Women Sharing in the Ministry of God: A Trinitarian Framework for the Priority of Spirit Gifting as a Solution to the Gender Debate

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Introduction

Though the freedom of women to be leaders in the church has increased in recent years, patriarchy continues to exercise considerable influence within contemporary evangelicalism. Evangelical patriarchy maintains that certain ministry positions in the church are inappropriate for women and should be restricted to men. In particular, women should not operate in positions of authority over men (representatives differ over which offices they deem authoritative). This view does not assert that women are of lesser value or dignity than men, but that God designed women to be subordinate to men in role or function. Hence, its advocates usually prefer the term “complementarianism” over patriarchy, since it emphasizes the affirmative aspects of their position (i.e., that men and women complement each other). In contrast to such a view, the argument of my article is that women should be welcomed and encouraged to serve in positions of church leadership and authority, and that giftedness and not gender should determine a person’s qualification to serve. This is because Spirit gifting is the primary criterion of suitability for Christian ministry. The sovereign call of the Holy Spirit trumps all other criteria that are based on church structure and tradition, or the innate qualities of individual persons (including gender). A preference for Spirit gifting is a common starting point for egalitarians, but it frequently lacks a thorough theological grounding and is criticized for being excessively experiential. This article demonstrates that the prioritization of Spirit gifting is not simply an appeal to experience or to mystery, but derives from the logic of the dynamics of Trinitarian grace. The sources for this Trinitarian foundation include Augustine’s mutual love model and J. B. Torrance’s discussion of the mediation of Christ. While the latter draws relevant implications from the sole priesthood of Christ, the former demonstrates why Christ’s work is inseparable from the Spirit’s work.

The priority of Spirit gifting

The priority of Spirit gifting provides a foundation for a theology of women in ministry (e.g., Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18). The Holy Spirit initiates and empowers all ministries and, properly speaking, is the agent of every ministry (e.g., Luke 4:14–15, 18–19; Acts 1:8; Rom. 8:26–27; 1 Cor. 12:3–11). The prior and continuing ministry of God the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, grounds and sustains all ministry, not the intelligence, creativity, or strategic efforts of human beings, nor their innate or biological advantages (e.g., John 15:26, 16:12-15, 20:21-22; 1 Cor. 2:1-5). This does not mean that human action is meaningless, but that it is always a response to God's prior working. While this response is truly our response, it is not thereby efficacious as such (Gal. 2:19-21). It becomes efficacious only through the creative, reconciling, and redeeming power of the Holy Spirit, who “commandeers” our words and actions such that our deficient language actually proclaims the Word of God and our feeble efforts actually accomplish the work of Christ. Ministry is, therefore, both a response to and an abiding-in grace—and grace, according to Karl Barth, is always God’s deed and act. Barth specifies, “It is never at all a quality of ours, inborn in us, such as would enable us to know of it in advance.” Any other interpretation would not be fully Trinitarian, but Pelagian (ignoring the sovereignty of the Spirit and/or the sole priesthood of Christ). The significance of the Holy Spirit for the Christian life is that we are “opened, prepared, and made fit by God for God.” The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not something we grasp or control, but is an event in which we are grasped or taken hold of in the movement of Trinitarian grace. The Spirit is given to us as Promise, not possession.

Gordon Fee makes several observations from Scripture that support the primacy of Spirit gifting as a criterion for ministry and leadership. First, he notes the ambiguity and fluidity of church structures in the New Testament. He suggests that this ambiguity on the part of the biblical authors should caution us against defining our own structures too rigidly or accepting them as a necessary given. Fee writes, “The New Testament documents simply show no interest in defining these matters...” Accordingly, “we know very little about the ‘organization’ of the early church, either as a whole or in its local expressions. And what we do learn, we gather from ‘gleanings’ of texts, not from intentional instruction.” The relevance of this observation is that questions about the appropriateness of women holding particular “offices,” such as pastor or teacher, often frame contemporary debates about women in leadership. However, the New Testament does not discuss ministry within the framework of “offices,” but of giftedness. According to Fee, before there were official positions in the early church, there were individuals who functioned in certain capacities, whom the church later recognized more formally. Those who exercised the gift of prophecy sometimes came to be recognized as “prophets.” Those who gave spiritual oversight to a congregation (“elders” in the tradition of the synagogue) were eventually called episkopoi (overseers), a term appropriated from Greco-Roman culture. In other words, giftedness preceded and constituted office. This fact is at odds with those who begin with a predetermined understanding of office, which they restrict to males, and then proceed to search for appropriately gifted men. Often, hierarchists have no problem with the idea of women exercising gifts, sometimes even pastoral.
or teaching gifts (at least in certain contexts: among women and children or in the mission field), but they are prohibited from holding office. This is problematic from a New Testament point of view, which emphasizes gifting, but is silent about "offices."

A second, related point is that the New Testament does not share our contemporary assumptions about organizational authority and control. According to Fee, ministry is what primarily drives the New Testament church, not concerns over authority. The reality of the Spirit’s presence, guidance, and empowerment in the congregation relegates the question of authority to a matter of secondary importance. Fee comments, "The priority of Spirit gifting does not usually lead to asking, 'Who’s in charge around here?' Rather, it sets the whole community free to discern and encourage the giftings within the body, so that all may grow and be built up." The emphasis is on everyone participating in mutual edification and ministry rather than a preoccupation with the special gifts of a few. Leaders are first and foremost servants—servants of Christ and hence also of Christ’s body. To demonstrate his point, Fee alerts us to the fact that Paul never addresses his letters to the leaders of the congregations, but always to the whole church. He never tells the leaders to take charge of a harmful situation or commends them for healthy circumstances, but admonishes and encourages the entire church (or addresses divisive parties directly). Fee notes that, even in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Paul directs his letters to the churches through Timothy and Titus because they were his representatives, not because they were the churches’ permanent leaders. Consequently, Fee wonders why the church today ‘can exercise so much energy in ‘getting it right’ with regard to leadership, when the New Testament itself shows so little interest in this?’ (Remember, Fee is criticizing a preoccupation with structures and offices; he is not arguing against the need to discern giftedness and maturity when appointing leaders.) Today, many people recognize legitimate leadership giftings in women. However, some are reticent to affirm women as official leaders because they are afraid of violating a biblically prescribed authority structure. Fee offers a helpful corrective by demonstrating that questions of structure and authority arise out of, and hence serve, Spirit gifting and calling.

Third, a reliance on Spirit gifting is more consistent with the New Covenant, in which God pours out his promised Spirit on all believers—sons and daughters, young and old, male and female (according to Joel 2:28–29; cf. Acts 2:17–18). The inbreaking of the new age of the Kingdom of God eclipses the exclusiveness of the Old Covenant along with its restrictions based upon race, gender, and social status (Gal. 3:28). At the advent of the Holy Spirit, old structures fade away. For example, when Peter visited the home of Cornelius, he saw that the gift of the Holy Spirit filled the Gentiles who heard the preaching of the word of God. He exclaimed, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47). On that basis, he baptized Gentile believers in the name of Jesus Christ, thereby breaking (or transcending) his received tradition. Peter made this bold, unprecedented move not on the basis of his exegesis of the Old Testament, nor by his authority as an apostle (preeminent as he was), but in response to the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work. Extending this precedent to the issue of women in ministry, Ray Anderson asks, "Can anyone forbid ordination for those women who give evidence of being called forth and gifted for pastoral ministry in the church?"

Thus far, I have argued that prioritizing Spirit gifting allows for both men and women to serve in church leadership. A possible objection is that such an approach is subjective and places too great an emphasis on human experience. To counter this charge, I propose that a Trinitarian theology of ministry, which is based on the logic of Trinitarian grace, provides a way to ground appeals to the Spirit and Spirit gifting on a clearer theological foundation. In a Trinitarian theology of ministry, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work collaboratively to draw human persons into participating in the ministry of God. This occurs as the Holy Spirit unites the prior and ongoing ministry of Christ with the responsive ministry of women and men to accomplish the will of the Father, who is the origin and destiny of all ministry.

A Trinitarian framework

This section articulates a Trinitarian framework for understanding ministry as participation in the ministry of the Trinity. Once such a foundation is in place, it becomes possible to ground appeals to Spirit gifting in the logic of Trinitarian grace. First, I invoke Augustine’s mutual love model of the Trinity, which highlights the Spirit’s role as the bond of union between (1) the Father and the Son, (2) Christ’s two natures, and (3) Christ and redeemed persons who minister on the basis of their union with Christ. Second, I explore the implications of Christ’s sole priesthood for church ministry from a Trinitarian perspective.

Augustine’s mutual love model

According to Augustine’s mutual love model, the Father eternally loves the Son, and the Son generates the Spirit (without beginning or end), and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. This is problematic from a New Testament point of view, because in God and in God alone love loves itself. Love becomes inter-subjectivity within God, because in God (and in God alone) love loves itself. Love takes on such an all-encompassing reality as to become a transcendent Subject. Steven Studebaker explains the mutual love model this way:
The Son is a subject who loves the Father. The Father and the Son in their concordant love for one another bring forth the Holy Spirit. The personal identity of the Holy Spirit is the objectification of the Father’s and Son’s mutual love. As mutual love, the Holy Spirit’s primary characteristic is union. The Spirit is the love that indissolubly unites the Father and the Son. The identity of the Holy Spirit as mutual love does not depersonalize the Spirit. The Spirit is a unique divine person whose activity is that of uniting the other two divine persons.29

The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son, and thus the Spirit’s basic characteristic is union. Furthermore, in accordance with Rahner’s axiom that the “economic” Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity, a correspondence is required between God’s being as Trinity and God’s redemptive activities.30 This means that the Father sends the Son because, in their immanent relations, the Son proceeds eternally from the Father. It also means that the Holy Spirit, who eternally binds the Father and Son together in love, binds the divine nature of the Son together with the human nature of Jesus Christ. Since the mutual love between the Father and the Son establishes the Holy Spirit’s unique identity, in the economy of redemption, the Spirit “must be both the Father’s love that brings about the incarnation and the incarnate Son’s return of love to the Father.”31 The incarnation is, therefore, the objectification of the Father’s love in creation, in which the Spirit, as the bond of love, brings created nature into union with divine nature (specifically, the Holy Spirit creates the humanity of Jesus).32 This bond forms the basis of Christ’s capacity to be the sole priest and mediator for fallen and alienated human beings before God. It allows Christ to receive and take to himself all of creation, to redeem it by means of the cross and the resurrection, and finally to offer it back to the Father as the New Creation.

The implication for human redemption is that the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between God and redeemed human beings, whom the Spirit brings into union with Christ.33 This union with Christ in the Spirit grounds and enables all of Christian life—being and doing, knowing and worshiping, loving and serving. It also grounds church ministry, which is first and foremost Christ’s ministry, in which Christians participate as the Holy Spirit binds their ministry to Christ’s. Furthermore, since the Son always accomplishes the Father’s work in and through the Holy Spirit, evidence of Spirit gifting becomes the primary criterion for a person’s suitability for ministry and leadership roles in the church. Before discussing the implications of this, we need to reflect further on the sole mediation and priesthood of Christ.

The sole mediation and priesthood of Christ

In his book Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, James B. Torrance discusses the implications of the sole priesthood of Christ for Christian worship. Through a theological reading of Hebrews, Torrance shows that Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator between God and human beings. As such, Christ is the unique priest who represents God to humanity and humanity to God.34 Torrance contrasts his Trinitarian theology of worship, which accounts for the sole priesthood of Christ, with two false views that reject or qualify it in some way. He calls the first of these false views a “Unitarian” or “Arian” approach.35 Arius was a fourth-century presbyter from Alexandria whose views about the nature of Christ were controversial.36 He taught that only God the Father is eternal and unoriginated. The Son is not of one being (homoousios) with the Father, but a quasi-divine creature who neither sees nor knows the Father completely. Christ is not “true God,” but a demigod who is given the courtesy titles “Son” or “Son of God” because of his appointed mission. Jesus’ relationship to the Father is not qualitatively distinctive, but generic (even if quantitatively exemplary). From an “Arian” perspective, argues Torrance, there is no unique priest or mediator between God and human beings.37 Torrance draws the implication for Christian life and worship that “the only priesthood is our priesthood, the only offering our offering, the only intercessions our intercessions.”38 He faults such an approach as being human centered, pneumatologically deficient, non-sacramental, and moralistic.39

The second false view is what Torrance calls the “existential, present-day experience model.”40 This view does not deny the uniqueness of Christ or his equality with the Father, but it qualifies his sole priesthood with an overemphasis on the necessity of human response. While God is seen graciously to give himself in the moment of encounter, the stress tends to be on the individual’s faith, repentance, and decision. While affirming that believers are saved on the basis of a God-humanward movement in Christ, the human-Godward movement remains fundamentally ours in a semi-Pelagian way. Such a view, Torrance argues, “emphasizes our faith, our decision, our response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ” (emphasis original).41 Furthermore, it ignores the fact that “God has already provided for us that response which alone is acceptable to him—the offering made for the whole human race in the life, obedience and passion of Jesus Christ.”42 Consequently, the “existential” model places an unwarranted stress on human action and lacks grounding in Trinitarian grace.

In contrast to these two erring models, Torrance proposes a Trinitarian one, in which Christ offers himself to the Father on our behalf and in our place. On the basis of Christ’s self-offering, Trinitarian worship “shares in a human-Godward movement that belongs to God and which takes place within the divine life.”43 While the human response truly is ours, it takes place in Christ by the Spirit. Thus, the real agent in worship, the one true minister, is Jesus Christ. Accordingly, our worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.44 A Trinitarian view maintains that worship is not the product of our religious experience, faith, repentance, or decision, but rather is a participation in the love and fellowship (i.e., the Spirit) shared between the Father and the Son in their unique relationship. The implication is that every aspect of Christian life is lived within what Alan Torrance calls the “I, yet not I, but Christ” dynamic of Christian existence. He explains, “Participation speaks of the fact that ‘we live, no, Christ lives in us’; that we pray, no, the Spirit intercedes for us and in us; we understand, no, we are
brought to participate in the understanding that is Christ's. . .".45
Our union with Christ means that we participate in Christ's on-
going work before the Father and his mission from the Father to
the world.46 Since we are included in God's Trinitarian life, our
own feeble actions and mixed intentions are taken up, cleansed,
and offered to the Father through the priestly work of Christ. Our
clumsy and awkward prayers are assimilated into Christ's perfect
intercession before the Father. Our doubts and faith struggles are
borne and carried by Christ's faithfulness to the Father. Our mea-
ger efforts to minister and serve God's people are transformed
and empowered by Christ's prior and ongoing ministry.

The logic of Trinitarian grace and a theology of women in ministry
The first implication of the previous two sections for Christian
ministry is that our ministry is ultimately not our own, but a par-
ticipation in the prior ministry of Christ who is "God's minister
par excellence."47 As Ray Anderson puts it, "The ministry of Je-
sus to the Father on behalf of the world is the inner logic of all
ministry. Every aspect of the ministry of Jesus is grounded in the
inner relation of mutual love and care between the Father and the
Son."48 Anderson's comment eloquently expresses the connection
I have been making between the Augustinian mutual love model
of the Trinity and the sole priesthood and ministry of Christ. The
foundation for all Christian ministry, therefore, is not human
ingenuity or innate capacity, but the ministry of Jesus Christ in the
Spirit. When applied to church ministry, the logic of Trinitarian
grace means that nothing is permitted to condition God's gra-
cious gifting and calling. The call to ministry is the prerogative
of the Sovereign Spirit of God, who draws human beings to par-
ticipate in Christ's ministry through faith and trust in him. Karl
Barth once made the intriguing inference that the Reformation
dogma of the imputation of Christ's "alien" or "exterior" righ-
teousness to believers applies not only to their justification, but
also to their sanctification, obedience, and even to their gifting by
the Holy Spirit.49 Barth correctly observed that our giftedness for
ministry is an "alien" giftedness, proceeding from the sovereign
Spirit of God, who is our Promise, not our possession.50

What follows from the Trinitarian model proposed in this ar-
ticle is that any theology that prohibits women from ministry or
leadership because of their gender qualifies the sole priesthood
of Christ and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Gordon Fee hints
at this when he says, "To begin with gender rather than gifts and
calling simply puts the emphasis at the wrong place, especially
for the new covenant people of God, where there is no longer any
priesthood (at least not as part of biblical revelation!)."51 From a
New Testament perspective, the sole priesthood of Christ fulfills
and renders obsolete the exclusivity of the Levitical priesthood of
the Old Testament. Christ alone is priest; when the term "priest"
is applied to believers in the New Testament, it is always in the
context of all believers who share vicariously in the priesthood of
Christ (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:5, 2:9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). Thus, in the New
Covenant, distinctions of race, social status, and gender lose their
significance as qualifying factors for priesthood.52 Conversely, a
male hierarchical perspective assumes that men, by some innate
capacity or quality of their own (i.e., their gender), are better suit-
ted to serve God in certain ways.53 Masculinity is retained as an in-
nate quality which predetermines and qualifies the way in which
grace works. Such a qualification of grace amounts to denying the
sovereignty of the Spirit and/or the sole priesthood of Christ, how-
ever subtly it may be explained or justified. As Anderson asserts
(commenting directly on the outcome of patriarchy for ministry),
"Male and female continue to operate as criteria outside of the
benefits of Christ. Nature determines the extent to which grace
can go in bringing the benefits of Christ into the historical and
temporal order."54 If this is true, then patriarchy has a disturbing
theological corollary: not only does it jeopardize the theological
ground of ministry as a secondary participation in Christ's minis-
try, but it actually threatens the integrity of the gospel by violating
the dynamics or logic of Trinitarian grace.55 This consequence be-
comes clear when we ask the question: What other innate human
quality or capacity would we dare impose as a condition on the
Spirit's gracious gifting?56 Race or color? Inherited social status or
class? Nationality? Intelligence? Disease or health? Accordingly,
gender is not a unique category outside the realm of grace.57

One of the largest stumbling blocks for many hierarchists is
Paul's teaching about women in texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1
Corinthians 11. The exegetical debates between hierarchical and
egalitarian interpreters seem endless, the details of which I can-
not explore here.58 The larger question, in my view, is why do
hierarchists employ these passages as controlling texts? Why not
make Galatians 3:26–29 the dominant text, or, for that matter, the
many other examples in Scripture of women exercising leader-
ship gifts? This demonstrates that a hermeneutical and theologi-
cal decision precedes and impacts the exegesis of the passages,
informing their debate about women in ministry. My own ap-
proach to reconciling these passages is that the New Testament
prioritizes the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit and Spirit gifting,
except in particular circumstances where specific problems in
the church (1 Tim. 1–2; 1 Cor. 11) or the integrity of witness (1 Pet.
2–3) call for more controlled measures. For Paul, the priority is
always the integrity of the gospel message and the people who
proclaim it. Consequently, he can be extremely pragmatic when
it comes to particular circumstances demanding a unique appli-
cation. Examples of this include his discussion of conscience in
Romans 14, his instructions concerning eating meat sacrificed to
idols in 1 Corinthians 8 (compare his comments with Acts 15:20
and 21:25), his decision to circumcise Timothy in Acts 16, and his
exhortations to women and slaves in Ephesians 5–6 and Colos-
sians 3. While in some cases Paul restricts the activities of wom-
en, in other cases he radically affirms them, as with Phoebe (a
deacon), Junia (an apostle), Lydia (a businesswoman and house
church leader), Euodia and Syntyche (who partnered with him in
the cause of the gospel), and his inclusion of women in congrega-
tional (public) praying and singing.59

A possible objection: Subordination within the Godhead
One potential objection to the Trinitarian argument of this article
is that the subordination of females to males is justified because
there is an eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father within the Godhead. According to this view, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are fully divine and equal in value and dignity, yet they are unequal in function or rank. Similarly, men and women are equal in value and dignity, but, with regard to rank, women are functionally subordinate to men. There are two responses to this objection. First, the assumption of eternal functional subordination within the Godhead is highly questionable.60 Second, for the sake of argument, even if there were a form of functional subordinationism within the Trinity, the precise nature of that subordination would still be unclear and its implications for the ministry of women and men together would remain highly questionable, if not impossible to discern.

For example, when the church Fathers say that the Father is greater than the Son, are they using the term “greater” in the same sense that current hierarchists read it today? Even if one speculates that a certain priority is in some sense given to the Father, can one be sure that this implies the same authority is attributed to men?61 For instance, Augustine’s discussion of the Trinity resists such simplistic role subordinations, not to mention their gender implications for human relationships. Augustine boldly states, “I will say however with absolute confidence that Father and Son and Holy Spirit, God the creator, of one and the same substance, the almighty three, act inseparably.”62 However, in discussing the economic distinctions in the Trinity, Augustine shows more caution and nuance. In his reflections on Scripture, he observes that the Father sent the Son to be born of woman (Gal. 4:4–5), but the Son also emptied himself in the incarnation (Php. 2:6–7). The Father gave up the Son on the cross (Rom. 8:32), but the Son also gave himself (Gal. 2:20). The Father raised the Son from the grave (Php. 2:9), but the Son also raised himself up (John 2:19, 10:18).63 Clearly, for Augustine, the role of the Son is not simply one of passive submission, but of active participation in the work of the Triune God. Perhaps the way the Father and Son operate is analogous to the grammatical functions of subject and predicate within a sentence. Though the subject of the sentence (the Father) is in some sense prior, it is a category error to speak of the subject as providing something like authoritative leadership to the predicate (the Son and the Spirit). Both work inseparably and derive their meaning on the basis of what the whole sentence (the Godhead) intends to communicate. Similarly, in Augustine’s psychological analogy of memory, understanding, and will, there is no clear way to establish which function is prior and which is subordinate.64 The action of one implies the joint action of all three. In any case, Augustine counsels us to exercise supreme caution when thinking about Trinitarian analogies, and thus he refuses to identify any of the Trinitarian persons with memory, understanding, or will.65 Augustine’s humility in this regard is worth emulating.

In order for an argument based on analogy to succeed, the analogy must be valid on the particular points being compared, thus a further question arises. Is the analogy of Trinitarian relations comparable to human relations on the points at which hierarchists draw their comparison?66 The following considerations demonstrate that it is not. First, in the economy of redemption, Christ is functionally subordinate to the Father not because his essence is different from or less than the Father’s, but because his mission as Logos and Sent One requires it. However, the subordination of women to men is based not on function (as hierarchists claim), but ultimately on ontology; thus, the analogy breaks down. Women are restricted from teaching, shepherding, and leading not because such tasks are inherently masculine (otherwise, hierarchists would have to prohibit women from engaging in these activities in all spheres and circumstances), but simply because, in ecclesiastical and domestic contexts, women must be submissive to men. They are not prohibited from teaching and exercising authority generally, but only from teaching and having authority over men. Thus, it is their nature as women, not their function per se, that is subordinated to men. Hierarchists who pursue such reasoning fail to attend to this distinction, and some even project their thinking into the Trinity and confuse function and ontology within the Godhead. For example, in one defense of the eternal functional subordination of the Son, two contemporary hierarchists come dangerously close to ontological subordinationism (I believe their position makes it inevitable). They argue that the Nicene expressions “begotten from the Father,” “God from God,” “Light from Light,” and so forth, “reflected a belief in the eternal subordination of the Son.”67 However, such statements cannot be interpreted to support functional subordinationism, because they concerned the divine essence—not the personal relations—and were designed to depict the unity of the Godhead.68 It is the Son’s divine essence that is eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God. The very expressions denote divinity, not functionality (i.e., the Son is “true God,” not simply “a god”). Were the interpretation of these authors correct, it would appear that the Nicene Fathers made an ontological distinction between the Father and Son (in which case the Son is less than fully divine and the gospel is forfeit)—but this is precisely what Nicene orthodoxy refutes!

The analogy between the Trinity and male/female relations breaks down at other points as well, as Rebecca Groothuis helpfully points out.69 For instance, a common hierarchist view is that husbands and wives should attempt to seek consensus in decision making, but in the case of a disagreement, wives should submit to husbands. In contrast, the persons of the Trinity are always united in will. There is never a case where the Father overrules the Son in a decision. Incidentally, the exemplary New Testament case of a husband and wife actually making a decision is 1 Corinthians 7:5, in which Paul simply tells them to agree. Further, Scripture states that the Father has given all authority and judgment to the Son (Matt. 28:18; John 5:21–27, 17:2), but, from a patriarchal perspective, a husband is neither expected nor required to share his own special authority with his wife. Therefore, drawing an analogy between relationships within the Trinity and those between women and men is invalid because such a comparison is too dissimilar at crucial points, for example, in comparing a human husband and wife with a divine Father and Son.


Conclusion

Ministry is not primarily a human accomplishment, but a response to and abiding in the prior and ongoing ministry of the Triune God. Specifically, redeemed persons minister out of their union with Christ in the bond of the Spirit, not on the basis of gender or any other innate quality.18 The Holy Spirit sovereignly bestows ministry gifts on both men and women and draws them to participate in God’s redemptive work. Gender is not a factor in God’s plan for leadership and does not condition his gracious calling. Consequently, the Trinitarian theology of ministry proposed in this article prioritizes Spirit gifting and advocates for women’s full access to ministry activities and positions of leadership within the church.

Notes


2. Labels are often misleading and reductionistic, yet we must use them for practical purposes. In its etymological sense, the word “patriarchy” is accurate and avoids the imprecision of “complementarianism” (most egalitarians also affirm complementarity in some sense). Steven R. Tracy provides the following definition: “Patriarchy refers to ‘male rule’ and hence ‘male authority’ and describes a very broad continuum of gender role models in which males have some type of gender-based authority over females” (“Patriarchy and Domestic Violence: Challenging Common Misconceptions, John’s Evangelical Theological Society 50, no. 3 [Sept. 2007]: 576).


14. Donald Guthrie makes the similar claim that Paul is concerned more with the work of ministry than with establishing a hierarchy of officials (New Testament Theology [Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981], 760–62).


18. Likewise, even when Paul gives the instruction to test prophecies, he is exhorting the entire church to exercise discernment (1 Thess. 5:20–21; cf. Rom. 12:2, Php 19–11).


20. Scriptural criteria for choosing elders are based on relative qualities that can be measured in degrees (virtue, maturity, orthodoxy, experience, etc.) rather than on ontological distinctions like being male or female. For example, it is possible for both men and women to meet the elder qualifications listed in Titus 1 (blamelessness, faithfulness in marriage, even-temperedness, etc.). Searching for such qualities in potential leaders actually highlights the priority of Spirit gifting, since it involves discerning the evidence of the Spirit at work.


22. Ray S. Anderson, The Shape of Pastoral Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Anderson argues that Christ’s resurrection and presence to us in the Spirit amounts to a new hermeneutical criterion: Jesus Christ is not only the author of Scripture, but also its reader and interpreter (The Shape of Pastoral Theology, 77–101). See also his qualifying comments on pages 109ff.


25. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (NRSV).


27. Augustine, The Trinity IV.1.2 (272).


29. Studebaker, “Integrating Pneumatology and Christology,” 12. For the following analysis I have relied heavily on Studebaker’s exposition of the Augustinian mutual love model.


31. Studebaker, “Integrating Pneumatology and Christology,” 14. This notion leads naturally to the filioque doctrine, which some theologians fear threatens the personal nature of the Trinity (e.g., John Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church [New York, N.Y.: Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002], 41 n. 35). However, as Edmund Hill points out, Augustine believed that the filioque was necessary precisely to safeguard the distinction of the three persons, particularly the Son and the Spirit. If both Spirit and Son proceed only from the Father, what is the difference between the two in their procession, and how can one explain that the Spirit is not also a Son? See Hill’s foreword to books IX–XIV (Augustine, The Trinity, 269).


33. Perhaps this perspective provides a relational basis for the Reformed doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s alien righteousness to the believer. It also explains how something that is alien to us becomes truly ours.


37. Lewis Ayres cautions against an overly simplistic depiction of the Arian Controversy as a dispute over whether or not Jesus Christ was God (the debate was much more concerned about whether or not there could be shades of divinity, i.e., “God” vs. “true God”). He also points out that Arius was a relatively minor figure in what came to be known as Arianism (and we know very little about Arius’s own theology). Nevertheless, it is clear that Arius believed (1) that “the Son does not know the Father and is unable fully to praise the Father”; (2) that the Son exists because of the Father’s will; and (3) that only the Father is by nature immutable (Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 55).


39. Torrance cites Adolf von Harnack and John Hick as modern examples of the “Arian” or “Unitarian” model. For such theologians, the essence of true religion is the individual soul’s immediate relation to God. There is no place for Christ as Son of God and sole priest and mediator.
41. J. B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, 29.
42. J. B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, 20.
44. J. B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace, 20.
45. A. J. Torrance, Persons in Communion, 363. This phrase is based on Galatians 2:20.
48. Anderson, The Shape of Pastoral Theology, 42.
50. I do not endorse a dualism between natural and supernatural, as if God never uses natural human capabilities. However, such capabilities are not the basis for God’s sovereign call. They may corroborate it, but do not condition it. Furthermore, human capabilities are effective only as God “commandeers” them for God’s own purposes.
53. John Piper asserts that male authority and female submission are of the essence of “what true manhood and womanhood are.” See his essay, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 34.
54. Anderson, The Shape of Pastoral Theology, 42.
55. As Catherine Mowry LaCugna reminds us, from the perspective of Christian redemption, both men and women are being formed into the image of Jesus Christ. Thus, one aspect of true personhood is freedom from biology as destiny (God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993], 282, 289). For an approach to theological anthropology that maintains a distinction between male and female without thereby projecting gender stereotypes, see Ray S. Anderson, On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology (Pasadena, Calif.: Fuller Seminary Press, 1982), 104–29.
56. Has the Holy Spirit sovereignly chosen to call only men to leadership? According to Scripture, this does not seem to be the case. Women are national leaders (Deborah), prophets (Miriam, Huldah, the daughters of Philip), “breadwinners” (Prov. 31), house church leaders (Lydia), evangelists (the women at Jesus’ tomb), disciples (in Luke 10, Mary sits and listens at Jesus’ feet in the posture of a disciple before a rabbi), teachers (Priscilla), “deacons” (Phoebe), and even apostles (Junia). For other examples, see Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987). One patriarchal response is that God uses women for such ministries only in exceptional circumstances, as when men abdicate their responsibility. This retort is, first, illogical, because there can be no exceptions to absolute rules based on qualitative distinctions. (If there could be exceptions, how would we know when we encountered one? Does not the very possibility of an exception throw the doors wide open?) Second, this notion seems irreverent and strains credibility (surely the sovereign God could have found a man somewhere, or even created one). The reality is that God can call whomever God wants, however and whenever God wants it to do.
57. Some have drawn parallels between patriarchy and the institution of slavery. Is patriarchy, like slavery, a residual “principality and power” in our day which Christians ought to vanquish? (I would say yes.) For an in-depth comparison between slavery and patriarchy leading to an egalitarian, “redeemptive” approach, see William J. Webb, Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

61. While Augustine grants a certain priority to the Father, this cannot mean inequality in either being or function, since the three divine persons always act inseparably (Augustine, The Trinity IV/5.30 [175]), yet hierarchists commonly speak of women being equal in dignity but unequal in function and role.
62. Augustine, The Trinity IV/5.30 (175).
65. Augustine, “Sermon 62.” However, he does assign places to the Trinitarian persons in his mutual love model because he believes that Scripture warrants it by revealing that “God is love” (1 John 4:16).
66. As an aside, a position based upon eternal functional subordinationism within the Trinity seems to imply a rather extreme form of social trinitarianism. It is therefore vulnerable to the criticisms directed at theologians such as Leonard Hodgson, Leonardo Boff, and Joseph Bracken. See John L. Gresham, Jr., “The Social Model of the Trinity and its Critics,” Scottish Journal of Theology 46, no. 3 (1993): 325–43.
68. For Athanasius, speech about the generation of the Son concerns the divine immateriality and simplicity. Lewis Ayres explains, “Homousios safeguards the point that the Son’s generation is unlike the generation of human beings and does not involve the creation of one thing that may be separated from its originator” (Nicæa and Its Legacy, 141). What is at stake is the status of the Son’s existence, not his function.
70. God often makes use of such qualities, but they do not condition God’s sovereign call; see note 51.

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