Gospel Truth in Gender Diversity Debates in Dutch Evangelical Churches

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Abstract

The inclusion of women in leadership navigates between the issues of unity and what is considered biblical. Recent empirical research in two evangelical churches in the Netherlands indicates that addressing female leadership as a secondary topic relative to the centrality of the gospel facilitates local churches to meet both values. The classification secondary is clarified as well as challenged by the evangelical definition of salvation. This article argues that a broader understanding of what is seen as the heart of the gospel might be beneficial in the approach to contemporary topics like gender roles in the church.

Keywords


Introduction

The position of women in church leadership in the evangelical movement in the Netherlands is an ongoing debate. Recent empirical research shows that when a church initiates a process to include women in leadership two
different values play an important role. The first concerns female leadership related to the church’s core convictions, where the quest to be biblical appears crucial. The second is about the importance of maintaining unity within the congregation, preventing believers from leaving the church owing to leadership changes. Paradoxically, the longing for unity contrasts with the desire to remain a biblical church. Research in two evangelical churches shows that by navigating between these different values the issue of female leadership in these churches was regarded as a secondary matter relating to the heart of the gospel. The acceptance of gender roles as not being part of what can be seen as ‘gospel truth’\(^1\) proved to be a successful leadership strategy, in that it moved the debate away from the authority of the Bible as a church identity marker.\(^2\) In this way, it was possible to have conversations by agreeing to disagree. However, the tension between notions of what is biblical and maintaining unity that emerged from this study point to theological contradictions when questions of women in leadership are framed as secondary issues.

This research concerns the lived religion within Dutch evangelical churches, particularly concerning women in leadership which, as I have explained extensively elsewhere, is all about finding meaning through ‘endless conversations’\(^3\) not only with church leaders (m/f) but also with the religious traditions they are part of.\(^4\) The focus of study in this article, arising from the empirical research, is the question, How does the evangelical understanding of salvation relate to gender roles in the church? In addressing this question, I first look at the concept of ‘gospel truth’ in light of what is considered ‘the gospel’ in the broader evangelical movement. Secondly, after setting out my methodology, I sketch a portrait of the two churches and highlight the data related to this ‘gospel truth’, paying attention in the discussion to some hermeneutical choices that influenced a previous normative stance on gender roles and changed the perception of what was considered biblical. Thirdly, the two cases are brought together to examine how the perception and discussion of gender roles within

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the churches, impact the women members themselves. In conclusion, in light of the analysis, I discuss a way forward which might help similar churches in the current gender debates.

In this research gender roles are defined as ‘shared societal expectations about the behaviour and occupations of men and women based on their gender’. By the evangelical understanding of salvation, I am referring to the Statement of Faith of the Dutch Evangelical Alliance (MissieNederland) which speaks of

The universal and general sinfulness and guilt of the fallen human, subjecting him to God’s wrath and condemnation; the redemption of the sinner by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and his justification by grace, not by works, but by faith in Him; the bodily resurrection of the dead; of believers to eternal life, and of those who perish to judgment.

In short, Dutch evangelical churches summarize the essence of the gospel as the redemption of the believer for eternal life through the saving work of Christ on the cross.

Gospel Truth

In the discussion of female leadership in evangelical churches, the first question raised is how the Bible views the position of women in the church. The historian Beth Allison Barr describes how the complementarian view among evangelicals, where men and women are equal but called to fulfill different roles in church and marriage, brought about the term ‘gospel truth’. This became evident in 1998 when the submission of women became part of

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5 Loes Meeussen, Aster van Rossem, Colette van Laar and Belle Derks, ‘Gender Stereotypes: What Are They and How Do They Relate to Social Inequality?’, in Mara A. Yerkes and Michèlle Bal (eds), Solidarity and Social Justice in Contemporary Societies (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 79–86, at p. 84.

6 Most Dutch evangelical churches and organisations refer to and endorse this statement, it is available in Dutch as ‘Beginselverklaring’, https://www.missienederland.nl/over/evangelisch (accessed April 26, 2023). Points e, f and g are translated by the author and quoted.

7 Historian Beth Allison Barr sketches the historical journey of female leadership in the church and shows that complementarianism reflects a quite recent view on the roles of women in Christian history. In describing the Greek-Roman context of the New Testament she argues that the notion of ‘biblical womanhood’ which is the foundation of the complementarian view on gender roles, is not found in the context in which the apostle Paul wrote his instructions to the young churches. See, Barr, The Making of Biblical Womanhood, pp. 39–70.
the stated core beliefs and creed of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. These complementarian views have shaped the understanding of biblical womanhood as explained by Barr:

Even a woman like Lynne Hybels, who attended a church that supported women in ministry, still seemed trapped by evangelical teachings about biblical womanhood. As I listened to her, I realized that biblical womanhood had become more than a clause in the ‘Baptist Faith and Message 2000’. It had become more than a return to traditional family values. It had become a gospel issue – intertwined with the very nature of God. It had become God’s timeless truth, defended by those who remain the most faithful.

The question could then be asked if gender roles are part of gospel truth for those denominations that hold the conviction that women cannot share leadership positions in the church, should it not also be part of gospel truth when a church or denomination discovers that inclusive leadership is the biblical way forward? However, it seems that churches in favour of women in leadership tend to emphasise that gender roles are not part of the core or heart of the gospel. This is what I observed in evangelical churches like those specifically examined for this article. The salvation of the soul is seen as the heart of the gospel and in this sense a primary matter or as New Testament scholar Scot McKnight calls it ‘populist gospeling’: ‘Jesus came to die for sins so humans can go to heaven when they die.’ Although Evangelicals refer to

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9 Barr, The Making of Biblical Womanhood, at p. 111. The husband of Lynne, Bill Hybels, is a well-known figure within American orthodox Christianity, and founder of the Willow Creek Community Churches out of which the Leadership Summits have grown. These summits also take place in the Netherlands and have equipped and influenced evangelical leaders since 1995. See https://www.globalleadershipsummit.nl/ and Miranda Klaver, This Is My Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications, Amsterdam University Press, 2011), at pp. 58–59. Chapter two of this book speaks about the trans-Atlantic influences on the evangelicals throughout the different decennia.


the four key elements of faith, as expressed by David Bebbington, they stress the cross, death and resurrection. This often-called narrow salvific view is consistent with the Statement of Faith of the Dutch Evangelical Alliance, to which both churches refer on their websites.

A recent example of separating the acceptance of female leadership from issues of gospel belief can be observed in the remarks of influential pastor Rick Warren. He states, 'Female leadership is not a matter of creed but of interpretation.' Warren, who has been expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention because of the inclusion of women in leadership, explains that creeds and dogmas are contextual and culturally-laden interpretations of biblical texts and that alternative interpretations are possible. Therefore, female leadership should be considered a secondary issue, not related to salvation. Salvation is described on the website of the Saddleback churches as follows:

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\text{Man [sic] can never make up for his [sic] sin by self-improvement or good works — only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God’s offer of forgiveness can man [sic] be saved from sin’s penalty. Eternal life begins the moment one receives Jesus Christ into his or her life by faith.}
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The designation ‘the heart of the gospel’ is closely related to beliefs concerning the creation of man and woman that are seen as non-negotiable to maintain a high view of scripture. Complementarians practise a literal reading of (certain)
texts, which is referred to as biblicism, where concepts such as creation order or the Trinity are seen as ‘biblical’ signposts of a complementarian interpretation of gender roles. In this respect, Baptist theologian Cherith Fee Nordling explains that complementarians link gender roles to the normative biblical interpretation that men are in authority over women, not only in church but in every sphere of life. Thus, theological concepts, the literal reading of certain texts, and a narrow view of salvation all play an essential part in what is understood as ‘gospel truth’.

Empirical Research

This article is part of a larger study of gender roles in the Dutch evangelical movement. The processes to include women in the leadership of two churches were studied and described through document analysis, creative in-depth interviews with representatives of the church leaders, with facilitators of the process, and focus groups with current (sub-)leaders in the church. In the focus groups, the participants (m/f) reflected on the process in retrospect

17 The complementarian view argues that women are seen as equally saved but not equal in the roles they can fulfill in their homes, the church, or more broadly, in the Kingdom of God. In Dutch, this has been distinguished by the words gelijkwaardig and gelijk which can be compared to the English equal and sameness. See the translated article of Andrew Wilson on the Dutch website of the Gospel Coalition, https://www.tgcnederland.nl/artikel/prachtig-verschil/. Original: Andrew Wilson, ‘Beautiful Difference: The Complementarity of Male and Female’, November 20, 2020, Think Theology, https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/beautiful_difference_the_complementarity_of_male_and_female (accessed February 27, 2023).

18 Cf. Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas and Eveline Van Staaldhuine-Sulman (eds), Evangelicals and Sources of Authority (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016), at p. 11 where the editors mention that ‘the view on the Bible changes and readers shift from proof-text to the general message or narrative of the Bible’.


and described what changed for them. Additionally, some extra interviews were organised with leaders who did not feel comfortable speaking openly in a group or an online setting. This ethnographic approach has been chosen because it considers the context, social structures, and (faith) convictions of the people and the churches. It is an ‘analysis of practices’ and matches the urgency and sensitivity of this theme and the contemporary challenges the churches face when approaching the matter of women in leadership. For this specific article, I studied the documents and the transcripts of the interviews anew through thematic analysis related to the subject of gospel truth.

**The Process**

This research was conducted in the first quarter of 2021 in two large churches in the Netherlands which in the 2010s transitioned from gender-exclusive (male-only) to gender-inclusive leadership. The first is an independent Evangelical Church (ec) that opened all offices for women in 2018. The second, a Baptist Church (bc) and a member of the Dutch Union of Baptist Churches in the Netherlands, included women in leadership in 2015. Both churches initially discussed the matter of female leadership around the turn of the century. At that time the conclusion was that the ultimate responsibility in the church, both ministerial and in governance, belongs to men. Since then, the topic was brought back to the attention of the leadership by church members (m/f) who differed in opinion. For the ec, this resulted in small steps like including women in the board meetings and the bc women were asked to be involved in more visible tasks; however, this did not result in a change of policy until the recent process. The ethnographic research focused on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion before, during, and after this process of change. The results were examined in terms of the church’s socio-religious identity, in which ‘biblical authority’ has been demonstrated as a crucial issue. The label secondary or ‘not being the heart of the gospel’ was experienced as a helpful strategy in the process of the change in leadership in both churches.

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21 Dijkhuizen, ‘A Walk in the Woods.’
24 At the time of my research, the evangelical church had about 3500 visitors on Sunday morning and the Baptist Church around 600.
The BC shifted towards a contextual hermeneutical view of scriptural interpretation by approaching Christ as the centre\(^\text{26}\) and reviewing texts about women in the light of the whole of the Bible.\(^\text{27}\) In this way, the marker ‘biblical’ changed from a normative towards a narrative understanding. In the EC, ‘biblical’ was defined primarily by the leadership team, which had gone through a process of reinterpretation of related texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34,35, and of concepts like creation order. They decided to depart from the premise that these difficult passages of the Bible should be interpreted in the context of equality in Christ.

In the following sections, I will discuss the churches separately in order of the research: first the documents; second the interviews with the facilitators of the process; and third the results of the focus groups with the current (sub-)leaders.

**The Evangelical Church**

The leadership of the Evangelical Church is multi-layered. A supervisory board works closely with a team of pastors as the leadership team. Together they form the decision-making body of the church and manage the (regional) elders, deacons, and coordinators. A characteristic of the EC is a ‘couples culture’, where the role of an elder is undertaken by a married couple. Until 2018 the man was ordained while the woman was not. During the ordination, the elder’s wife would be asked to affirm a question in which she is invited to support her husband in the execution of this role, then she receives a blessing.\(^\text{28}\) This ritual form is consistent with a complementarian view on gender roles which was valued highly in this particular church and geographic area.\(^\text{29}\) The formal views on the theological convictions of the church are described in the Identity

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\(^{28}\) The inclusion of women in the meetings of elders (male) happened gradually from 2001 and the ‘support’ question was introduced around 2010. See also Laura Dijkhuizen, ‘Ambt en gender: wat betekent het om een ambt te delen met je echtgenoot?’ *Inspirare* 2 (2022), pp. 51–55.

\(^{29}\) The church is situated at the edge of the Dutch Bible Belt.
Document which was developed in 2001. The first section of this document contains statements of faith regarded as the heart of the gospel. This is the credo and is a static section that refers to the declaration of MissieNederland. The second section of church identity is described as ‘the character and colour of this church’ and has been adjusted whenever necessary. In this section, the matter of female leadership, which is addressed as an ethical topic, is described as a church characteristic, clearly distinguished from the core of the gospel.

Several interviewees mentioned that they found this distinction helpful since it separated a position on female leadership from the heart of the gospel.

The arguments in favour of female leadership are substantiated in a consultation document about ecclesiastic practices, drawn up by the EC’s advisor, a theologian affiliated with an evangelical theological university. This consultation document formed the basis for a study day at the start of the process which was held on November 11, 2017. It discusses ethical topics like female shepherding, and the need for a choice of policy in moving forward, and states: ‘We find it particularly important that no distinction is made between gender, nationality or social status when leading the congregation.’ And, ‘we believe that the difficult passages of the Bible should be interpreted in the context of the broader message of equality in Christ.’

This consultation document also argues that the leadership acknowledges that God’s grace is mediated through certain practices in the church, such as holy communion and baptism, but that the work of God’s Spirit is not limited to these church practices. Leadership is described ‘as serving leadership with the purpose to support the community and to grow towards the image of Christ’. This description suggests that ordained leaders (pastors, elders) can be deployed to fulfil a role in mediating grace, during the holy communion or baptism services, for example, but also in prayer and the anointing of people.

31 As indicated on the website of this church in which the Identity document is to be found. The declaration of MissieNederland is copied in this Identity document as well as the Apostles’ Creed.
32 EC Identity document, pp. 5–12.
33 Ibid., p. 6.
34 Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, ‘Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices’, pp. 256–257. Ongoing conversations between this researcher and leaders of evangelical churches learn that the distinction between conviction and identity (or as mentioned in the EC ethical topics) appears implicitly in most churches that discuss female leadership.
35 Ibid., pp. 253–255 for more about the role of this advisor.
37 Ibid., p. 5.
38 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
who are ill, in wedding ceremonies or children’s dedications. All these (and more) ministries and practices were reserved for male leaders until 2017.

The documents as well as the process were evaluated in an interview with two male representatives of the church leadership, key facilitators in this process. They commented that the position of female leadership before 2017 had been based on an oral tradition in which women were seen in supportive roles, as is common in similar evangelical churches. This oral tradition made it possible to differ in opinion without consequences. Because of this lack of written policy, female leadership did not seem a topic of great importance and was regarded as part of ecclesiastical practices which are separated from the statement of faith. An investigation of the Identity document reveals that an adjustment was made in 2009: women were permitted to be deacons and to preach in the Sunday services. Nevertheless, according to these interviewees, this step was not put into practice. Thus, despite subtle changes in the last two decades, leadership was still male in 2017. In that year the leadership team, supervisors, and pastors went through a period in which they discussed several ethical and relational topics, among which was female leadership. In the autumn of 2017, after two informative meetings, a Q&A session with the elders and coordinators of the church was organised. During this session, the matter was labelled as a secondary topic. However, both interviewees agreed that there were signals that for some people (men and women alike, as the focus group participants later confirmed) the exclusion or inclusion of women in leadership was part of their core beliefs. When discussing the concept of creation order, they admitted that their view had changed and that they regarded the concept not only as un-biblical but as a structural injustice against women. As a result of much deliberation, the opinion regarding

39 This interview took place on February 24, 2021, and was part of the empirical research in this church.
40 EC Consultation document, endnote 18: ‘However this is not about an essential belief (as in doctrine), it is an important point/topic with many ethical and practical consequences.’ And endnote 25: ‘The position of women should not be elevated to some kind of “litmus test of orthodoxy and biblical fidelity” and those who do not have a conservative point of view are then “branded” as liberal’ (translation by the author).
43 Male dominance was reinterpreted as the consequence of the fall and cancelled by the redemptive work of Christ. EC Consultation document, p. 5 and endnote 22. In endnote 24 the implications for marriage are discussed. The discussion is found in the EC transcript interview, p. 10.
44 This concerned the supervisory board and the team of pastors; the elders did not participate in the decision-making process but were kept informed.
gender roles had dramatically changed and led to the unanimous decision (2017) to open all offices to women and the adjustment of section two of the identity document in 2018.

The results of the focus group discussion with the current (sub-)leaders such as elders, coordinators, and supervisory board members,\textsuperscript{45} show a more nuanced picture. Although a previous change of leadership structure had taken the elders out of the decision-making process, most focus group participants were satisfied with the mode of sharing information, though not all felt included.\textsuperscript{46} The conversations revealed several painful stories when women, despite being the wife of an elder, were not allowed to perform sacramental acts, as in the case of a woman who requested the wife of an elder to baptize her rather than a man because of past trauma. But this was not possible since she was not ordained as an elder.\textsuperscript{47} The sensitivity of the matter was also illustrated by a recently ordained female elder who stressed ‘I was ordained as an elder, on the podium, so I have a full right to be here now’, indicating that some of the elders’ wives themselves were earlier dissatisfied with their supportive roles. It appeared that the position of the women in this church still depended on the position of the husband and his calling, as one participant explains, ‘On the one hand I can do everything, but on the other hand, if my husband is not around, I can’t do anything. So what is my added value?’\textsuperscript{48} Another woman contributes, ‘I genuinely needed healing in being a woman and also in the role I have now.’\textsuperscript{49} The newly ordained women perceived their role and their responsibilities in a different way and expressed more boldness and authority. However, one female focus group participant shared, ‘We still do things just like before, my husband and I do everything together.’\textsuperscript{50}

A regional elder and his wife who were in the process of leaving the church emphasized that their personal, complementarian view on gender roles was the reason for them to step down. In their words: ‘The scales have tipped to mercy and are no longer in balance with the truth.’ They felt they were

\textsuperscript{45} The composition and the sampling of the focus group are described in the introduction of the dissertation (unpublished).
\textsuperscript{46} Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, ‘Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices’, p. 262.
\textsuperscript{47} EC transcript focus group conversation, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{48} EC transcript focus group, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{50} EC transcript focus group, at pp. 5–6. Most of the focus group conversation was about doing things together as husband and wife.
among the last people standing for this ‘biblical truth’ and decided to leave.\textsuperscript{51} Another interviewee, an elder who regularly preached on Sunday, considered the opening of all offices for women as a sign that the church was no longer a ‘biblical church’ and referred to the metaphor of a slippery slope.\textsuperscript{52} He felt overruled by the opening of offices for women and said emotionally, ‘There was no process’ when female leadership had been presented as the biblical way forward and, as this elder stated, it was ‘Take it or leave it’.\textsuperscript{53} Although most of this congregation stayed, the people who left the church did not feel heard or understood. This demonstrates that what is regarded as a ‘non-essential’ issue can in practice cause division in a church based on the argument of being ‘unbiblical’. Although the leadership team emphasized that the matter of female leadership should be seen as secondary, and that opening all positions for women did not mean that the normative framework of the church had changed, it was perceived as a change of doctrine for the people who left.

\textit{The Baptist Church}

The Baptist Church managed not to lose members during the process on female leadership, most likely because of their emphasis on unity. Although the matter of women participation in the board of elders was often raised during general church meetings, it did not return to the agenda until 2013, owing to the concern for unity and stability and other, more urgent topics, as one of the interviewees explained.\textsuperscript{54} However, when this church started a process,

\textsuperscript{51} The couple left the church four years after the decision had been made. I was able to interview them at the moment of leaving. At first, the couple felt comfortable staying on as an elder couple with the wife in the supportive role. However, they differed in opinion on female leadership and the wife decided against ordination. However, gradually, discomfort arose and they felt compelled to leave the church.

\textsuperscript{52} ‘A slippery slope fallacy is deducing, with little or no evidence, that act A inevitably ignites a chain reaction leading to situation B which is undesirable. Slippery slope arguments are typically negative arguments intending to discourage someone from taking a certain course of action’: Y.Y. Tamir, ‘Slippery Slope Morality’, \textit{Ethnicities} 4 (2022), p. 552. See also Barr, \textit{The Making of Biblical Womanhood}, p. 103, where she explains why evangelical leaders believe that supporting women in leadership leads to liberalism and agnosticism as a slippery slope effect.

\textsuperscript{53} Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, ‘Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices’, p. 254.

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with process facilitators: ‘Every congregational meeting there was at least one person who asked about it, during the questioning. Then it was said: we’ll park that for a while. Several people wanted change, but also an extensive group who were fine with it.’ The report of the advisory committee indicates that these questions to the board go back to 1983 (BC, advisory report, (2014), p. 1).
it was prepared extensively by an advisory committee comprised of leaders and members of the church. The committee studied the Bible, the cultural context of the New Testament, and church history. This resulted in an advisory document with two options, which reflected the opinions of the members of the committee. The results of their studies were also added to the document in two attachments and available to the members of the congregation.

Option one describes how church history in general has been under the influence of cultural male dominance and that translations of the Bible have been affected by this. This option sees no biblical obstacles to female participation in the leadership of this church.\(^{55}\) Option two restricts women from having the final responsibility in the church, such as becoming an elder or pastor, but all other positions are open. In this option, women are allowed to preach in the Sunday services. The committee stood unanimous behind option two but was divided on option one. Another important document in this process was the by-laws, which stated that church council members should be male.\(^{56}\) Changing the leadership into a gender-diverse group of elders would mean changing this legal document.

Baptist churches are congregational in structure and make decisions by what is known as discerning by the community, which works via a voting system. However, there were not enough members present at the church meeting in which the vote would take place. The minutes of this meeting state: ‘The council does not consider this the most important subject and believes that it should not lead to division and schism in the congregation.’\(^{57}\) This might be to convince people that their vote would not interfere with the notion of ‘being a biblical church’. A second evening was organised and the votes on this occasion were in favour of opening all offices in the church for women, option one. Ultimately, it was a tight outcome, which led to an extra evening for those who voted against female leadership, with the main reason to ‘keep the unity’ and not to ‘convince’ people of the biblical truth of gender inclusivity. Interestingly, the pastor stated that he regarded female leadership as ‘unbiblical’, but this would not prevent him from working with women. He explained to the attendees that he approached the Bible through Christ: ‘With Christ as the central figure, opinions can change.’ This resulted in people not accusing others of being unbiblical but accepting a difference of opinion as

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\(^{55}\) Attachment 1 of the BC advisory report.

\(^{56}\) ‘Church council members must be at least 25 years old, an active member of the church for at least 2 years and male. A woman can be a deacon, provided she is not a member of the church council.’ In ‘BC Statutes and Decisions of the Board’ (1997).

\(^{57}\) BC minutes of church meeting, November 24, 2014, p. 2.
part of (church) life. The way that this church was able to open leadership positions for women demonstrates that the church community recognised that various bible interpretations were possible and legitimate, although some participants of the focus group expressed their worries, mentioning the ‘slippery slope’ effect. They referred to the debate on LGBTQ a few years later when for some, the limits of what is understood to be ‘biblical’ were reached and they did leave the church.

The focus group participants described how male leadership is seen as an important biblical principle for several people in this church. For them, it is integrated into the way God created humankind and how the church is intended to function, the complementarian view. These people did not attend the bible study evenings about gender-related topics, the so-called un-informed voters as people in the focus group termed them, which, in the quite strong view of the group, leaves them in general unaware and hostile to other views. They are perceived as heart-hardened in discussions. In contrast, one of the focus group participants explained that inclusivity in leadership was so important to him that it prevented him from taking on a leadership role as long as women could not participate. These examples indicate the diversity of beliefs in this church.

In the BC people were not persuaded to change their opinion, although Bible studies and congregational meetings were organised to discuss this issue.

59 BC transcript focus group, pp. 20–21.
60 Quotation in focus group transcript: ‘Holding on to each other, I find that the greatest challenge. Also around this more recent process [about homosexuality] I know that people on two sides of the camps left the church on this matter. On the one hand, because they found it so painful that we have now taken this step to at least give a little more space, and on the other hand people left the church because they thought “Yes, come on, it’s 2021, how is it still possible to be as limited as this step”’ (p. 21).
61 Probably also in combination with roles of men and women in the family, but this is outside the focus of this empirical research, although the hypothetical situation that a woman would preach when her husband would be in the congregation, did come up. Cf. Wilson, ‘Beautiful Difference: The Complementarity of Male and Female’, on the combination of family and church.
63 Interview with the process supervisors, see also Laura Dijkhuizen, ‘Ik kom niet als een vrouw spreekt’, Missienederland.nl, 31 Augustus 2022: https://www.missienederland.nl/actueel/blog/artikel/2022/08/31/Ik-kom-niet-als-een-vrouw-spreekt (accessed February 27, 2023).
Because the church was already used to women on the stage (worship leader, church service leader) and in teaching roles (discipleship courses, youth clubs), changing their hermeneutics from a normative to a narrative approach was not so problematic.\(^{65}\)

An additional interview with one of the first female elders gives more insights into the changes that took place during and after the process of including women on the board of elders. She explained that recent changes in theological views are the result of a transition that has taken place within the church. In the past, church leaders used to express clear positions on several matters like gender roles and homosexuality as a result of a normative and literal reading of the Bible. This perspective shifted during the process to a more relational and contextual way of explaining difficult bible verses.\(^{66}\) She shared that the congregational meetings had not been attended well before opening the board of elders for women. According to her, this might be because of the business-like style of preparing and chairing these meetings.\(^{67}\) She explained that board meetings had been dominated by elderly men (baby-boom generation) which influenced the atmosphere of congregational meetings and the topics on the agenda. When two women joined the board and addressed this way of governing the church, the culture of the meetings changed. They brought cookies to the meetings and put flowers on the tables and, in her words, 'Relationships grew in importance, we were more concerned with connecting.'\(^{68}\) These changes made it possible to agree to disagree and to speak their minds without falling into a yes/no or true/false paradigm.\(^{69}\) This change resulted in higher attendance at the meetings and some new, young leaders who joined the board of elders.

Interestingly, whilst in the BC complementarianism was not as visible in terms of wives having roles based on their husbands’ positions as in the EC, in the search for a new pastor, the focus was on a male pastor with the desire

\(^{65}\) Ibid., pp. 260, 265.

\(^{66}\) BC transcript interview female elder, p. 16. She speaks about a ‘standpunten kerk’ which I translated as ‘clear positions’. She comments in Dutch, ‘De preken zijn wel hetzelfde maar ze zijn genuanceerder en niet meer over goed fout en niet meer over zwart wit’ (The sermons are the same but more nuanced. Not so much about right and wrong and not so black and white anymore).

\(^{67}\) Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, ‘Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices’, p. 258.

\(^{68}\) BC transcript interview female elder BC, pp. 9–10.

\(^{69}\) Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, ‘Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices’, p. 265.
that his wife would play an active and visible role in the church. Inclusive leadership is not seen as the heart of the gospel, neither by the board of elders nor by the members of the focus group. Although the advisory committee has approached the topic as a theological matter with a legal outcome and a demonstrable change in leadership style, it is mentioned several times by the pastor and the former (male) board members that this could be reversed if insight changes and the congregation were to decide otherwise.

**Preliminary Conclusion**

Although the leadership model in both churches is completely different, both struggled with what it means to be a ‘biblical’ church when looking at the change towards a more inclusive representation of leadership. By marking female leadership as a secondary topic, in writing as well as in the spoken word, the subject was consciously separated from what was regarded as the primary salvific gospel beliefs of the church. Although this has been perceived as positive by the interviewees, a deeper examination of the data reveals that people were hurt, left the church, or had unanswered questions about what ‘biblical’ means in this so-called secondary matter. While in both churches Bible study has been at the heart of the processes and the authority of the Bible was upheld, the inclusion of women in leadership did not affect the statement of faith of the churches and become gospel truth. However, the answers of some of the interviewees give reason to think that inclusive leadership is part of their core beliefs and as such does affect the perception of what is gospel truth.

**Gospel Truth: Discussions and Conclusion**

Is it problematic to relegate an important subject to a secondary or non-essential topic to avoid polarization, ‘keep the peace’ and not lose too many members? It could be argued that the two cases demonstrate that it was effective in that these churches did implement women in leadership positions without a schism. However, looking at the data, testimony emerged of people who resisted female leadership as part of their set of beliefs and a marker of

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70 BC transcript female elder, p. 12. This search for a new pastor had just taken place and this elder played an active role.

71 Meaning the question: is including women in church leadership the biblical way forward?.


73 Ibid., concluding section.
being a biblical church. They left the church over this matter. Others refused to accept a leadership position as long as women were not given the same opportunities. Further, some spouses of elders and supervisors expressed their hurt and showed signs of identity insecurity: ‘Who am I when my husband is not around?’ Thus, although the focus group participants spoke positively about the distinction between the issue of gender roles and salvation, I noticed in their stories, arguments, and emotions that the issue touches upon the essence of one’s identity, convictions, and beliefs. This highlights, I suggest, the problematic narrow construction of what is regarded as the essence or heart of the gospel in the evangelical tradition. With the focus on salvation in light of eternity, questions of societal justice, including gender relations, are then left out. What is not addressed either is how the gospel remains good news for believers who are denied the opportunity to follow their calling or use their (God-given) gifts to lead, based on their gender. The next section examines how the evangelical understanding of salvation has impacted the ideas and practices of gender roles in the churches studied.

**Female Leadership as a Secondary Issue**

The situation of women in the two churches reflects a long-standing stance within Christianity. Although scholars like Barr, Nordling and others indicate that complementarianism, a supportive role for women in family and church, does not have its roots in the New Testament, this theology is an important identity marker for orthodoxy in churches around the world. Theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson explains:

> While not refused the fruits of the *imago Dei*, namely, salvation, women have been viewed by much of the Christian tradition, Reformed and otherwise, as lesser bearers of the image of God ... Suffice it to say that the general belief of the church fathers from Calvin through the formative period of American Presbyterianism was that women’s nature and place excluded her from positions of authority.\(^{74}\)

This complementarian view results not only in gender roles but also in gender stereotypes such as the assumption that women are better in caretaking roles and men are more equipped for leadership. Once these stereotypes are rooted

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in certain (church) cultures, it is difficult to assess a person without looking through the lens of the stereotypes.75

The change in the leadership style of the BC, for example, could be ascribed to female influence in terms of ‘cookies’ and ‘flowers’. Nevertheless, this new style of chairing meetings did attract a younger group of men who felt more comfortable accepting a position as an elder. However, contradictory to this, the desire to have an active and visible pastor’s wife tends toward complementarianism. In the same way, the exclamation of the now-ordained female elder in the EC ‘we still do everything together’, which was confirmed by other participants of the focus group, indicates the deep roots of complementarianism in this church.

The data shows how painful it can be for women not to be allowed to perform sacramental acts such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and other practices, which theologically suggests that the Bible does not allow women to mediate grace. This is especially true for congregations in which only elders or pastors are allowed to perform sacramental acts.76 In both focus groups, women shared that they experienced situations of rejection that were hurtful before the change in leadership. In the EC, women were present at board meetings but had no right to vote and were not acknowledged by the church members as leaders. They were uncertain about their positions and responsibilities although some felt comfortable in the role of supporting their husbands. This is following the view the advisor of the EC offered on the concept of creation order, concluding that it is not a biblical concept and is used as a tool for injustice against women. Notably, the consultation document of the EC starts the paragraph concerning creation order with, ‘We believe that man and woman are both created in God’s image and are equal. The assignment to rule over the earth was given to both of them. God intends that they be one together and thus reflect God’s love.’77 This is announced as a creed, a belief, yet it is not inserted in the statement of beliefs but in ecclesiastic practices.

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75 Cf. Loes Meeussen, et al., ‘Gender Stereotypes’, p. 79: ‘Moreover, stereotypes indicate that men and women should not be what is stereotypical for the opposite gender: e.g., Men should not be too caring and women not too assertive. Gender stereotypes warrant the idea that men and women are suited for different roles in society.’

76 In Pentecostal churches there is a difference between spiritual and governing leadership, as explained by the general superintendent of the National Board of the VPE, the Dutch Assemblies of God. See Dijkhuizen, The Invisible Women, pp. 276–278. Generally speaking, non-ordained Pentecostal women have more freedom to perform spiritual acts such as the sacraments, the benediction at the end of the service, and praying.

77 EC Consultation Document, p. 5, emphasis mine.
which are part of the identity of this specific church. While not explicitly stated as part of gospel truth or related to salvation – as the Southern Baptist Convention in 1998 did – it might be said that with this format and placing the church has unintentionally described gender roles as part of their set of beliefs which members are asked to comply with.

Cherith Fee Nordling starts her discussion on gender by discussing the letter to the Corinthians:

Paul reminds them that because of God's self-giving generosity, there is no longer any need or place for division over leadership that would limit the gifts of the Spirit poured out equally on women and men alike. To do so would be to go backwards, to live as an 'old creation'. Rather, these diverse women and men, reconstituted by the Spirit, are 'new creations'.

She sees equal gender roles as part of a new creation, a way to refer to someone who is 'saved' and relates this to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, pastoral motives, such as a calling to lead the church or the spiritual gifts of women, did not come up in the conversations. Nor did this research show that the initiators of the process acknowledged any specific need in the church for what women can offer, what might be called ecclesial motives.81 The topic seems to be approached as something that concerns women and not primarily as what is best for the church as a whole.

Conclusion

This research on gender roles in two Dutch evangelical churches demonstrates that moving towards inclusive leadership is a delicate process in which church leaders try to navigate between what is biblical and how to maintain unity. In doing so, the choice to designate the issue as a secondary or non-essential topic to salvation proved to be successful. However, I suggest that gender roles as a secondary subject can be questioned from a theological point of view. The

78 As the website still states, one and a half years after the empirical research (accessed September 18, 2023).
79 Nordling, ‘Gender’, p. 498: “ALL things are yours,” writes Paul to the women and men of the church at Corinth, be it “the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1 Cor. 3:21b–22)’ (emphasis original).
80 Cf. 2 Cor. 5: 17–19.
81 The missional motive was mentioned once; we need all people on deck to preach the gospel.
definition of salvation prominent among the Dutch evangelicals clarifies the choice to devalue the issue of gender roles. Salvation is seen as an individual approach to the redemptive work of Christ and is accessible to men and women equally. Thus, gender roles are not integral to the creed of the church, gospel-truth, but a matter of church identity, which is time and place-dependent. In this way, any statement of inclusivity in the creed of the church could be avoided. However, I observed that the reading of individual texts on the issue through the lens of equality in Christ (EC) and approaching the Bible more relationally by looking at Christ as the centre instead of claiming truths (BC), hermeneutics shifted from a literal, more normative way of understanding to a relational, narrative approach. Although the authority of the Bible is still valued highly, the way this is handled in the discussion about gender roles in leadership has changed. However, looking at what is gospel truth, we have seen that these churches maintain a narrow salvific view that conforms with the broader evangelical movement. I contend that the move towards a narrative approach should also result in a broader interpretation of what is considered gospel, good news.82

The narrow view is critiqued within evangelical circles as well as challenged by Pentecostal theology. Theologians like Scot McKnight warn the evangelicals that ‘Evangelicalism will make a colossal mistake if it reduces “gospel” to the message of salvation that prompts faith and ignores the substantial ideas logically entailed in that gospel message.’83 Pentecostal theology steps in with the term ‘full gospel’.84 Here, the focus on the dwelling of the Spirit makes it possible to experience salvation not only as the saving of the soul but also as healing in the body, material blessings and the deliverance of (spiritual) bondages resulting in the restoration of relationships. Furthermore, the Pentecostal emphasis on the Holy Spirit, including the gifts of the Spirit, is given to all believers, regardless of gender. However, the ‘full gospel’ message

82 This happened in the paradigm shift toward a more holistic approach within missions. Cf. David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007). Although the Evangelical Movement arrived quite late to this understanding compared to the World Council of Churches members, the integral mission with its roots in liberation theology in Latin America has become broadly accepted within MissieNederland and the missiology of the Dutch evangelical theological institutes.
has not resulted in equal gender roles within Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{85}

Contemporary topics like gender roles, but also environmental issues, poverty, racism and more, have forced scholars to study the Bible from different perspectives. Theologians in the fields of eco-theology and liberation theologies – including black, feminist, and post-colonial theology – look at contemporary issues in relation to the gospel as good news for the whole of creation and what this could mean for the church and believers. These theologies dispute the focus on individual salvation and the omission of the praxis of Jesus in liberating and addressing the oppressive systems during his days on earth.\textsuperscript{86} As Moder argues, ‘With the broadening of sin beyond the scope of individual notions of pride and abuse of power, Christian feminist theologians importantly reimagine salvation to include not only personhood but liberation from systems and structures of domination and evil that require human agency.’\textsuperscript{87}

In sum, the answer to the research question: how does the evangelical understanding of salvation relate to gender roles in the church, is both simple and complicated. At first sight, gender roles are not part of the evangelical understanding of salvation, which makes it possible to discuss female leadership as a secondary issue in the Dutch evangelical churches. However, this research shows that at an existential level gender roles are integrated in both church and society and affect the spiritual and emotional well-being of women as well as (some) men in the church. Of note, is that in the process towards inclusive leadership, the authority of the Bible was experienced in a different, more relational way and choices were made which changed the beliefs of the leaders in the church and affected the church as a whole. Therefore, it is my suggestion that the current debate on gender roles within the Dutch evangelical movement would benefit from a broader, contextual understanding of salvation, which might result in an alternative definition of the concept of ‘gospel truth’.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 101.