

The Intersection of Motherhood and Ministry: Reexamining the Woman's Role in the Church

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**Abstract**

Women are in the minority in church leadership, and historically, ministry has been a male-dominated field. Women working in ministry may have the support of other church leaders, but may face congregational pushback or be constrained to supporting roles in ministry. For a woman to work in ministry, she has to be prepared to face questions or pushback only because of her gender. I will look at gendered socialization and the conscious and unconscious prejudices that mothers in ministry face. I will analyze and examine the differences between the experiences of working mothers and working fathers.. I will implement solutions based on stories(in books, articles, and my conversation extension) of women who felt called to both ministry and motherhood. I will advocate for them by exploring ways in which women can be encouraged as both parents and pastors. I will explore practical ways that Christians can support women stepping into ministry and caretaking without burning out or having to choose between the two.

**Keywords**

Women in Ministry, American Christian Church, Motherhood, Working Mothers, Social Norms

I remember the churches I grew up in. I remember the people who shaped me in them. I remember the Sunday School mornings and Wednesday night meals. I remember the VeggieTales episodes and Tobymac songs. I remember the people I looked up to— Mrs. Kim, Mrs. Katie, Mrs. Grace, Mrs. Hillary— the list grew with age. And I also remember getting older and getting to go to big church! When I got to big church, there weren't as many women teaching me anymore. Sure, worship was normally led by a woman, but the elders, deacons, and ushers never were. Sure, our secretary was a woman, but no woman ever passed me the communion elements. Sure, my mom was always serving, but my dad was the one preaching.

And that's just the way it was. The way it was supposed to be. What the Bible said. Women were second place, happy to take on any and every supporting role in the church. Happy to show up early, four kids in tow, to cook on Wednesday nights. Happy to teach their women-only Sunday School classes and to lead craft nights for the Women's Ministry. Happy to support their husbands making every decision, preaching every sermon, and giving every communion meditation. I never felt second class as a kid. I never felt like the boys had more answers in Sunday School class. I was never taught that I had to support the boys. But I saw it. And when I felt the call to ministry, I felt all this internal conflict— I heard the voices of teachers, both men and women, quoting Scripture to me that told me I was second place. I was supportive, not leadership material. How was I supposed to be a good wife and raise a good family if I was subverting the Bible by wanting to lead?

Of American Christian Protestant Churches, only 11% have female pastors. For high school and college aged girls in the process of deciding majors and career paths, this isn't an encouraging statistic. Additionally, many young women wrestle with their calling because of advice they receive when they consider ministry as an option. When young women defer their

calling because of implicit and explicit messages they've received growing up telling them ministry is a man's role, the church needs to reconsider its priorities. The pulpit has been a traditionally masculine space, and many congregations aren't open to understanding the new perspectives a woman could bring to it. Women are told that their main calling is supportive and maternal, meaning there is an unhealthy emphasis in the church on women as wives and mothers. This emphasis adds an extra level of hesitation for a woman considering ministry, making her question whether it is possible for her to succeed as a mother and a minister. Women go against a traditional norm by pursuing ministry, as well as going against a traditional norm by working full time. The fear of subverting traditional female roles can be a roadblock to answering God's calling. The Great Commission calls all Christians to go and make disciples— not just male Christians. To encourage more women to pursue ministry, the church should reevaluate conceptions of work and family life.

### **Women are Made, not Born: *Gendered Socialization***

Raising Godly children is important— and even Biblical. Proverbs 22:6 says “Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it.”<sup>1</sup> Christians are called to raise good children, and parenting is an important task, regardless of gender. Why then do most primary caretaking responsibilities fall on women? One reason commonly cited for this parental imbalance is that women are “naturally” better at nurturing. It's in their “nature.” But the belief that women are naturally better at caretaking isn't backed by science. It's rooted in tradition. Van Leeuwen notes that the “present, idealized role structure of the nuclear family— father as commuting breadwinner, mother as full-time homemaker and childrearer[...]—is largely

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 22:6 (Common English Bible)

a product of the nineteenth-century urban middle class.”<sup>2</sup> Today’s family structure isn’t Biblical, but rather, rooted in societal expectations. Men and women have occupied different societal roles going back to nomadic society. But the belief that the roles are natural and have always existed as they do now is false. Additionally, the belief that these roles are Biblical is false. Although God knits [the Psalmist] together while [he] was still in [his] mother’s womb,”<sup>3</sup> most Biblical references to parenting don’t mention the separate roles of mother and father. Children are told to “honor their father and mother”<sup>4</sup> and scripture says that children are a “gift” and a “reward”<sup>5</sup>, but it does not ever mention the female being a stay at home mother or full time caregiver. Although the Bible does not define gender roles for Christians, prominent cultural and political Christian groups have.

The idea that women are inherently caretakers starts in childhood. The implicit and explicit messages children receive while growing up are called socialization. When these messages are tied to gender, they are referred to as gendered socialization, which can take on a lot of forms. Children are exposed to media, books, toys, other kids, teachers, pastors, and babysitters growing up— all of which influence them. When this influence is tied to gender, even children with well-meaning parents are exposed to this gendered socialization. And in a lot of ways socialization tells women, implicitly and explicitly, that their main role is caretaker. While this isn’t necessarily negative, it becomes a problem when it feels like this tendency is natural rather than learned. Are women better at nurturing? Not necessarily. But if every toy, every costume, every book, and every movie has taught them to raise children and to cook and clean, it

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace: Love, Work & Parenting in a Changing World*. (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 170.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 139

<sup>4</sup> Exod. 20:12

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 127

begins to have an effect. Susan Harris Howell writes that when making decisions later in life, neither men nor women “will think about how the messages they received shaped their thinking about something as sacred as their work for God.”<sup>6</sup> She writes this because these messages aren’t typically abrasive. And so when couples get married, they don’t perceive these messages interfering, but Howell, as a college professor, has never had a male student tell her they were “unsure about whether to pursue their call given their desire to get married and have children.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Howell’s female students are consistently concerned that their work-intensive careers won’t allow them to be parents. Thus, the patterns learned in childhood persist, even for college aged adults. These messages push boys and girls along prescribed lines that become harder and harder to fight. The same principle applies in ministry. While gendered socialization doesn’t seem harmful, the messages women receive starting in childhood interfere in their decision making later in life. The decision to consider caretaking before career just *feels right* somehow. Being a stay-at-home parent isn’t a bad thing by any means— but when gendered socialization is accounted for, *only* women are being pointed towards full-time parenthood.

Parenting is an honorable, Biblical task. Yet, men and women don’t vie for who becomes the primary caretaker. Howell again affirms that women are told “that raising children is far more important than any job, or even ministry, they could otherwise pursue.”<sup>8</sup> Because of this socialization, women come to think that managing a household is inherent, natural, and the right Christian thing to do. But this concept is societal, not inherently natural or Biblical. A woman’s calling from God may then come second to her husband’s calling, and there won’t be any

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Harris Howell. *Buried Talents: Overcoming Gendered Socialization to Answer God’s Call*. (Downer’s Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2022), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Howell, *Buried Talents*, 13

<sup>8</sup> Howell, *Buried Talents*, 17

resistance to this, but rather, the silent resignation that God's will wouldn't contradict what they've been raised to think, what they're "good at," and what they saw growing up.

### **The Harvest is Plenty, but the Workers are Few: *Complementarian vs. Egalitarian***

Resisting both the tradition and the belief that women are inferior to men is difficult. There are several ways of Christian thinking about the role of women, and as with most theological controversies, both sides are nuanced and have Biblical support. The main two schools of thought are called complementarian and egalitarian. A complementarian look at Christian women holds that men and women both have roles in the church, but different functions. It holds that men are leaders and the heads of their households because God created them to be, and women are submissive to their husbands because God created them to be. These puzzle pieces fit together to form a bigger picture of what God planned when he created male and female differently. While a complementarian would be okay with a female police officer or male nurse, a subversion of typical gender roles, they do not believe women should lead in church. A stricter complementarian, now referred to as a patriarchist, might believe that women should not work outside of the domestic sphere at all, but that view is becoming more extreme and less prevalent in the 21st century. To complementarians, Eve being referred to as "helper"<sup>9</sup> in Genesis 2 is the first indication that men and women encompass separate roles Biblically. In the context of marriage, statements Paul makes in Ephesians 5 of women submitting and man being the head of the body are used to defend complementarianism. And, specifically to defend male leadership of the church, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is referenced— "A wife should learn quietly with complete submission. I don't allow a wife to teach or to control her husband. Instead, she should be a quiet listener."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>10</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-12

The complementarian Christian stance has been held historically by many prevalent Christian spokespeople. *The Danvers Statement*, published in 1987 by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CMBW), exists as a defense of the complementarian view of Christianity. One of the main points reads “in both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries (1 Tim. 2:11-15, 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9).” Most Christians wouldn’t deny that the statement alone is true. However, the scriptures used to defend the statement are open to interpretation. While the CMBW reads them as universal statements of gender expectations in ministry, an egalitarian perspective sees them as contextual.

An egalitarian look at Christianity believes that Christian men and women are equally called to serve God’s church, even in leadership. Roles are ability-based rather than gender-based, and marriages are partnerships between two equals submitting to one another. To egalitarians, Paul’s revolutionary statement in Galatians 3:28— “there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”<sup>11</sup> - is the most important Biblical statement on gender expectations. Egalitarians point to frequent female leaders in the Old and New Testament, and the radical, countercultural ways in which Jesus interacted with women.

In order for women to be seen and accepted as leaders in the church, an egalitarian perspective is necessary. Egalitarianism looks at the Scriptures complementarians use to defend the subordination of women as contextual. They believe that Paul only intended his writings to be used in the specific letter he wrote, not as a general expectation for societies to come. There are multiple things that need to change in the American Christian Protestant Church in order for

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<sup>11</sup> Galatians 3:28



egalitarianism to be the norm, such as Bible translation, Biblical interpretation, and comprehensive education on what the Bible is saying about current cultural issues. It is problematic when a scripture is interpreted by men in favor of men, because there is not a lot of incentive to change its interpretation. But there are contradictions in translation that need to be addressed before an argument can be made that the church must always align with its traditional way of thought.

Today's patriarchal stance says that a woman is unfit for authority or decision making. Historically, women have been thought unable to make these decisions because of their mental and moral inferiority. Both of these positions are based on the belief that by simply *being* a female, a woman is not allowed to share in Christian authority with men. Rebecca Merrill Groothius notes that "nothing she does either confirms or negates his state of affairs."<sup>12</sup> This sums up the logical fallacy of the complementarian argument. Women are inferior to men simply by being. Nothing they do adds or subtracts to this fundamental inferiority, which is not supported by the Biblical narrative as a whole—nor by the Biblical Imago Dei. The strong female leadership presented in both the Old and New Testament negates the contextual writings of Paul encouraging the silence and submission of women. Miriam, the Israelites' first female prophetess, rescues Moses, one of the Old Testament's most important figures. Deborah, the only female judge in the history of Christianity, leads her people militarily. Esther saves the entire Israelite nation from execution. Mary Magdalene is one of Jesus' disciples. Phoebe, Dorcas, and Lydia are important to Paul and to the life of the early church. There are examples of

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<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Merrill Groothius, "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role: *Challenging the Logic of Women's Subordination*." in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. 3, Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, Christa L. McKirland (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2021), 396.

women made in the image of God who lead with power and authority in the Bible. The scriptural defense of the complementarian stance overlooks their importance to the Biblical narrative.

Because of the prevalence of the complementarian and even patriarchal views, women are often told or shown that their role is caretaker and supporter. They wind up in positions that do not teach both men and women, but only women. They are expected to be in and seen most in the areas of the church that support children. The subordination of women says that it is not the place of women to speak— and it involves some contradiction, because it places an emphasis on the male’s spiritual authority. Complementarians believe that men and women are created spiritually equal yet societally different— but if women have to submit to a spiritual head or authority— in this case, their husband, they aren’t created spiritually equal at all. Women, according to this argument, become spiritually inferior to men.

### **The Domestic Sphere: *Pressures Mothers Face***

The term “domestic sphere” refers to the home, and there is a traditional belief supporting the role of the woman in the domestic sphere, while men should be the primary provider for the household. This is rooted in nostalgia and societal tradition rather than in biblical evidence. It is less widely accepted today, although the popular choice to switch to part time or quit entirely upon motherhood is still a prevalent pressure mothers face. Of married mothers with children ages 0-3, 36% do not work outside the home.<sup>13</sup> It is against the cultural norm to choose to remain a full time worker after the initial postpartum maternity leave ends. Howell notes that “the woman who has gifts and a call that would take her into more global service might find work at home unsatisfying, her days incomplete, even when busily caring for a husband and children she

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<sup>13</sup> “Christian Women Today, Part 1 of 4: What Women Think of Faith, Leadership and Their Role in the Church.” Barna Group, 2012.

loves dearly.”<sup>14</sup> She goes on to add that limiting herself to the implications imposed by her culture will eventually impact her identity, even if the woman didn’t start out constrained to it. A woman who defers her call to ministry for the call to be a good wife or a good mother may find herself feeling constrained or stuck. And while that isn’t *who* she is, after 18 years of 40 hours a week of full time caretaking— her identity as caretaker eventually overcomes her former call to ministry.

Slogans and encouragements that “motherhood is a ministry” become dangerous for women pursuing vocational ministry. Motherhood is indeed its own ministry. God gives the gift of work and it is Biblical to be a parent. Work in the domestic sphere is by no means easier than the professional workplace. And for some families, it makes more financial sense for the woman to stay at home. But to make or insist that the Christian standard for women to stay at home is unfair. It is unfair to women who believe they are called to both motherhood and ministry. It is also unfair to women, especially single mothers, who cannot afford to be stay at home mothers. It reinforces the popular conception that being a stay-at-home mom is better for children. It is a hard choice to continue working, but research shows that for children,<sup>15</sup> having *both* parents actively loving and teaching them is better for their development long term. The issue here is not to say that work is more important than family, but to suggest that both parents should equally decide their callings and their parenthood are God-ordained, so that the task of caretaking and nurturing does not fall unevenly and heavily upon the woman. Men can be parental ministers and congregational ministers too.

### **Nostalgic Desire: *Reevaluation of Conceptions of Leadership in the Church***

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<sup>14</sup> Howell, *Buried Talents*, 94

<sup>15</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace*, 185

In a patriarchal society, even egalitarian churches have a hard time accepting female leadership. It's against the grain, it's new, and it goes against nostalgia. But it's important to note that the egalitarian movement isn't just cultural. It doesn't only line up with the second wave feminist movement of the 1960's, as is commonly argued, but it exists as an approach to Scripture that encompasses the calling of both genders. And through the egalitarian approach to ministry, the church has the power to change conceptions of what leadership looks like within the church.

The church can be the starting point for changing the notions of socialization in a world that prioritizes male leadership. This starts by encouraging and equipping women already in ministry. This also means male leaders making a commitment to understand and learn how the uniquely female parenting experience affects work. Things like pregnancy, breastfeeding, and prenatal/postpartum depression are uniquely female experiences. In instances such as these, leadership seeking to listen and understand is not only important, but biblical. Mothers should not be assumed to be "benched" until their children are older, but should be given the same opportunities as their colleagues. The mother should be given the support to make her own choices.<sup>16</sup> The church can also provide support and encouragement for women in ministry approaching motherhood, whether it be through classes, showers, letters, or prayers. It can assure young women that the intersection of motherhood and ministry is not a dangerous one, but one that the body of Christ is ready to embrace alongside them. Acknowledgement and affirmation of the challenges that accompany working mothers in ministry is important. Church leadership can create spaces for less extroverted women to express concerns and share places where they feel that something is weighing down on them because they are a woman in a traditionally male

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Ago. "Pregnancy and the Pastorate: An Opportunity to Reflect Christ." CBE International, 2022. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/pregnancy-and-pastorate-opportunity-reflect-christ/>.

field.<sup>17</sup> Many egalitarian churches have staff support teams that work to ensure the workplace is one that is flexible with staff lifestyles. It is important to include mothers and fathers on these committees to ensure new parents are being supported during very transitional times in their lives. In the way that God values God's children, the church should work to affirm those struggling with the challenges of parenthood.<sup>18</sup>

Ministry and marriage involve sacrifice, but it doesn't require one partner to do *all* the sacrificing in educational, vocational, and ministerial decisions. The church can encourage young married couples to pursue their callings together. Howell writes that "to the extent that Christians consistently integrate males into the work of caring for children, they are helping to interrupt the continuation of men's tendency to fear and devalue women."<sup>19</sup> Parenting is a gift, but it's not one only gifted to women. By embracing parenthood as a partnership, the church inherently encourages both men and women to accept God's calling on their lives.

Placing stay-at-home mothers on a pedestal means the church overlooks those who are financially unable to be full time caregivers. Single mothers or even those working in ministry may not have the financial means to stay at home, regardless of desire to do so. By empathizing with, respecting, and affirming mothers who work as well as mothers who choose to be full time caregivers, the church helps to recognize those who cannot stay at home. This also affirms women in the church who are unmarried, or married and without children. It is important to recognize those who want to be mothers but struggle with infertility, in an additional attempt to

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<sup>17</sup> Ago, "Pregnancy and the Pastorate: An Opportunity to Reflect Christ."

<sup>18</sup> Christine Teng-Henson. "Caring for the Mothers in Our Midst: The Church's Responsibility." CBE International, 2022. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/caring-for-the-mothers-in-our-midst-the-churchs-responsibility/>.

<sup>19</sup> Howell, *Buried Talents*, 81

assure motherhood does not become an idol.<sup>20</sup> Van Leeuwen cites an idolatry of marriage in the church today, and that “we have neither biblical nor psychological warrant to marginalize single persons[...]and only when we have renounced the idolatries associated with both sexuality and marriage will we be able to do proper justice to all of God’s children, regardless of sexual orientation or marital state.”<sup>21</sup> The church is called to be a community, and one way the church can undo an idolization towards marriage is to recognize those without marriage or children. Often, unmarried people in the church have greater flexibility in their lifestyle. If the church can implement programs, classes, or groups that allow married and unmarried Christians to grow in faith together, it accomplishes the mission of the body of Christ. It may even lead to relationships in which an unmarried person’s flexibility is a gift to struggling new parents. And time spent with a newborn baby may be a gift to an unmarried person who lives alone. Hospitality is found not in the separation of those with and without kids, but in the recognition that learning happens alongside one another.<sup>22</sup>

The church can provide support and encouragement for women considering ministry, starting at a young age. The church can address from the pulpit stories of Biblical women and the cultural contexts of the Bible. It is harder to examine context and translation than it is to affirm readily accepted interpretations. But being intentional about Bible translation doesn’t only help in this sphere of Christianity, it’s important for an overall healthy church. By accurately translating scripture, churches affirm with words *and* action that women belong in leadership. Starting with youth education, the church can support God’s call and provide examples of strong

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<sup>20</sup> Brenda-Lee Sasaki. “I Am More than a Mother: Dismantling the Madness of the Motherhood Myth.” CBE International, 2022. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/i-am-more-mother-dismantling-madness-motherhood-myth/>.

<sup>21</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace*, 229

<sup>22</sup> Sasaki. “I Am More than a Mother: Dismantling the Madness of the Motherhood Myth.”

female leaders, encouraging exploration of that call in college and young adulthood, and providing steps to continue to answer that call once in ministry. Once in ministry, the church can provide flexibility for the sake of mother and child, providing adequate expectations for pregnant and nursing mothers sharing their bodies with a tiny human being- something uniquely gifted to them. The church can be a voice of encouragement for young women *and* men to pursue their God-given calling.

Understanding that the role of women in the church is more than merely maternal and supportive is important in ensuring that the body of Christ includes each of its members. In order to affirm and encourage women accepting God's call on their lives rather than giving it up, churches need to encourage healthy expectations of parenthood that encompass both male and female parenting roles. Churches need to implement education and programming that validates and affirms women seeking to follow God's call on their lives. Listening to stories, rather than listening to mere generalizations, is what moves us forward. The church *needs* to listen to women in *all* stages of Christian ministry and motherhood.

Christians believe that they are called to the Great Commission— to go and make disciples of all nations. Their greatest commandment is to love God and the second is to love one another. Through this love, the world will know that they are disciples of Jesus. If they believe that women are also called to this Great Commission, and that Jesus, through his death, made it so that Paul's words ring true—that there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free— that does not mean God does not call us to serve God in unique ways based on our stories. But it does mean that gender doesn't define our call to serve God's kingdom.

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