



Proverbs 31:10-31
ECO Values
“We Are Egalitarian”

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This morning we continue our brief three-Sunday series on three major theological values of our church and our denomination. We are part of a denomination called “A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.” We often shorten it to ECO or ECO Presbyterian, even though ECO is not an acronym given that the letters are in different order. And: **In ECO we have some theological values that guide us and how we do ministry: That we are Reformed, Egalitarian and Evangelical.** We talked about our Reformed theological heritage last week, and if you missed it and this is your home church or you’re curious to know more about who we are, I would encourage you to watch it online at our website or YouTube channel.

Today we look at our theological value of being Egalitarian. **We believe Scripture – which is our highest authority in life and faith, as our Reformed heritage leads us to believe** (Not the pastor or some denominational representative)...**we believe Scripture tells us that God has given both men and women gifts for ministry, with no restrictions on either men or women in regards to ministry roles.** So, we have both men and women who serve as pastor, Elders, and Deacons, teaching classes, leading ministries, administering communion, baptizing, and so forth.

To get us into this topic, I’ve picked a passage this morning that right off the bat debunks some assumptions about women’s roles more broadly in society that some people have, including many Christians. The passage doesn’t get into church leadership, though we’ll look at some others that do. But the last 20 verses or so of Proverbs 31 are about “the wife of noble character” as many subheadings (added by publishers to help us find particular passages) in Scripture will say. So, I invite you to grab a Bible or open the Bible app on your phone and go to the last chapter of the book of Proverbs, or follow along on the screen as we read **Proverbs 31:10-31**. This is God’s Word to you and me this morning...

Pray. **Right off the bat, we see that this passage stands against all kinds of cultural assumptions about women’s roles in the home and society.**

Often, those assumptions have been propagated by Christians. However, the woman described here is clearly not being kept at home cooking, cleaning, and raising the kids while waiting for her husband to return home from work.

What we see here is a lot of freedom for her to be engaged in a number of things outside of the home. Notice almost immediately, we're told that: **Her husband has "full confidence in her" (verse 11).** He trusts her. This lets us know that she's got freedom to make decisions and do things as she sees what's best, undoubtedly in conversation with her husband – she's not a renegade, just as he wouldn't go off and buy a boat without consulting her. They're like teammates on the court or field who trust one another in their decision-making and their talents and abilities.

Now, there are routines that we might associate with a "traditional woman's role" – such as preparing food and making clothes for her family. But there's so much more. **For instance, in verse 16 we see that she's a business woman: she buys land, and does so out of "her earnings" – notice they are her earnings and not her husband's – and she plants a vineyard.** Verse 18 tells us that her trading is profitable, and we get more about that in verse 24: that she makes and sells garments. So, she owns a vineyard, and she's making clothes – not only for the family but to sell or trade in the market. So, she's engaged in the marketplace actively in multiple business ventures, and is successful at it. Verse 20 tells us she's hospitable toward those in need, and helps to care for them – so her vision is beyond the household to those in need. Verse 26 tells us she has wisdom and gives faithful instruction to others – and not just her kids, apparently. It's "others". Verse 27 says she watches over the affairs of her household.

So, the picture painted here is of a woman who's out doing stuff, engaged with and impacting the world as she supports, leads, and shepherds her family. This is not June Cleaver from the 1950's.

And: When we look at the whole of Scripture, this kind of portrait of women is what we frequently see. Yes, the focus tends to be on the guys. But where the women are highlighted, we frequently see women who are on

equal footing with men, engaged in business, in the marketplace, in leadership, and so forth. You go all the way back to the two accounts in Genesis of God creating humans – with one being kind of the “high-speed, big picture account of God creating the heavens and earth to God creating humanity in his image” and the other focusing in on the creation of humanity and giving more information and more detail...and in both of them, there’s a sense of male and female equality. Distinctly male and female, yes; they are biologically different. But there is a shared responsibility and sense of equality in their roles.

Genesis 1:27 says quite bluntly, “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Both are equally created in the image of God. Then in the next verse, both are blessed by God and both are told to be fruitful and increase in number; both are told to fill the earth and subdue it; both are told to rule over the fish, the birds, and every living creature. Same directions and same responsibilities are given, by God, to both of them. No differentiation. Everything about our theology of men’s and women’s roles in church is rooted in this.

In the slowed-down account of the creation of people in the next chapter of Genesis (2), the man – we usually call him Adam, which comes from the Hebrew word for man – he’s created first. For some folks, this is where the idea of men having some kind of preferential or hierarchical status over and above women takes root. (Also that Eve is his “helper” though the word there – Ezer – is used almost exclusively to describe God as our helper, and God is not subservient to us!) So the order of the creation of man and woman is the starting place for some people that men are given some kind of priority or have superiority. But that’s a two-edged sword and can go the other way, too. As the joke goes: When God had finished the creation of Adam, He stepped back, scratched his head and said, “*I know I can do better than this!!*” 😂

But both of those interpretations are distortions of reality: Adam isn’t created first in a hierarchical order, and Eve isn’t the improved version. In Genesis 2:23 Adam says, after seeing Eve, “Wo, man!” And hence, her name, Woman. Ok...cheap humor at the expense of truth. Please delete that from

your memory! **He says, “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh (Genesis 2:23).”** It’s really a statement of equality: They’re on equal footing, equally human, equally created in the image of God, in a way that none of the animals are. As the 17th and 18th Century English Bible commentator Matthew Henry puts it, and I shared once nearly three years ago: **“[Eve] was not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved” (Matthew Henry).**¹

So, how do we get from *that* to this idea that men rule over women, and a woman’s place is in the home and a woman can’t teach or preach or be in certain church leadership positions? In a nutshell, there’s a lot of cultural stuff that comes into play from outside of Scripture. For instance, Greek culture in Jesus’ day, and in the centuries leading up to that time, was *not* a good influence. It was highly patriarchal. By the time you get to the 1st Century A.D., Judaism had developed a prayer (started a couple centuries or more before) that religious leaders (rabbis, Pharisees, etc.) and other men would pray that went like this, **“I thank you God for not making me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman” (ancient Rabbinical prayer).** It’s not necessarily a prayer to bash Gentiles, slaves, and women – though it could be understood that way. But it *is* a prayer that men in their day would pray thanking God that they were a free, Jewish man because they were allowed to fully participate in the community of faith. There weren’t restrictions, for instance, on where Jewish men could go in the temple – whereas Gentiles and Jewish women had restrictions on where they could go.

And then comes Jesus, who values Gentiles, and slaves, and women. We’ll come back to Jesus in a moment...but the apostle Paul, who before encountering Jesus was a Jewish religious leader as a Pharisee (a “Pharisee of Pharisees” as he says himself) and was a violent persecutor of Christians...he almost certainly would have prayed that prayer about not being a gentile, slave, or woman. And then after God gets a hold of him and he does a 180 degree turn and follows Jesus ardently, and works hard to bring people into a relationship with Jesus...he then writes to the church in Galatia, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for**

you are all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Notice the exact correlation to the prayer that was so common for a male Jew in his day – Gentile (Greek), slave, female. He’s directly confronting that prayer, elevating the status of all people, including women. So, where did this come from? Good question. Glad you asked.

As we’ve seen, it starts in Creation where men and women are created equally in the eyes of God, and equally in the image of God ...and carries on in the Old Testament, not as prominently as we might like, but it’s definitely there such as in women prophets and leaders like Huldah and Esther and Deborah among others. But the primary catalyst to get people to see women on the same playing field as men, is Jesus. Jesus routinely elevates women in his sphere of ministry. For instance, Luke 8:1-3, **“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:1-3).** First, notice the parallels with Proverbs 31 – these women had their own financial means. Second, they ministered to Jesus and the disciples through their generous financial support. They financed the ministry. Later, it is some of these same women, again named by Luke, who discover the empty tomb and are used by God to proclaim the Good News to men. They were the first to testify to the resurrection. Keep in mind, that in their day and culture, a woman’s testimony was not admissible in a court of law at that time – they were considered pathological liars. So, the first people God worked through to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection were *women*, and it was to a group of men that they delivered the message! I don’t understand how some churches and denominations can read this and then have a theology that women can’t teach men. Thank God these women went and persuaded the men that the tomb was empty!

Elsewhere, we see Jesus touching women in public (which was against the cultural norms of the day), healing them (the women named in that Luke passage had been healed by Jesus), at times he prioritized conversations with

women over men which was a total scandal (such as the woman at the well in John, instead of talking with the disciples), He defended them against male accusers (woman caught in adultery...and where was the guy, btw), and Jesus was ministered to by them. Some people say, “Well, the 12 disciples were men, so men are supposed to be the church leaders.” **True, Jesus did pick 12 men as his disciples. But we don’t restrict *discipleship* to men because of that.** They were his core group of *disciples*. If it’s normative for disciples of Jesus only to be men, then there shouldn’t be any women in the church. They should be at home cooking brunch and cleaning the house for when the men get home doing church stuff. 🙄

But, we do see that in the larger group of disciples outside the 12, there definitely were women. We see that throughout the gospels in passages like the ones from Luke I mentioned, where he writes, “the 12 were with him and also some women...” almost as if they are in the same position as the 12, and Luke names some of the women, even. And some of these women have their names mentioned more in the gospels than some of the 12 disciples do, even. And this was ground-breaking, because in their day, Jewish rabbis only taught men.² But Jesus taught men *and* women, and received the care and ministry of men *and* women, as well.

And from there, you can go through the rest of the New Testament, and see women not only named as participants in the early church – like Lydia and Tabitha, and Lois, and others – but: **We also see women in church leadership.** For instance, Paul greets and commends a host of men and women in Romans 16 who have led and carried out ministry in various forms. As a part of that, he names Phoebe as a deacon (not a “deaconess” – that word never graces the pages of Scripture) and he names Junia as outstanding among the apostles, and he commends 9 other women who have worked hard “in the lord”. In fact, although he lists about twice as many men as women in Romans 16, most of the men he’s simply greeting (as in, “Say hi to Jimmy for me”); he *commends* about twice as many women as men for their work in the Lord (as in, “Jennifer has been an incredible co-worker in ministry!”). In Philippians 4, Paul names two women (Euodia and Syntyche) as “co-workers” in ministry, using the same language (as he always does) to

describe their work as he does for men. Paul doesn't see women as secondary or second-class co-workers in ministry.

So, the two times in Paul's letters that we know as 1 Timothy and Titus that seem to say women should be silent in the church or can't be in church leadership, must be read in light of Paul's ministry where women are affirmed in leadership roles, and in light of Jesus' ministry where women are affirmed, and in light of the Old Testament going all the way back to Creation. And I've covered those passages not that long ago: Titus just this last March and 1 Timothy in January of 2022, and I'll link those sermons to today's message online (See Endnotes)³...but suffice it to say, there seems to be idiomatic language Paul is using. Just as the Women's National Basketball Association's official rules talk about *women* playing "man to man" defense and *women* passing the ball "to the open man" so there is language in Paul's letters that is almost certainly meant to be read in much the same way – idiomatically and inclusively of men *and* women – so that any restrictions he gives on teaching or leading a church are intended for both men and women. And so, it's a restriction for certain situations, rather than for anywhere and everywhere for all the time, otherwise no one could ever teach in any church and we should all go home and watch football.

So: This is where we get our theological value for being Egalitarian in ministry: from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and from Paul and the other New Testament letters as well. In other words, from the Bible. And for us ECO churches, it's not just a value "in principle," or tacked on at the end, either: it's a core value that is part of our denomination's essential tenets. Now, you can be a part of our church, or any church in our denomination and think differently on that matter. Similarly, I have friends who go to a church that restricts women in church leadership (no female pastors or elders), and my friends disagree with that theology, and yet it's been their home church for over 20 years. Similarly, you can attend here, be a member, participate in ministries and so forth, and think differently. But to be a pastor or elder or deacon in an ECO church, to be at that level of church leadership, we take vows to uphold our essential tenets – including our Biblically-based Egalitarian view of ministry. I'm so glad to be a part of a church and a denomination that believes this and actively lives into it.

Now, if you think women in church leadership and teaching roles is a controversial topic, or if you think that makes us flaming theological liberals, then you should be sure to come back next week. Because **The third and final theological value we'll look at next Sunday places us in what is generally considered a more theologically conservative camp, and that is the value that we are Evangelical.** There *is* some inherent tension between Reformed, Egalitarian, and Evangelical. Reformed/Evangelical and Egalitarian/Evangelical especially are difficult for some people to see how we hold these things together. For many Christians they are separate boxes, and the boxes should never meet. But you can't put God in a box, and if you do, your vision of God is too small. He's bigger than the boxes we create. I was asked to give a nearly hour-long presentation on this topic of "Evangelical" at a denominational meeting a year ago, so this is a topic about which I've done a lot of research, thinking, and am passionate about. I'll make sure next Sunday's message isn't an hour long...but I look forward to sharing with you next Sunday on what we mean by "Evangelical" and how it impacts us.

In the meantime, let us – both men and women, created in God's image – “be the church” this week: living as disciples of Jesus, leading one another and others toward Jesus where we live, work, and play. It's what a Proverbs 31 woman would do, and it's what God calls *all* of us to do as we follow Jesus together. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Gen.2.21-Gen.2.25>

² <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/attitudes-to-women-the-rabbis-vs-jesus/> “Tractate Sotah 21: “*Whoever teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her obscenity.*” There are a lot of quotes at this website from Jewish documents that help us see the cultural attitude toward women within Judaism in the 1st Century and surrounding centuries as well.

³ 1 Timothy 2:1-15 Audio: <https://rosehillpc.org/sermonaudio/22-01-09.mp3>

1 Timothy 2:1-15 Text: <https://rosehillpc.org/sermonaudio/22-01-09%20Text.pdf>

1 Timothy 3:1-16 Audio: <https://rosehillpc.org/sermonaudio/22-01-16.mp3>

1 Timothy 3:1-16 Text: <https://rosehillpc.org/sermonaudio/22-01-16%20Text.pdf>

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