is patterned upon the single person who then moves into marriage, as if that is a secondary change. Even a single individual needs to understand what it means to be male and female by looking at the original marriage⁷.

When it comes to male/female relationships in Genesis 1-2, two things could be inferred from the text. Firstly, there is a sense in which male and female stand in a mutual relationship of *equals* in their

⁶ Written in an email to the author.

⁷ Written in an email to the author.

relationship to God, each other and the world⁸. The word ‘sense’ is deliberate: we read Genesis in its own light, without reading into the text. Equality is an inference drawn from similarities in the nature and purpose of the creation of male and female.

Secondly, there is a suggestion of an *order* in gender relationships⁹. Again, the word ‘suggestion’ is deliberate, in an attempt to read Genesis in its own light without importing back what we know from later parts of Scripture. Here order is suggested from the inference that the timing and method of creation indicate priority. Perhaps the strongest inference of order/male headship - is that the man names the woman (Genesis 2:23). Naming in the Bible is an authoritative exercise – it is God who gives things their nature when he names them in Genesis 1.

In Genesis 3, it would be reasonable to infer that the curse on the woman – her desire to control her husband that will be resisted and crushed – shows that male/female relationships are now subject not just to disarray, but to *disorder*¹⁰.

b) Beyond Genesis – the Old Testament

Outside the garden, God redeems a people for himself, and we see the shape of the *society* God sets up. Positions of authority in society were almost exclusively reserved for men. The God-appointed judges, kings, and prophets were all characteristically male, and the priesthood was exclusively male. Male headship or authority was the norm.

However there were exceptions like Deborah, a prophetess who judged (led) Israel (Judges 4-5). Deborah’s position was not condemned as sinful, and she even had a prominent role in God’s plan to liberate the Israelites from Canaanite oppression brought on by Israel’s sin. It is difficult to know what to make of these Old Testament female exceptions. Certainly God sometimes works in unexpected ways¹¹. (In Judges 4-5, Deborah’s role could perhaps be a condemnation of the weakness of men at the time, since it is not just Deborah that liberates the Israelites – there is also Jael and her tent peg.).

c) The New Testament

After Pentecost, the nation of Israel is no longer God’s society. Believers come to Jesus, the nucleus of God’s new society, and it is the *church* that is called the ‘household of God’ (1 Timothy 3:15).

The church is one sphere for the Apostle Paul’s teaching on male headship. Interestingly, Paul looks to Genesis for his instructions for gender relationships in church, indicating how he understood the order inferred in the Genesis text. For example, Paul commands that a woman is not to ‘teach or have authority over a man’ (1 Timothy 2:12). His reason: ‘For Adam was formed first, then Eve’ (1 Timothy 2:13-14). So the chronology in Genesis, that man was created before woman, is understood by Paul to indicate authority. For other examples, see the footnote¹².

⁸ For example, they are together made in the image of God and both are blessed by God and given dominion over the non-human creation (Genesis 1:26-28). The woman is clearly demarcated to be of the same nature as man - she is not a separate creation out of the dirt, but formed from the bone and flesh of the man (Genesis 2:21-24).

⁹ For example, there are differences in the timing and method of creation – man is created first (Genesis 2:7, 22). Chronology could infer priority. Secondly, the woman is created from man (Genesis 2:22-23). That man is the ‘source’ of woman could be the basis for a relationship of authority. Thirdly, the woman is created as a ‘helper’ for the man (Genesis 2:20). The woman was made with the man in view and came into existence for him. Note that nothing is said at this point that ties the role of ‘helper’ to the woman’s worth or dignity. If anything, the man needs the woman, and the man is not able to exist independently of the woman. Lastly, the new humanity of male and female is collectively referred to as ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ (Genesis 1:27). This too could be an indication that chronology infers priority.

¹⁰ Eve’s desire for her husband is not referring to sexual desire. A similar construction is in Genesis 4:7 in the words to Cain: ‘sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it’. So ‘desire’ is a desire to control.

¹¹ For another example of this, the Israelites were commanded not to marry Moabitess (Deuteronomy 23), and yet, Ruth, a Moabitess, is the ancestor of David (Ruth 4) and Jesus (Matthew 1).

¹² Another example is when Paul teaches that women should pray or prophesy with their head covered (1 Corinthians 11:5). His reason: ‘For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman but woman

Paul does not permit a woman ‘to teach or have authority over a man’ (1 Timothy 2:131-4). Here two activities are on view: ‘teaching’ and ‘authority’¹³. When it comes to teaching, he is talking about an authoritative word in mixed congregations, since the context for the command is Paul’s wider concern that Timothy might know how they are to ‘conduct themselves in the household of God’ (1 Timothy 3:15)¹⁴. So it would be unreasonable to argue that every woman must submit to every man in her relational orbit on every occasion.¹⁵

Another sphere where Paul applies gender roles is marriage (Ephesians 5:22). This is understandable when the relationship between marriage and the church becomes clear. Paul uses the relationship between Christ and the church as a model for how the husband and wife should treat each other (Ephesians 5:23-26). This is because, when marriage was instituted way back in Genesis 2, the ‘one flesh’ that was actually on view was Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

What do the church and marriage have in common? Both are households. The church is the Household of God (1 Timothy 3:15). Marriage is also a household in the ordinary human sense (1 Timothy 3:5), but also an illustration of Christ’s relationship to the church. They are households or *familial* relationships. So while in Genesis the creational pattern of marriage might help us to understand what it means to be male and female, by the New Testament we can see that the creational pattern of marriage is in fact, all about the church. So it is in this context we would expect to see male headship exercised, rather than the world at large, which is how it was in Genesis. The church is not the world, nor is the world the church. Until of course, at the end of time, when the church will be the world in the new creation (Revelation 21:1-4).

2. Why it would be difficult to apply this to the corporate workplace

If male headship is for familial relationships, then it is difficult to see how there could be a definitive ‘no’ – that no Christian woman should ever accept any corporate position that could involve leading any men in any kind of capacity. For the corporate workplace is not a familial relationship. The corporate workplace is part of the world, which in the overlap of the ages, is not the church.

3. Why this is a qualified answer

While it might not be a definitive ‘no’, this ‘no’ should be *qualified*. For a particular Christian woman, considering a certain position, the right decision could in fact be not to accept the position.

This is because, while male headship might not be extended into the corporate workplace, it should still be *respected*. Male headship is part of God’s good ordering for all society – not just his church. Respecting male headship is a great witness to the society that God is re-creating.

Christian women can respect male headship by leading in ways that do justice to their feminine personhood. This does not mean that women will abdicate their leadership by allowing, for example, male subordinates to make the decisions – that is non-leadership. It will however impact the leadership styles she adopts and the manner in which she relates to male superiors, peers and subordinates.

from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man’ (1 Corinthians 11:7-9). So Paul understands that source in Genesis (the woman was created from man) and ‘helper’ in Genesis (the woman was created for man), as in indication of order in gender relationships.

¹³ Piper, ‘Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood’, p185.

¹⁴ There is also a link between headship and prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:3-16). There is some ambiguity over what prophecy is, and how it differs from teaching. What is clear is that prophecy is an authoritative word, though not of the same class as teaching since it needs to be weighed and also arguably because women too can prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5, 14:29-33).

¹⁵ There are some contexts in which Paul even argues for mutual submission: see Ephesians 5:15-21.

Firstly, leadership styles. According to the Hay Group, there are 6 leadership styles¹⁶:

Affiliative	This leader is concerned about creating harmony and promoting friendly relations. They generate a lot of good will because they don't mind rolling up their sleeves and pitching in on the shop floor. However their need for harmony may get in the way of making tough decisions.
Authoritative	This kind of leader paints the big picture and sees their role as moving the team towards a shared vision. Because they believe that selling their long-term vision is the key to success, they will take time to explain the 'whys'.
Coaching	Such a leader focuses on the long-term professional development of employees. They help identify strengths and weaknesses, encourage employees to establish long-term goals and provide guidance and feedback on achieving them.
Coercive	These leaders are intent on getting others "to just do it the way I tell you". They issue directives, rely on negative, correctional feedback and 'motivate' by stating the negative consequences of non-compliance.
Democratic	A democratic leader focuses on building commitment and generating new ideas. They invite employees to develop directions for themselves and the company, so there are usually many meetings to gather and discuss employees' views.
Pace-setting	These leaders set high standards of excellence, are apprehensive about delegating and have little sympathy for poor performance. Usually leading by example, they will take away jobs if high performance is not forthcoming.

Secular leadership theory says that great leadership is all about adopting the right leadership style for the situation. Effective leaders are adept at all 6 leadership styles and can switch from one to another, depending on the circumstances. But typically, leaders will default to the style they are most comfortable with, especially in times of crisis and stress (indicating the relationship between leadership style and personality).

(This secular leadership theory is useful for Christian leaders. The major leadership motif in the New Testament is servant leadership¹⁷. If we go with the same logic that this kind of leadership is good for all society, and not just familial relationships, and is a great witness to the society God is re-creating, then servant leaders will adopt the right leadership style for the situation in order to serve the interests of others¹⁸.)

Certain leadership styles are generally perceived to be more feminine by society at large: the coaching, affiliative, democratic and authoritative styles. The coercive style: "just do it the way I tell you to"; and the pace-setting style: "if you can't do it right I'll do it myself" are much more authoritarian and directive in their approach, and generally perceived to be more masculine. Interestingly, even secular writers are acknowledging that women lead differently to men. Executive coach Lois P Frankel writes that while men rely on the traditional paradigms of command and control leadership, 'women's success shows that a non-traditional leadership style is well-suited to the conditions of some work environments and can increase an organisation's chances of surviving in an uncertain world'¹⁹. By 'non-traditional' she means highly consultative, collaborative, big picture focus, relationship building, incorporating the ideas of others... effectively the coaching, affiliative, democratic and authoritative styles.²⁰

¹⁶ The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of leadership consultant Janet Hohne. "Staying onboard: managing your boss in the upturn", Leadership, January 2010, www.haygroup.com.

¹⁷ For church leaders see Luke 22:24-27; for husbands see Ephesians 5:25-29. Even Jesus' shepherd leadership in John 10:1-18 is about serving the interests of others.

¹⁸ The difference between this secular leadership theory and servant leadership is that generally speaking, the 'right leadership style for the situation' is ultimately about what is in the *company's* best interest.

¹⁹ Lois P Frankel, 'See Jane Lead: 99 ways for women to take charge at work' (NY: Warner Business), 2007, p8.

²⁰ Lois P Frankel, 'See Jane Lead', p5-6.

It is worth pointing out that we are talking about the *habitual* exercise of certain leadership styles. There will be times when a female leader will need to exercise the coercive or pace-setting style because that is the right leadership style for the situation/in the best interests of others – for example, if the building is burning down, a coercive leader will save human life. If women are only ever to exercise certain leadership styles then legalism is triumphing over grace.

So a Christian woman, considering a particular corporate leadership role, should ask:

1. Will the company culture (including the personalities and leadership styles of immediate superiors and subordinates) support me exercising the more ‘feminine’ leadership styles?
2. Will I be able to manage the stress of the role and the effect on my personality so that I won’t end up lacking sympathy or telling people what to do all the time?

So far we have just been talking about leadership styles. Of course there are all the subjective dimensions of how women relate to the men in their relational orbit. Things like demeanour, bearing, attitudes, courtesies, initiatives and numerous spoken and unspoken expectations. There is a cultural element to these subjective dimensions in terms of what is interpreted and understood from behaviour. A Christian woman will have an attitude that is concerned to ‘help’ - which is independent of culture. But they will also have a concern to express behaviour in a way that is mutually understood.

This is a significant challenge for Christian women in the corporate workplace where the common perception amongst women (and men) is that women need to be like men in order to succeed or get ahead. So again it is worthwhile for a female leader to think with respect to a particular role:

1. Will the company culture (including the personalities and leadership styles of immediate superiors and subordinates) permit me to exercise my role as a woman, and not a woman acting like a man?
2. Will I be able to manage the stress of the role so that I won’t end up acting in an aggressive or domineering manner in an on-going way?

All this is no easy task, requiring a lot of thought and discipline and prayer. If a particular Christian woman, considering a certain position, is not confident that she could adopt appropriate leadership styles and an appropriate manner, then the right decision is to pursue another position. For to say ‘yes’ to a position where she is not able, by and large, to respect male headship is, to use the words of Piper, *compromising her own feminine personhood*.