

Celebrating Women's
Leadership in the Church

EQUALLY CALLED

ADULT CURRICULUM

www.cbf.net/equallycalled



BAPTIST WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Editors

Ellen Di Giosia, Aaron Weaver, Jeff Huett

Graphic Design

Amy C. Cook

Copyediting

Clarissa Strickland, Lauren Lamb

Translation

Xiomara Reboyras Ortiz

Individual Study Guide Authors

Nikki Finkelstein Blair & Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

Adult Curriculum Author

Amanda Standiford

Youth Curriculum Author

Brittany Stillwell

Children Curriculum Author

Kristen Mathis

Video Production

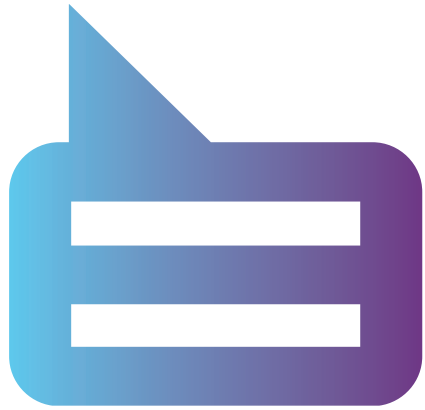
Sema Films

Video Contributors

Cheryl Moore Adamson, Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, Paul Baxley, Christy McMillin-Goodwin,
Caroline Smith, Meredith Stone, Mimi Walker

Resource Design Team

Cheryl Moore Adamson, Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, Ellen Di Giosia, Jay Kieve,
Grace Martino Suprice, Brittany Stillwell, Tyler Tankersley



Celebrating Women's
Leadership in the Church

EQUALLY CALLED

SESSION 1 Creation and Fall

IN THIS SESSION

- How does the way we understand the story of creation impact how we understand and sometimes limit the roles of women in our families, churches and society?
- How does our modern church structure continue to reflect limited or outdated understandings of how God calls women?
- What would it look like to fully embrace and enact mutuality in our world?

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bibles (physical or digital)
- Paper/writing utensils (optional)
- Video and equipment for playing it

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

As you facilitate this session, you may be inviting your group to understand the creation narratives in Genesis in a new way that they've never considered. If so, be mindful of how this work will challenge some members of your group, and be prepared to be gentle and understanding with those who struggle with this change in perspective.

Take time to familiarize yourself with the contents of the Individual Study Guide. There's a lot of helpful information online—more than can practically fit in this Leader's Guide. While this guide will point you to some of the highlights that will be most helpful, we suggest reading the resource material in full as part of your preparation.

Preview the video for this session. Look through the video discussion questions and note whether there are any you especially want to emphasize.

Read through and make notations on the lesson. Decide how much time you plan to dedicate to each part during your gatherings.

AS YOU GATHER

Depending on the size of your group, your space and whether everyone is arriving at once or trickling in, you can approach this part of the session in one of several ways. You may want to try inviting participants to write or draw their answers privately, then share them if they choose. You may opt to engage in small group discussion, or to have participants share their thoughts on a communal whiteboard or piece of butcher paper. The form is not as important as the conversation these questions will hopefully spark. If you have participants who didn't grow up in church and might not be as familiar with these stories, you may want to have some Bibles available.

Ask:

1. What do you like best about the stories of creation? You can draw from anything in Genesis 1-3.
2. What do you think is most important about the stories?

Pay attention to the way the participants in your group answer these questions. Note what is important to each person. Their responses may help you to discern how to navigate challenging conversations ahead.

INTRODUCTION

Say: So much of how we understand the role of women in the family, the church and the world is connected to how we read Scripture. During the four sessions in this study, we will reexamine four key biblical texts that are often used to justify inequality and sexism and sometimes even misogyny. It may be hard work.

As a group, we come from different backgrounds and have been taught to read and understand Scripture in different ways. That means that this study is going to impact each of us differently. Some of us may find that we're being asked to completely reevaluate long-held beliefs. Others may find that the interpretations found here fall pretty close to what we already think. As we enter into discussion with one another, please keep

that in mind. Do your best to show up with an open heart and mind. Commit to listening to what others have to say and to communicating respectfully, even when you disagree. Remember that while each person in this space has different life experiences and has followed a different path to sitting in this room today, we are all called to speak and act in love.

Pray: Holy Spirit, we gather today to remember old and beloved stories and to examine them in light of where we've been and who we are becoming. Give us curiosity to consider new perspectives, the grace to speak gently and the wisdom to know that no question or challenge we bring to these sacred texts will break them. We are free today to wonder and to imagine without fear. Amen.

VIDEO

This may be a good place to pause and show the video for this session. It can provide an overview of what's ahead and spark some initial conversation.

THE PAST

(Reading and Discussing Scripture):

Say: In this session, we'll spend time in the creation accounts found in Genesis 1, 2 and 3. There are two accounts to consider: Genesis 1, the more poetic, broad story with the "And God said, 'It is good,'" refrain throughout, was likely written during the exile, when the people of God looked to their shared story for survival and encouragement during a difficult season. Genesis 2 and 3 contain what scholars believe to be the older narrative — the close-up story we know as "Adam and Eve."

Throughout the centuries, these creation stories have often been used as proof that women do not belong in leadership roles in the church and sometimes beyond.

The first piece of our work together today is to reexamine the language and context of these stories and discover what they actually say about both women and men.

Most of us don't speak Hebrew, which means we miss some of the nuance in the language in these texts. Let's begin in Genesis 1:26, which is near the end of the "And it was good" poem. This is the part where God creates humankind. The Hebrew word for humankind is *adam*. When it's used this way, it is not the name of an individual person. It's simply a generic name for all of humanity, made in God's image.

Read, or invite a participant to read Genesis 1:26-27 aloud, substituting *adam* for *humankind*. (Note that the word may not be *humankind* in all translations — this may prompt some conversation!)

Say: God calls *adam* into being, names them, and blesses them with purpose. God even shares God's own power with them, commissioning them to care for all that God has made and to "be fruitful" (Gen 1:28) as God was fruitful in creation. God calls *adam* into being and blesses — not burdens — them with responsibility. God does not define an empire, a power structure, or even a patriarchy; rather, in God's self-giving image, God calls *adam* together to share in God's own care for creation.

In Genesis 2:4 and following, we encounter a different use of the word. In this part of the narrative, an individual human, the first to be created, is called "Adam."

Read or invite a participant to read Genesis 2:4-25.

Say or summarize the following from the "Unity, not Hierarchy" section of the Individual Study Guide.

God makes Adam the garden's caretaker and leads him on a tour of the land he is responsible for. Then God realizes that Adam's solitary existence is not good, so God makes a bunch of other creatures who, it turns out, are not appropriate partners for the man. Finally, God takes from Adam's side to create a woman while Adam sleeps (v. 21). In this telling, when he awakes Adam invents a new vocabulary, calling

her woman, ishshah, and himself man, ish (v. 23). In Genesis 3:20 he will give her the proper name Eve.

Say: In Baptist life, you may have come across the term "complementarian." A complementarian believes that God has given women and men distinct roles in the home, the church and even in society that do not often overlap. This Genesis story is one of several texts complementarians often point to as proof that God has ordained that women should be subordinate to men.

However, other biblical texts can offer perspective on all these assumptions:

In Genesis 1, *adam* is God's last and highest creation; if the same logic applies to Genesis 2, the woman holds that position. (Yes, this is a little silly. But if we're going to make that assumption in one place, we have to make it in the other.)

The Psalmist and the prophet Isaiah both refer to God as "Helper," suggesting not a subordinate role but another example of humankind being created in God's image.

God forms the woman from Adam's flesh and bone. Again, this isn't about subordination — rather, they are quite literally "one flesh." Their relationship is divinely designed oneness, not a hierarchy of power, status or role.

Pause here. Invite participants to share in the large group or to break into small groups for a moment, depending on the size of your group and the time you have available.

Ask: Is there anything in this discussion of *adam* that surprised you? Is there anything you find difficult to believe or accept?

Acknowledge any difficulties or disagreements before moving forward.

Say: Let's move now to Genesis 3, another place where complementarians and others find evidence that women should occupy different roles than men.

Read or invite participants to read Genesis 3.

Say: Let's consider a few things you may or may not have noticed in this text.

Ask: Whom did God tell not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? (The answer is Adam — Eve had not yet been formed.)

Say, then ask: Even so, Eve knew she wasn't supposed to eat from the tree — she said as much to the snake in the garden. We often think of Eve as the seducer — the person who gave in to temptation and then turned around and dragged Adam into it. But look closely at verse 6. Where was Adam when all of this was taking place?

Say, then ask: Adam and Eve experience shame together. They try to hide their nakedness. They try to hide from God altogether. And then Adam tries to pass the buck. He attempts to blame Eve, and even to blame God. But what is God's response?

Say, then ask: God lays out three curses: one for the snake, one for Eve and one for Adam. But historically, we've put a lot more emphasis on God's words for Eve than on what's said to the other two characters in this passage. What do you notice about the three curses? Could you read them as prophecies instead? How might that affect our understanding?

Say, then ask: Adam does not name Eve until AFTER all of this occurs. What might this tell us about how their relationship has changed? Do you sense a shift from oneness with God and with one another to something more separate? Is this God's intent or a consequence of what's occurred?

Ask: Is there anything from our discussion of Genesis 3 that leaves you wondering? Is there anything you'd like to study further?

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

[Theologian] Walter Brueggemann says, "In God's garden, as God wills it, there is mutuality and equity. In God's garden now, permeated by distrust, there is control and distortion. But that distortion is not for one moment accepted as the will of the Gardener" (Brueggemann, 51). The will of the Gardener is grace. God does not leave the humans shivering in their fig leaves, but makes them warm, soft clothing of skins. They must leave the garden, and eventually "to dust they will return" (Gen 3:19b), but God does not forsake them. The rest of the Bible's grand story describes, again and again, how "God makes a gracious, unconditional commitment to stay with the world, come what may in the wake of human sinfulness" (Fretheim, 337). If God will redeem humanity from the curse of death (1 Cor 15:55-57), perhaps even the curse of patriarchy is not the final word.

THE PRESENT

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide.

The stories of creation are the starting point for assumptions and presumptions about God's intentions for women—and about a hierarchy of men over women—that have stretched through all of Church history. The themes of Eden have been interpreted through a lens of human culture instead of holy companionship, and sometimes the lessons of the garden are simply willfully misconstrued. These interpretations have supported patriarchal power structures for centuries, both in and outside of the church.

If you did NOT watch the video, be prepared to share the statistics from the 2021 State of Women in Baptist Life report that are included on page 6 of the Individual Study Guide.

Depending on your group size and the time you have available, you may opt to break into smaller groups to consider these discussion questions. Ask:

- Egalitarianism is the assumption that both women and men are welcome to assume any role they choose in the family, the church and the world. How does our church support egalitarianism in its structures, teachings and practices?
- How are both women and men hurt by understanding the story of creation as a story of power and hierarchy? How do both women and men lose out when there is a lack of true partnership?
- Who benefits when the Genesis stories are read as a model of power and hierarchy? Who benefits when they are read as supporting mutuality and equality?

Bring the group back together if you've split up for discussion. If time allows, invite groups to share their most interesting insights with the larger group.

THE FUTURE

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

The world around us is changing rapidly, but the call to reject the subordination of women is not a newfangled notion. The goal of mutuality between women and men goes back to the beginning, when God created adam in God's own image. If we believe all people are created with purpose as a reflection of God's image, then the way we treat one another is a direct expression of what we believe about God. If we take seriously this fundamental understanding, we cannot practice dominion over any person, regardless of gender—or ethnicity, or ability or any other human category.

The way we read and understand the ancient stories of creation has direct implications for

the way we treat one another today. Both these biblical origins and our commitment to following their model will have direct implications for the ways generations to come will know God's presence, live in relationship with God and one another, and experience God's call on their lives. As people of faith and as bodies of believers, we can reclaim the mutuality and grace of God's good garden, so all people—all adam—can walk with God, care for the earth, and take up God's blessed work together.

Ask:

- What models of the roles of women and men did you experience growing up? In what ways have you embraced, adapted or rejected those models as an adult?
- What understanding of these roles do you hope to pass on to the next generation? How are you working to achieve that?

CLOSING

Say: In this session, we've read and examined the creation stories with fresh eyes. We've considered how these stories have been used to defend inequality between men and women and how reading them in context and with knowledge of the original language invites us to reimagine God's design for humanity, even after the fall. We've also taken time to think about our own lives and our own church. We have not agreed with one another on every point. Yet as we go today, may we be gracious to one another and remember the love and trust we share as followers of Jesus. In fact, in our next session, we'll take time to consider the stories of the women who served alongside him and the roles they play in his story.

Pray: Thank you, God, for this time of learning and imagining together. May your Spirit move among us, helping us to have open hearts and open minds as we go out into the world and as we prepare ourselves for our next conversations on this topic. Amen.

SESSION 2

The Jesus Model

IN THIS SESSION

- How does Jesus' treatment of women contrast with what was typical for the time and place in which he lived? What can that teach us about God's vision for humanity?
- What roles did women play in Jesus' ministry? How are those roles continued or distorted in the church today?
- What can we do to help make space for women as leaders and equip them for the work?

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bibles (physical or digital)
- Paper/writing utensils
- Whiteboard or poster board and markers
- Video and equipment for playing it

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Be prepared to talk about the difference between a descriptive and prescriptive understanding of Scripture. This paragraph from the Individual Study Guide for this session is especially important:

When we read the books in Scripture, written in different ancient contexts and cultures, it is important that we engage their stories with an awareness of how they fit within their own times. We must acknowledge that many stories in the Old Testament reflect the culture of their Ancient Near Eastern context. When we read about abusive practices like Abraham and Sarah forcing their servant Hagar to conceive a child, or kings treating women like property to be acquired, we should read such customs as descriptive of their culture, not prescriptive, as if God condones them. There are moments in Scripture, however, that provide redemptive trajectories pointing us beyond the limits of ancient patriarchal traditions. In the last session, we explored the accounts of creation in Genesis, noticing how God created all humans in God's image and how the man and the woman shared the responsibility and consequences of their choice in the garden. This counter-cultural element of mutuality shows us God's egalitarian vision for humanity, one that would become clouded by the selfishness and disobedience of people. The Bible contains other counter-cultural stories that provide us glimpses of God's ideal of gender equality. Throughout the Old Testament, we see women serving God as prophets (like Huldah, in 2 Kings 14:20, and Miriam, in Exodus 15), as judges (like Deborah, in Judges 4-5), as heroes (like the midwives Shiphras and Puah, in Exodus 1, and Esther) and as examples of faithfulness (like Rahab in Joshua 2 and Ruth).

Take time to familiarize yourself with the Individual Study Guide. There is a great deal of additional helpful information online—more than can practically fit in this Leader’s Guide. While this guide will point you to some of the highlights that will be most helpful, we suggest reading the resource material in full as part of your preparation.

Preview the video for this session. Look through the video discussion questions and note whether there are any you especially want to emphasize.

Read through and make notations on the lesson. Decide how much time during your gathering you plan to dedicate to each part. Be sure to plan for adequate time for the group work in the “The Past” section of this session.

AS YOU GATHER

Divide the group into two or more teams. Set a time limit, and invite the teams to write down as many names of women from the Bible as they can recall.

Compile everyone’s answers on a whiteboard or poster that everyone will be able to see throughout the session. You may wish to add to it throughout the session.

INTRODUCTION

Say or summarize: In this session, we’re going to spend time looking at some of the women who crossed paths with Jesus, and we’re going to consider the ways that Jesus interacted with them and what that might teach us.

As you noted in our gathering activity, there are many women, both named and unnamed, in the Bible. Their roles in the story of the people of God vary greatly, especially in the Old Testament. Sometimes, women are leaders, like Deborah and Miriam. At other times, they have very little agency and suffer at the whim of others — consider figures like Hagar and Vashti who were cast aside and left to make their own way.

It’s important for us to consider here that Scripture can be both *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. When Scripture is prescriptive, it is telling us how to live. It is showing us the best way. Think here of the Ten Commandments or some of the words of instruction given by the prophets and later Jesus. At other times, Scripture is descriptive. Recall Abraham and Sarah lying about being siblings in Egypt or the feud between Esau and Jacob. In these cases, Scripture is merely descriptive. It’s telling

a story, not suggesting that this is the right way to live. As we discuss the stories of the women in both the Old and New Testaments, it will be important for us to hold these distinctions in mind.

Pray: Loving God, as we gather today to come close to these stories of women, may we see them fully. May their stories and their strength invite us to hear also the stories of the women in our church and to embrace the gifting of these leaders in our midst. Amen.

VIDEO

This may be a good place to pause and show the video for this session. It can provide an overview of what’s ahead and spark some initial conversation.

THE PAST

(Reading and Discussing Scripture):

Read or invite a participant to read Matthew 1:1-17. As you read, have the other participants note the names of the women mentioned (though sometimes not named) in Jesus’ genealogy. They are: Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (Uriah’s wife), and Mary.

Ask:

- Who are each of these women? *Depending on the biblical literacy of your group, you may need to be prepared to give a quick sketch of each of the women’s stories.*

- In what ways did each of them thwart the cultural expectations for women in their time?
- It was unusual in this time to name women in a genealogy. Why might the author have chosen to include them in this list?
- How familiar were these stories of women who were disciples? What obstacles keep you from knowing their stories the way you know the stories of Peter, John, Paul and other New Testament men who followed Jesus?

Say: Next, we're going to spend some time with the stories of the women who worked and served alongside Jesus. We'll break into groups for this part of the session, then regather to share and unpack our findings.

Split the participants into four or more small groups. Assign each group one of the following women (or sets of women) to research. Depending on the amount of time you've designated for this activity, you may want to suggest that groups skim the texts for what they see as important rather than reading them aloud together.

- Mary of Bethany: Luke 10:38-42, John 11
- Martha: Luke 10:38-42, John 11
- Mary Magdalene: Luke 8:1-3, John 20:1-18
- Women in Luke 8:1-3 (leave out Mary Magdalene), at Jesus' crucifixion and burial (Luke 23:44-56), and at the tomb (Luke 24:1-12).

Ask each group to consider:

- What do we know about this woman (or these women)?
- What might have been unusual about her (or them) in their time?
- What was her (or their) relationship to Jesus?

Invite each group to briefly share its findings with the larger group.

Ask:

- What roles did women play in Jesus' ministry?
- Do you think the stories of Jesus and women are descriptive or prescriptive? Why?

THE PRESENT

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide.

The role of these women has often been downplayed in the Church. They have not been considered disciples, much less apostles. Even the word "diakonos" when applied to a woman has been translated "worker" or "servant" and disconnected from the word "deacon." Today, women in ministry experience this same kind of dismissiveness.

If you did NOT watch the video, be prepared to share the statistics from the 2021 *State of Women in Baptist Life* report that are included on page 10 of the Individual Study Guide.

Depending on your group size and the time you have available, you may opt to break into smaller groups to consider these discussion questions.

Ask:

- What were the women who followed Jesus like? How do you imagine people in their time and place responded to them? How do people respond to women who follow Jesus into leadership roles in the church today?
- Who are the women who have influenced your faith life? How were they like the women disciples?
- Why do you think the models of the women who were Jesus' disciples have been downplayed in favor of other texts and teachings?

Why do language and interpretation matter? For example, who benefits from translating *diakonos* as “deacon” only when it applies to men? Who suffers?

Bring the group back together if you’ve split up for discussion. If time allows, invite groups to share their most interesting insights with the larger group.

THE FUTURE

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

We have to be the ones to make sure the future for women in ministry is different. Baptists in CBF may have been supporting women in ministry since its inception, but we have not called enough women to pastoral positions, nor advocated for women in the ways they need, nor given them the support that helps them flourish. We must do more to encourage young women who feel a call to church leadership. We must bring more women into pulpits in congregations that don’t have women preaching consistently. We must elect more women to deacon councils, read more commentaries and books written by women scholars, and support organizations like Baptist Women in Ministry that equip women pastors and seminary students. There is much we can do to change the current reality.

Ask:

- Why do you think there are so few women pastors in Baptist life? Do you know anyone who belongs to another denomination where women are regularly called as pastors? How is their experience like and unlike yours?
- What difference do you think it will make in the next six years of Baptist life if more women are called and ordained to pastoral leadership? In the next 16 years? In the next 60 years?
- Do you know any young women or girls who seem to you to have gifts for ministry? What opportunities do you see for them in the future? What support and learning opportunities are available for them today? What path will these women take to becoming pastors and faith leaders? Is it easier or more difficult for them to get there than it is for their male peers?
- What is our church doing to advocate for women in ministry, to encourage women as senior pastors, to elect women deacons, and to equip the next generation of women ministers? How might we be able to do more?

CLOSING

Say: In this session, we’ve spent time with the stories of the women who were Jesus’ disciples. We’ve reckoned with the reasons we know less about them than we do about many of the men who followed Jesus, but we’ve also had an opportunity to see how their participation is vital to the story. This calls us to examine the roles of women in our own congregation and to consider how we can support their gifts and callings.

Pray: Thank you, God, for time to discuss, discover and imagine together. May we watch and listen for the stories, gifts and callings of the women among us this week, and may we continue to more fully make a place for them in the life of our church. Amen.

SESSION 3

The Early Church

IN THIS SESSION

- How did women and men lead and serve side-by-side in the Early Church?
- How do we discern which of the examples of the Early Church to follow and what belongs to a specific time and place?
- What does it look like to faithfully interpret the presence of women in the Early Church in our congregations today?

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bibles (physical or digital)
- Paper/writing utensils
- Video and equipment for playing it

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If Session 1 brought up challenging conversations in your group, Session 3 may do the same. In this session, you'll look closely at Paul's epistles and consider what pieces of his instructions to the Early Church regarding women's roles should continue to guide us today and which we should see as products of his particular time and place. You'll also be asked to wrestle with what we do when Paul's words and actions don't seem to align—when he tells one church to direct women to be silent while he ministers alongside women in other contexts. Any conversation around how we read the Bible can be fraught, and the approach we take matters. Take a moment as you prepare to think about who in your group may be challenged by the perspectives in this study and how you can handle their concerns with dignity and grace.

Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Individual Study Guide. There's a great deal of additional helpful information online—more than can practically fit in this Leader's Guide. While this guide will point you to some of the highlights that will be most helpful, we suggest reading the resource material in full as part of your preparation. Before this session, take time to read through the first section, titled "The Scripture," at least once or twice.

Preview the video for this session. Look through the video discussion questions and note whether there are any you especially want to emphasize.

Read through and notate the lesson. Decide how much time during your gathering you plan to dedicate to each part.

AS YOU GATHER

*Since much of today's lesson will be connected to the letters Paul wrote to the Early Churches, begin today's lesson with a speed-writing contest. Choose something familiar that everyone in your group will know — the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 may work well, but you may be able to think of a song or something else that's familiar to each person. Give everyone in the group a piece of paper and a writing utensil and, on your cue, have each person hand-write the text you've chosen as quickly as they can. Recognize the first few people to finish. If appropriate in your context, have fun passing the papers around and deciding which person's work is the best balance between speed and legibility, etc. **Wonder together about the differences between communicating in writing and communicating in person.***

INTRODUCTION

Say or summarize: In this session, we're going to engage some of the texts most frequently used to argue that women should not be leaders in the Church, many of which come from the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Early Churches he helped, visited, corrected and encouraged. As we consider these texts, we'll hold them in tandem with what we know of Paul's ministry, looking particularly at the many women he considered to be partners in that work. Like our discussion around the creation narratives in Session 1, this task is going to invite us to read Scripture critically and to note the differences between what Paul said and what Paul seemed to be doing, as well as to reflect on Paul's cultural context and how his words might have been heard differently in his own time and place.

Pray: Gracious God, may we look and listen for your best ways as we study today. May we know deeply your love for all people, and may we seek wisdom in how we understand and interpret the words of Scripture, passed down to us across the generations. Amen.

VIDEO

This may be a good place to pause and show the video for this session. It can provide an overview of what's ahead and spark some initial conversation.

THE PAST

(Reading and Discussing Scripture):

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

The Apostle Paul had a ministry that was both in-person and long-distance. In person, he made multiple journeys during which he taught, preached and established churches. By long distance, he advised, encouraged and corrected churches through his letters, sometimes addressing concerns and crises in these early Christian communities. The best way to describe the literary form, or genre, of Greco-Roman letters is as occasional literature. Epistles in the ancient Mediterranean world were written to particular people in particular contexts and dealt with occasions or situations that arose among these people. This is certainly true of Paul's epistles. As we read Paul's letters today, we have access to his words but not to the problems, issues and social conditions that prompted him to write. It is like listening to one side of a two-sided conversation. These will always be aspects of Paul's writing that lie just beyond our comprehension since we are only hearing one side of the conversation.

Because of the nature of occasional letters, it is often difficult to understand why Paul dispenses some of his more confusing bits of advice, especially when they seem to conflict with his words elsewhere.

Say: Let's begin with the story of Lydia. Paul went to the city of Philippi after being prompted to do so in a dream. Here's what happened once he arrived.

Read or invite a participant to read Acts 16:11-15.

Ask: What does the text tell us about Lydia?

Say: We know from other mentions in Paul's letters that Lydia was the head of her own household and that she used her resources to further the work of Paul and his companions. She becomes a leader in her church and her community and, as our Individual Study Guide notes:

Some years later Paul will write to the Philippian church, "when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (Phil 4:15). Perhaps Lydia's generous discipleship and leadership were a model for her church, so that Paul could tell them truthfully, "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Phil 1:3).

Say: Let's turn now to Romans 16:1-15, where Paul lays out his greetings to people in the church at Rome whom he considers to be co-workers in the Gospel at the close of his letter to the congregation. Nearly half of the people Paul names are women.

Read or invite a participant to read Romans 16:1-15.

Say: Let's take a closer look at these women. Phoebe is a deacon. The Greek word is *diakonos*, and though it's the same word Paul uses to describe male deacons, as we noted in the last session, it's often been mistranslated where it's connected to Phoebe. Phoebe is a financial supporter of the church and likely the person whom Paul entrusted to deliver his letter.

Paul also names Prisca (who is called Priscilla in Acts 18), his fellow tentmaker and co-worker.

He names Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and Persis, all of whom he commends as hard workers for the cause.

Paul mentions Junia, who was in prison alongside him. He calls her an apostle and notes that she was a Christ-follower before he was.

He names Rufus' mother, who has been like a mother to him, and Nereus' sister.

Ask:

- What tone do you hear in Paul's greetings?
- Do you see distinctions between his greetings for women and men or differences in the roles he describes them serving?

Say: Now let's look at a couple of the passages that are most often used to argue that women do not have a place in church leadership. Keep in mind as we read these passages that we do not know the full contexts or what questions or complaints Paul may have been responding to as he wrote these words.

Read or invite a participant to read 1 Corinthians 14:34-40.

Ask:

- What is Paul suggesting here?
- Given the respect for women's voices Paul demonstrates in Acts and Romans, why might he say this to the Corinthians?

Read or invite a participant to read 1 Timothy 2:8-15.

Ask:

- What is Paul suggesting here?
- Again, given the respect for women's voices that Paul demonstrates in Acts and Romans, why might he say this to Timothy?

Say: We could continue to read tidbits from Paul's letters that are like this — some that lead us to believe that Paul respected and encouraged women to be full participants in ministry, and some where Paul gives an instruction that seems to say the opposite. Ultimately, Paul's writing doesn't give us a totally clear picture of how Paul understood the role of women, but perhaps his assertion in Galatians can help abate some of the tension between Paul's two perspectives.

Read or invite a participant to read Galatians 3:26-29.

Say or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

“Jew or Greek” is not the only distinction that is equalized by God’s grace and Christ’s crucifixion. Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Being “clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27) in baptism does not magically erase these differences, but it does eliminate the status-seeking and power-grasping that these differences often prompt. Baptism in Christ creates “a community in which gender distinctions,” along with ethnic and social-class distinctions, “have lost their power to divide and oppress” (Hays, 273). In this body where “all of you are one” (v. 28b), “the barriers, the hostility, the chauvinism, and the sense of superiority and inferiority... are destroyed” (Cousar, 86). There is no turning back to the old ways of judging, classifying, and ranking God’s people against each other; in Christ, they are one.

THE PRESENT

Say: Paul wrote to churches that were both like and unlike the churches we participate in and know today. This is important to remember as we discern what parts of Paul’s letters are for us, too, and what parts belong specifically to the churches he intended to read them.

If you did NOT watch the video, be prepared to share the statistics from the 2021 State of Women in Baptist Life report that are included on pages 14 and 15 of the Individual Study Guide.

Depending on your group size and the time you have available, you may opt to break into smaller groups to consider these discussion questions.

Ask:

- How are women in leadership received in the secular world? Do you think the Church should have different expectations for women in leadership and for the overall treatment of women than secular organizations, businesses or even governments?
- We’ve looked at some of the texts that have been used to “prove” that women should not lead in the church. Are there other texts that have affected your own understanding of what God might call you to do? Have other people interpreted Scripture in ways that prevented you from following God’s call?
- What obstacles for women in ministry come from our culture’s standards and expectations? What obstacles come from interpretations of Scripture?

Bring the group back together if you’ve split up for discussion. If time allows, invite groups to share their most interesting insights with the larger group.

THE FUTURE

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

Nearly 2000 years after the Apostle Paul wrote his letters, his teachings still have huge impacts on the life of the Church. Paul himself probably could not have imagined that his epistles would have such importance. The beliefs we claim and the choices we make today will also affect churches—and the women God calls to ministry—in a future that we cannot imagine.

Ask:

- How do you think the way we interpret Scripture today will affect the congregations and ministers that will follow us?

- What does it look like to faithfully interpret the whole of Paul's writings (particularly in light of Jesus' interactions with women) in our church today?
- Is it possible for people to change their understandings of Paul's writing about women? If so, how does that happen?

Pray: Thank you, God, for the richness of the narratives, poems, prophecies, stories and letters that make up the Bible. Thank you for freedom to discern and wisdom and knowledge to help us with that work. May we be faithful to your dreams for our world. Amen.

CLOSING

Say: In this session, we've looked at places in Paul's letters where he addresses women as participants in the life and leadership of the church. We've discovered that Paul's commands to the churches aren't always consistent with what seems to have been his practice. We've wondered about how that should inform our understandings and practices.

SESSION 4

The Reign of God

IN THIS SESSION

- What is the Day of the Lord and what did it mean to the people of God in the Old Testament?
- How does Pentecost illuminate and enact Joel's prophecy?
- How do we understand and live in the beauty and the challenge of the Day of the Lord in our churches today?

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bibles (physical or digital)
- Video and equipment for playing it

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This session has three areas of focus: the words of the prophet, Joel, the repetition of those words by Peter at Pentecost in Acts, and the question of what those words mean for us in our churches now. It may be worthwhile as you prepare to remind yourself of the story of the people of God in exile and to read through the entire Pentecost story in Acts 2.

Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Individual Study Guide. There's a great deal of additional helpful information online—more than can practically fit in this Leader's Guide. While this guide will point you to some of the highlights that will be most helpful, we suggest reading the resource material in full as part of your preparation.

Preview the video for this session. Look through the video discussion questions and note whether there are any you especially want to emphasize.

Read through and notate the lesson. Decide how much time during your gathering you plan to dedicate to each part. Note that the section on "The Past" is a bit shorter in this session to allow for more time for conversation about the present and future.

AS YOU GATHER

Invite your group to divide into pairs or trios as they're comfortable with doing so. In these small groupings, ask each participant to briefly share a crazy (nighttime) dream they've had at some point in their life—the wilder, the better. If you feel like you need to get the conversation rolling, you can start out by sharing your own dream story. Be sure to keep a close eye on the time and keep things moving—some people dream in a lot of detail and may have a lot to say!

INTRODUCTION

Say or summarize: During our sessions together, we've examined God's intent for women and men at creation, Jesus' relationships and interactions with women, and how Paul wrote about and worked alongside women. We've wondered together about how studying these things might inform our understanding of God's call to women in our churches today. In our last session, we'll work to tie all of these pieces together, considering the movement of God's Spirit across the Old Testament, the New Testament and Church history.

Pray: Living God, as we look for your Holy Spirit throughout history in our study today, may we also know that your Spirit among us. Fill us with holy curiosity and wonder as we look for your movement in our lives, our churches and our world. Amen.

VIDEO

This may be a good place to pause and show the video for this session. It can provide an overview of what's ahead and spark some initial conversation.

THE PAST

(Reading and Discussing Scripture):

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

The creation of women in God's image and the role of women in God's service echo through the

whole Bible. From the garden of Eden to the Early Church—and even to us today—faithful women inhabit the stories of God's people, share in the life and ministry of Jesus, and shape the life of the church. When women contribute their voices, the word of God is heard. When women commit their gifts, the work of God is taken up. When women's voices and gifts are welcomed, all God's people can thrive.

Today, the Church is facing a harsh reality: membership is declining. Many pastors are retiring or simply leaving the ministry. Seminaries are shrinking and even closing their doors. In this challenging time, the full participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church is not just a practical necessity or a problem-solving measure. It is a call to those who yearn for God's reign to be realized in our world. It is an opportunity to join God's Spirit at work, here and now.

Say: When the people of God were in exile, and even afterward, the prophets invited them to repent and then to look forward to “the day of the Lord,” a time when God's people would be made whole and everything would be in its place. From where they were sitting, that vision must have felt nearly dreamlike. The prophet Joel, in particular, paints a vivid picture of that much-anticipated future. The book of Joel begins with a fairly vivid description of the way things are. The prophet describes famine, plague and general misery and calls the people to lament and then to repent. Then, in the middle of chapter 2, we come to the prophet's holy imagining of what God will do on the repentant people's behalf.

Read or invite a participant to read Joel 2:18-32.

Say, then ask: Verses 18-27 are primarily concerned with the physical. The land will bear good fruit, and God will send rain to water the crops so that there is plenty to eat. If verses 18-27 are about God's meeting physical needs, how does the topic shift in verses 28-32?

Ask: Who is included in the spiritual revolution that Joel describes?

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

The Hebrew word for “spirit” is ruach, which is also the word for “wind.” In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is a powerful force that accomplishes divine work. God’s ruach “swept over the face of the waters” at creation (Gen 1:2) and took Ezekiel to the valley of bones (Eze 37:1). God sent a ruach to turn the Red Sea into a dry escape route (Ex 14:21) and to upend Jonah’s boat (Jonah 1:4). Joel proclaims that in the day of the Lord, this same powerful, purpose-full Spirit will come upon all people. All—young and old, men and women—will overflow with God’s ruach; they will dream God’s dreams, envision God’s ways, and prophesy God’s words. The Spirit who has been at work all along will work through all who “call on the name of the Lord” and all “those whom the Lord calls” (v. 32).

Say: The Spirit of God is also a primary character at Pentecost, described in the book of Acts. The Joel text we’ve just read and the Pentecost story interact on many levels, but perhaps the clearest connection is that the apostle Peter quotes Joel as he explains what is transpiring.

Read or invite a participant to read Acts 2:1-21.

Say: Observers that day assumed that the disciples must be drunk; but Peter assures them that they’re simply seeing Scripture fulfilled—that this is the day of the Lord of which the prophets spoke.

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

Elizabeth Achtemeier writes that from the day of Pentecost, “the believer will begin now to live in the powers of that new age heralded by the pouring out of the gift of the Spirit”

(Achtemeier, 328). Joel’s message of who will receive the Spirit and how they will live in the Spirit has not changed. Sons and daughters, young and old, men and women will dream, have visions, and prophesy. Just as Joel foretold, the divine empowering that was once reserved for only a few is available to all, here and now. Here. Now. All.

Say, then ask: The book of Acts was likely written to empower early believers to boldness and confidence in their Christian faith. What encouragement might those believers have found in this recounting of the Pentecost story? How might the quotation from Joel have enriched their understanding?

Ask: What changed at Pentecost? Why is this occasion important?

Say, then ask: In Acts 2:37, people listening to Peter ask, “What should we do?” How did Peter respond? What is our invitation in light of Pentecost?

THE PRESENT

Say, then ask: At Pentecost, Peter helps connect what people are witnessing in the present with what Joel dreamed long ago. Both Joel and Peter cast a vision of a world where the Holy Spirit comes to everyone. Even so, there is much resistance in our world to women who do Spirit-filled work. Why do you think this is?

If you did NOT watch the video, be prepared to share the statistics from the 2021 State of Women in Baptist Life report that are included on page 18 of the Individual Study Guide.

Depending on your group size and the time you have available, you may opt to break into smaller groups to consider these discussion questions.

Ask:

- How can the Church—the body of Christ—function and thrive when women are not allowed to use the gifts God has given them? If 86 percent of women in ministry experience obstacles to using their gifts, what impact does that have on a local church? On a community? On the spread of the Gospel “to the ends of the earth”?
- What do you imagine when you pray the words “thy kingdom come”? What do you hope and dream God’s reign will be like?
- Why is it important for the church to behave as if God’s reign—and the pouring-out of God’s Spirit on all people—is at work in our world, here and now? How does this affect our witness in the world?
- What do we need to do to bridge the gap between the way things are in our churches and the reign of God that Joel and Peter envision?

Bring the group back together if you’ve split up for discussion. If time allows, invite groups to share their most interesting insights with the larger group.

THE FUTURE

Read or summarize the following from the Individual Study Guide:

When the prophet Joel’s words were fulfilled at Pentecost, God was not really doing a “new” thing. From the time when the ruach swept over the waters of creation, God intended women and men to experience God’s full presence and to live in mutuality. Throughout the history of God’s people, women as well as men have served God, been faithful disciples, and contributed to the life of God’s people. Now, in the reign of God, the divine intention is renewed and realized, and the Spirit has poured out on all. We can respond just as some of Peter’s audience did: we may be “cut to the heart” and ask, “What should we do?”

(Acts 2:37) Our answer to that question will impact the future of the Church and the ability of the Church to serve, meet needs, and take the Good News of Jesus Christ “to the ends of the earth,” until Christ comes again.

Ask:

- How does the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost connect us, today, with the biblical narratives of God’s creative intent (in Genesis), Jesus’ disciples (in the Gospels), and the Early Church’s servants and leaders (in Acts and the epistles)?
- What can we do today that will create space for a more complete fulfillment of the vision cast at Pentecost?
- Are there changes happening in your mind and heart regarding women in ministry? What do you need to say aloud to be clear about what you believe about God’s calling and equipping women for ministry? Who needs to hear what you have to say?

CLOSING

Say: Over the course of our four sessions together, we’ve looked at how God calls women through the lenses of creation, Jesus’ life, the Early Church, and the prophets and Pentecost. We could spend many more sessions exploring the stories of the women God has called, both in Scripture and beyond, and perhaps that’s something we’ll choose to explore together as we continue to learn how to make and hold space for everyone on whom God pours out God’s Spirit.

Pray: We give thanks for the richness of the stories of the people of God. May we dream with you and act alongside you as we live into all you have called us to be and do. Amen.