

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

PART 4: UNITY AND DISAGREEMENT

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Note from the author: I respectfully request that this paper isn't distributed outside Grace Church Truro without my permission.

All quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV).

Introduction

In 2017, Princeton Theological Seminary offered respected evangelical pastor, writer and teacher Tim Keller an award for his contributions to Reformed theology and public witness. The backlash from parts of the American evangelical community was immediate and severe. One prominent critic, Carol Howard Merritt, wrote on her blog:

As Princeton Theological Seminary celebrates Tim Keller's theology, I will be mourning. As he presents his lecture and receives his \$10,000 award, I will lament for my sisters who have been maligned and abused. In these difficult days, when our president says that women's genitalia is up for grabs by any man with power and influence¹, I hoped that my denomination would stand up for women, loud and clear. Instead we are honouring and celebrating a man who has championed toxic theology for decades (Merritt, 2017).²

Keller's crime was to subscribe to a complementarian position on women in leadership. Yet, by any measure, Merritt's criticism of Keller's position is extreme. Writing in *Christianity* magazine, Ruth Jackson identifies herself as no fan of complementarian theology, but confesses herself appalled by the extremeness of Merritt's language:

Not only is her post grossly hyperbolic by equating Keller with Trump's womanising, it is also a heinous misrepresentation of the church leader's ministry which has focused on urban transformation and reaching sceptics, not fighting the culture wars of right wing politics. Her use of words such as 'maligned', 'abused' and 'victims' are incredibly offensive to individuals who have experienced genuine abuse both inside and outside the Church. Likewise, I would rather reserve terms like 'poisonous beliefs' and 'toxic theology' to those preaching a message antithetical to the gospel. Extremist jihads who kill innocent people in God's name, harsh task masters who negate grace and oppress individuals through staunch legalism, selfish dictators who refuse to help the poor and downtrodden – these beliefs and practices are poisonous and toxic (Jackson, 2017).

¹ A reference to Donald Trump, who was serving a first term as US President.

² Is complementarian theology inherently toxic? To my mind, anyone who has read carefully Tim and Kathy Keller's book, *The Meaning of Marriage* (2011), will struggle to recognise Merritt's caricature of Keller's theology. In Chapter 6 on gender roles, for example (a chapter it should be noted is written by Kathy, not by Tim), we find statements like the following: '[I]n the dance of the Trinity, the greatest is the one who is most self-effacing, most sacrificial, most devoted to the good of the Other. Jesus redefined – or, more truly, defined properly – headship and authority, thus taking the toxicity of it away, at least for those who live by his definition rather than by the world's understanding' (p. 177). 'Jesus redefined all authority as servant-authority. Any exercise of power can only be done in service to the Other, not to please oneself' (pp. 177-78). 'In Jesus we see all the authoritarianism of authority laid to rest, and all the humility of submission glorified' (p. 178). In the Appendix on 'decision-making and gender roles', Kathy sets out the following four principles: (i) The husband's authority (like the Son's over us) is never used to please himself but only to serve the interests of his wife; (ii) A wife is never to be merely compliant but is to use her resources to empower; (iii) A wife is not to give her husband unconditional obedience; (iv) Assuming the role of headship is only done for the purposes of ministering to your wife and family (pp. 241-42). Throughout the book, we see the Kellers taking pains to distance their position from anything that might be construed as toxic or misogynistic.

Critics of complementarian theology often present the more subtle argument that complementarian belief isn't inherently toxic; it *opens the door* to toxicity in male-female relationships. Andrew Haslam from Grace Church London (another Advance-partner church) has written an interesting piece on this (2024). Most complementarian thinkers are prepared to admit that their critics have a point, but maintain that (in the words of John Stevens, Director of the Federation of Independent Evangelical Churches), 'complementarianism, properly understood with the full biblical perspective, isn't an abusive position. Where abuse takes place, it's not because of complementarianism – it's because complementarianism hasn't been properly understood' (Cornwell, 2022, p. 42). John Piper and Wayne Grudem also consider this issue in the classic complementarian tome, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991), arguing that 'we stress Christlike, sacrificial headship that keeps the good of the wife in view and regards her as a joint heir of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7); and we stress thoughtful submission that does not make the husband an absolute lord' (p. 76).

Jackson's appeal for moderation notwithstanding, the anti-Keller brigade won the day. As a result of the outcry against a complementarian theologian being publicly honoured, Princeton Theological Seminary reversed the decision to offer Keller the award (Shellnutt, 2017).

Here's a second example of the way in which the divergence of views on the question of women in ministry can easily descend into hyperbolic or exaggerated language. This time the shoe is on the other foot as it comes from someone on the other side of the debate to Keller's critics.

In 2007, the *Newfrontiers* magazine carried an interview with prominent complementarian scholar, Wayne Grudem. Here's what he said to Nigel Ring:

There is still a lot of controversy in the church but in the last 20 years the complementarian viewpoint ... has increasingly been winning the exegetical argument. New research in grammar, meanings of ancient words and interpretations of Scripture have very significantly endorsed the complementarian position. However, under the pressures of the culture many churches have capitulated to an egalitarian position and have women as pastors and elders. I think this is a terrible mistake. It is going to result in increasing feminisation of the churches and driving men away. Ultimately, there will be a decline of churches into a much more liberal view of Scripture in many other areas. ...

[Churches who do not adopt a complementarian position] will increasingly slide down a slippery slope that, first, allows the appointment of women elders, second, denies male headship in marriage and third begins to deny anything uniquely masculine about men except for our physical differences. Fourth, it begins to call God 'Mother', ... and, fifth, it involves the increasing endorsement of the legitimacy of homosexuality. The last stage is the endorsement of homosexual marriage and the appointment of homosexuals to ordained positions and leadership in the church. This is already tearing some denominations apart.

Nigel, I have detailed that slide down the slippery slope in a very new book, *Evangelical Feminism – a new path to Liberalism* (Crossway, 2006). I document and quote 25 different ways in which egalitarian arguments deny or undermine the authority of Scripture and lead towards liberalism. We have to stand together against the trends in the rest of the church that is compromising so rapidly with the rest of the culture (Ring, 2017, p. 38).

This is fighting talk! Observe the catalogue of errors that Grudem warns will follow if churches capitulate to egalitarian theology. Men being driven away from the church. The denial of masculine identity. Altering the way in which believers speak of God. The descent down a slippery slope which leads, ultimately, to a revisionist theology of sexuality and endorsing same-sex marriage.³ All these things are the natural consequences, Grudem believes, of failing to accept what the Bible teaches plainly about male authority and female subordination. They are the result of elevating culture over the authority of God's Word.

For Grudem, the exegetical and hermeneutical arguments⁴ are on the complementarian side. The assertion that 'the complementarian viewpoint ... has increasingly been winning the exegetical argument' is wishful thinking on Grudem's part. But Grudem goes further, claiming that all evangelical

³ There's no good reason to suppose that rejecting the kind of hard complementarian position espoused by Grudem will *necessarily* result in affirming a secular sexual ethic. The leadership team of Bridgetown Church, Portland, include a helpful discussion of this (in 'Appendix 1: Slippery Slope', 2023a, pp. 25-26). However, it's true that egalitarian theology and affirmation of same-sex marriage are frequent bedfellows. Matt Hosier (2023) is suspicious of 'slippery slope' language, preferring in its place the language of 'scaffold': 'I do think that the theological jumps made in egalitarianism create, if not a slippery slope, a scaffold for further theological innovations to be made in respect of same sex relationships, *even though many egalitarians will never follow that route*' (emphasis mine). This is a more nuanced argument than that of Grudem and is surely correct.

⁴ *Exegetical/exegesis*: having to do with the detailed scrutiny of texts. *Hermeneutical/hermeneutics*: having to do with the principles of interpretation.

egalitarians/mutualists are guilty of denying or undermining the authority of Scripture. This is disingenuous towards the egalitarian position. As I've tried to show in the previous three papers, there are strong biblical arguments on both sides. Grudem's position is totally one-sided and extreme.

The tendency to reach for language that polarises and vilifies the opposition is a hallmark of the way in which the world conducts dialogue and debate.⁵ My argument in this paper is that, as Christians, we should be able to do better. Here's Ruth Jackson again, in connection with the Tim Keller story:

The furore around this case draws out everything that is utterly opposed to gospel unity. As Christians we need to learn to disagree kindly – to acknowledge that what unites us is so much greater than that which divides. ... I'm not saying the issues that divide us are unimportant, but we must do better than this.

Then she says:

Our world is desperate for the good news of Jesus but so often we get in the way. It's time for us to put aside our petty in-fighting and unite in preaching the hope of the gospel to a hurting world (Ibid, 2017).

Disagreeing 'Christianly'

In this paper, I want to get practical. Given the differences of opinion that exist within the evangelical Christian community on gender roles, how should we handle this issue in Grace Church? It's an important question, not least because how we address *this* question has implications for how we handle a whole bunch of other issues as well. How should we handle our disagreements with brothers and sisters who see things differently to ourselves?

Through this paper I'm guided by a simple thought: *healthy church life is not marked by a lack of disagreement but by how we handle our disagreements*. Fleming Rutledge notes: 'Struggling to understand another's perspective so as to engage it sympathetically and accurately is a Christian action' (2015, p. 6). Consider the three verbs in that sentence. Taken together, they might be understood to define what we mean by action that's distinctly *Christian*:

- Firstly, our dialogue with those who think differently to us will involve *struggle*. It's frequently difficult. It will challenge and inconvenience us. It requires work.
- Secondly, Christian debate and dialogue must be *sympathetic*. We choose to think the best of our sisters and brothers who see things differently to us. We acknowledge that the issues are complex and that we may not see the whole picture with perfect clarity.
- Thirdly, we must ensure that we understand a dialogue partner's position *accurately*. We need to be a student of their position as well as their own. We don't misrepresent their argument to make it easier to refute (this is called building a 'straw man' argument). We don't over-exaggerate the weaknesses of their position or the strengths of our own.⁶

⁵ Here's Preston Sprinkle (he's writing on the same-sex marriage issue): 'When people feel the need to resort to dehumanizing slogans, or when they can't agree with a single aspect of the other person's view, I start to wonder if they're compensating for unexamined weaknesses in their own view' (2023, p. 33).

⁶ For all its strengths (and there are many), I think this is an issue with Terran Williams's book, *How God Sees Women* (2022). I'm broadly sympathetic with Williams's desire to puncture the over-confidence of the complementarian balloon, but Williams's wholesale dismissal of a complementarian viewpoint is unwarranted given the degree of his uncertainty over the disputed texts. For instance, in relation to 1 Corinthians 1:3-16 (one of two places in the New Testament where Paul specifically introduces the term *kephalē* in a discussion of men and women), Williams writes, '[T]his passage ... raises more questions than answers. Even the stronger views are tentative. As such, humility is required' (p. 124). Similarly, in relation to 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (the significance of which for the complementarian-mutualist debate can hardly be overstated), Williams concludes: '[T]he passage

The opposite of 'Christian' is 'worldly'. Friends, we do not conduct debate and dialogue in the manner of the world. We don't take our lead from the unfettered ferocity of the blogosphere or the confected outrage of social media. That is not the way of Christ.

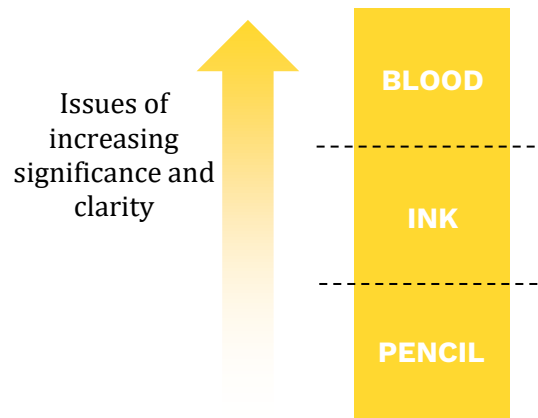
So, let's explore what it means to engage with those with whom we disagree 'Christianly.' Here, I want to look at two foundational elements of a Christian framework for debate and dialogue. These are 'blood, pencil and ink' and 'unanimity and unity'. Following the theologian Preston Sprinkle, I'll then consider how these foundations translate into Christian action before presenting a real-life case-study from the story of Grace Church.

is so cloudy that it does not warrant being the basis of a doctrine or church practice' (p. 149). In this respect, I find myself in agreement with Williams's position that 1 Timothy 2, on its own, doesn't provide a suitable basis for prohibiting women from teaching men, but I take issue with Williams's broader stance that refuses to recognise *any legitimacy* for a complementarian viewpoint.

Blood, ink and pencil

One of the things I've wanted to get across in this series of papers is that deciding what we should think about gender roles is not as straightforward as 'looking at what the Bible says.' When we open the pages of Scripture, there are a whole bunch of things that aren't made perfectly clear on *this* issue.

Those last three words are important. I'm not suggesting that everything taught in the Bible is opaque or cloudy. Far from it. The fundamental tenets of the faith are taught clearly, consistently and urgently. But there is a spectrum of clarity, and that corresponds with the scheme that I introduced in Paper 1. For us as Christians, some issues are written in blood, others in ink, and still others in pencil.



When I first started reading theology in my early twenties, my appreciation of this framework was practically zero. I had little or no ability to differentiate between issues of primary, secondary or tertiary significance, nor did I acknowledge degrees of certainty my knowledge. In consequence, *all* the Christian convictions I held I tended to hold with equal, fiery intensity.

As time has gone by, my experience of thinking, studying, discussing and debating has made me both more and less sure. Some of the convictions I used to hold I hold more tenaciously than ever before, but other convictions I'm more ambivalent about. In other words, I'm both more confident and more open than I used to be.

David Brooks writes: 'Wisdom starts with epistemological modesty.⁷ The world is immeasurably complex and the private stock of reason is small' (2015, p. 265). One of the things I've tried to show in the previous three papers is that the question of what the Bible teaches on gender roles is complex. Yes, there are things which are clear and unambiguous. These are things written in blood. For the elders at Grace Church, our convictions that women and men are created equal and that the Bible affirms a vision of male-female complementarity sit in that category. But not everything is a blood issue: some things are written in ink or pencil. For me, personally, many of the conclusions I've come to concerning 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2 sit in the ink or pencil categories. A further example is the precise way in which Paul intends for his readers to understand the term *kephalē*. I'm not one hundred percent certain on what to think about those things. My private stock of reason is limited.

The problem is that epistemological modesty doesn't come naturally to most of us. We'd much rather trade in black-and-white certainties.⁸ Yet God, in his wisdom, has seen fit to set up a world filled with

⁷ 'Epistemological' is the philosophical term for the theory and study of knowledge. So, epistemological modesty means being conservative with our estimation of what we know, or think we know.

⁸ Is this a particular problem for those of us who are evangelical charismatics? I'm at risk of painting a caricature here, but I think we need to beware of how elements of our tradition can predispose us to think in binary categories (truth and falsehood, right and wrong) which blind us to the presence of nuance and complexity. Our evangelicalism inclines us to say, 'The Bible says...' and that means we're not always particularly strong on the

complexities and ambiguities. And complexities and ambiguities are found in the Bible, too. At the end of the previous paper, I offered a suggestion of why that might be. God wants each of us to go on a journey in our hearts and not just in our heads. Building on this idea, Tom Wright points out that the Christian understanding of how we come to know things is distinctive. We're not designed to arrive at knowledge in isolation. *We need one another to arrive at the truth*. This means that 'wisdom is both bold and humble. It is never afraid to say what it thinks it has seen but always covets other angles of vision' (2014, p. 159).

The implication for how we grapple with what the Bible teaches about men and women is clear. Wherever we place ourselves on the complementarian-egalitarian spectrum, it's important that we remain open to believers whose viewpoints are different to our own.

subtleties of careful biblical interpretation ('The Bible doesn't need to be interpreted; it simply needs to be read!'). Our charismatic convictions incline us to say, 'The Spirit will guide me into the truth' and that means we're not always as strong as we could be in employing our minds.

Unity and Unanimity

Understanding the blood-ink-pencil scheme has important implications for our expectations concerning the church community. Ask yourself the question: do you expect all members of Grace Church to agree on doctrinal issues? And if not, why not?

One would hope there would be a high level of agreement – perhaps even universal agreement – on issues written in blood. The church would quickly find itself in all kinds of trouble if there were divergent views on such matters as the triune nature of God, the deity and humanity of Christ and the historicity of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.⁹ But I hope it’s equally clear that as we move along, or down, the blood-ink-pencil spectrum, we might expect more and more differences of view. And that’s ok.

The strength of the blood-ink-pencil scheme is that it does two things simultaneously. It reminds us of the fact that there are convictions we share as well as legitimising differences of opinion on things that aren’t essential for us to agree on. There is room for disagreement in the church.¹⁰ And that means that it’s a matter of the greatest importance that we don’t take our lead from the mudslinging and name-calling that goes on in the world between those who subscribe to different viewpoints. We need to learn to disagree Christianly.

The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was no stranger to debate and disagreement in the church (nor, for that matter, to mudslinging and name-calling). Speaking of the church’s identity as a sign to the world of peace and reconciliation, Welby says:

It doesn't mean we all agree, it is that we find ways of disagreeing. We need to understand reconciliation within the Church as the transformation of destructive conflict, not unanimity. It doesn't mean we all agree, it is that we find ways of disagreeing, perhaps very passionately but loving each other deeply at the same time, gracefully and deeply committed to each other (2013).

I find Welby’s vision compelling. What he’s doing is suggesting that the familiar idea of unity in diversity doesn’t just relate to the operation of spiritual gifts in the church (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12) or the embrace of all races and cultures (e.g. Ephesians 2 & 3), it also has implications for our commitment to fellow-believers whose opinions are different from our own. Unanimity (where everyone finds perfect agreement) is not the same thing as unity.

The key question can be stated as follows: is it possible to disagree passionately with a fellow believer, yet remain deeply committed to loving and serving them from the heart? I think it is. Admittedly, the past two thousand years shows that the Church doesn’t have a great track record in this regard, but we

⁹ I included this note in Paper 1, but it’s worth repeating here. At Grace Church, we define written-in-blood issues in church-historical terms with reference to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (<https://www.stpauls.w-berks.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=84&type=pdf>) and in contemporary-evangelical terms with reference to the *Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith* (<https://www.eauk.org/about-us/how-we-work/basis-of-faith>) [accessed, 5 April 2024]

¹⁰ In 2023, the leadership team of Bridgetown Church, Portland (made famous due to John Mark Comer’s rise to prominence as a previous pastor of the church) clarified their church’s stance on women in leadership (eldership). In a paper addressed to the congregation, they write: ‘Because the biblical interpretation of this issue is so complex, we sincerely hope Bridgetown to be a church that makes room for thoughtful disagreement and loving acceptance when it comes to women and leadership. We do not require that all who call Bridgetown “home” agree entirely with our belief’ (2023a). The fourth of their accompanying lectures is a masterclass in how to appeal to a congregation to remain united even though differences of opinion may remain (2023b). In my four papers, the stance I’m taking differs at a couple of points with that of the Bridgetown Church leaders and I don’t agree with some of their final points of exegesis (e.g. their embrace of Lucy Peppiatt’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 (see my Paper 2) or the confidence with which they assert some of their conclusions about 1 Timothy 2 (see my Paper 3)). However, the leadership qualities exhibited by the team as they take this local church on a journey towards greater clarity and unity is admirable.

mustn't let that prevent us from seeking to build community in which we celebrate our unity with brothers and sisters who think differently to us on issues of pencil or ink.

Our unity in Christ is infinitely greater than anything that threatens to divide us. So, let's disagree, debate and argue, and give permission to people to do this openly and honestly, while remaining absolutely committed to the biblical (written-in-blood!) imperative of unity.

How to have a fruitful conversation

Preston Sprinkle is an example of a theologian whose specialism is delving into theological issues that touch on today's culture wars. In one of his recent publications, Sprinkle prefaces his discussion of a contentious issue¹¹ with a chapter entitled, 'How to have a fruitful conversation' (2023). It's extremely relevant for the present discussion.

Sprinkle begins by defining what he means by a fruitful (or profitable) conversation:

I used to think that good conversations happened only when two people agreed. But a profitable conversation is not one where everyone has to agree; that would be unrealistic and not always helpful. A profitable conversation, rather, is where everyone feels understood and honoured – *even if disagreement remains*. Unprofitable conversations are ones where people aren't actually listening to what others are saying; where both sides focus on defending their viewpoint rather than exploring what's actually true; where people feel more degraded and angrier when the conversation is over (Ibid, p. 17, emphasis mine).

We're back to the important distinction between unity and unanimity. Sprinkle recognises that believing the sound doctrine – as biblically defined – is important. He's conservative and traditionalist in many of his theological convictions. But he understands that the posture of our hearts matters as much as the content of our beliefs. In his words: 'Sometimes *how* we believe is just as important as *what* we believe' (Ibid, p. 18, emphasis original).

When we talk about heart posture, we're talking about the attitude of our hearts towards the truth *and* to one another. Our seeking after the truth should be done humbly and reverently. Our relationships with fellow believers should be conducted in exactly the same way.

Preston Sprinkle offers the following advice for how to have conversations that cultivate this kind of heart attitude. Here's how we can have fruitful (as opposed to damaging and divisive) conversations with one another about gender and gender roles:

- i) *Be willing to rethink your point of view.* We should view all dialogue as an opportunity to get closer to the truth. 'Rather than focusing on how we can prove [a dialogue partner] wrong, we should ask the question, Where might they be right?' (Ibid, pp. 24-25)
- ii) *Be a genuinely curious person.* 'We should be genuinely curious about the other person *and their viewpoint* if we expect them to be curious about ours' (Ibid, 25).¹² This kind of openness to learn from the other person is practically guaranteed to turn down the temperature on what might otherwise turn into a heated conversation.
- iii) *Be a good listener.* Genuine listening opens up the possibility of mutual understanding. Listen in order to understand and not just to refute.
- iv) *Ask good, honest questions.* Asking genuine questions of our dialogue partner (as opposed to interrogating them) enables us to arrive at a clear understanding of their viewpoint. We're back to the danger of constructing a 'straw man' of the other person's viewpoint. This is where we poke holes in their viewpoint by misrepresenting it and/or exaggerating its weak points.

¹¹ The issue in this case is what the Bible has to say about same-sex marriage.

¹² Terran Williams develops the curiosity idea by saying that it's better to operate in 'scout' rather than 'soldier' mode. A soldier's job is to attack and defend a given position. When under fire, a soldier doubles down on their current position. A scout's role, by contrast, is to seek to understand. 'The scout wants to know *what's really there*, as accurately as possible' (2022, p. 351, emphasis mine).

- v) *Find some point of agreement.* ‘Again, finding points of agreement shows that you’re more interested in discovering the truth than you are in simply winning an argument at all costs’ (Ibid, p. 27).
- vi) *Understand the power of belonging.* Human beings are tribal creatures. We find our identity in membership of our tribe. There are two implications of this for having profitable conversations. Firstly, we need to understand that a person’s beliefs are nearly always influenced by tribal affiliation. This is no less true for us than it is for our dialogue partner! Secondly, we need to be mindful of the fact that urging someone to change their beliefs may well cost them membership of their tribe. This can be very, very costly. It’s almost impossible to overstate the importance of this point. Where conversations around gender are concerned, ‘we’re never simply dealing with the cumulative weight of one set of theological facts against another. ... [W]e’re dealing with whole people who crave belonging, and our viewpoint is a membership card to community and relationships’ (Ibid, p. 29).¹³
- vii) *Don’t be overly confident.* Yes, we can have convictions and confidence, but our convictions ‘should be tempered by honest humility’ (Ibid, p. 30). Honesty and humility always go together. Which of us can claim with absolute confidence that our views on male and female roles are entirely without error? Far better to approach this subject by saying something like, ‘Here’s where I’m at right now’, or, ‘Based on the things I’ve read and the people I’ve talked to, I believe this...’ (Ibid, p. 30).

These seven points, taken together, demonstrate how we can engage with others – including those whose viewpoints are different from our own – *Christianly*. The values of humility, gentleness and honour should shape the way we engage with differences in opinion when (not *if*) they arise in the local church.

¹³ This is a primary reason why most of us hate changing our minds and are psychologically disinclined to do so. Williams (2022) concludes his book with a section on ‘why facts might not change our minds.’ Similarly, Sprinkle acknowledges the intensity of the struggle experienced by many as they’re challenged by data that don’t fit their existing paradigm. Both Williams and Sprinkle reference the seminal book *The Righteous Mind* (2012) by American psychologist, Jonathan Haidt. Haidt presents evidence that most of our beliefs stem from our intuitions, and that the main task of reason is to offer post hoc justifications for our intuitive judgments. Haidt identifies as an atheist, and isn’t trained as a theologian, but his thesis has enormous implications for understanding why human beings believe what they believe and how, why and under what circumstances we might be convinced to change our minds. To make a connection with an earlier discussion (from Paper 2), Haidt is an expert guide for ‘the world in front of the text’ that will *always* influence the way a person interprets Scripture.

A real-life case study

Some years ago, a female student arrived at Grace Church. Upon visiting the church, she was surprised to discover that we don't have women elders at Grace Church (I explained why this is the case in Paper 1; that paper provides essential backdrop to what's written here). She was also curious and, along with another student friend, asked if she could meet with me to talk it through.

I remember our conversation vividly. We opened our Bibles together and went through most of the New Testament passages that speak of gender. At the end of the conversation, I still wasn't sure where this student and her friend stood. And then I received her letter.

With her permission, I reproduce most of the letter here:

Hi Andrew,

Sorry this letter is a little late in getting to you but I wanted to wait for our meeting on Friday and then write a response to what we discussed – I'll keep it short!

Firstly, thank you for taking the time out to meet with me and _____ ... I found the conversation really helpful and it made me contemplate things I hadn't thought about before and changed my views on other things.

The whole issue of women in leadership, though important, wasn't going to change my mind about wanting to enter into membership at Grace – it was just about putting my mind at ease and to understand where the leadership at Grace stood on the matter.

I completely understand the way you as a leadership team agree that women can have an active part in the running of the church, in terms of the wider leadership roles. But that they cannot take on an eldership role. Going through that point by reading scripture was really helpful and informative in knowing that it hasn't been 'picked out of thin air' (not that that view is what I assumed before we met). ...

I terms of my own personal view, just because of my upbringing and having women in eldership roles, I still don't think I have a problem with the idea of women elders. This obviously puts me at a slightly more of an egalitarian view/standpoint ... but as you said, everyone is on a spectrum of what they view to be appropriate. ...

Before meeting I had possibly been influenced by others expressing their views/understanding of what women in leadership looked like under the umbrella term of 'Newfrontiers'. In hindsight, this was quite unhelpful and I now feel comfortable in expressing and explaining to them how Grace Church works and how this strong complementarian view is not all that it seems, or what they perceive it to be without knowing all of the facts.

I think I've said all that I wanted to, putting things down on paper is much harder for me than just saying them! Thank you again – I hope this makes at least a little sense and I'll see you on Sunday.

This letter, written by a woman in her late teens, is exemplary in how it engages with the contentious subject of gender roles in the church. Notice the acknowledgment of the complexity of the issues ('everyone is on a spectrum of what they view to be appropriate') and the desire to *understand* what's going on in the debate so she can put some previously held misconceptions to bed ('I now feel comfortable in expressing how [the complementarian position] is not ... what [others] perceive it to be.') Notice, too, how my correspondent explains that she still adopts a different position to the one embraced

by our movement ('I still don't ... have a problem with the idea of women elders') but that doesn't stop her wanting to commit to Grace Church as a member and honouring those who take a different view.

Near the start of the beginning of this paper, I quoted Fleming Rutledge: *'Struggling to understand another's perspective so as to engage it sympathetically and accurately is a Christian action'* (2015, p. 6). I think this letter illustrates perfectly the kind of action that Rutledge would identify as 'Christian'. My correspondent engages in the struggle to understand, she is sympathetic in her assessment of alternative views and intent on arriving at an accurate understanding of the complementarian position. That is how to disagree Christianly.

Conclusion

Observing the state of public discourse in the western world at this cultural moment, it's easy to become disheartened. The world is becoming more shrill, more cruel, more polarised. We're getting used to the idea that the algorithms that shape what we view online are becoming ever more effective at shoving us into an echo chamber. The internet is making the worlds we inhabit both larger and smaller. Social media are coaching us in how to access information by scrolling. Not many people engage in deep reading anymore. Our modern world is addicted to the soundbite. In such a world, there's little room for complexity, nuance and balance.

This is not how it should be in the Church.

These four papers I've written on what we believe about men and women in Grace Church represent my heartfelt plea to you to engage in the struggle to apprehend the truth, to wrestle with the issues and bear with your brothers and sisters in love. When it comes to understanding biblical teaching on gender roles, God doesn't hand all the answers to us on a plate. What he does is call us to open our hearts to one another, including (and especially) those who think differently to us. This is how we arrive at a deeper apprehension of the truth. It's how we grow, not just in knowledge, but in wisdom.

Seeking after the truth can't be done passively; it requires active engagement. It's costly. Most of us don't like our views being challenged by others: it makes us feel insecure. Most of us don't like engaging in theological study: it's hard work. And most of us don't like having to listen to someone whose perspective is different to our own when we've already told ourselves 'they don't know what they're talking about.'

What we do like, in our natural selves, is point-scoring and slamming down an opponent. We like separating ourselves from believers who see things differently to us so we can be in a cosy huddle with like-minded Christians. We like having someone online tell us what to think without searching the Scriptures for ourselves. But none of these ways is the Christian way.

Unity is a blood matter

Towards the end of Paper 1, I sounded the note of unity. In all our struggling, wrestling, questioning, debating and arguing about gender roles in the church, this is non-negotiable. We cannot, we must not, divide over non-essential matters. This is a matter that's written in blood.

The high point in New Testament teaching about unity is the upper room discourse from John's gospel. Here, Jesus sets out his priorities for all those who call themselves his disciples. It seems fitting, therefore, to end this series of papers with these words of Jesus. I invite you to read them – slowly – and allow Jesus' twin challenges of renouncing worldly ways and embracing unity to percolate to the innermost parts of your heart:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that [those whom you gave me] may have the full measure of joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you would take them out of the world but that you would protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ...

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:13-16, 20-23

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