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#6 Female church leadership, complementarity and marriage

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers questions on what the New Testament says about the role of women in church leadership. Does 1 Tim 2:13-15 forbid women from preaching? What does he make of complementarian vs egalitarian theology? How does he treat passages such as Ephesians 5: 22 'wives submit to your husband'?

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Transcript

Hi there. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic, pretty quickly.

But one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God.

And you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premierinsight.org/resources. Premier Podcast.

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. A very warm welcome. I'm Justin Briley sitting down with Tom Wright to ask your questions again on today's episode of the podcast.

It's produced by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT-RIGHT online. So very glad you're

with us for today's show. As we draw once again on the thought and theology of Tom Wright, research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St Andrews, a celebrated author, theologian and of course occasional musician, as you will have heard if you've listened to previous podcast episodes.

As ever, please do rate and review us on iTunes or wherever you get your podcast from. Helps to let others know about the show. And today, Tom's going to be tackling your questions on women leadership and complementarian theology should be an interesting one.

If you'd like more episodes from the show, updates or want to ask the question yourself for a future programme, then do register at our podcast website, askNT-RIGHT.com. Now, if you're registered now, you'll also get access to bonus content such as Tom answering Stuart in Surrey's question, what do you think about Paul speaking in tongues? That's only available to subscribers. So go there, register, and you'll get access to that bonus video along with others. Anyone also who signed up to the newsletter by the end of March this year also gets automatically entered into a prize draw for one of three signed copies of Tom's translation of scripture, the Bible for everyone.

Tom has translated the whole of the New Testament and John Goldingay has done the Old Testament. So sign up now for the bonus videos, the prize draw, the newsletter, and of course, to ask a question if you want to. Loads of good reasons to become a newsletter subscriber at askNT-RIGHT.com. Let's get into today's edition of the podcast.

It was great to be back with you, Tom, for another edition of the podcast. This is a particular issue that we're going to be digging into today that has divided lots of parts of the church, particularly in the last century or so, women leadership. Just before we get into some of those questions, it would be interesting to know from your perspective, as an Anglican, which has only in the relatively recent past begun to ordain women and so on and even more recently into the roles of bishops and so on.

Has your thinking changed on this over the years and anyway? Oh, yes, because of course I grew up in a church where clergy were male. And the most that a woman could do when I was growing up in the, I was born in 48 so in the 50s and 60s was to be a Deaconess, which was like a Deacon, but probably not actually presiding at services except occasionally in rural churches when there wasn't a vicar around, as it were. And there were plenty of women doing plenty of things.

One of my answers actually an Anglican nun and very active in the church and then a deeply prayerful person of great personal spiritual leadership and people used to go to her for counsel and so on. So I've been used to women taking quite an interesting role rather than just passive, but not being ordained. I suppose I started thinking more seriously about it when we were in Canada in the early 80s because I was in Montreal and Montreal had just decided they were going to ordain women and that was quite a challenge for me.

And it forced me to go back and look at the various passages and particularly some of the ones we'll probably be talking about in a minute. And I came out with the view that though I couldn't necessarily explain all the details of all the verses that are sometimes quoted again, there was a very strong groundswell of scriptural affirmation. In other words, this wasn't just, oh, I had seen women doing it and realized it was okay.

There may have been a bit of that kind of softening me up making me ready for the fresh scriptural awareness. And then it's basically all gone from there. But I've had friends who have thought this and then thought that and have changed their mind this way and some who've changed their mind that way.

So I'm very much aware of debates continuing. And do you find yourself still able to work concord with people who maybe do hold a very different position on that? Well, I would certainly, but they wouldn't necessarily say that when I was Bishop of Durham, for instance, there was a group of clergy who because I was going to ordain women could not regard me as their bishop because they were in a different, what we call a different integrity, how you can have two integrity is still quite tricky. But I've always believed that there isn't something you should divide the church over and that as with some other contentious issues, the aim should be to live in such a way that doesn't make demands on one another's conscience, but may make demands on one another's charity.

And that was hammered out by the Church of South India in the 1940s when they wanted to bring together Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians, etc. And they would live for a while with demands on one another's charity, but without putting demands on one another's conscience, that is really, really important. And so that's what I've tried to model and as with everything else, it isn't always easy, it doesn't always work the way you would like.

Well, let's go to some of the questions. Abby in Bournemouth asks, you know, a sort of general question on this front, what does the New Testament really say about the role of women and leadership in the church? Is it biblical for a woman to lead a congregation? Is it biblical for a woman to preach to a congregation of both men and women? And Abby's setting up some of the traditional sort of points at which people differ over exactly where a woman's authority to lead and preach occur in a local setting? Sure, sure. As with many other things, I want to go to the resurrection, I want to go to the resurrection stories of Jesus in the first light of Easter day.

Actually, you know, without the resurrection of Jesus, everything falls about anyway, there is no Christianity. And within that culture, the idea that the prime witnesses to the most important event in the whole story would be women in tears is so counterintuitive that as a historian, I have to say nobody would ever make up that story. Interestingly, in 1st Corinthians 15, when Paul quotes what is now the shaped up and polished tradition, the women have disappeared already by the early 50s.

Here's our tradition, and we know that people aren't going to believe us if we say he

appeared first to these women. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it's all very clear the first person to see the risen Jesus were the women. And particularly, the first people to be told to tell other people that Jesus is alive again, Mary Magdalene and the others.

Now, all Christian ministry flows from the announcement that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now the Lord of the world. And this is just a cultural revolution that Jesus had up till then chosen 12 men, who will let him down in various ways. He now transforms that, and this is part of the newness of new creation, it seems to me, by saying now actually this extraordinary explosive message is so subversive that the best people to take it are strange women who no one's going to believe and the disciples themselves don't.

But they were telling the truth. And it seems to me we need to inhabit that story and that way of looking at that story and say, so was this just a flash in the pan? And was this just, well, Jesus had a special thing about his mother or Mary Magdalene or whatever. But after that, it all went.

And the answer is absolutely not. Read Romans 16. Now, of course, most people studying Romans find it hard to get to chapter eight, let alone or let alone 16.

But Romans 16 is explosive. Paul greets all these church leaders in Rome, many of whom are women who are church leaders in their own right, one of whom is an apostle, he says so, junior, and there's been a huge attempt to try to make out that this is Junia As a man, but the scholarship is quite clear. This is a female name and she is an apostle.

For Paul, that means somebody who has seen the risen Jesus and is thereby commissioned to be an authorized representative. And here's the crunch. The first woman mentioned in Romans 16 is the bearer of the letter to Rome.

Now, if you're Paul and you know in your bones, you have just written a letter, which is the most explosive piece of theological writing you can imagine, who you're going to give it to to take it to be read under Caesar's nose in Rome. Well, presumably some strong man, no, a deacon woman from the church in Kenkrae. We assume she's an independent business woman, Phoebe, and she's on the way to Rome.

And what we know about the way letters worked in the ancient world was if you sent a letter, via a friend or somebody, the chances are you can't prove this. The chances are they will be the one to read it out. They might well be the one to explain it to people who I mean faced with Romans.

We'd have a thousand questions. So Phoebe, tell us what. So the probability is that the first person to expound Paul's letter to the Romans was a woman, a deacon from the church in Kenkrae.

I want to say, get used to it, guys. This is explosive, but it's the sort of thing that happens when new creation is going forward. And to row back from there and to say, well, you know,

Paul didn't really mean that.

And so now we've, I then want to say, what are the forces in our culture today? Particularly, I have to say in America, which are forcing some churches and some people to fasten on one or two verses from elsewhere to say, Oh, no, no, we can't have women doing this and that and the other. Because that's a highly, highly selective reading of scripture. And as with all other theological answers, the best place to start is with the resurrection of Jesus, and then everything that flows out from there.

So in summary, in a sense, to Abbe's question here, is it biblical for a woman to preach, to lead a congregation of men and women, you would say, on balance? Yes. I would miss out on balance. I would just say, yes, it is, it is biblical.

Yes. There are particulars. I mean, do you want me to get to? Well, let's talk about that, because that comes up in the next question.

Lisa in California, interesting to women asking these questions. First, in my seat, two, 13 to 15, though you could expand beyond that. Can you explain what these verses have to do or to say specifically about women teaching if they do at all? And specifically, what your thoughts are on verse 15 in particular? Would you like to read that from? Yeah, yeah.

Well, I think there's there's a few things to say. And let me say, I've written a piece on this, which is printed in my book, surprise by scripture. And so all I can do here is summarize some of the arguments.

I've set it out more fully. And indeed, in Paul for everyone, the pastoral epistles, there's there's a chunk on it there. And that those overlap inevitably.

The first thing to say is that in verses eight and nine and 10, Paul is saying, men and women don't go with the stereotypes. The men must lift up holy hands without getting angry and having arguments. In other words, men, we all know about testosterone, just now your Christians learn to deal with that and don't be all sort of power brokers and so on.

Women don't think that your life is defined by having an elaborate hairdo or by having jewelry. That just plays into the idea that women are the pretty little things the decoration on the side while we men are doing the fighting as it were. So he's saying, let's get rid of the stereotypes and learn a wise way of being human, which avoids those.

In other words, it isn't that he's crossed with women for wearing jewels. It's that don't get trapped in thinking that that's all that it means to be a woman, to be a pretty bit of decoration on the side. And then he says, this is my second main point, a woman should learn in peace in all submissiveness.

But the idea, the word *manthanetto* let her learn is the same root from which we get *maithetis* disciple. And *hesukiya* is what you have if you're a student, you have the leisure to study. The word scholar actually comes from having leisure to study.

And it looks to me as though this is similar to what you have in Luke chapter 10, where Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha, where Mary, shock horror, is not in the back room where the women should be doing the cooking. She is in the front room, sitting with the men disciples, which means she is in training to be herself a learner. And then it's like, somebody sitting at the feet of a rabbi is suit related to going to be a rabbi themselves.

I remember when I've I had Paula Gooda on my unbelievable podcast discussing this with Francesca Stavra Kapula, who takes a view that it's all inherently sexist and patriarchal. And Paula was keen to say, of course, it came out of a very patriarchal culture. So we're bound to see aspects of that.

But pointed out that in this specific instance, simply saying, women should learn exactly quite radical. It is. It is.

And women would regularly ever since Aristotle, who saw women as a deficient form of men, actually, women were regarded as not that sort of thing. And this, of course, has gone on in the Western world and still in some circles does to this day. But then the crucial thing then, I think, is the possibility, and it is only a possibility, that this is written to the context of Ephesus.

And what we know about Ephesus in the first century is that, as we know in Acts, the great temple in Ephesus is Diana or Artemis in Greek. And the cult of Artemis, which has this vast temple, one of the wonders of the world, is a female only cult. And various people have argued, this isn't my idea, but I think it has some mileage, that actually what Paul is opposing here is the idea, well, of course, we in Ephesus know that religion is basically a female thing.

So if there are any men there, then the women is going to have to take over the leadership from them. And because we want to hold our heads up, like the Artemis priestesses, where men aren't allowed to look in. And this would then be, verse 12 would then be a rebuke to that, that women should not usurp or try to take over authority from men.

Now, I want to say, I don't know that that's what that means, but the key Greek word in the middle, "authentine," is a very strange word, which, when you look at the about the men there, is does this mean women shouldn't be usurping authority from any man or from their husbands, or they shouldn't be teaching their husbands, as though there's a husband/wife thing going on here, as though, yes, women teachers fine, but maybe not if it's the, I really don't know on that. And then the argument about Adam and Eve, rather like the one in 1 Corinthians 11. If you read it out for us, and we call it the first.

Sorry, yes. Adam was made first and then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and got herself into trouble, and she became in transgression. I shouldn't make clear for those who can't see, but you're actually reading from the original Greek here.

Sorry, it was a problem. It's just, some people might assume, why is he sort of questioning

how to do, I just want to make clear, you're not reading from an English Bible at this point, you're translating it. No, I mean, so for Paul, this is a flicker of the Adam and Eve story, and I've heard it expounded both ways.

I've heard, well, Adam was not deceived, but he jolly well sinned, whereas the woman was deceived, so that's all the more fault for Adam. But you could read it as that Adam was above that sort of thing, but in the story, Adam did eat. So it's not quite clear to me or not at the moment, the different ways of possibly reading that.

And then verse 15, which was specified, that the woman will be saved through childbirth if she continues in faith and love and holiness with wisdom. The point there is that in Genesis 3, there is this warning to the woman that you will have great pain in childbirth, which goes with the warning to the man that the ground will bring four thorns and thistles in you, you'll have hard work digging it. And so it seems to be Paul saying, okay, that was the Eve problem, the Eve story, but that doesn't mean that all is now lost, that Eve will be saved through childbirth.

It doesn't mean she'll only be saved if she gives birth lots of children. It means that the apparent curse on this painful childbirth is not the be all an end all that God will make the way through. Now, so all of that pretty well, everything I've said could be contested and has been contested.

It seems to me that is as good a way of reading the passage as any I've come across. And my question is, why have some people taken those three verses and made an entire church policy out of it and been very fierce about it, which has happened, particularly again in America? We thought we'd kind of got beyond that and it's now come back again. What's going on in the culture to make people say this is the defining thing when they miss out so many other things in the New Testament? That's one little passage.

How many times do we have teaching about riches and poverty in the New Testament? How many times do we have teaching about generosity to the poor and all of that? And many people who fixate on that don't actually seem to bother about all those other things at all. That's the real problem here. Well, thank you very much.

I hope that's been helpful Lisa on where Tom goes on that particular passage, 1st Timothy 2, 13 to 15. We'll be back with more of your questions in a moment. The Ask, Anti-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online.

Anti-Write Online is the place where you can find all of Tom Wright's online theology courses taught by Tom himself in video format. Now, Tom's new book, Paul Abiography, is available and you can get a podcast listener discount on the video teaching course on that particular book at anti-writeonline.org/askentiwright. It's going to give you brilliant insight into the person of St. Paul and the extraordinary way he took the gospel from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. So that podcast listener discount of 75% off on the Paul Abiography

video teaching course at anti-writeonline.org/askentiwright. It opens up the whole question of what's sometimes been called the egalitarian and complementarian view of men and women in Scripture.

This is Thomas' question in Seattle. It says, "What do you believe," the Bible says, "about firstly women as pastors and elders?" Well, we've sort of covered that. But he says, "I believe more in complementarianism in the roles in church.

And yet I struggle. Should I be updating my beliefs on this?" So what do you understand to be this kind of complementarian view versus an egalitarian view? I think both of those words are misleading because it does seem to me that men and women are different and that psychologically, biologically, in all sorts of ways men and women are quite radically different, which of course raises all sorts of other questions in our culture right now as well. That's not to say that they're completely different.

It seems to me that certainly what little I'm not a psychologist, but what I've read and what I know as a pastor, et cetera, is that there is a considerable overlap so that men tend to be this way out and women tend to be that way out, but there are many, many overlaps. And there's a sense in which they are complementary in that sense? Precisely, precisely. And, you know, Viva La difference and all that.

And if you do personality test like the Enneagram or the Myers-Briggs, there is a preponderance in some ways, more men are in this category than that and more women, but there is lots and lots of overlap. So, but that doesn't mean equality. It doesn't mean identity.

And in a sense, I saw this when we first ordained women, I was dean of Litchfield in the '90s. And the first ordination of women was, I think, '94 or '95, something like that. And many of the older clergy who had argued for the ordination of women for years had done so on the grounds that men and women were identical, so it was unjust.

We got a preacher for that occasion who was a Catholic woman, interestingly Mary Gray, Professor Mary Gray. And she argued from the pulpit very strongly that we ought to ordain women because men and women are so different and God wants all these different gifts in the ministry. And some of the older modernists were horrified.

This is a postmodern affirmation of difference, which seemed to challenge the identitarian solidarity. And I want to say that's the rich mixture of cultures we live in right now. As far as I can see, both from scripture and from pastoral practice, et cetera, men and women are very significantly different and are not interchangeable in that sense and that God does want different giftedness right across the board in church leadership and ministry.

And just to drop in as a footnote, first Corinthians 11, whatever it means about Adam and Eve and wearing of hats, Paul envisages women leading in worship in that passage. So you think it is time for Thomas to update his beliefs on this? If he doesn't think that women can lead in worship, then yes, he needs to update. Okay.

What about in the family situation? Because that's the other area where we do get writings from Paul Ephesians and so on. And what do you do with some of those sort of household rules and the famous one in Ephesians, wives to submit to your husbands and so on. A lot of people read that and say, "Oh, there we go, patriarchal Paul, a product of his time," and so on.

Product of his time would never ever ever have written what he writes about slaves, about children, about women. Because the product of his time, it would have been absolutely battering down the hatches. The man rules the roost and slaves and children and women watch out.

Give us the context then. I've obviously cherry picked a verse there. Well, the passage about husbands and wives in Ephesians chapter 5, verse 21, begins, "Submit to one another in the fear of the Messiah and then the women to their own husbands as to the Lord.

But then he talks about husbands, love your wives as the Messiah, love the church and gave himself for her. So the role of the man there is incredibly demanding. Think about Jesus going to the cross.

Think about all the self-renunciation that went into that. Now, that's how you have to love your wives. That doesn't look like patriarchy to me.

But what there is there, in the context of a pagan city like Ephesus or Corinth or Rome or wherever it is, what there is is a radically different way of life in which in this family there is mutual respect, mutual enjoyment of different giftedness and a relishing of the other to be the other, and to use our postmodern language, in which the women are radically respected as fellow Christians, not as subsidiary versions that we men are the real ones. And there is in that context of the pagan world. I think those household codes are really revolutionary.

And we have to remember that we are reading this after all the rhetoric about Victorian mories, etc. Although actually a lot of it was Georgian as in 1920s and so on. And so we react this way in that.

But if you just go back to the classical world and read a few books, say Robert Harris' novels on Cicero or Tom Holland's brilliant books are on the Roman Empire, imagine yourself living in that world and how women and slaves and so on were treated then and then read the household codes. I know which I'd rather talk. In that sense, if we are to draw anything from Ephesians, it's about mutual submission in that sense.

Very specifically, Ephesians 5:21, submit to one another. And Paul is seeing their marriage very riskily as a reflection of something going on in Genesis 1 and 2, which fits with the whole of the rest of Ephesians, which is about heaven and earth coming together, about Jews and Gentiles coming together, about men and women coming together. There's something cosmic going on here, which is mutually affirmative.

No surprises in our platonic western world. We have discounted earth and think we can get to heaven. So we've discounted femininity and think that masculinity is worth it.

No, actually, they both matter. Just to finish this off, and I will plead my own biases here, I'm married to a church minister, Lucy, and I once got into a conversation with a well-known evangelical Calvinist, Mark Driscoll, who was on my podcast many years ago at the height of his sort of fame and he was very much sort of ministry, church leadership is just male. And he sort of challenged me in that podcast to say, "Well, how many men do you get along to your church?" His view was, "If you don't have a man leading, you won't attract men." And there's a sense in which, I've heard that from other quarters that we were at risk of a too feminized version of the church and so on.

Now, as it happens, I pushed back on that. I felt we were very well represented in both genders and that wasn't an issue in our church. But that's been the view, even if it's whether or not it's kind of supported from scripture.

I think a lot of people say, "We need men at the front because they're the leaders essentially." And it seems to me that was one of the possible takeaways from First Timothy 2, that if the women take over and say, "We're in charge now and you men get out of here," then everything is going to go out of kilter in ways that it's perhaps hard to quantify. I know that argument. I've run into it a few times.

I'd say that's simply not in fact how it works. And I don't know, Mark Driscoll personally, and I haven't debated with him or anything. But within the church, God moves in many mysterious ways and we mustn't be short-term about this.

I mean, there is some wisdom in seeing how the complementarity of men and women does work. For instance, the Cascio movement, I'm not sure if you're familiar with it, the little courses which came out of Spanish Catholicism after the Civil War, that these were ways of bringing Christian spirituality back to ordinary folk. When my wife and I went on Cascio in Montreal, it was quite clearly organized that there were male Cascos and female Cascos, and a woman could only go if a married woman could only go, if her husband had already gone, in order to prevent any sense that this was poets for the women, etc.

And I think there was a bit of earthy wisdom about that, but that was the same as that members of the congregation could only go if the rector of the parish had already been, because the last thing they wanted was to have a little revolutionary group aware the real ones here and the rector not knowing what was going on. So there was a kind of a wisdom about the stability there. They didn't want to be seen to be subverting the institution.

That can be something that's helpful in a particular situation or cultural instance. And Cascio here in the UK, I think, they have mixed Cascos. Well, fascinating stuff.

Thank you so much. Thank you. People want to follow up, as I said, on any of these issues, then do go and check out all of the other things you can read about from NT Wright on this front, and do check out the resources available from our partners on the podcast, SBCK,

and NT Wright online.

That podcast I mentioned with Mark Driscoll from The Unbelievable Show, which is the other podcast I run available. I think if memory serves back in early 2012 was when we put that out. So if you search in the archives, you'll find it there, that conversation.

But it's been another fascinating edition of our program. Thank you. Good to be talking.

And I look forward to seeing you again next time. Yes, indeed. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Next time, we're asking Tom your questions on biblical inerrancy, solar scriptura, and how we should read the Bible. So look out for it on your podcast feed in a couple of weeks time might even sneak another Tom Wright unplugged edition in as well. Please do share with others, rate and review this podcast, sign up to our newsletter as well at ask NT Wright dot com.

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