

# Is The Role of Women in Church a Gospel Issue?

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## **Abstract**

The role of women in the church is a controversial issue. There is a division between complementarians and egalitarians. It is not unusual for Christians to disagree on doctrines that are not central to the gospel. However, this article will contend that some have elevated this issue to a gospel issue in practice, if not in theory. The article addresses this issue by considering: the concept of theological triage; where the issue of the role of women in church is situated within the theological tiers; the stated views of particular complementarians; theological reasons to disagree with complementarianism; and the absence of discussion of women's roles in the historic Creeds and Confessions of the church. Recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention will be used to illustrate the misplaced importance given to the issue of women in ministry over and above upholding the core tenets of the faith. It is vital that the church come to an agreement on the relative importance of the issue of women in ministry in order that productive discussions can take place.

**Key Words:** women in ministry, complementarianism, egalitarianism, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), gospel, theological triage, first-, second- or third-tier doctrine

## **Introduction**

The role of women in the church is a controversial issue, with a range of views held across (and sometimes within) denominations regarding women in church ministry

and leadership. There is a division between those who call themselves complementarians and those who identify as egalitarians. It is not unusual for Christians to disagree on doctrines that are not central to the gospel. Indeed, most are in agreement that not all doctrines hold the same degree of significance to the Christian faith. For some, the question of women in ministry is disputable matter.<sup>1</sup> However, for others, the matter is of extreme importance. Even though complementarians deny the matter is on the level of a gospel issue, some complementarian statements as well as church practice reveal that the matter has been elevated to the status of a gospel issue for several complementarians and churches.

To be clear, the core argument in this article is not a theological argument to justify women being able to use their ministry, teaching and leadership gifts in the church. Many such theological arguments exist. Rather, the core of the argument revolves around whether the question itself is on a par with the need to uphold the gospel. In other words, it is a matter of whether the issue of women's place in the church is of the highest concern or whether there can be differing viewpoints without compromising unity. Agreeing on the relative importance of the issue is a necessary step towards the various parties working through the issue without an invective posture toward one another.

To consider this matter, the concept of theological triage will be explored, and the place of the role of women situated within the theological tiers. Following this, statements of selected complementarians will be considered to demonstrate that they have elevated the question of women's roles in church to a gospel issue. Complementarian concerns are noted, as are some reasons why complementarianism may be questioned. The complementarian stance will then be compared to the historic creeds and confessions of the church. Finally, recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention will be used to illustrate the misplaced importance given to the issue of women in ministry over above upholding the core tenets of the faith.

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<sup>1</sup> As per Rom 14:1.

## Three-Tiered Theology

Doctrines are not all as central to the gospel as one another. Some are crucial to salvation. Some might be considered matters of opinion. Others are situated on a spectrum of orthodoxy. As a result, Albert Mohler has argued for what he calls “theological triage”. The concept is similar to what happens at the Emergency Department, where a triage nurse decides which cases need to be seen first and which can wait until later. Mohler divides doctrines into three levels. Level-one theological issues are those which a person cannot deny and still remain within the Christian faith. These include the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Bible as the word of God and justification by faith. The ecumenical councils of the early church debated these doctrines and enshrined them in Creeds. Second-level doctrines leave room for disagreement between Christians and yet these often result in church division. These include questions about baptism, church governance and the ordination of women. Third-level doctrines are of lesser importance and thus less likely to cause a break in fellowship. This level would include different versions of eschatology (Mohler, 2011, pp. 78-80).

Mohler contends that theological triage offers a way of avoiding the extremes of assuming that all doctrines are of first order importance, which often results in unnecessary division and breach of fellowship. It also forestalls the opposite error of considering first level doctrines as third level doctrines, and thereby losing the gospel altogether. Thus in Mohler’s model, the greatest debates and disagreements will be in regard to second-order doctrines (Mohler, 2011, p. 80).

All major divisions of Christianity agree that there are differing levels of doctrine: some doctrine must be believed for salvation, and some is of lesser importance. Dogma is the generally accepted term for doctrines of the highest importance for faith. These doctrines are connected to the seven ecumenical councils of the early church. Both the Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestant churches accept that the doctrinal decisions of the ecumenical councils of the early church are afforded the status of dogma. The Roman Catholic Church extends the acceptance of dogma beyond the earliest ecumenical councils to some later councils and to the decisions of popes (González, 2005, p. 47). The assumption is that the ecumenical councils were

guided in their deliberations and decisions by the Holy Spirit (Jenson, 2010, p. 68). Each of the subsequent councils accepted that the Council of Nicaea (325) (and the updates of the Council of Constantinople in 381) were directed by the Spirit and authoritative in setting out foundational doctrine of the church (Pelikan, 2005, pp. 10-16). The central dogmatic conclusion of Nicaea is that the gospel hinges on “the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the Godhead” (Torrance, 1988, p. 3).

That it is needful to classify doctrines in the ways explored above is not in dispute among most Christians. However, the question raised here is twofold. Firstly, where should questions of women in ministry or the roles of women in church and home be placed in this three-tier system? Secondly, where do complementarians place this issue in practice? The answer to the first question is far less controversial than the answer to the second.

Gavin Ortlund considers theological triage necessary because the need is urgent, due to the present cultural confusion. He argues that the church must make deliberate decisions about doctrines to enable it to effectively proclaim the gospel. His theological triage involves four tiers. For the purposes of the argument advanced in this article, the important distinction is between first-tier doctrines – which Ortlund describes as “essential to the gospel itself” – and second-tier doctrines – which he says, “are urgent for the health and practice of the church” (Ortlund, 2020, Intr.). It can be observed that the distinction between the first and second tier is the place where the most debate seems to occur in regard to the place of women in the church.

Ortlund offers three examples of second-tier issues: baptism (paedo versus credo); spiritual gifts (cessationism versus continuationism); and women in ministry (complementarianism versus egalitarianism). Although it is indisputable in which tier to place the doctrine of the Trinity, second-tier doctrines are quite varied in theological significance. Some secondary doctrines are on the border of first rank and some on the border of third rank. In other words, not all second-rank doctrines are equally important (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5). This article contends that it is here where some complementarians demonstrate intellectual and theological inconsistency regarding the treatment of the place of women in the church.

Ortlund is himself a complementarian, and thus his observations about the connections between doctrine and the gospel are significant.

Each doctrine finds its ultimate meaning in relation to the entire gospel. Thus, some doctrines may appear to be relatively minor in themselves but utterly essential in the way they function toward other doctrines. . . . Second, the importance of any particular doctrine sometimes turns out to depend, to some extent, on context and usage. . . . Or a particular doctrine may be especially urgent for the church's public witness at one time and place, and less so at another (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

Ortlund identifies three reasons why the complementarian and egalitarian debate falls into the second rank of doctrines. Firstly, practically speaking, no church can sit in both camps because it impacts church governance and other aspects of church activity. Secondly, the secular culture of the western world is mired in a lot of confusion regarding gender. Therefore, Ortlund avers, "complementarianism versus egalitarianism is not simply about how we structure our churches and marriages but also about competing visions of faithfulness to Scripture amid the turbulence of late Western modernity" (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5). Lastly, the two have distinct biblical hermeneutics. Ortlund laments that complementarians view the egalitarian position as adopting the wrong hermeneutical course, and egalitarians consider complementarian interpretation of the Bible dangerous<sup>2</sup> (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

## Statements by Complementarians

That some complementarians think that egalitarians have fallen into liberalism can be demonstrated with statements made by high profile complementarians regarding the egalitarian position. The first is a statement made by Justin Peters, a prominent Reformed Baptist who exercises a discernment ministry, particularly with regard to Word of Faith preaching (*Justin Peters*). Peters states:

Men and women are of equal value before God, have equal access to God, and are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. But to argue as all liberal and most charismatic "theologians" do that these verses are limited to the culture of biblical days or somehow do not mean what they appear to mean is to be intentionally dishonest to the holy writ. If a church has a female pastor or has put women in positions of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, some egalitarians consider complementarianism a theological shelter for domestic abusers (Jantzi, 2025).

spiritual authority over men, you can know that no matter how much fidelity they profess to the Word of God, their professions are mere lip service. Female spiritual leadership in the church is a sure sign that that church is well on its way into full blown apostasy. It is an affront to God and, ironically, it is demeaning to women for it puts them into a role for which they were not designed. (Peters)

This statement strongly implies that anyone taking an egalitarian position is either liberal or charismatic (an insult from the perspective of Justin Peters) and that they do not believe the teachings of the Bible. For Peters, the existence of female pastors within a church means an inevitable slide into false teaching. This man cannot conceive of the possibility that a woman in leadership could be equipped by God, blessed by him and could teach sound doctrine. He makes all egalitarians out to be liberals and liars. Using quotation marks around the word theologians is also extremely telling as to how Justin Peters views people who disagree with his complementarian stance. This is a marked contrast with accepting egalitarians as brothers and sisters in Christ.

A second quotation comes from The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). They warn that

As evangelical feminism continues to spread, the evangelical community needs to be aware that this debate reaches ultimately to the heart of the gospel. . . . The authority of Scripture is at stake. . . . The health of the home is at stake. . . . The health of the church is at stake. . . . Our worship is at stake. . . . Bible translations are at stake. . . . The advance of the gospel is at stake. . . . Deviation from biblical teaching on manhood and womanhood hinders the advance of the gospel  
(*Mission & Vision*).

It is evident from this extract that CBMW believes that egalitarianism (evangelical feminism) compromises the gospel. It is not merely a second-tier issue. For CBMW, what women do within the church is a gospel issue.

Dr. Ben Witherington III is a renowned biblical scholar (*Dr. Ben Witherington III: Jean R. Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies*). He writes with dismay:

I heard recently the founding leaders of the Gospel Coalition (John Piper, Don Carson, and Tim Keller) say or suggest that if one did not agree with their hermeneutics, their exegesis, and their theological approach to the issue of male

and female and, as a result of that approach, their approach to women in ministry, then you were on the slippery slope and likely to compromise the Gospel in other ways too (Witherington, 2016, Ch 5).

Witherington's reflection on the Gospel Coalition is in keeping with observations made about other complementarians, who believe that any deviation from male-only church leadership will endanger the gospel. This implies that the issue of women in church ministry has been elevated from a tier-two issue to a tier-one issue, or at least is heading that way.

The above assumptions about women in the pulpit cry out for an answer to many questions. Can women who lead or teach in church be accepted as Christian women? This is a gospel question. The complementarians cited above seem to suggest that any woman who teaches men is a liberal and therefore not a Christian at all. If these ideas are accepted as true, then egalitarians are in danger of losing their salvation because of their position on the ministry of women. The issue of women and their position in the church no longer stands in the second tier of Christian doctrine but looks very much like it is in the first tier, on a par with doctrines that define the gospel.

### **Concerns of Complementarians**

Complementarians are concerned that allowing women to exercise teaching and leadership gifts in the church will compromise the gospel. One suggested path toward this outcome is the suggestion that if women are ordained, it will not be long before the church is accepting homosexuality. Wayne Grudem, systematic theologian and a member of the board of directors of The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (*Board of Directors*), has authored at least two books arguing against evangelical feminism. In *Evangelical Feminism? A New Path to Liberalism?*, his stated concern is that the arguments of evangelical feminists will lead the church into liberalism – that is, to a denial of biblical inerrancy – and ultimately to the acceptance of homosexuality (Grudem, 2006, Chs 1, 32). In fact, Grudem cites examples of just such a trend (Grudem, 2006, Ch. 2).

In fairness to the complementarian position, there is evidence that women in the U.S. are more accepting of homosexuality than men (Hildebrandt & Jäckle, 2023). Such studies may fuel complementarian concerns that ordaining female pastors

would lead to the ordination of homosexual pastors. However, evangelicals are not as enthusiastic to accept homosexuality as Grudem fears, despite their acceptance of changing gender roles. One study focused on the change in attitudes of Americans over time from the 1970s to 2014. It found that:

Evangelical gender attitudes regarding work and family issues are more conservative than those of all other groups, but are adaptive to broad trends, changing at a rate similar to those of other groups since 1994. Evangelical attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality and same-sex marriage are also more conservative than those of all other religious groups. Their rate of change, however, is slower than other religious groups, meaning that they are diverging over time. Separate patterns on the two issues suggest that gender and sexuality attitude change is decoupled, especially among evangelicals who are adapting more on gender while increasingly distinguishing themselves on same-sex relationships (Schnabel, 2016, p. 44).

In addition, the evangelical author of *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* argues clearly throughout the book that there is a “fundamental difference between the women’s issue and the homosexuality issue” (Webb, 2009, Concl.). Indeed, even Grudem acknowledges that he personally knows many evangelical feminists who have not gone in the direction of liberalism or acceptance of homosexuality (Grudem, 2006, Ch. 1). In sum, a possibility is not an inevitability, but it should caution evangelical feminists to keep their arguments biblical, rather than extrabiblical.

## **Reasons to Question the Complementarian Position**

As this article is not intended to provide an extensive critique of the complementarian theological position, it will be sufficient to provide “reasonable doubt” regarding what complementarians assume is a clear and strong biblical position regarding women and ministry. There is evidence that the central passage which is used to oppose the leadership and teaching ministry of women in the church – 1 Tim 2:11-15 – can be interpreted differently than the way complementarians do so. There is insufficient room here to provide all of the evidence. That would require many such articles, if not books. It is not necessary to prove the egalitarian position in this article, but merely to show that these doubts preclude the possibility that the question of women in Christian ministry is a gospel issue. That is to say, the issue is not a first-tier doctrinal matter.

Firstly, the occasional nature of the Pastoral epistles must be noted. The false teaching in the Ephesian church was Paul's main concern, rather than the perpetuation of male-only teaching and leadership (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995, pp. 125-127). Craig Keener calls 1 Tim 2:12 "the only explicit prohibition in the entire Bible against women teaching" (Keener, 1992, p. 101). His thesis is that this prohibition was put in place because of a specific situation in Ephesus at that time. There is evidence in 1 Timothy that the women in Ephesus were ignorant and engaged in foolish teaching. The goal of allowing women to learn was presumably for them to eventually to teach. Keener observes that Timothy did not appear to know the rule regarding women, despite having spent years working with Paul. This contrasts with several passages in which Paul reminds his readers of traditions he has passed on to them (Keener, 1992, pp. 108, 112).

Another significant problem is the word *authentain*, which is translated as "exercise authority" (ESV) in 1 Tim 2:12. This word is hapax legomena in the New Testament, making it difficult to be precise about its meaning. The problem is further compounded by a dearth of usages of the word in extant literature of the time. Professor Emeritus of Religion and Theology/Classical Languages Al Wolters states: "Its first occurrence in surviving Greek literature is dated to the first century BC, not long before Paul used it, and for centuries after that its recorded uses are quite rare. In fact, until the official recognition of Christianity under Constantine in the year 312, the verb appears in only a handful of places, most of them in obscure nonliterary sources" (Wolters, 2016). Wolters argues for a complementarian reading of the text. However, it is sufficient here to observe that the paucity of surviving examples of the word must, at minimum, produce a humility about its meaning in 1 Tim 2:12.

Thirdly, the ministry of Priscilla calls into question the all-encompassing nature of the 1 Tim 2:12 prohibition. Priscilla taught a man (Apollos) in Ephesus (Acts 18:26), as Paul well knew and approved. Paul had himself trained Priscilla and sent her to Ephesus with her husband, Aquila (Witherington, 2016, Ch. 5). Thomas Torrance writes, "It is hardly surprising, then, that St Paul applies to her along with Aquila the term 'fellow-worker' (*synergos*) which he used to refer to people associated with him in the ministry of the gospel like Timothy (Rom 16:3, 21 – cf. also 1 Tim 3:2; 1 Cor

3:9), or Clement (1 Phil 4:3) or Mark or Luke (Philem 24)” (Torrance, 1992, p. 7). When Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned together, Priscilla is mentioned first on four out of six occasions, suggesting that hers was the dominant ministry role (Webb, 2009, Ch 4).

## Creeds and Confessions

That said, it is time to return to the question of where to place the doctrine regarding the ministry of women. In order to situate this, it would make sense to see what the church has historically said about this in the Creeds and Confessions. Before looking at these, The Gospel Coalition’s “Confessional Statement” (2011) will be considered for the sake of comparison.

**3. Creation of Humanity** We believe that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image. Adam and Eve belonged to the created order that God himself declared to be very good, serving as God’s agents to care for, manage, and govern creation, living in holy and devoted fellowship with their Maker. Men and women, equally made in the image of God, enjoy equal access to God by faith in Christ Jesus and are both called to move beyond passive self-indulgence to significant private and public engagement in family, church, and civic life. Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. *In God’s wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays the caring, sacrificial love of Christ, and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in creation, fall, and redemption and must not be sidelined by appeals to cultural developments.* (Confessional Statement, Italics mine)

Ortlund defends The Gospel Coalition on the inclusion of their complementarian position within their “Confessional Statement”, even though they have no statement about baptism, the millennium or spiritual gifts. He maintains that simply because a

doctrine is not integral to the gospel itself does not mean that it “has no bearing on the gospel” (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

To decide whether The Gospel Coalition are actually justified in placing this segment within their “Confessional Statement” it will be instructive to make a comparison with historical statements of faith. To this end, what follows is a brief survey of Creeds and Confessions.

The four major Creeds – Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedonian and Athanasian – each focus on Christ and the Trinity, with some mention of the church and salvation. They contain no reference to men or women as separate sexes and nothing about roles. Some Confessions mention men and women, but not particular roles as such. The Anglican “Articles of Religion” contains an article about the call to ministry. It refers to men taking up the office of public preaching and ministering the sacraments (*Articles of Religion*). The word “man” is used throughout to refer to humans. In this article, the assumption may be that it refers to males only. However, it is never spelled out that women should not be in this office.

The “Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>3</sup>” mentions men and women in several places. Chapter 4 (“Of Creation”) mentions the creation of male and female “with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts ...” Chapter 6 (“Of the fall of man, of sin, and of the punishment thereof”) blames “our first parents” for sin. There is no division in this, that is, both are guilty. Eve is not separated out. Chapter 8 (“Of Christ the mediator”) mentions both the virgin Mary and the seed of the woman. Chapter 24 (“Of Marriage and Divorce”) gives regulations regarding marriage, including that marriage is between one man and one woman, and polygamy is not lawful.

“The New Hampshire Baptist Confession<sup>4</sup>” does not mention men and women. The “Heidelberg Catechism<sup>5</sup>” states that the disobedience of both Adam and Eve is the reason for the corruption of human nature. The only other mention of a woman in

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<sup>3</sup>Westminster Assembly. (1646) *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, John Newton. (1833) *The New Hampshire Confession of Faith*.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Reformed Church. (1563) *Heidelberg Catechism*.

this catechism is a reference to Mary. “The Belgic Confession<sup>6</sup>” contains no mention of male and female in the doctrine of creation. It does not mention males with regard to church government or the officers of the church. “The Canons of Dort<sup>7</sup>” make no mention of women. The “Augsburg Confession<sup>8</sup>” contains a couple of articles which address the question of whether priests or monks can marry. Beyond this, there seems to be nothing about women or men and women together. The “1689 Baptist Confession<sup>9</sup>” says nothing about women being excluded from the pulpit. It says nothing about men being ordained. It says nothing about roles in marriage.

This list of historic Creeds and Confessions lacks references to the roles of men and women in the home or the church. The writers, then, did not find this topic central to the gospel message. This begs the question as to why The Gospel Coalition finds it so important to include such a discussion in their “Confessional Statement”.

Comparing the other articles of faith in The Gospel Coalition’s “Confessional Statement” will provide perspective on how important the question of women in ministry is to The Gospel Coalition. These are in order: The Triune God, Revelation, Creation of Humanity, The Fall, The Plan of God, The Gospel, The Redemption of Christ, The Justification of Sinners, The Power of the Holy Spirit, The Kingdom of God, God’s New People, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and The Restoration of All Things. With the exception of “Creation of Humanity”, each of these articles would likely find a home in either Creeds or Confessions of the past. It is only the discussion of the roles of men and women that finds no such home in historic Creeds or Confessions. This seems to suggest that the roles of men and women in church and home are considered as important to The Gospel Coalition as first-order doctrines. The Gospel Coalition may have made complementarianism a first-tier doctrine by default.

## **Recent Events in the Southern Baptist Convention Illustrate the Point**

Doctrinal stances are difficult to separate from church praxis, although the latter tends to expose the truth or falsehood of what churches profess to believe. The

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<sup>6</sup> de Brès, Guido (1561) *Belgic Confession*

<sup>7</sup> Christian Reformed Church. (1618-1619) *The Canons of Dort*.

<sup>8</sup> Lutheran Church (1530) *The Augsburg Confession*.

<sup>9</sup> The Second London Confession of Faith (1677/1689) *1689 Baptist Confession*

biblical writers make it clear that faith is not genuine without actions of an appropriate kind (1 Tim 5:8; Jas 1: 22-25; 2:14-19; 1 John 3:15; 4:19-21). Therefore, what a church professes as most important to the faith and how that church acts might not be in alignment. In order to test whether churches of a complementarian persuasion are acting in alignment with their professed beliefs of the relative significance of the question of the role of women in church, an example will be considered.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is “the largest Protestant denomination in the United States” (Flowers & Seat, 2020, p. xiii). The denomination is influential both politically and among other evangelicals (Lai, 2025, p. 35). Whether the conservatism regarding women’s ministry in the SBC is in keeping with the Bible or not, the influence of this Protestant denomination cannot be ignored. For this reason, recent events in the SBC are an appropriate test case to determine whether complementarian churches are making the question of women in ministry a gospel issue or whether they are keeping the issue within the bounds of a second-tier doctrine.

The SBC have recently formalised their position on the ordination of women. However, the polemic regarding women in ministry is not a new one in the SBC. This began in 1979, with the goal of having conservatives in control of the organisational framework of the SBC. This conflict centred on whether a woman could receive a call to a pastoral role. The first female pastor in the SBC was ordained in 1964, and the second in 1971. As more women were ordained, many in the denomination became concerned about the consequences (Andrew & Gerardo, 2022, pp. 3-4). In 1984 the SBC Convention successfully passed a resolution which effectively allowed women to minister in churches as long as they did not fill pastoral roles or become ordained. The argument was that Scripture shaped this decision (Andrew & Gerardo, 2022, p. 6)

The issue of female pastors in the SBC came to head in 2021 when the (then) largest church in the SBC – Saddleback Church – ordained three female elders, allowed a woman to preach on Mother’s Day, and then employed both a man and his wife to replace the retiring pastor, Rick Warren. This prompted some in the denomination

to draft an amendment to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (the confessional document of the denomination), which would exclude churches who accept women in the pastoral office. Support for this amendment was substantial. By the time of the 2024 SBC annual meeting, two churches – in addition to Saddleback – had been disfellowshipped and three churches had chosen to dissociate from the SBC (Garrote, 2024, pp. 1-2, 6).

There are some disturbing aspects to this recent decision which bear investigation. In an article on The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CMBW) website, there is a video of Denny Burk (the current CMBW president) arguing that Saddleback should be disfellowshipped. A portion of this speech is quoted below.

What is this amendment about? It's about how to apply our doctrinal statement to our cooperation when it comes to female pastors. That's it. Article 3 of our constitution says that the churches in friendly cooperation must closely identify with the BF&M [Baptist Faith and Message] and then it gives three examples of what it would look like to not to be in friendly cooperation: churches that affirm homosexuality, racism, and sexual abuse would be opposing the specific language of the BF&M and would not be in friendly cooperation. This amendment would simply add one more example of what it looks like not to be in friendly cooperation. Churches who affirm women as pastors would not be in friendly cooperation. That's it (Damico, 2023).

In this same article “CBMW executive director Colin Smothers, who also serves in a Southern Baptist church” said, “the SBC showed once again why Baptists are know [sic] as Bible people” (Damico, 2023). Because the SBC is claiming that they disfellowshipped Saddleback due to the SBC's concern for biblical teaching, it is worth considering Denny Burk's statement in detail. This will be done by examining the SBC's lack of concern for Rick Warren's practices and use of Scripture during his time at Saddleback, the similar example of Steven Furtick at Elevation Church, and the SBC's failure to act on sexual abuse in SBC churches.

Rick Warren was the founding pastor of Saddleback Church and pastored that church for forty-three years, retiring in 2022 (Shellnutt, 2023). His book *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over thirty-five million copies, making it “one of the bestselling books of all time” (Wenner, 2023). In 2021, Saddleback Church was the

largest church in the SBC (Wingfield, 2021), and it continued as part of the SBC until 2023.

Despite the obvious popularity of Rick Warren's books, there are serious biblical issues with Rick Warren's teaching, both his sermons and his books. In his PhD on Rick Warren and Bill Hybel's model of church, Jacob Shelley observes that, as a strong advocate of the Church Growth Movement, Rick Warren believes that fulfilling the Great Commission equates to church growth in the sense of getting more people into churches. This assumption spills over into the way Warren uses the Bible as a tool, and proof-texting, rather than faithfully preaching it. Seeker-sensitive services are the means by which people are drawn to church, according to this model. This results in salvation being dependent upon making the message pleasing to the hearer rather than dependent on the work of Christ (Shelley, 2006, pp. 11, 42-43, 52, 67).

Many have expressed concerns that Rick Warren has a shallow understanding of the gospel (Cloud) and fails to preach Christ (DeWaay). His approach to preaching is to offer a gospel that does not mention sin, God's wrath on sinners or the need for the cross of Christ. It is a gospel without offence (Malan). Warren downplays theology as a function of the church (Shelley, 2006, p. 15). Canadian Baptist Pastor Tim Challies argues, "Warren is willing to overlook critical theological differences that strike to the very heart of the gospel in order to press forward towards his goals... Warren shows that he is willing to let go of the gospel" (Challies, 2005). Furthermore, Warren regularly misuses Scripture to make his points. He takes verses out of context and uses multiple translations and paraphrases in order to find a version that backs up what he wants to say (Challies, 2005).

These serious concerns are mentioned because, although there is no indication that Rick Warren has changed his stance on these matters, the SBC did not disfellowship Saddleback Church over the watering down of the gospel. The SBC were apparently unconcerned about Rick Warren as pastor of Saddleback Church. A search of SBC.org and the Baptist Press turned up no criticisms of Rick Warren. Concern over Rick Warren appears to be solely focused on the matter of the ordination of women. For example, an article by Landon Coleman – graduate of the Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary and a lead pastor at Immanuel Church in Odessa, Texas – expresses concerns about Rick Warren’s stance on ordaining women, with no mention of watering down the gospel (Coleman, 2023). It is difficult to conclude otherwise than the SBC only disfellowshipped Saddleback because of the introduction of a female pastor. This strongly suggests that the SBC, who pride themselves on upholding the Bible, appear blind to departures from core biblical doctrine.

As with Saddleback, Elevation Church has recently left the SBC. It was not that the SBC disfellowshipped Elevation Church, but simply that, for unstated reasons, Elevation chose to leave. There has been speculation that Elevation withdrew from the SBC because of the SBC’s decision to affirm that the teaching office belongs only to qualified men and that women cannot hold the title of pastor (Staff Report, 2013). In light of the recent decision to disfellowship Saddleback, it is worth considering Elevation as well.

As with Saddleback Church, the lead pastor of Elevation Church – Steven Furtick – has problematic theology. Furtick has been charged with adhering to the “little gods” doctrine, preaching modalism, misquoting Scripture, claiming that God broke his own law out of love, stating that God is energy, and teaching that Jesus is limited by our unbelief. There is also evidence of manipulating people to be baptised by planting people to answer altar calls (*The False Teaching of Steven Furtick*). In the time since Furtick founded Elevation Church in 2006, the SBC would have had opportunity to censure or correct Furtick’s doctrine. If the SBC was concerned to uphold core biblical doctrine, this surely would have been done. But Elevation removed themselves from the SBC, not the other way around.

Furthermore, the SBC has historically taken a weak stance on sexual abuse in its churches. In 2019, The Houston Chronicle reported on the sexual abuse taking place within SBC churches and the response of the denomination towards this problem. The article describes the efforts of victims of abuse to get the SBC to enact new policies to make churches safer. In 2008, one such person petitioned the SBC to adopt prevention policies, but those reforms were nearly all rejected. According to the Houston Chronicle, many sexual abuse complaints have been ignored or hidden

from authorities, and alleged abusers were not removed from the pulpit. SBC leaders claim that, because each congregation is autonomous, reforms are impossible to enforce. However, during the decade preceding this news report, at least four churches were disfellowshipped because of their affirmation of homosexuality. Although the SBC President asserted that a church which made a habit of ignoring abuse should be disfellowshipped, the newspaper claims to have found at least ten churches with pastors or volunteers who had been charged with sexual offences. Some victims were pressured to get abortions. Others were pressured to recant their allegations (Downen et al., 2019).

A more recent article in the Houston Chronicle observes that the SBC has begun to take steps against sexual abuse in their churches (Tedesco & Downen, 2022). Even so, in late 2023, controversy still raged in the SBC as lawyers for the SBC petitioned to avoid extending the statute of limitations on law suits for sexual abuse victims (Blair, 2023). Despite a resolution to deal with the sexual abuse cover ups, by tracking pastors accused of abuse and providing training, no visible progress was evidenced on the Ministry Check website in 2024 (Garrote, 2024, p. 5).

Of interest is that fact that two of the architects of the recent conservatism in the SBC – Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler – have been implicated in sexual abuse scandals. Pressler and Patterson worked together to change the SBC and remove all liberal influence from it. Because of Pressler’s exposure to liberal theology at university, he subsequently hated liberalism and sought to root it out of the SBC (Silliman, 2024). Pressler has been accused by several men – one of whom as a teenager when the abuse began (Platoff 2017) – of sexual abuse. Some were paid off to be silent. In one instance, church leadership covered up his inappropriate behaviour with a student to protect “the cause of Christ” along with his reputation (Silliman, 2024). Patterson is accused of covering up the rape of female seminary students (Shellnutt 2018).

The Houston Chronicle exposé<sup>10</sup>, among others, implies that sexual abuse has been ineffectively dealt with by the SBC. The SBC have disfellowshipped churches affirming homosexuality or pastored by women but have not prevented sex offenders or sexual predators from being in the pulpit. On the basis of their lack of action on

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<sup>10</sup> (2019)“[Abuse of Faith: 20 years, 700 victims: Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reform.](#)”

Rick Warren and Steven Furtick, and their lack of action against sexual abuse, but their firm action against female pastors, the idea that the SBC is concerned about upholding biblical teaching and values seems questionable.

The implication is that the SBC acted to disfellowship Saddleback Church for reasons other than the identification of Baptists as “Bible people”<sup>11</sup>. Certainly, Scripture is opposed to homosexual behaviour, against sexual abuse, and against racism – the three examples cited by Denny Burk.<sup>12</sup> However, being a woman is not a sin, and therefore cannot be compared to homosexuality, abuse or racism. Even if one were to concede that Scripture opposes female pastors – a position that is not conceded here – the failure to uphold the gospel in the case of Rick Warren and Steven Furtick, and the failure to address serious sexual misconduct in any meaningful way until recently demonstrates that the priorities of the SBC are problematic. It appears that they consider keeping women in their place of more importance than the faithful proclamation of Christ or the protection of the vulnerable.

## Conclusion

Complementarians have serious concerns regarding the ordination of women to pastoral leadership in the church. This issue has been debated for decades. Given that not all theological doctrines should be considered first-tier doctrines, the question raised in this article has been where in the doctrinal hierarchy have complementarians placed the issue of women in Christian ministry. The history of the church, as documented in historic Creeds and Confessions, shows that this matter has historically not been a first-tier issue. However, the Gospel Coalition “Statement of Faith” reflects the importance of the issue in the eyes of complementarians. Pastors and theologians on the complementarian side of the issue have spoken about the ordination of women in terms implying that they perceive this issue to be a first-tier one. The practice of the Southern Baptist Convention – the largest denomination in the US – also demonstrates the enormous importance the SBC has placed on the issue, over and above safeguarding the gospel itself. All this demonstrates that the ministry of women has been elevated by particular complementarians to a gospel issue, rather than a second-tier issue on

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<sup>11</sup> See Colin Smithers statement earlier in this article.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted earlier in this article.

which Christians can disagree without accusing one another of being liberal, feminist, pro-homosexuality or people who ignore the Scripture. Before progress can be made in any discussion about the place of women within the church, agreement must be reached regarding where the issue is situated within the theological hierarchy.

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