

Article from the Gospel Coalition by Kathleen Nielsen

Why Women's Ministry? Questions You're Asking

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Why women's ministry?

I recently received this question from a woman who describes herself as a complementarian in a church filled mostly with egalitarians. How should she answer? How can she articulate the value of women's ministry for those who believe men's and women's roles in the church should be identical?

The question arises often—and just as often from various complementarian contexts. Why shouldn't women simply participate in church services, small groups, and various ministries along with the rest of the body, rather than needing another layer of ministry focused on women?

I'll suggest five responses to this question—not the only responses, of course, but some initial ones that may also connect in part with egalitarians. If we're going to talk about women's ministry, we must be ready to answer this question clearly and biblically. (Much more detailed discussion can be found in [Word-Filled Women's Ministry: Loving and Serving the Church](#) [review].)

Response 1: Formal women's ministry is not essential.

It's actually important to say that a women's ministry program is not a biblical requirement. The Bible doesn't command believers to organize small groups and Bible study groups and special gatherings just for women. Many of us tend to think immediately of formal programs when this subject arises. But while these can be wonderful, we should acknowledge that ministry among women can and will take place in a whole variety of ways within a healthy congregation.

Response 2: The Word calls women to teach women, in a local church context.

Even though a women's ministry program isn't essential, it may be most helpful to organize and formalize ministry among women in one way or another. You know where I'm about to go. We must go there—to Titus 2, where Paul instructs Titus to lead his church in such a way that men and women are serving specifically as godly men and godly women, and specifically as godly older and younger men and women. The famous command for older women to teach younger women “what is good” ([Titus 2:3](#)) arrives in the context of a letter that glories in the eternal doctrines of the gospel and how they're lived out in all the ordered layers of God's people together in a local worshipping body.

In numerous places the New Testament addresses women in the church specifically as women, calling them to live as godly women and (in Titus 2) to teach this godliness to one another. This specific emphasis implies needed time for women to be together and teach each other—primarily though the communication and prayerful application of God's Word, with an eye toward knowing Christ and honoring him in all our relationships and responsibilities. While this teaching can take place informally, organized women's ministry provides a context in which it can be offered to all the women of a congregation.

Response 3: We must raise up Word-filled women.

As I mentioned, this teaching happens primarily through the communication and prayerful application of God's Word. Effective women's ministry builds up generations of women who

study and pass on the Scriptures. The Bible is clear about itself: it is God's breathed-out revelation of himself to human beings. It is the light on the path and manna for the soul of every single follower of Jesus.

It's crucial for women to receive regular teaching of the Word from ordained leaders, and instruction and encouragement from both men and women. But it's also crucial that women "teach what is good" by passing on to other women not just practical principles but the grounding in the Word from which those principles grow. What a blessing is the role model whose heart and mind are saturated in Scripture, whose life is being transformed by the Spirit into the image of Christ, and whose tongue is proclaiming his excellencies loud and clear. I've been blessed by such figures through the years, from Sunday school teachers to Bible study leaders to women who simply took time to pray with and for me. The coming generations will need such role models more than ever—and not just celebrity or virtual ones, but real women in real-life congregations.

Of course this Word-filled teaching happens in all sorts of ways—from big Bible studies to one-to-one Bible reading at a kitchen table. It happens in mentoring relationships based on sharing God's Word. It happens as women pray, serve, minister, celebrate, and grieve together—always with the Word on their lips. Pastors and elders can help it happen with excellence and substance. And when this Word-filled teaching takes place, it affects the whole church body.

Response 4: Word-filled women's ministry blesses the whole church.

Women's ministry shouldn't separate women from the rest of the congregation. In fact, it shouldn't aim for the good of women alone but for the good of the whole church. As women encourage each other in Christ through his Word, they become increasingly godly, prayerful connectors with others in the body—family members, those needing physical or spiritual help, children, and church leaders.

We will bump into complementarian distinctives at some point in this conversation, probably earlier but surely now. For complementarians this is a joyful bump because we believe God has set in place an order for marriage and for the church—an order for our joy and good. We celebrate our participation in the divine drama of the love between Christ and his church, playing our part as God's female image-bearers. It's a joy to see a church where male pastors and elders caringly shepherd all the members of their congregation—including the females ones, giving pastoral oversight to women's ministry and encouraging training for women leaders. As a result, the whole church is strengthened and men and women are equipped to partner together in gospel work. One pastor who read a draft of this article said he'd add only this: the more sharp women of the Word are raised up in his congregation, the happier he is, since they help sharpen him in all sorts of ways.

The process can be hard. Leaders in marriage and in the church are still sinful human beings—and so are those who follow their leadership. In churches without unanimity concerning gender roles, untold sensitivity is required as believers faithfully pray for the leaders in place and seek to follow and serve according to God's Word. Only by God's grace, as he transforms us into his Son's image through his Spirit and Word, do we grow together into a body that honors him.

Response 5: Women's ministry is a valuable channel of evangelism.

Really, for this point, you should just read Gloria Furman's chapter in [Word-Filled Women's Ministry](#). If you've been tempted to think of women's Bible study groups simply as cozy places for longtime friends, get ready for a paradigm shift. Women have amazing opportunity in

today's world to embrace other women who would never come (or, in some cases, never be allowed to come) to a mixed group. In all contexts, women's groups rooted in God's Word have enormous potential to minister to lost and hurting women who are drawn to authentic, gracious community—and who need above all to meet the Lord and Savior who shines through the Scriptures from beginning to end.

Many of us need to hear the stories of how God's Word studied and taught has invaded the heart of a woman and then reached an entire family with the gospel—and how that grows faith and evangelistic fervor in churches (see, for example, [Cindy Cochrum's chapter](#)). I've seen this happen in many groups, especially as leaders pray for this kind of gospel fruit and as one member after another invites an unbelieving friend to come along with her.

What an opportunity, through women's ministry, to embrace the calling of God's set-apart people to be salt and light in the world, for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.