

Unearthing Identity: Characteristics Restricting Female Leadership in the Evangelical Church

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Introduction

Gender equality is “all the rage” so to speak. The majority of the increasingly secular America is publically in support of males and females having equal opportunities, equal rank, and equal importance. Gender equality is nationally recognized as a goal toward, which we should be striving. When it comes to religion, however, many are not quite in line with this thinking. This reasoning shows through the holders of explicit authority in the majority of churches. For example, in an article entitled “What Americans Think About Women in Power,” the Barna Group wrote that regarding women holding leadership roles, “Evangelicals...express *by far* the lowest levels of comfort (39%)” (2017). This lack of comfort matches the reality that 9% of all Protestant head pastors are women. The majority of these are found in mainline

churches, not Evangelical congregations (Barna Group, 2017).

These aforementioned statistics simply provide a glimpse into the large quantities of research that have already been conducted on women in leadership in the church. Academics have rather thoroughly studied how many women in the Evangelical church are leading and what members of the church think about women leading. There is clearly a gap separating many Evangelical women from leadership positions, and that undoubtedly stems from unequal beliefs about women and church authority. But what this research fails to incorporate is the idea of an identity formed from Discourse and its effects on members of the Evangelical church. How do Evangelicals identify the role of women, and how does that identity influence this disparity between women in leadership? The research in this report was conducted to provide some answers to this question, specifically in the context of the *Life Church* and *The Table* discourse communities.

Background Information

To analyze the Discourse of a certain discourse community and its effects on the members, one has to first hold a solid understanding of the idea that is “Discourse.” In *Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics*, James Paul Gee, who has both an M.A and Ph.D. in linguistics, defines Discourse as an “‘identity kit,’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (1989). Gee makes the point that in any given discourse community one is provided an identity that they fulfill by participating in the community. He also claims that a Discourse consists of members operating in the

“saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations” set up by their discourse communities (Gee, 1989). With this professional opinion regarding Discourse and how it affects us in mind, one can conclude that these identity kits support the enculturation of a community’s values and beliefs in its members.

When referencing two separate discourse communities, it is also important to provide a broader context for the differences in each community. Although *Life Church* and *The Table* are both predominantly white Evangelical churches and communities I am a part of, they differ in their philosophy regarding women and leadership. *Life Church* has no visible barriers to women in leadership and has some women in various head leadership positions. For example, one woman is an associate pastor and some elders are women. In contrast, *The Table* is one of three smaller bodies that together create a larger church, *The Hive*. These are governed by a board of elders who hold authority over the church and are responsible for making major decisions. Within this congregation, there is a rule barring women from holding the position of elder, although women do preach, lead worship, and have the opportunity to fill all other leadership positions.

The reason I chose to research both groups, despite the variety of their practices, is to get a broader sense of the common beliefs about women and their roles. Although their methods are very different, both groups have few women in leadership roles, and the overall group of Evangelicals has the same result. *The Table* church also specifically has the goal of getting more women into leadership roles, although they disagree with putting women in the top position of authority. My goal with this research is to uncover any beliefs about female identity that apply to both churches that might

constitute a common theme across the Evangelical board.

Methodology

My primary research included three different, in-depth interviews of various leaders from both Evangelical churches. The head pastor of *Life Church*, Don Finley, the head pastor of *The Table*, Jake Bumstead, and a member of the leadership team at *The Table*, Tammy Bumstead, were the interviewees. Since both Tammy and Jake have the same last name, they are referred to by their first names below. Each participant was asked questions about their congregation's view of women's roles in the church, and the reasoning behind this view. See Appendices A and B for interview questions. They were also asked to explain their interpretation of some specific Bible verses and which texts they believe should be applied to the church. Although the general set of questions for each participant was the same, I asked different follow-up questions in response to various answers, asking each participant to elaborate, define, and expand on certain parts of their responses to get a better understanding of their views. These responses were recorded through a voice memo application and reexamined for direct quotes.

In addition, some of the primary research I gathered was through observation. Head pastor Don Finley, who speaks in a teaching format to the congregation almost every Sunday, made some claims in June of this year about gender roles. These specific comments were informative concerning the subject of this study. I observed these remarks firsthand as I sat in the audience, and the sermon was also recorded online in YouTube format so I was able to review the teaching there to correctly recall specific lines.

Although both the interviews and the observation provided me with an ample amount of information on the expected identity of women in the church, more information will always be more enlightening. Further research, for example, more interviews of leaders in the church or a large-scale survey, could create a more in-depth look at how the feminine ideal corresponds with the functions of the Evangelical church. Examining other expected characteristics that make up women's identity in the church, as well as focusing on the limits to which women are expected to be indirectly influential, could benefit the discussion of this subject. Since this report has its limitations and could benefit from additional investigation, others could continue to add to the research completed in this report.

Results

Three main themes of the Discourse identity for women were evident in the primary research: submissiveness, passivity, and influence. The depiction of these traits came about in different mediums from each association but can be classified together as an expectation of women's roles in the general Evangelical church.

Submissiveness, for the sake of this analysis, is defined as readily conforming to the will of others. In other words, to be submissive is to willingly obey the authority over you. Tammy expressly stated that in her understanding, her church's "really deep core values are submission and authority, and (specifically) submitting to authority" (T. Bumstead, 2020). This is a strong belief held by the leadership of the church and coincides with their belief that only the man should hold the elder positions of authority for the church and its constituents. The idea that women should submit to the authority of the church also relates to the family

structures to which leaders of *The Table* subscribe, where the woman should submit to the husband's "God-given authority," and the man should use that authority to make decisions that put the woman's life above his own (J. Bumstead, 2020). This is similar to the common belief in secular society that both parents are expected to put their children's lives above their own. This understanding comes from interpretations from specific Bible verses in Genesis and Timothy. For *Life Church*, submissiveness is more implicitly stated as an expected role of women. This can be observed in a sermon Finley gave this past Father's Day. "Men give and women receive; that's how it is naturally and that's how it is spiritually," he maintained (Life Church, 2020). In this line of thinking, men are assumed to have the power to give to women. And women, in general, are expected to receive what is given to them. This can easily connect to the idea that men give orders, initiating authority, which they have in disproportionate amounts, and women are required to receive them. This reasoning, in Finley's estimation, comes from the process of procreation where men give the sperm and women receive the sperm.

For this project, passivity is defined as the acceptance of what happens without active resistance. Finley praised this specific quality in women when talking about what females should do to reach those positions of authority. Finley had previously acknowledged that implicit biases are still very evident in the mindsets of many in his church and the broader category of Evangelical churches, and women are often overlooked because of this (D. Finley, 2020). However, he went on to make it very clear that being "self-promoting or angry at other people" is not the way Christ wants someone to act to obtain leadership. Neither is pushing one's way to the top, because

as he described it, referencing the nature of Christ in Philippians chapter two of the Bible, “he emptied himself of his divinity so that he could come to earth...he humbled himself. That place of personal humility, and letting God lift you up, is pretty much the best way for everything” (D. Finley, 2020). In these statements, Finley promotes the idea of passivity in women who are being overlooked for leadership opportunities. Passivity was also implicitly stated as an important trait in women by Jake, when he said, “When I’ve seen marriages that the husband is passive and absent from his role of leadership in his family and the wife is leading the family, in every one of those experiences that I’ve seen, it doesn’t play out right” (J. Bumstead, 2020). With this statement, Jake makes the point that, according to his beliefs and the ideals of *The Table*, the women should be the passive ones in the family instead of the men because that is how the family is instructed to be according to their interpretation of the Bible.

Being influential, in the context of this piece, will be defined as affecting others and their actions. On the topic of elders’ wives, Jake recognized that his wife has considerable influence on the decisions he makes. He credits Tammy and other elder wives in supporting the decision-making by processing and praying with their husbands (J. Bumstead, 2020). In this way, he explicitly acknowledges the way women in his church setting often affect even the highest positions of authority and church decisions. Finley mentioned numerous times the ability women have to influence others. When talking about potential women leaders he said, “[they] can’t shrink back from that influence but they influence...and they’re not just influencing women they’re influencing men” (D. Finley, 2020). He went on to reference Paula White, a spiritual advisor to the president, and some other “great preachers” who are just “so powerful and I love to hear

them because they've got something to say and it's life-changing" (D. Finley, 2020). In these ways, women are referenced as extensively affecting others. When combined with submission and passivity, however, one might wonder how such influence is mitigated. It seems the influence must be indirect in many cases— such as the impact elder's wives have on their husbands— to be acceptable in this environment.

Analysis of Data

So how do these passive, submissive, and influential traits of ideal evangelical women relate to their positions in leadership? The answer is complex. By separating these three aspects of the common identity of women, we can evaluate how they may influence leadership disparities differently.

Passivity involves letting things happen to oneself without actively resisting. This was mentioned as an expected trait for women by both religious groups, with the *Life Church* pastor suggesting women act in a passive manner to be promoted into leadership through what he referred to as "the correct way" (D. Finley, 2020). However, according to a study entitled "Claiming Authority: How women explain their ascent to top business leadership positions," passivity was the opposite of the trait these women described that propelled them into leadership. The faculty research working paper series from the Harvard Kennedy School summarizes two major factors that contributed to how 50 various women in top leadership positions came to be there. It explains that the women were able to reach success partly because they self-advocated. In other words, they actively, not passively, worked to promote themselves to their bosses to get to where they are (Bowles, 2012). This presents a conflict between what women are

taught in the church and what will support their striving for leadership roles.

Submissiveness has similarly been found to affect women in the context of leadership. In “The Interdependence of Work and Family Roles,” submissiveness is reported to be seen as a negative quality associated with women. In turn, submissive women are traditionally seen as lacking the required characteristics of leadership (Nieva and Gutek, 1981). In this way, submissiveness, although a praised and expected attribute in women just like passivity, does not support bridging the gap between women and leadership in the Evangelical church. If anything, it can be seen as working against women’s leadership aspirations.

The research clearly indicates that a common view of women in these congregations is of having influence over leadership. From the perspective of someone who wants to affect others and their actions but doesn’t want to accomplish it directly through a leadership position, this works. However, from the perspective of attempting to fill more leadership roles with women, this finding appears insubstantial. Influence exists on a spectrum, so this finding cannot solidify any real understanding of the extent to which women influence the church. Furthermore, this influence clearly does not automatically cause women to obtain leadership positions at anywhere near the ratio of men, and so has little to no impact on the research question at hand. Clearly, influential women are those who are allowed to lead in their respective bodies, but the numbers still lag drastically behind men. One might ask, “How much influence does a woman really have if she can’t move into leadership?”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project's research highlighted three common characteristics of the Evangelical woman's identity within the church to be submissiveness, passivity, and influence. When answering the question of how the Discourse, that is the identity kit, assigned to women in the Evangelical church relates to the disparity between women in the church and leadership, these praised features have been found to either support it or not affect it either way. Passivity and submissiveness are both contributing factors to the lack of women in leadership in the church, whereas influence has neither a positive nor negative effect. However, much more can be learned about other characteristics that compose a woman's expected identity, and the nature of the indirect influence women are allowed in this Discourse. More research is needed, and I encourage others to add to this report through further investigation.

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Appendix A. A List of Interview Questions Asked of Don Finley

1. What, in your opinion, is the role of women in the church?
2. Why do you think there aren't very many women in leadership in churches like yours?
3. Do you think that some of the interpretations or translations [of the Bible] are wrong?
4. Do you think [head women pastors] have extra challenges to overcome?
5. Are there any texts/other resources you refer to, in order to formulate your opinion on women in leadership? If so, what are they?
6. Do you believe that messages coming from leadership in the church influence women's beliefs about themselves in regard to leadership? Why/why not? If so, in what ways?
7. Do you believe that messages coming from leadership in the church influence women's beliefs about themselves in regard to leadership?
8. How would women who are facing people with biased mindsets go about fulfilling leadership roles that they are called to do when they are overlooked?
9. Do you think [that] women who want to change the culture...should push, that they should self-advocate...to more of a degree than just "being there"... in a way that's not even being overly aggressive?

Appendix B. A List of Interview Questions Asked of Jake and Tammy Bumstead

1. What, in your opinion, is the role of women in the church?
2. Should women be allowed to hold leadership positions in the church?
3. Why?
4. What specific positions?
5. Are there any texts or other resources you refer to, in order to formulate your opinion on women in leadership?
6. These are common verses used in support of certain views of leadership and women in the church:
 - a. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 NIV: Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.
 - b. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 NIV: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”
 - c. Can you describe in your own words the meaning you take away

from these passages?

7. Are there any other verses of the Bible or understandings that reflect the practices of this church towards women?
8. Can you define your understanding of “suppressed”?
9. So you think having more of a broad range, (more leadership positions and other roles for women to take on), keeps them from being suppressed?
10. What sets [the elder position] apart [from other positions]?
11. Where does your view [of women in leadership] come from?
12. Can you describe “right”?
13. What is your reasoning for which verses you follow more strictly in present-day practices of the hive and which ones you don’t?

Author Bio

Faith DeVyldere is a freshman studying Education and Psychology at WOU. After graduation, she plans to either work in the education or law field as an advocate for children with developmental disabilities. Faith spends her free time volunteering at youth summer camps, teaching Sunday school at her church, and playing for the WOU club soccer team.