

Is There a Correlation Between Biblical Errancy and Gender Equality?

by Brandon Flanery

Abstract

Is there a correlation between someone's relationship to Biblical text and their views of gender equality? To answer this question, 159 individuals were surveyed, and five women were interviewed. Rather than focusing on more abstract questions to measure one's perceived views of gender equality (e.g. Do you believe men and women are equal?), this study zeroed in on the question "Do you believe that women can be in all forms of church leadership and carry the title of pastor?" Focusing in on this question, the survey data revealed three data points which had a direct correlation—the self-reported gender identity of the participant, the participant's believed gender of God, and the participant's belief regarding errancy of Biblical text—while the interviews revealed one data point that had direct correlation: the believed gender of God.

Keywords: feminism, theology, Bible, gender

Introduction

A startling phenomenon was showcased in Scholz's (2005) "The Christian Rights Discourse on Gender and the Bible." After feminist discourse entered the world of academia and religious studies, fundamentalist publications and organizations responded in force to oppose it, claiming God's good and perfect plan includes a view of gender that is complementarian in nature, rather than egalitarian. Kassian, a writer for the Gospel Coalition, helped coin the term "complementarian" back in the 80s, defining it as "the belief that God created male and female to reflect complementary truths about Jesus." Organizations like the *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* and publications like the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* speak out against women and men having access to the same roles and leadership options, not because genders are unequal, but because they are meant to express different aspects of the image of God—complementarianism. As these organizations make counter-claims regarding feminism, the main argument that continues to surface in their rhetoric is a "sincere commitment to the Bible," as Scholz puts it (2005, p.86). These publications and organizations refuse to modify their opinion because they believe they are obeying scripture, claiming, "It is essential that Christians hear clearly the voice of God through the Word of God in order to counteract secular society's pervasive influence" (Scholz, 2005, p.87). This brings up the question of errancy, in other words, does the Bible have errors? Scholz and those that share his view would say that it does not have errors, and that they are honoring the inerrancy and authority of scripture. There is an assumption being made here by Scholz, and that assumption is that people who have an egalitarian view versus those who have a complementarian view do not have a sincere commitment to Biblical text. Scholz would likely claim that those who hold an egalitarian view of gender believe the Bible has errors or is not the inspired Word of God. This assumption is held by more than Scholz.

Hass, in his essay “Patriarchy as an Evil that God Tolerated: an Analysis and Implications for the Authority of Scripture,” says, “to retain the authority of the Bible and the unity of a Biblical ethic, one must reject the assumption that the patriarchy found in the Bible is an evil” (1995, p.336). Hass walks through both New and Old Testament scripture, pointing out how the patriarchy is affirmed by God. His examples include men holding the power of property, men dictating the future spouse of their daughters, women being silent in church, and women being restricted from church leadership. However, this is not the only view.

In Osiek’s essay, “The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives,” Osiek summarizes there are five ways of relating to the Bible as a feminist: rejection, loyalty, revision, sublimation, or liberation (1997, p.960). While there are feminists that abandon the Bible altogether to esteem their values of egalitarianism, there are still other ways of relating to the Bible to allow for equality between the sexes.

With all these articles in mind, there is clearly a correlation between someone’s relationship to Biblical text and gender equality; otherwise, these parties would not have brought up feminist themes in light of a Christian’s relationship to Biblical text and organizations would not have been instituted in response to feminism entering academia and religious studies.

In light of the “Me Too” movement, the first-ever female presidential candidate, and the largest amount of women in congress, the correlation between people’s understanding of Biblical text and people’s views of women in leadership have real-world consequences, especially when 78% of U.S. Americans identify as Christian (Straughn, 2010, p.281). So this in turn begs the question if someone interprets the Bible more literally, are they more or less likely to believe women can lead in church and carry the title of pastor? That is the primary question this research aims to answer.

Method

Both qualitative and quantitative data was utilized for this research—the qualitative being five interviews; the quantitative being 159 survey responses.

Everyone interviewed was a woman who was once a Christian or is currently a Christian. All five interviewees were picked because of their unique relationship and history to Christianity. Two women had since de-converted to atheism or paganism; two are currently employed by a local church; and one is not actively engaged in a church but still considers herself a Christian. Interview questions included:

1. What is your faith background?
2. What are your views on gender equality?
3. What does your relationship with the Bible look like?
4. Does that look different than your church?
5. What gender do you believe God is?
6. Do you believe women should be in all forms of church leadership and carry the title of pastor?

All interviews were transcribed and coded using the grounded theory analytical approach (Charmaz, 2014). This included summarizing and identifying key elements for various excerpts. Themes were then identified where patterns were found. Short biographies were constructed from the interviews to visually represent each woman (Appendix I). They were placed on a spectrum of church involvement, as this was the most visible difference between the five women.

The survey was 24 questions long (Appendix II) and was advertised through multiple social media outlets (Facebook and Instagram). Anyone could fill out the survey and could stop at any time

if the participant did not want to continue. 159 participants completed the survey via Qualtrics: 83 by men, 73 by female, and 3 by other. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72 and had various faith backgrounds. The question that was used to dictate someone's ideas around gender equality was "Do you believe women should be in church leadership?" The reason this question was chosen was because it focuses in on the application of ideas and beliefs surrounding gender equality, rather than abstract ideas or theories regarding gender equality (e.g. Do you believe women and men are equal?). When observing this question, the data was analyzed by splitting up the data by other various data points to see if the other data points significantly affected how many participants believed women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor. The three data points that had the largest effect on this number were the self-reported gender identity of the participant, the participant's believed gender of God, and the participant's belief regarding errancy of Biblical text.

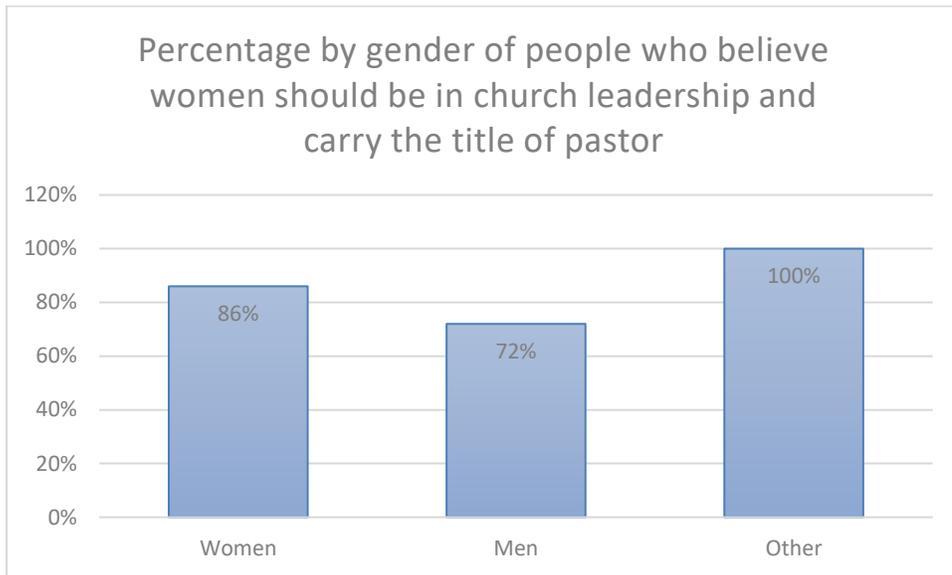
Results

A common theme between all the interview participants was their frustration with being a woman within Christian churches because of the limitations put on them, specifically regarding leadership. Every woman expressed a moment where they argued with a church leader or family member about women not being allowed to be a priest or a pastor. For participants 1 and 2, it was the main reason they left the church; for participant 3, it is the main reason she is not attending a church, and for participants 4 and 5, it was the main reason they fought to be in church leadership—to instigate change.

Participants 1 and 2 have de-converted and no longer have a relationship to the Bible. They believe it is a work of literature and is full of errors. They also believe God is both male and female. Participant 3 considers herself a Christian and believes God is male. She also believes the Bible is "the Word of God." When it comes to women in leadership, Participant 3 is unsure what she thinks or feels. This is one of the main reasons that she has not chosen a church to participate in. Participants 4 and 5 both believe God is male and female, are on staff with a church, and have varying relationships to the Bible. Participant 4 has a strict relationship with the Bible, believing there are no errors and is "the guide of her life," while Participant 5 believes the Bible is "a product of its time" and is not the inherent Word of God. When it comes to verses that forbid women from being in leadership, Participant 4 says that these verses are contextual, while Participant 5 says this is part of a Jewish-cultural framework and not a framework from God. In short, both Participant 4 and 5 do not take the verses about women being unable to be in leadership at face value. One uses historical context while the other interprets the Bible more "loosely." This allows them to believe women should be in leadership while staying committed to a church.

When it comes to the survey data, there were three data points that showed significant differentiation regarding women in church leadership: self-reported gender identity of the participant, the participant's believed gender of God, and the participant's belief regarding errancy of Biblical text.

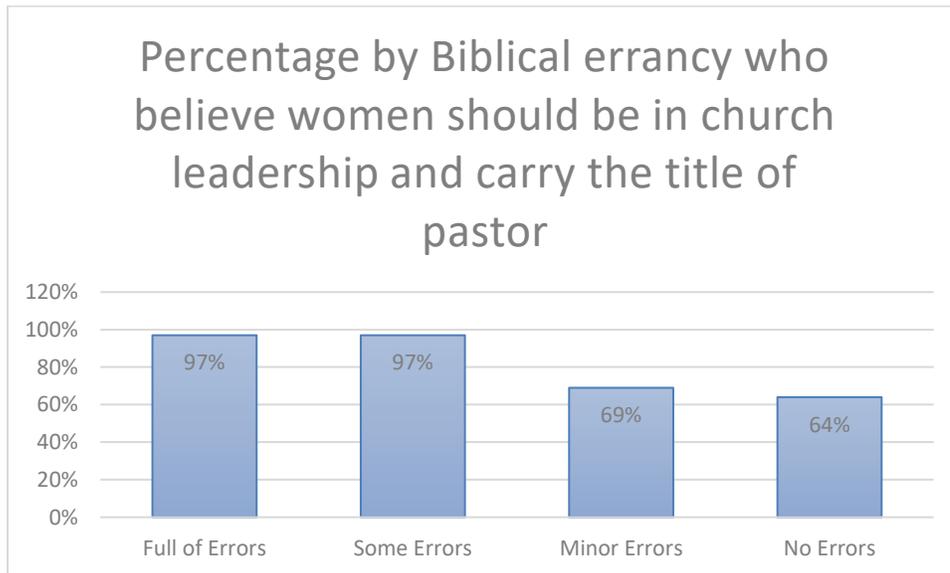
Regarding the self-reported gender identity of the participant, 86% of the women surveyed believe that women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor, while 72% of the men surveyed believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor. 100% of persons who identify as "other" for gender believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor.



Regarding the believed gender of God, of those who believe God is “both” male and female, “neither” male or female, or “other,” 87% believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor. Of those who believe God is “male,” 60% believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor. Not a single survey participant said God is “female,” though it was an option.



Regarding errancy in scripture, of those that believe there are “full of errors” or “some errors” in the Bible, 97% believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor. Of those who believe the Bible is “without error,” 64% believe women should be in church leadership and carry the title of pastor.



In summary, in both interview and survey data, the gender of God significantly correlated to a participant’s belief around women being in church leadership. Regarding survey data, the gender of the participant and errancy of scripture significantly correlated to a participant’s belief around women being in church leadership.

Conclusion

This study reveals significant correlations between women in church leadership and the three variables discussed prior: the self-reported gender identity of the participant, the participant’s believed gender of God, and the participant’s belief regarding errancy of Biblical text—the biggest factor differentiating the data being beliefs around errancy of Biblical text.

With this in mind, it is critical for Christians to take a serious look inward as to whether or not they truly believe in equality for *all* genders. While the majority of survey participants believe men and women are equal, only 64% of people who believe the Bible is without any errors would appoint women to church leadership and let them carry the title of pastor. Based upon this data, it seems as though the stricter a person relates to the Bible the less likely a person is to believe that women should be in church leadership.

When there are verses that prevent women from speaking in church (I Corinthians 4:13), shame men when a woman wins a battle (Judges 4), and ordains only husbands as elders (I Tim 3:1-7), it is incongruent to say the Bible is without error and written by a God who believes genders are equal. It is one or the other. The implications of this belief are startling, as this study reveals that strictness to scripture is the number one variable limiting women from church leadership.

It is important that conservative, evangelical Christians start critically thinking about the implications of their beliefs holistically, as they have real-world consequences. Of the interview participants, Participants 1 and 2 no longer identify as Christian because of the patriarchy they experienced, a patriarchy that is being defended by scripture.

Limitations and Future Research

It should be noted that all the interview participants were women. For future research, it would be important to include male voices.

It should be noted that this study did not analyze trans or non-binary genders, when relating to God. Except for a participant's self-identified gender, gender was talked about almost explicitly in binary terms. This was intentional for the audience. That said, it is a limitation of this research.

It should also be noted that faith and denominational background data were gathered in the survey but were not analyzed for correlative data. For future research, it would be beneficial to look at this data, with hopes of revealing correlations to women being in church leadership.

In future research, it would be beneficial to decrease the survey length, as over 251 participants started the survey but only 159 participants finished it. It is possible that the length of the survey frustrated people and they did not finish.

It would also be beneficial to ask those who were interviewed their perceptions of specific verses in the Bible that explicitly limit women. This would be a clear way to identify participants' perceptions of the Bible, rather than abstract questions about the Bible as a whole, as that is more theoretical and less concrete.

It should also be noted that there is potential for confirmation bias. That said, the data was not skewed to serve the means of a bias. The data speaks for itself and is affirmed by the articles mentioned in the introduction—articles that came from three authors of differing opinions regarding women being in church leadership. It was the goal of this research to be as objective as possible regarding the data, simply looking for data points that significantly affected participants' answer to the question "Do you believe women should be in church leadership." This is affirmed by the fact that other data points were discovered that also had a significant correlation to women in church leadership that were not anticipated: the self-reported gender identity of the participant and the participant's believed gender of God.

Appendix I



Appendix II

Q1 I have read and understand the above consent form, I certify that I am 18 years old or older and, by choosing "I consent", I indicate my willingness voluntarily take part in the study.

- I do consent (1)
- I do not consent (2)

Q2 To what gender do you identify?

- Female (1)
- Male (7)
- Other (8)

Q3 What is your age?

Q4 To what country or state do you reside?

Q5 To what country are you a citizen?

Q6 To what body of faith do you identify? Please include denomination if applicable.

Q7 What are your beliefs regarding errancy in Biblical text?

- Full of errors (1)
- Some errors (2)
- Minor errors (3)
- No errors (4)

Q8 What are your beliefs in relation to authorship of Biblical text?

- Written by humans without divine guidance (1)
- Written by humans with divine guidance for general ideas (2)
- Written by humans with divine guidance for every thought (3)
- Written by humans with divine guidance for every letter (4)
- Written by God (5)

Q9 What are your beliefs in relation to translations of Biblical text?

- Original texts were divinely inspired and selection and translation have been divinely guided throughout the centuries (1)
 - Original text was divinely inspired but selection and translation have been conducted by humanity throughout the centuries (2)
 - Original text was written by man and selection and translation of the Bible have been conducted by humanity throughout the centuries (3)
 - Original text was written recently by man (4)
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Q10 Do you find Biblical text helpful or harmful to yourself?

- Very helpful (1)
 - Somewhat helpful (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Somewhat harmful (4)
 - Very harmful (5)
-

Q11 Where would you rate the authority that Biblical text has over your life?

- No authority over my life (1)
 - Some authority over my life (2)
 - Major authority over my life (3)
 - Complete authority over my life (4)
-

Q12 How would you describe your sentiments in relation to gender?

- Different and not equal (1)
 - Different but equal (2)
 - No differences in gender and equal in value (3)
 - Gender is a social construct (4)
-

Q13 In your own words, describe your relationship to Biblical text.

Q14 Do you think there is a disparity between genders in Biblical text?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q15 Please elaborate on your above answer.

Q16 In relation to your gender, how would you describe your representation in Biblical text? Do you see yourself in Biblical text?

Q17 When it comes to pronouns in Biblical text, do you see one preferred over the other?

- She, Her, Hers (1)
 - He, Him, His (2)
 - No preference (3)
-

Q18 Does the above answer affect you in any way?

Q19 In your opinion, what gender is God?

- Male (1)
 - Female (2)
 - Neither (3)
 - Both (4)
 - Other (5)
-

Q20 Does the above answer affect you in any way or your interactions/beliefs around God?

Q21 Do you believe women should be in church leadership?

- Yes, in all roles and can carry the title of "Pastor" (1)
- Yes, in all roles but should not carry the title of "Pastor" (2)
- Yes, in some roles (3)
- No, women should not lead in any capacity within the church (4)

Q22 Do you feel the Bible gives preference to a specific gender?

- Women (1)
 - Men (2)
 - No, it does not give preference to any gender (3)
-

Q23 Do you feel institutions built upon Biblical texts (churches, ministries, organizations, etc.) give preferences to a specific gender?

- Men (1)
 - Women (2)
 - No, Biblical institutions do not give preference to any gender (3)
-

Q24 Do you feel God gives preference to a specific gender?

- Women (1)
 - Men (2)
 - No, God does not give preference to any gender (3)
 - I do not believe in the existence of a god (4)
-

Q25 Please use this question to elaborate or give final thoughts. If you have nothing to add to your survey, please type "N/A".

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