

# What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?



By Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION  
INTERNATIONAL

*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

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## Ambassador College of Christian Ministry

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## **Preface**

When we announced that our denomination would be formally considering the role of women in the church, we invited members and pastors to send us their research. As we expected on this controversial issue, we received a variety of responses. Some responses were well thought out; others gave opinions without any particular support.

Members of our doctrinal team read these papers, consulted numerous books and journal articles, and discussed this issue for almost two years, eventually distilling their thoughts in this series of studies. These studies are a committee product, and since not every member of the doctrinal team sees this issue in exactly the same light, it has been necessary for us to take a cautious approach with the evidence.

The question is sometimes phrased as “women in ministry,” but we should note that we have always had women in ministry. That is, we have always had women who served in the church, in a variety of roles, and we’ve had women who were leaders of groups within the church (although their role as leader was not always acknowledged with a specific title). The question before us is whether women can be ordained as elders. A related question would be whether women can serve in leadership offices that are generally reserved for elders, such as senior pastor, district superintendent, etc.

This is not simply an academic question. In some of our smaller congregations, even before this study began, women were already serving in roles of spiritual leadership. As we learned more about spiritual gifts and lay ministries, we also observed that gifts in areas of spiritual service, such as worship, biblical studies, public speaking, and pastoral care, are not limited to men. In some cases, women were serving on congregational leadership teams, not because of any push for feminine representation, but because the congregation believed, and the district superintendent agreed, that these

particular women had spiritual maturity and belonged on the pastoral leadership team.

Before we entered this study, some members of our doctrinal team felt that these women could be ordained as elders; other members believed that the Scriptures forbid the ordination of women as elders, and some were undecided. Our goal was to understand what the *Bible* says to us about this subject.

Each chapter of this book originated as a distinct study. One member of the doctrinal team wrote a draft, and it was then circulated to all members of the doctrinal team. After their edits were incorporated, the draft was sent to all our national leaders and district superintendents. After their input and edits, the revised paper was sent to all of our pastors by email. It was then revised again, based on their input, and published for all our members to read. We published approximately one study every two months, as we worked through the questions in a systematic way. Most of this work was done in 2005-2006.

We believe it is just as important for members to see *how* we reach our conclusion, as it is to read the final decision. It is my prayer that we will all learn from the process, and be filled “with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that [we] may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10).

In Jesus’ service,  
Joseph Tkach, president,  
Grace Communion International

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# 1

## **Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction to the Question**

Our denominational *Statement of Beliefs* does not say anything about women in church leadership. However, it does say that the Bible is “infallible in all matters of faith and salvation.” It is the basis for Christian life and church life. Our question, then, is what the Bible says about women’s role in the church. Our starting point, and the final authority, is Scripture.

Our *Statement of Beliefs* also says that we are willing to grow in knowledge, willing to respond to God’s guidance. We recognize that we do not always understand Scripture perfectly. Some parts of Scripture are difficult to understand. Others parts are easy to understand but difficult to apply.

Scripture often calls on us to resist trends within society; at other times it encourages us follow cultural customs. For example, Scripture includes the following command: “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Pet. 5:14). Although Christians in some cultures have no problems with this command, people in America generally do, and we have long considered this command to be based in culture and not a timeless truth. We encourage members to implement the *principle* of the command, without obeying it literally, even though Paul probably never thought the day would come when a kiss would be objectionable rather than friendly.

When Peter and Paul wrote their commands for a holy kiss, they were influenced by their culture. When Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:1), he was accommodating himself to culture. He was not advocating slavery itself. There is no question that *some* of his commands apply only to his culture. Others just as clearly are timeless, and there are a few in the middle that are debatable.

So, the question is, how do we tell when a biblical command is based on culture and in need of modification for the different cultures we live in today? How do we tell when a command is timeless? When Paul writes that he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12), is he just expressing his own opinion (after all, he states it as what *he* does, and not as a command), or should we treat his policy as a permanent rule for the church?

How do we decide what God's will is? It is a question not just of what Scripture says, but *what it means for us today*. Should we apply it literally? Or should we (as with Rom. 16:16) analyze what principle lay behind Paul's words, and follow that? Let us look at an example of a conflict between Scripture and culture. Although this example is *not* an exact prototype for the issue of women in the church, it does help illustrate the question.

### **Comparison with slavery**

In 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Paul tells Christian slaves to respect their Christian masters, and he never commands the masters to free their slaves. Is Paul therefore supporting slavery, as many 19th-century Americans argued? Or was he simply going along with culture, so the gospel would not be seen as an enemy of society—"so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered"?

Slavery had a few positive functions in ancient society, but Paul could have challenged slavery itself as demeaning, as contrary to the love that should characterize God's people, and as a violation of the created order. But he did not; neither did he challenge the political system of Rome, the frequent brutality of the army, or unfair methods by which taxes were collected.

Nevertheless, the gospel challenges culture. It challenges us to treat poor people with respect, not to favor the rich (Jas. 2:1-7). The gospel challenged Jews to treat Gentiles as equals; it challenged Philemon to treat his slave

Onesimus “as a dear brother” (Phm. 16). If masters treated their slaves as family members, then slavery would soon disappear—and in this way the gospel challenged the attitudes that allowed slavery to exist. The gospel sowed the seeds that undermined the injustice of slavery—but the Bible does not attack slavery directly.

Some people today say that the gospel sows the seeds that undermine gender restrictions, too. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse is about equality in salvation, but does it sow the seeds for leadership equality within the church, too? Is it possible for people to have equal importance within the church without having the same roles? The church no longer treats Jews and Gentiles differently; we denounce as unjust the existence of slavery; so should we also stop differentiating between men and women when it comes to leadership in the church?

In other words, when Paul said that women should be silent in the churches, was he simply going along with his culture, just as he went along with slavery, knowing that the gospel would eventually correct the problem? Did he expect his comments in Gal. 3:28 to eventually counteract his comments in 1 Tim. 2:12? Or was he so close to his culture that he never really thought about it, just as he probably assumed that a holy kiss would always be fitting and appropriate? Or was Paul giving a policy that provides permanent guidance for the church?

## **History**

The church has not always been on the right side of cultural questions. When it came to slavery, some Christian churches were in the forefront of the move for emancipation. But in the 20th century, many American churches resisted the cultural move for social equality for the descendants of those slaves. Sometimes culture is right, sometimes it is not.



Culture sometimes *asks* ethical questions, but for Christians, culture cannot answer them. Rather, we look to Scripture as the foundation for what we do. Even if some cultures in the 1930s said that we should treat Jews as subhuman, the gospel says that Christians should have resisted the cultural trend, even though some church bodies went along with it. But when it comes to the authority of women in the church, it seems that the church is *responding* to culture rather than being an initiating force.

We believe that the scriptural record as it pertains to women in roles of leadership requires careful study and a detailed response to the question of the ordination of women as elders.

### **Dealing with differences**

The issue *does* require careful study. When it comes to a holy kiss, we can't just say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." That approach may sound humble, but it is simplistic and arrogant, because it assumes that "I" have the only accurate understanding of what Scripture teaches.

We all come to Scripture with some assumptions from our own culture. Some of us come from a culture where women are expected to submit to men in particularly restrictive ways; others of us come from a culture that encourages women to think for themselves and to take leadership roles. Some cultures today are similar to ancient cultures in their attitudes about women; others are quite different. Some people are afraid that any change in gender roles will cause more social chaos; others feel that changes are necessary. Each of us needs to be aware of the bias we bring to the Bible and, through discussion with one another, see how our particular bias might be influencing our understanding. In that way we let the Bible speak to our biases.

Prayer is an indispensable part of the process—we want to discern God's will, rather than assuming that we have already got it right. We want to understand why some sincere Christians come to different conclusions on this

issue, and then we want to decide which explanation seems more likely to be what God intended when he inspired the Scriptures. We want the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13)—and that means that we don't have it all yet. No one does.

Since no one group has a perfect understanding of all the issues, there are some differences of opinion on biblical interpretation, even when there is agreement on the most basic doctrines of the faith. Some Christians think that the Bible instructs women to be completely silent in church; others do not, even when those holding each view have an equal belief in the authority and accuracy of the Bible. Some Bible-believing Christians believe that women must wear a covering on their head when in church; others do not. The question we have is not whether to believe the Bible; it is how to understand what the Bible is teaching. Are the biblical restrictions on women cultural, like the holy kiss, or are they permanent, like the prohibition on adultery?

Since conservative Christians are divided on this issue, we would be naïve to think that we will achieve unanimous agreement. No matter what conclusion we come to, *some* members will think we have not weighed the evidence fairly. What should they do then? Is this issue important enough to leave the church? We don't think so. Our unity depends on Christ, not on complete agreement on every point of doctrine.

There are many doctrines that are essential to Christian faith—for example, the church must teach that there is only one God, and that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet there are many other doctrines that are not essential to our faith, but are practical guidelines or policies for our physical life, and these may differ from culture to culture, or from one time in history to another. We *want* to get them right, but we must also understand they are not essential to what it means to be a Christian. We believe that eldership of women is one of those doctrines. It is a policy

matter. People do not need to leave the church if they think we are wrong about the millennium, nor do they need to leave if they think we are wrong about women's role in the church.

No matter who our congregational elders are, they are not perfect, and we all have to respect them anyway. We have to weigh what they say, accept the true and overlook minor mistakes. That will be the case whether an elder *is or is not* a woman. We might like to be part of a church with all the guaranteed correct answers, but such a church does not exist. Spiritual growth does not depend on being in a perfect church. Rather, we must learn to do the best we can in the circumstances we are in, trusting in Christ to cover us with his righteousness.

Some people will be disappointed if we permit women to be elders; others will be equally disappointed if we do not. We do not know how many hold one opinion, or how many the other—for our task, it does not matter. Our job is to discern what God wants us to do, and we will therefore concentrate on prayerful study. We ask for you to study the issue along with us, not just react to the conclusion. We will all learn, and as we share the strengths and weaknesses of various arguments, we hope the great majority of us will agree on the results.

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## 2

### **The Nature of Leadership in the Church**

As we examine what the Bible says about whether women may serve as elders, we need to clarify what the office of elder entails. One of the key scriptures under discussion is 1 Tim. 2:12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” One of the key words in this verse is “authority.” What authority is involved in the office of elder? Is this the sort of authority that Paul did not allow women to have? We will address the meaning of this verse in more detail in a future study, but first we want to explore what the Bible says about church leadership and authority in general. This study discusses valid principles of Christian leadership no matter who the leaders may be.

#### **Not like the Gentiles**

Jesus told his disciples, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26).

In the church, authority must be viewed in a different way than it is in the world of government and business. Jesus did not say that it was wrong to lead, but that leaders should *serve others* rather than expecting others to serve them. They are to be motivated by love, not selfishness. They are to be humble, rather than giving themselves important-sounding titles. There is nothing wrong with *being* a benefactor, but it is wrong to call attention to how “good” you are.

Those who seek authority more than they seek to serve, no matter whether they are men or women, are not viewing church leadership in the right way. Church leadership is not a place to assert the importance of a particular person, ethnic group, personality type, or gender. Leadership roles are a

means of service, not a means of venerating the leaders or the groups to which they belong.

Leaders in the church do have authority, and Christians are told to obey them, but that authority does not rest in themselves—they are servants “who must give an account” to God (Heb. 13:17). Their authority is authentic only as it reflects God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as described in Scripture. God wants leaders to use their authority to serve. Paul twice wrote that the Lord gave him authority for building people up (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). That is the purpose of authority in the church. Leaders are to build up the church, edify the believers, and help them grow spiritually.

### **Responsibility to teach**

Not every leader is a pastor, but for the purposes of this study, let us look at what Ephesians describes as the role of a pastor. God gave pastors to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12). Pastors serve by preparing believers for service and helping them work together, so that the church grows (verse 16). This involves doctrinal instruction (verses 13-14). Teaching is one of the main responsibilities of leaders who are identified as “pastors and teachers.” This is suggested not just in Ephesians 4, but also by the following points:

- Ephesians is the only book in the Bible to use the word “pastor” to describe church leaders; in other places the primary leaders of congregations are called elders and overseers—apparently two terms for the same role. The ability to teach is part of the description of an elder or overseer (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24; Tit. 1:9), but it is not part of the description of a deacon, suggesting that the primary responsibility for teaching falls to elders and overseers.
- The apostles decided that it was more important for the apostles to attend to “the ministry of the word” than to supervise the distribution of food. They viewed teaching and preaching as their primary role, and this focus on “the word” is apparently appropriate for elders as

well.

- Paul told Timothy to devote himself to teaching Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13).

Elders should not teach on their own authority—they should “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2)—teaching truth in agreement with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. A message is “inspired” not by rhetorical skill or volume, but by whether it is true to the Bible, and by whether it leads people to faith in Christ. An elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Tit. 1:9). “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Members are to weigh carefully what is said, deciding whether it is true to the gospel (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 John 4:1).

The authority of an elder is a derivative authority, as authorized by God. Leadership therefore begins with submission to God’s authority. When elders teach false doctrines or attempt to promote themselves, they are misusing the authority of their role. Their authority lies largely in the truth and their ability to teach it. That is the way in which members will be built up, being helped to become more like Christ.

### **Administrative authority**

Sometimes, however, administrative authority is necessary. Since elders are to “take care of God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5), the elders usually have a supervisory role in the administrative matters of the church. Paul was involved in administrative matters when he oversaw the collection of resources to aid another part of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 16:1-4). Paul told the Corinthians that if he could not correct them through his letter, then he would have to come in person and “be harsh in [his] use of authority” (2 Cor. 13:10). He had authority, and he had already judged and instructed the Corinthians to expel one particularly blatant sinner (1 Cor. 5:3-5). In another

use of authority, he warned them not to associate with people who claimed to believe but persisted in certain sins (verse 11). He gave similar instructions in Rom. 16:17 and 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15.

Paul told Titus to “encourage and rebuke with all authority” (Tit. 2:15). If people do not listen to sound doctrine, they must be rebuked (Tit. 1:13). False teachers “must be silenced” (Tit. 1:11). For practical purposes, this must be done by *elders*—we do not invite heretics to present their case before the entire congregation (see 2 John 10) to see whether they should be expelled, just as we do not invite wolves into the flock to see whether they might devour anyone.

When false ideas are circulating, leaders need to teach the truth and refute what is false, and do what they can to prevent heresy from being taught. Although biblical truth informs the judgment, elders must use their own judgment to decide whether the sins or heresies are sufficiently grievous to warrant this type of discipline, when repentance is genuine and reinstatement is appropriate, what level of confidentiality or announcement is necessary, etc. This administrative authority is generally given to elders, although it is often appropriate for elders to consult with peers and superiors on such decisions.

## **Summary**

Elders are to

- 1) train members for works of service, coordinate their work, and promote unity,
- 2) devote themselves to prayer and Scripture,
- 3) preach the gospel of grace,
- 4) defend the church against heretics, false believers, and divisive people, and
- 5) supervises administrative functions of the congregation.

6) anoint the sick (Jam. 5:14).

Elders also perform baptisms, officiate at weddings and funerals, and lead communion services, although the Bible does not restrict these functions to elders. The Bible does not mandate, although practical considerations usually do, that the elders be formally appointed. This is the function of ordination.

Peter gave this instruction to elders: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Elders are not to use their position for their own benefit, but to help others.

God will judge church elders on how well they serve in these areas of responsibility (Heb. 13:17), and he gives them authority to serve in these ways. He also gives spiritual gifts that help them lead.

### **Pastoral gifts**

There are many types of spiritual gifts, Paul told the Corinthians, but they are all given “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Although the gifts are different, they “are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (verse 11). God distributes these abilities so that we might grow by helping one another.

Paul explained, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Rom. 12:6-8).

Elders would find any of these gifts useful, but not all elders are equally gifted in each area. Some are gifted speakers, some are helpful with physical



needs, some are good at explaining doctrine; some are very motivating; some are very generous with their time and other resources; some are great personnel coordinators; and some are good at hospital visitation. Elders generally start with some of these skills, and grow in the others as they gain experience. No matter what gifts they have, they are to use them to help others (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

When applied to elders these gifts can be deemed as “pastoral” gifts, but the presence of these “pastoral” gifts does not automatically qualify a person to be an elder—particularly when others in the congregation are even more gifted. Pastoral gifts may be used in a variety of roles, such as in children’s ministry, lay counseling, or in leading a small group. An elder should be gifted by the Spirit, and responsive to the Spirit in using those gifts. As a practical matter, for spiritual leadership to be effective, the congregation should agree 1) that the person is gifted for pastoral service, and 2) that the person is submissive to the Spirit.

## **Qualifications**

What skills do elders need? Paul gave some guidelines about the people to be appointed:

The overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap (1 Tim. 3:2-7).

This is an idealized portrait, as we can see by a comparison with the

similar list in Titus 1:6-9. Since Timothy was working in an older church, Paul said that an elder must not be a recent convert; but he did not specify this for Titus, since the churches Titus was working with were new. Paul himself had appointed elders in new churches (Acts 14:23), which means that he appointed new converts, because those were the only people who were available. Therefore, when Paul told Timothy that an elder must not be a new Christian, he was not creating a rigid requirement for all future churches. This shows that the items in his list should be seen as important guidelines, but not as absolute requirements. For example, elders who have already served well would not be automatically disqualified by a disobedient college-age child. All the factors should be taken into consideration.

We should also comment on what it means to be “the husband of but one wife.” This is not talking about polygamy (which was rare). Nor does it disqualify single men and remarried widowers, although a literal reading would disqualify both. The term (literally, “a one-woman man”) means a man who is faithful to his wife rather than having a mistress on the side (which was common in Greco-Roman society). There was no stigma attached to a widower who remarried, nor to a man who was legally divorced and remarried. What was important for Paul is that the elder, if married, would be faithful to the woman he was married to. [Further information on this is in Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 1991), chapter 7: “Can Ministers Be Remarried?—1 Timothy 3:2”; see also the discussion in William Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary 46: Pastoral Epistles* (Nelson: 2000), pp. 170-173.]

### **Practical considerations**

Ordination as practiced by most churches today serves biblical goals, for it involves a formal ceremony in which people are appointed as

congregational leaders, and the congregation asks God to help those leaders as they serve the congregation in the work of God. A formal ordination acknowledges that 1) leaders are not self-appointed, and 2) other Christians agree that these people are gifted and called by God to a leadership/service role. Formal appointment helps a person not only lead within the congregation but also represent the congregation in the community.

If a person claims to be gifted and called to the role of elder, but the congregation does not *look* to that person for leadership, it is likely that the person has misunderstood the call. Since the *fact* of service is more important than the title that is given, such a person should serve in other ways, and perhaps in time the person or the congregation will come to see the situation differently. Not everyone who *claims* to have pastoral gifts is really called to be a pastor.

The selection of elders is a practical matter as well as a spiritual one, and it is affected by social expectations, since leadership itself is a social phenomenon dealing with the functioning of a group of people. Paul wrote that an elder should have a good reputation even among unbelievers. Consequently, cultural matters *must* be considered, and it would be a mistake to appoint someone who was not respected in the particular culture, and it would be a mistake to appoint anyone who was unable to win the respect of the congregation.

## **Conclusion**

This study is not a complete “theology of church leadership.” It is designed to survey some of the more important points so that we know what is being discussed when we discuss whether the Bible teaches that women may serve in the office of elder within the church. This overview does bring out certain points for our study:

- We should not ordain anyone on the basis of gender alone. The person has to have the appropriate spiritual gifts, and the congregation must

accept the person's leadership.

- Since a church leader must be under the authority of Scripture, we cannot ordain women as elders if Scripture does not allow women to serve in that role. At the same time, we cannot exclude women from serving as elders if Scripture does not prohibit it.
- Since teaching is vital to the role of an elder, we should not ordain anyone who cannot effectively communicate spiritual principles in a way that edifies the listeners.
- We should not ordain anyone who is spiritually immature, self-seeking, theologically unbalanced, notoriously disobedient, or abusive with authority.
- We should not ordain anyone who has a poor reputation in the community.

In subsequent chapters, we will look more closely at what Scripture says about the role of women in church leadership. Our next study will examine Genesis 1-3.

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### 3

#### **Men and Women in Genesis 1-3**

Does the Bible require men and women to have different roles in the church? Although the Old Testament does not provide the final answer for the question, proponents and opponents of females as elders often look to the Old Testament for evidence.

When Jesus analyzed the question of divorce for his first-century Jewish audience, he cited the creation account in Genesis to show how it was “in the beginning” (Matt. 19:4-5). Since Genesis tells us about the creation of male and female, the account may tell us something about God’s original design for male and female roles. We might see what the ideal was before sin distorted the relationship between the sexes. However, Genesis does not say as much as we might like, and perhaps both opponents and proponents of women’s ordination have claimed too much for what it says.

#### **Genesis 1**

In the beginning, God made humanity male and female, said Jesus (Matt. 19:4). This creation set a pattern for marriage, and it may also set a pattern for relationships between male and female. [The relationship between male and female in marriage is not automatically determinative for roles within the church. These spheres are related, but not identical. Although the focus of our study is roles within the church, we will look at the Old Testament passages to provide a background for New Testament passages, with the understanding that Old Testament society and worship is not necessarily a model for what the church should do today. Further, our conclusions about male-female relations within the church may or may not apply to relationships within marriages.]

We will examine what Genesis says verse by verse. The initial pattern is given in Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

There is a plural use of the word “man.” The Hebrew moves without comment from the singular word “man” (*'adam*) to the plural pronoun *them*, and explains that “man” means both male and female. “Humanity” is a better translation, for in this verse the word *'adam* clearly includes all humans, male and female alike. Genesis 5:2 also shows that the word *'adam* includes male and female.

Some scholars think it is significant that God names the human race by one sex, “man.” [Raymond C. Ortland, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3,” pages 95-112 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), pages 97, 480. This book is the most thorough defense of the conservative position.]

In response, we note that *'adam* does not mean “male”; as noted above, it can also be used for females. Perhaps the best translation is “human,” and it is reasonable for God to name the first person “Human” without implying that all subsequent *males* represent the human race any more than females do. The fact that the same Hebrew word was used for the first male as for all humanity could be *consistent* with male authority, but if male authority is really God’s design, that should be demonstrated by more than a mere implication from the choice of terms.

Male and female alike are made in God’s image. Genesis 9:6 says, “Whoever sheds the blood of man [*'adam*], by man shall his blood be shed;

for in the image of God has God made man [*'adam*].” The meaning is not man as *male*, but “man” as male and female. The NRSV accurately renders the verse in this way: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.” Although people might argue about what “the image of God” means, it is generally agreed among conservative and liberal scholars alike that men and women alike are made in the image of God. Most conservatives agree with Ortland when he says, “Both male and female display the glory of God’s image with equal brilliance.” [Ortland, 97. On page 98, Ortland speaks for the conservative consensus when he writes, “Who, I wonder, is teaching that men only bear God’s image? No contributor to this volume will be found saying that.”]

Although men and women are made in the image of God, Paul writes, “A man [*anēr*, meaning a male] ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor. 11:7). We will discuss this passage in more detail in a later study, but let us note for now the way that Paul reasons. He says that a woman should cover her head when she is prophesying (verse 6), but a man should not, for *the man* is the image and glory of God. The logic *might* imply that women are not the image and glory of God—but almost all scholars *reject* the conclusion that women are not made in the image of God.

Thomas Schreiner, a conservative, says, “Paul is not denying that women are created in God’s image, for he is referring to the creation accounts here and was well aware that Genesis teaches that both men and women are created in God’s image.” [Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16,” pages 124-39 in Piper and Grudem; here, pages 132-33.] Schreiner focuses on the word *glory*, but does not discuss why Paul also includes the word *image*. Gordon D. Fee

similarly concludes that “Paul’s own interest, however, is finally not in man as being God’s image, but in his being God’s glory. That is Paul’s own reflection on the creation of man, and it is the word that finally serves as the means of contrast between man and woman.” [Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 515.] C.K. Barrett says, “Paul values the term image only as leading to the term glory.” [C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black’s New Testament Commentary; London: A&C Black, 1971), 252.]

The broad consensus is that Genesis teaches that women are made in the image of God, and it is a mistake to interpret Paul as contradicting that conclusion. This verse shows that it is a mistake to use Paul’s arguments (designed for a different situation) to interpret Genesis. When Paul uses Genesis as a supporting rationale, he may be giving only a narrow slice of the situation, only as it applies to his immediate concern, rather than giving a complete statement on what Genesis teaches. Paul uses Genesis to support his argument, but it is hazardous for us to make inferences from his argument to interpret Genesis. When we read between the lines, we may be reading more into it than Paul intended. We will see this illustrated again later in this study.

As our last comment on Genesis 1:26, we note that male and female alike were assigned to rule over the earth and its animals; although God made male and female distinct and different from one another, this chapter says nothing about male and female having different roles. Verses 28-29 say:

God blessed them and said *to them*, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you [plural] every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.” And it was so.



The instructions are given equally to male and female—both were given the command to reproduce and rule. Both were allowed to eat from every fruit-bearing tree.

## **Genesis 2**

The second chapter focuses on the creation of human beings—it begins with a barren land, without rain, plants or humans (verse 5). So God “formed the man [*ha’adam*, the human one] from the dust of the ground [*ha’adamah*, a feminine word]” (verse 6). God planted a garden, made trees grow in it, and put the man there to take care of the garden (verses 8-9, 15). Then God warned the human not to eat from one particular tree (verse 16).

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (verse 18). In contrast to all other creation being “good,” Scripture highlights that it was *not* good for the human to be by himself. God wants humans to be social and sexual.

Does “suitable helper” imply that the woman was made as a *servant* to the man? No, the Hebrew word “helper” is more commonly used for *God* as a helper of humans (e.g., Ex. 18:4)—the word does not presume lesser authority. The woman could “help” the man by working as his equal just as much as by working subordinately to him. The point being made in Genesis is simply that the woman is “suitable” for the man—that is, she is the same kind of being. Gordon J. Wenham writes, “The compound prepositional phrase ‘matching him,’ [*kenegdo*] literally, ‘like opposite him,’ is found only here. It seems to express the notion of complementarity rather than identity. As Delitsch (1:140) observes, if identity were meant, the more natural phrase would be ‘like him.’” [Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 68.]

Is it significant that Eve was made “for” the man? The Hebrew preposition does not presume lesser authority—the point being made in

Genesis is that the man was incomplete without the woman. This verse says nothing about authority. Paul likewise notes that the woman was made *for* the man (1 Cor. 11:9), but then concludes that men and women are mutually dependent (verse 11)—the word “for” does not imply inferiority or hierarchy.

Genesis explains that God had created animals, and “he brought them to the man to see what he would name them” (verse 19). So the first human named the animals (verse 20). But no “suitable helper” was found for the solitary human. None of the animals was an appropriate partner. God had known this ahead of time, of course, but the exercise of naming the animals helped the first human be aware 1) that he was not like any other animal, and 2) that he (unlike the animals previously created) did not have a partner.

Once the man was aware of his need, God put him to sleep, took one of his ribs, and from it fashioned a woman (verses 21-22). [Many interpreters have offered suggestions about the symbolism implied in the rib. For example, Matthew Henry wrote, “Woman is not made of a man’s head to climb over him, she is not made of his feet to be trampled on, but from his rib to be by his side as an equal, under his arm to be protected and close to his heart to be loved.” No matter how appealing this symbolism is, it cannot be proven that this was the original intent.] Although the first human was made from the ground (just like the animals were—v. 19), the woman had a *human* origin, apparently to emphasize her organic unity with the man. God brought the woman to the man, and the man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ [*’ishshah*], for she was taken out of man [*’iysh*]” (verse 23). This poetic expression—the first recorded words of any human—are an expression of joy at discovering the suitable partner that the man needed. The two people, although different, were the same flesh.

The words are an expression of similarity, not of hierarchy. However, it is

often noted that the man *named* the woman, just as he had earlier named the animals, and the simple act of giving a name is supposedly an indicator of authority. [“Though they are equal in nature, that man names woman (cf. 3:20) indicates that she is expected to be subordinate to him, an important presupposition in the ensuing narrative” (Wenham, 70). See also Schreiner, 207.] But this is not necessarily so. [Linda Belleville writes, “Naming in antiquity was a way of memorializing an event or capturing a distinctive attribute. It was not an act of control or power” (chapter 2 in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg [Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan], p. 143).]

Hagar gave God a name: “The God who sees me”—a name that God apparently accepted, for it is in Scripture (Gen. 16:13). Naming does not always indicate authority. [Leah and Rachel named the sons of Jacob; only Benjamin was named by Jacob (Gen. 29-30; 35:18). Moses and Samuel were also named by women (Ex. 2:10; 1 Sam. 1:20).] In the naming of the animals narrative, the literary context has nothing to do with authority over the animals; it is about the creation of woman and Adam’s appreciation of her. When Adam named the woman, the point being emphasized in the text is how much *like* Adam she was.

The Bible then concludes from the essential similarity of man and woman: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Curiously, it is the man who is said to leave—this is not said (though it is probably assumed [“Israelite marriage was usually patrilocal, that is, the man continued to live in or near his parents’ home” (Wenham, 70). Psalm 45:10 advises the woman to leave her parents.] ) for the woman. The couple become a new family, not under the authority of the man’s father and mother. This indicates that, no matter where they live, the man’s primary responsibility is to his wife, not his

parents, and similarly, the woman's primary responsibility is to her husband, not her parents. But the verse presumes nothing about the authority of one person over another.

Genesis 2 (unlike Genesis 1) makes distinctions between male and female. The male was made first, given a job in the garden, warned about the forbidden fruit, told to name the animals, and he responds with joy to his God-given companion. The woman does not do anything in this chapter, nor is anything said about why one was made before the other. Richard Davidson writes, "The movement in Genesis 2...is not from superior to inferior, but from incompleteness to completeness." [Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," pp. 259-95 in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (edited by Nancy Vyhmeister; Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press), 261.]

However, the next chapter shows that the woman was aware of the forbidden fruit—the silence of chapter 2 does not mean that she was not told. [Thomas R. Schreiner has no evidence to suggest that "God likely commissioned Adam to instruct Eve about this command" (chapter 4 in Beck and Blomberg, 203).] Genesis does not tell us who told her about it, whether it was God or Adam. *Who* told her apparently did not matter. Likewise, we cannot put much significance on the silence of chapter 2 on other issues.

The man was created first, and it is often concluded from this that God thereby gave him authority over the woman. [Schreiner argues that Hebrew readers would assume the laws of primogeniture (*ibid.*).] However, this should not be assumed. For example, plants do not have authority over animals, and animals do not rule humans. Throughout Genesis, we see that the firstborn does not always rule over the younger siblings. Beck and Blomberg write, "One wonders if a hypothetical 'first-time' reader of Genesis 1-3, even in the ancient Jewish world, would have picked up any of the six

indications of female subordination [such as priority of the male] that Schreiner discusses.” [Beck and Blomberg, “Reflections on Complementarian Essays,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 312.] This comment suggests that a definitive answer must come from the New Testament; this discussion of Genesis is only a preliminary study. For a conclusion, we need other biblical evidence, and the writings of Paul are relevant for this point.

### **Paul’s comments on creation**

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that a woman should cover her head when prophesying, but a man should not, for “woman is the glory of man. For man [*anēr*] did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (verses 8-9). There are numerous questions about the way that Paul reasons in this chapter, and a later study will discuss them in more detail. But here we can note that Paul uses the creation priority of the man in support of the the *cultural* custom of women covering their heads. Paul can use the creation account to argue for a temporary custom.

Paul is saying that men and women in Corinthian society of his day may prophesy, but they must do it in slightly different ways. He is not addressing the relative authority of men and women. [When Paul says that “the head of woman is man” (verse 3), Paul may be referring to authority (that is a question for a later chapter), but the rest of the passage argues on the basis of honor and dishonor, not of authority. Men and women have an equal right to prophesy, and their prophecies are of equal authority; the only question in this passage is the manner in which they prophesy. That is why we say above that Paul is not addressing the authority of men and women. That is a tangential comment, not the main subject.]

Nor is Paul addressing the authority of what they say, but only the

appearance of the person saying it. He also weakens the significance of the priority of the first man by observing that male-female relationships are transformed in the Lord: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman” (verses 11-12). [Beck and Blomberg note that “verses 11-12 may suggest that the new creation in Christ goes beyond God’s original creation. Clearly it will in the world to come” (312).] These verses strike a note of equality in the Lord, and they remind us that although the first woman came from the first man, all subsequent men have come from women, and the argument from priority is inconclusive.

So what does this passage tell us about the meaning of Genesis 2? It means that Genesis 2 can be used to argue for a cultural custom, but it also shows us that an argument for authority based on priority has a logical weakness. The passage does not prove that men are given authority over women, for that is not Paul’s purpose in this passage. Rather, he allows women to do the *same* as men, advising appropriate conformity with cultural norms.

To illustrate, we might paraphrase the logic of 1 Corinthians 11 in this way: Women should cover their heads when prophesying because men were created first. Genesis itself does not say that, of course, and it is not self-evident as to how Paul went from premise to conclusion; this may indicate that he was reasoning based on a practice found in his own culture.

The argument of creation priority also appears in 1 Timothy 2:13, and again, a full discussion will have to wait for another study. Verse 12 says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” Then verse 13 gives this rationale: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” But as we have already seen, the priority of Adam could be used to argue for a *cultural* custom, and therefore the fact that this passage argues for

women's subordination does not in itself tell us whether that role was a cultural one, or a timeless, normative one.

Similarly, 1 Timothy 2 says that women should not teach or have authority over men because men were created first. Again, Genesis 1-3 does not say that, and it is possible that Paul went from premise to conclusion by an assumption of culture. Both passages *use* the creation account, but neither is an attempt to tell us what Genesis means. Both New Testament passages are easily read with the understanding that the creation priority of man gives men some sort of authority over women. However, they may also be read with an assumption of equality; we will address them in more detail in later studies.

The evidence of Genesis 1 leans toward equal roles, and the evidence of Genesis 2 would *allow* for different roles. However, neither chapter directly addresses the question of authority that we might bring to them, so we must be cautious about conclusions that we draw. The evidence of Genesis 2 is tempered by the following observations:

1. Our goal in the church is not always to imitate the original, pre-Fall creation. We do not suggest that people remove their clothes, for example!
2. New Testament scriptures may override the conclusions that we draw from Genesis. Genesis 1-2 are not addressing the question of authority and we must not try to *infer* something from these chapters beyond what they directly say.
3. Scriptural finding relevant to gender authority may not provide a full parallel to questions about church leadership. For example, gender authority in the family structure would not necessarily carry over into the church structure.
4. The New Testament may give us additional insights, since some New Testament verses address the question of church leadership more directly.

## Genesis 3

Sin enters the story in chapter 3, beginning with the crafty serpent. The serpent spoke to the woman—even though the man was with her (verse 6). Why did the serpent speak to the woman rather than the man? The text does not say. What the text does say is that both ate it. Eve was deceived by the serpent and Adam went along with her.

The serpent flatly contradicted what God had said, and the woman wanted what the serpent offered, so she ate. She apparently wanted the man to be wise, too, so she gave him some fruit, and he ate. For some unexplained reason, they became ashamed of their nakedness and hid from God even though they had made something to cover their nakedness (verses 7-8). They responded equally to the sin: “The eyes of *both* of them were opened, and *they* realized they were naked; so *they* sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.... *They* hid from the Lord God.” Genesis does not assign significance to which person sinned first – theologically, it does not matter, for the point is that they both sinned.

God called out to the man (verse 9). Why the man rather than the woman? The text does not say. Adam said he hid because he was naked, and God asked him whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree. [When God pronounced a punishment on Adam, he did not hold Adam accountable for what Eve had done—Eve had to give account for herself (Mary Seltzer, “Women Elders...Sinners or Saints?,” 59; unpublished paper).] The man blamed the woman, and the woman blamed the serpent. So God cursed the serpent (verses 14-15). The word “curse” is not used for the humans, but God described some unpleasant consequences for them. He told the woman, “I will greatly increase your pains [*‘itstsabon*] in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”



Why did God pronounce the punishment on the woman first? The text does not say—it may be for literary style. The sequence goes back and forth: 1) serpent, woman, man; 2) man, woman, serpent; 3) serpent, woman, man. The most significant curse – death – seems to be reserved for last, in the punishment pronounced for the man. To the serpent, God predicted conflict with the female and conflict with a male offspring; to the woman, God predicted conflict with her husband; and to the man, God predicted conflict with the soil—and the soil would triumph.

Sin affected the relationships between the sexes. God told the woman that “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” The precise meaning of “desire” is debated, but is not essential for our study. [The Hebrew word is also used in Gen. 4:7 and Song of Solomon 7:10. Susan Foh, a conservative, argues that God is predicting that even though women will desire to master their husbands, the men will continue to rule over the women. (*Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979], 68-69). Ortlund also accepts this view (108-9). The more traditional interpretation is that women will want the companionship and protection of men despite the sorrow involved in childbirth.] In Genesis 3, God made gender distinctions, and he said that husbands would rule their wives. At this point in the story, Adam represents subsequent men, and Eve represents subsequent women.

When God explained the consequences of sin, some things remained the same, and others changed. When God said that the woman’s sorrow would increase in childbearing, he was not creating a new role for the woman, but predicting a change in the role he had already designed for her. When God said that the husband would rule over the woman, was he predicting a change? The word “rule” in Gen. 3:16 is from the Hebrew word *mashal*, which *can* be used for oppressive rule, but rule itself does not imply

oppression. [Mashal is used for the sun and moon ruling over the day and night (Gen. 1:18), for Joseph ruling over Egypt (45:8), and for Israel to rule over other nations (Deut. 15:6). The Israelites requested Gideon to mashal over them, and he replied that God would mashal over them. “The precise nature of the rule is as various as the real situations in which the action or state so designated occur” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:534).] Since *mashal* is not necessarily a negative form of rule, it seems that either 1) the fact of male rule is not new, but now that sin has entered the picture male rule will be tainted with sin, or 2) the fact of male rule is new; it is in itself one of the consequences of sin. However, since Genesis has said nothing before this about one sex ruling the other, a change seems to be implied. [William Webb points out that biblical curses often include a change of status vis-à-vis other people, creating a hierarchy where none existed before (*Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity], 117-19). The word “curse” is not always used in these, just as it is not for Eve and Adam.]

To the man, God said,

Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil [*‘itstsabon*] you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

The man would suffer because he had listened to his wife. Did this mean that he was not supposed to listen to her before? No, the problem is not in who he listened to, but that he listened (in the sense of obeying) *when she*

*suggested a sin.* There would be nothing wrong with a man listening to his wife if she suggested that he sample a strawberry. Listening is a problem only if sin is being suggested; this verse does not imply anything about God's original design for male-female roles.

Because of sin, the earth is cursed, and the man's work would be greatly increased. Food would become hard to get, and the man would eventually die and return to the ground. [The death sentence applied to both men and women, so why was it given to the man only? Linda Belleville suggests a plausible literary reason: "The impact on the man is related to the ground from which he was taken.... The impact on the woman is related to the man from whose rib she was formed" (*Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* [Baker, 1999], 104; several Hebrew words have been deleted from the quote without indicating the omissions by elipses.)] At least the latter part of the prediction applies to women as well as men, and in many cultures, women have to toil for food as much as men do, or even more. The negative consequences on family life—although given to the woman—would also affect the man. Both Adam's curse and Eve's curse contained elements applicable to the other.

When God told the woman about the marital consequences of sin, it was not because she represented family life more than the man did; similarly, when God told the man about death, it was not because he represented humanity more than the woman did. Genesis makes the point that the man and woman both sinned, and both suffered the consequences. Genesis does not say that there is any significance to which sex sinned first.

### **Paul's comments on the first sin**

Romans 5:12-19 teaches that all humanity was sentenced to death because of Adam's sin; it is sometimes said that this shows that Adam represented humanity, not only because he was first, but because he was *male*, implying

male authority over females. However, this makes the mistake mentioned earlier: When Paul uses Genesis to support his point, it is hazardous for us to try to use his point to interpret what else Genesis means, because Paul is not intending to explain Genesis. Rather, he is using small portions of Genesis to make his specific point, and we are misusing his words if we try to turn them into something Paul did not intend, i.e., an explanation of Genesis.

In verse 12, Paul says that sin entered the world through one *anthrōpos*, which means a human, either male or female. Paul could have easily used *anēr*, which means a male, but he did not, showing that he is not concerned about the sex of the first sinner. For Paul's purpose, gender is irrelevant. In the last part of verse 12, Paul uses the plural of *anthrōpos* to make his point: death spread to all humans, because all [humans] sinned, including Adam and Eve, who sinned *essentially at the same time*.

Paul then says that death reigned from Adam until Moses (verse 14). He is not saying that Adam was the first person to die. He may be alluding to the fact that Adam was the person to whom humanity's death sentence was given, but more likely, he is referring to Adam as the first *human*. He is designating a time period, from creation to Moses, and he does so by naming the first person, Adam. Paul focuses on Adam because he is using him as an antetype, or analogy for Christ. The first human, Adam, foreshadowed the first of God's *new* humanity, Christ. The analogy would be unnecessarily complicated if Paul had used both Adam and Eve.

In verses 15-18, Paul says that the many (i.e., all humanity) died because of the trespass of "the one," apparently referring to the transgression of Adam mentioned in verse 14. In Genesis 3, humanity's death sentence was given *to Adam*, even though it applied to Eve as well, and Eve was subject to the death penalty from the instant she sinned.

Throughout this discussion, Paul says nothing to indicate that Adam

represented humanity because he was *male*. His theological point is different: Adam is contrasted with Christ, his sin is contrasted with Christ's righteousness, and the death sentence given to humanity through Adam contrasts with the free gift of righteousness given through Christ. Adam is the point of contrast that Paul uses to preach Christ as the solution to the death sentence that applies to all humanity, without respect to sex.

### **Summary**

What does Genesis 3 tell us about male-female relations? Very little, directly—its focus is on how sin entered the human race. Here is what it tells us:

1. The woman was deceived and sinned by eating the forbidden fruit. The man, instead of resisting the sin, ignored God's warning, ate the fruit and blamed his wife.
2. The text also shows that God makes some gender distinctions, although their significance is not made clear in Genesis.
3. Sin affected the roles of male and female, and verse 16 tells us that the man would rule the woman.

Genesis 1 gives both male and female rule over creation. Genesis 2 describes what Adam did before Eve was created, and then describes the woman as similar to the man; it says nothing directly about one person having authority over another. Genesis 3, however, tells us that the man would rule the woman. The chapter concludes by saying that Adam named his wife Eve, and God gave them animal skins for clothing and expelled them from the garden. In our next study, we will examine what the rest of the Pentateuch says about male and female roles.

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## 4

### **Men and Women in the Books of Moses**

In our previous study, we surveyed the teaching of Genesis 1-3. Here, we will survey the rest of the books of Moses. Because of the large volume of material involved, we will be brief at many points.

#### **Interpretive difficulties**

Many of the practices, events and laws contained in the Old Testament might seem strange to us. However, the Old Testament is part of the Bible, and in our survey of what the Bible says about the relationship between men and women and God, we need to examine what this part of Scripture says. We do not want to sugar-coat what it says, nor to dismiss it. We will see many things that we would not want to imitate, but we will also see positive examples. And we will see that some biblical laws are purposely set in specific cultures to address specific cultural issues, and as such, may not be intended to be followed blindly.

There are numerous interpretive difficulties in this material. Much of it is narrative – it tells the story of what happened without commenting on whether it was good or bad. Other parts give laws about men and women – but even these (such as laws about divorce) may be an accommodation to culture rather than a timeless principle.

Moreover, many of the Old Testament laws are obsolete. Why then should we even examine these passages about an ancient society, when we are asking about a different situation—roles in the church? Many scholars believe that roles in the church are assigned by God in a way that is consistent with God-assigned roles in society. We therefore want to see what the Bible says about male and female roles in general—even if some of that instruction is now obsolete. We will learn, for one thing, that biblical commands are often set in their particular cultural situation. This survey will

also provide background for verses in the New Testament, some of which refer to Old Testament passages.

Throughout this survey, we cannot conclude that just because something happened, it therefore presents an example we should follow today. We do not assume, for example, that Abraham is the ideal husband, nor Rebekah the ideal wife. We evaluate behavior based on New Testament principles, rooted in Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. That command also existed in the Old Testament, yet certain laws of Moses required that men *not* treat women the way they treated one another.

## **Genesis**

The early chapters of Genesis tell us little about women: We are told that Adam slept with Eve and she had sons (4:1-2, 25). Cain slept with his wife and she gave birth to Enoch (4:17). Lamech married two women, Adah and Zillah (verse 19). In one of the most debated verses of the Bible, we are told that the "sons of God" slept with "the daughters of men and had children by them" (6:4). Noah's wife and his daughters-in-law were saved in the ark (7:13). Genealogies rarely name women, though it is noted that various men had "sons and daughters" (11:11 etc.).

Abram married his half-sister Sarai, and Abram's brother Nahor married their niece, Milcah (11:29). Abram, Sarai, and Lot moved to Canaan, and then to Egypt (12:5, 10). In Egypt, Abram and Sarai assumed that Pharaoh would take Sarai because of her beauty; the only question was whether Abram would survive. So Abram said that Sarai was his sister, and Pharaoh indeed took her into his harem (verses 15, 19). After God punished Pharaoh for this, Pharaoh gave Sarai back and sent them all away.

Later, Abraham did a similar thing with Abimelech, king of Gerar, saying that Sarah was his sister, and Sarah said that Abraham was her brother (20:2, 5). God warned Abimelech, so he stayed away from Sarah (verses 3-4), and

Abraham explained that Sarah was his half-sister (verse 12). Abimelech acknowledged that he had offended Sarah, but gave money to Abraham to cover the offense (verse 16). Abraham had told a “half-truth,” and Pharaoh and Abimelech were right to protest Abraham’s attempts to deceive them.

Sarah told Abraham to sleep with Hagar, her maidservant (16:1-2). According to ancient custom, any resulting children would then be treated as if borne by the wife. Sarah said, “Perhaps *I* can build a family through her.” Later, Rachel did a similar thing and said, “Sleep with her so that she can bear children *for me* and that through her I too can build a family” (30:3).

“Abram agreed to what Sarai said,” and Hagar became pregnant (16:2-4). Then there was tension between Sarai and Hagar, and Sarai unjustly blamed Abram for the problem (verse 5). Abram let Sarai do whatever she wanted with Hagar, and Sarai mistreated Hagar so much that she fled (verse 6). An angel told Hagar to go back and name her son Ishmael. And Hagar gave a name to God: “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me’” (verse 13). [“Nowhere else in ancient Near Eastern literature is it recorded that deity called a woman by name, yet the angel of the Lord does just that twice in the case of Hagar (Gen 16:8; 21:17). The conversation between the angel of the Lord and Hagar is just as startling in its cultural milieu as the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in his day. In both instances God invests a woman with full dignity by solicitously caring for her and by giving her revelations even though both of them come from outside the pure race and are sinners” (Bruce Waltke, “The Relationship of the Sexes in the Bible,” *Crux*, Sept. 1983, pp. 11-12).]

When God told Abraham that Sarah would have a son, Abraham laughed and (apparently lacking faith in the promise) suggested that Ishmael might be blessed instead (17:17-18). But no, God’s promise was for Sarah just as much as it was for Abraham (verses 16, 19). Later, God again said that Sarah would



have a son, and Sarah laughed (18:12). “Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh’” (verse 15).

In chapter 19, Lot set a horrifying example. When the men of Sodom wanted to have relations with Lot’s visitors, Lot offered the men his virgin daughters (even though they were pledged to someone else) to “do what you like with them.” Lot felt more obligated to protect his visitors than his own daughters! But the angels rescued Lot and his daughters. Lot reached safety in the village of Zoar, and God destroyed Sodom. Lot’s wife looked back and was killed. Lot and his daughters moved to the mountains, and there his daughters got him drunk and became pregnant by him. It is a tragic story.

Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and when he was weaned, she told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael (21:10). Abraham was concerned about Ishmael, but God told him to do whatever Sarah said (verse 12). So Hagar and Ishmael were sent into the desert, where they would have died, except for God’s intervention. Sarah died at age 127 and was buried near Hebron. Abraham also had sons (no daughters are mentioned) by Keturah and some concubines (25:1-6).

Isaac married Rebekah, the daughter of his cousin Bethuel. She was a girl willing to talk to strangers, industrious enough to volunteer to water 10 camels, willing to extend hospitality on behalf of her family, adventurous enough to go on a one-way journey to Canaan, and willing to speak for herself (24:15-61). Abraham specified from the start that she had to be willing (verse 8).

Rebekah was barren at first (barrenness was generally blamed on the woman), but Isaac prayed for her, and she became pregnant (25:21). After the babies fought within her, she inquired of the Lord, who told her that the older son would serve the younger one. (Apparently she did not have to go through her husband to inquire of the Lord, or to receive an answer.) Rebekah knew

that the Lord would bless Jacob, and she favored Jacob, but Isaac favored Esau (25:28). When Rebekah learned that Isaac wanted to bless Esau (contrary to God's intent), she conspired with Jacob to deceive Isaac (27:5-10). She prepared the meat, and Jacob pretended to be Esau and obtained the blessing. When Esau wanted to kill Jacob, Rebekah told Jacob to go to Haran. She managed to get Isaac to bless him yet again and send him to northern Mesopotamia to find a wife (27:42-28:5).

Esau married two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath (26:34). His parents did not like his Hittite wives, so he married a cousin, Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, and others (28:9; 36:2-3).

Isaac moved to Gerar because of a famine, and just as his father had done, he told Abimelech that his wife was his sister (26:7), and Abimelech protested (verse 10).

Jacob was deceived by Laban, and ended up marrying two sisters. Leah had four children, and Rachel demanded that Jacob sleep with her handmaid so that she could have a surrogate family. Leah did the same, and at one point she paid Rachel for the opportunity to sleep with Jacob (30:16). There are plenty of wrong examples in this history. Rachel stole her father's household idols and lied to her father (31:35).

In the city of Shechem, there was a prince named Shechem who slept with Dinah, the daughter of Leah, which caused her to be defiled and shamed in the eyes of her brothers. Shechem offered to pay as much as was wanted, but "Jacob's sons replied deceitfully" and slaughtered the city, taking women and children as slaves (34:13, 29). Jacob complained about this, but Simeon and Levi responded, "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?" Yet it was their mother who had purchased a night with their father.

Rachel had said, "Give me children, or I'll die" (30:1). And when she had her second child, she died. She named him Son of My Trouble, but Jacob

renamed him Benjamin, son of my right hand (probably a reference to Rachel). She was buried near Bethlehem (35:19).

Reuben, the firstborn son of Leah, slept with Bilhah, the handmaid of the now-deceased Rachel (verse 22). As firstborn, he would have eventually inherited his father's concubines, but because of his premature action, he lost his status as firstborn (1 Chron. 5:1).

Genesis 38 tells the story of Tamar. Judah had married Shua, and they had sons named Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah got a wife for Er named Tamar. God killed Er, and in keeping with ancient custom, the next brother was supposed to sleep with the widow to produce offspring in Er's name (verse 8; cf. Deut. 25:5). But Onan did not want to make offspring for Er (because Onan would then get a smaller inheritance), and God killed him, too. But even after Shelah had come of age, he was not sent to Tamar to give her children. So Tamar pretended to be a prostitute and became pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah. When the pregnancy became known, Judah threatened to burn her to death, but when she proved that Judah was the father, he said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah" (verse 26). She had upheld her duty to her family, but he had not.

Women play a smaller role in the Joseph story. Joseph had a dream in which the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed before him. The moon was interpreted as his mother (37:10), even though she was dead. Potiphar's wife wanted to sleep with Joseph, but when Joseph refused, she accused him of attempted rape (39:14). But she has no further role in the story. Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife—Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and they had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (41:45-52).

### **Exodus-Deuteronomy—narratives**

Exodus begins with the initiative of some women. The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah refused to kill Israelite boys. They lied to Pharaoh, and

God blessed them (Ex. 1:19-20). A Levite mother hid her son for three months, then put him in a basket on the Nile; his sister watched while Pharaoh's daughter rescued the boy. The sister offered to find a wet nurse, and the mother was paid to nurse her own baby (2:1-9).

After Moses fled to Midian, he came to the defense of seven women and watered their flock of sheep; he married one of them, Zipporah, and they had a son named Gershom (2:15-22). When God was about to kill Moses, Zipporah saved his life by circumcising Gershom and touching Moses with the foreskin (4:25). God told Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and he promised to make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward them. "Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing" (3:22). Later he told Moses that both men and women should ask their neighbors for silver and gold (11:2).

Miriam the prophetess led the women singing and dancing in worship (Ex. 15:20). Later, she and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his Cushite wife, and Miriam was punished for a week (Num. 12:1-15), presumably because she was the chief instigator; no mention is made of her gender. Men and women alike were involved in the golden calf (Ex. 32:2-3), and both were involved in building the tabernacle (35:22-29).

In Numbers 27, the daughters of Zelophehad petitioned Moses for a change in inheritance laws, allowing daughters to inherit if there were no sons. Moses took the request to God, who said, "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right," and their request was written into the law (verses 1-11). These women left a permanent mark in the laws of the old covenant.

### **Exodus-Deuteronomy—laws**

Just as in other neighboring cultures, laws were normally written in the masculine, as if only men would commit crimes. For example: "If a man

[*iys**h*] steals an ox or a sheep... If a man borrows an animal... (Ex. 22:1-14). The NRSV rightly translates these to be inclusive: “When someone steals an ox or a sheep... Whenever someone borrows an animal...” Many additional examples could be given of laws that assume the person is a male; a few laws mention women as well. All the laws of incest are given from the male perspective (Lev. 18). [Thus the law prohibits a man from sleeping with his aunt (verses 12-14), but nothing is said about a woman sleeping with her uncle.]

The laws of Israel sometimes apply to men and women equally, sometimes unequally. We will present some of them to illustrate points of equality and aspects of inequality. God said he punished the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20:5), but nothing is said about the sins of the mothers. Women were specifically included in the Sabbath commandment (verse 10) and the commandment to honor parents (verse 12). Anyone who cursed or attacked either parent was to be killed (21:15, 17). But in the tenth commandment, the “neighbor” is presumed to be male—nothing is said about the possibility that the neighbor might be a widow who owned property (20:17).

If a Hebrew man became an indentured servant, he was to be set free after six years, and his wife would be free, too; but if the master gave him a wife, she and her children did not have to be set free (21:2-4). The man could stay with his family only if he became a servant for life (verses 5-6). Servants, whether male or female, were to be freed if injured. A bull that killed either a man or a woman was to be destroyed (verses 26-28).

If a female was sold as a servant, [Fathers could also sell sons into slavery; men and women could sell themselves (Lev. 25:39; Deut. 15:12).] she was not to be set free. (In that society, such “freedom” might force her into prostitution.) She could be sold to Hebrews, but not to foreigners. If she

was purchased for a son, she had to be treated as a daughter. If the son married another woman, he must not deprive the first one of conjugal rights, or else he must set her free (21:7-11). The last verse may imply that sexual relations were involved in the previous situations as well; it was common for female servants to be concubines.

If men caused a premature birth through reckless behavior, [But if they caused a stillbirth or serious injury, verse 23 would then apply. Christopher Wright argues that in this context, “life for life” does not mean a death penalty, but a living child given to compensate for one killed before birth. The death penalty was not appropriate for accidental homicide (verse 13). (*God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* [Paternoster, 1997], 212).] they could be fined “whatever the woman’s husband demands” (21:22). No mention is made of what the woman wanted. If a man slept with a virgin, he had to pay a bride-price, even if the father did not allow the marriage (22:16-17). [Deut. 22:28-29 is similar, but does not allow any refusal, and specifies that the woman can never be divorced.]

Women were unclean for a longer period of time after giving birth to a female (Lev. 12:1-5). After an emission of semen, men would be unclean until evening; but women would be unclean for seven days for menstruation, and her uncleanness was more transferable (Lev. 15:16-24).

For vow redemption, females were valued less than males were (Lev. 27:2-7). Both sexes could take Nazirite vows to dedicate themselves to divine service (Num. 6:1). [However, the rest of the chapter is written as if the Nazirite is a man, in keeping with the convention that laws are written as if for males even when they apply to females.] Women were permitted to take religious vows, but they would be valid only if the father or husband approved (Num. 30:3-14). A vow by a widow or divorced woman was

automatically valid (verse 9).

Apparently women could not be priests, although no law specifically addresses that (but most men could not be priests, either). A priest could give sacrificial food to his daughters, even to those who had returned to the family after being widowed or divorced (Num. 18:11; Lev. 22:13).

Males were required to go to the festivals and give an offering three times a year (Deut. 16:16), but it was assumed that women, children and widows would normally go as well (26:12; 31:12).

When the Israelites captured women in war, they could take a woman as a wife. [No restrictions about race are noted.] She could be freed, but not sold or treated as a slave (Deut. 21:10-14). If a man married two women, he was to count the firstborn son (who got the larger inheritance) fairly, not based on which wife he liked more (verses 15-17).

If a betrothed woman voluntarily slept with another man, she was guilty of adultery and both people would be killed (22:23-24). But if it happened in the country, it was presumed to be a rape, and only the man was to be killed (Deut. 22:23-27). If the girl was not betrothed, the man would be forced to pay 50 shekels and marry her, without right of divorce (verses 28-29). The law did not give the girl any say in this.

If a man suspected that his new bride was not a virgin, he could challenge her. If evidence of virginity could not be given, the woman was to be stoned at her father's house, for being promiscuous while under his care (22:13-21). [But if he falsely accused her, he could never divorce her. The "evidence of virginity" may have been a cloth stained by a recent menstruation, showing that the woman was not pregnant at the time of marriage.] If a man had been married for a while and suspected his wife of infidelity, he could bring an offering to the priest and put her to a test (Num. 5:12-28); the law presumed her innocence and left the punishment up to God's intervention.

If it could be proved that a wife slept with someone else, she and the other man were to be killed (Deut. 22:22)—but it did not work the other way around. A husband who slept with a prostitute, for example, was not considered guilty of adultery. Similarly, laws did not require men to be virgins when they married. Men could have multiple wives, but women could not have multiple husbands. Laws regulated the sexual behavior of young women and wives, but they did not regulate the sexual behavior of widows; nor did they prohibit prostitution. [However, prostitution was regulated and discouraged. Religious prostitution was not permitted, and the wages of a prostitute could not be brought into the tabernacle (Deut. 23:17-18). The daughters of priests could not become prostitutes, and priests could not marry prostitutes (Lev. 21:9, 14). Fathers could not force their daughters into prostitution (Lev. 19:29). But there was no penalty for prostitution itself.]

If a man wanted to divorce his wife, he had to provide her with a paper that permitted her to marry someone else (Deut. 24:1-4). The woman was not given the right to divorce her husband. Wives were legally under the authority of their husbands, and were sometimes treated like property, but they were not in the same legal status as “property”—they were not part of an inheritance, although concubines were. “A wife could not be sold as an ox or a donkey could.... A woman’s conjugal rights... distinguished her from the slave who was truly owned.” [Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Baker, 1999), 77.]

## **Conclusion**

Women were usually better off under the laws of Moses than they would have been in other nations. [For examples, see William Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, pages 76-80, and the articles on women in *the Anchor Bible Dictionary* and *InterVarsity’s Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*.] Nevertheless, many of the above laws still strike us as favoring



men over women. How should we respond to these laws?

First, we must acknowledge that the laws, as part of the old covenant, are obsolete. Christians today are under no obligation to live by these laws.

Second, we must recognize that even when the old covenant was in force, these laws did not describe the ideal society. Jesus pointed out that the law of divorce was a *concession* that God allowed because the people were sinful (Matt. 19:8). An already existing custom was regulated to prevent flagrant abuses, but the law did not imply approval of the custom itself. The same is true for many of the other laws, such as those that implied a greater sexual freedom for men than for women. The *lack* of penalty for men should not be taken as a divine endorsement of their freedom to visit prostitutes, for example. It was a patriarchal culture, and God allowed some inequities to continue for a time.

We believe that *no one* should be bought or sold into slavery. We believe that the life-long commitment of marriage should not be arranged without the consent of both bride and groom. We believe that fornication and adultery do not merit the death penalty. We believe that men as well as women should be virgins when they marry, and we believe that men as well as women should refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage.

Yet we also recognize that we cannot always insist on these ideals. In many nations, marriages *are* arranged, and the couples have to live with the result. Many young people are not virgins, and adultery does happen. Even within the community of believers, there is sometimes “hardness of heart”—a hardness that calls for repentance, but also necessitates practical accommodation to what people have done.

This is not the place to spell out ethics for the diverse situations that people get themselves into—we are simply pointing out that these laws, although biblical, were given in a particular cultural context, and we should

not view them as timeless directives from God. Even in the New Testament, there are directives that have been shaped by culture—head coverings for women, greeting people with a kiss, making a roster of older widows, etc. We will discuss these in a later chapter, but for now it is sufficient to note that the Old Testament is culturally limited to a far greater extent than the New Testament is.

In our next chapter, we will look at women in Israel's history—from Rahab to Esther. Due to the volume of material, we will again have to be brief, but this survey will give some historical context to the ministry of Jesus and the writings of Paul.

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## 5

### **Women in Ancient Israel— From the Conquest to the Exile**

In the previous study, we noted that the laws of Moses must be evaluated by New Testament values, because many of those laws were designed for a patriarchal culture. We cannot take the inequities of the laws of Moses as models for male-female relationships today—and certainly not as rules about the role of women in the church.

In this chapter, we survey additional Old Testament material about the role of women in ancient Israel. Although this survey does not directly address our question about the New Testament church, it does provide background and provide examples that may help us better understand what the New Testament says.

#### **The book of Joshua**

After Moses died, Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, where God gave them military victories. A woman plays a prominent role in the beginning of the story. Joshua sent two men into Jericho to spy out the city, and they stayed at “the house of a prostitute named Rahab” (Josh. 2:1). [Some people wonder if Rahab was really a prostitute, or merely an innkeeper. But the law of Moses permitted prostitution, and there is no reason to think that this Canaanite woman had a higher standard of morality. The New Testament remembers her as “Rahab the prostitute,” and praises her faith but not her occupation. A person that is exemplary in one area is not necessarily a good model in others.] When the king wanted to arrest the spies, Rahab hid them and lied to the king’s agents.

Rahab then told the spies of her faith in the God of Israel: “I know that the Lord has given this land to you.... The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (verses 9, 11). She asked the Israelites to spare

her, her parents, her siblings, and their families, and the spies agreed. She helped them escape the city and suggested a strategy for them to avoid the Canaanite soldiers. Joshua told his soldiers to spare Rahab and her family when the city was destroyed (6:17, 25).

Whatever Rahab's faults might have been, she was a positive role model because she acknowledged the power of God. The New Testament praises her faith (Heb. 11:31) and her willingness to act on that faith (Jas. 2:25). She married Salmon and became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5). [Although it is possible that Matthew's Rahab is a different woman, it is not likely. Only one Rahab would be known to Matthew's readers, the one mentioned in Joshua.]

## **Judges**

After Joshua died, Israel was ruled by various judges. One judge was a woman. "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading [KJV: judged] Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel...and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided" (Judg. 4:4-5). As prophetess, she had a religious role, and as judge, she had a civil role in a public place. [Since various people came to the Palm of Deborah, it was a public place. Israel did not yet have any official government buildings.]

Even in this patriarchal society, the people looked to her for leadership and wisdom, and the text does not imply any dishonor for Israel in being led by a female. She apparently became a judge because of her role as prophetess (most other judges rose to prominence through military victories).

As a prophetess, she gave orders from God: "She sent for Barak...and said to him, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: "Go, take with you ten thousand men..."'" Barak refused to go unless Deborah went with him, and she agreed, but noted that the honor of victory would then go to a woman

(verse 9).

Sisera, the Canaanite general, gathered his army to attack. Deborah ordered Barak, “Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands” (verse 14). So Barak attacked and killed the Canaanites. Sisera escaped to the tent of Jael, Heber’s wife, who gave him a false sense of safety, then killed him while he slept (verse 21). Deborah and Barak then sang praises to God—a song that at least in parts was composed by Deborah (see 5:7). This is another religious role for her: public worship.

When God gave Deborah his words, she spoke with the highest possible authority. Although God could have led Israel through a man (as he usually did), in this case he chose to give authority to a woman, even though Barak was enough of a leader that he could raise an army of 10,000 men. [Deborah was not working in the tabernacle—she was primarily a civil leader. We should also acknowledge that some of the prophets and judges would not be qualified to be church pastors. God can choose to speak through a young boy, but that does not mean that we should consider boys as likely candidates for ordination (a point made by Bruce McNair in an unpublished paper). We must look to the New Testament for the qualifications of a New Testament office.]

Nevertheless, Deborah set a precedent for women to be able to sing praises in public, for women to tell men what God has commanded (cf. Matt. 28:10), and to have certain kinds of authority, even spiritual authority in some situations. But none of those roles necessitates ordination in the role of elder or pastor.

Another notable woman in Judges is the daughter of Jephthah, a man who made a vow to offer “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites” (11:31). The exact nature of this offering is debated, but the daughter’s willingness to cooperate is not: “My father...you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you

promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies.”

Delilah, another famous woman from the book of Judges, set an example of deceit and betrayal. However, her example was no worse than what Samson did.

Judges 19 tells us about a man and his concubine who spent the night in Gibeah. In a story reminiscent of Sodom, the men of Gibeah wanted to have sexual relations with the man, but he gave them the concubine instead (verses 22-25). They raped and abused her, and she died. The man cut her body into 12 pieces and sent them throughout Israel. The Israelites were outraged at what the people of Gibeah had done and they went to war, nearly exterminating the tribe of Benjamin (20:46-48). Then, to give wives to the surviving Benjamites, they killed everyone in Jabesh Gilead except for the virgin women; then they arranged for other Benjamites to seize women at a festival (21:10-22).”

The book ends with this sad commentary: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (verse 25). In other words, they lacked a king to maintain civil order and promote righteousness. They knew that this behavior, including the mistreatment of women, was scandalous. The text does not tell us which aspects of the sordid story they wanted to correct—but later books show that a king was not the answer to the problem.

## **Ruth**

The book of Ruth provides a positive example from the same time period. Ironically, the example of faith and loyalty was set by a woman from Moab, even though the Torah said that Moabites could not yet become part of the people of Israel (Deut. 23:3). Nevertheless, three generations later, a descendant of that Moabite woman became king of Judah and Israel.

Elimelech and Naomi moved to Moab, and their sons married Moabite women. After Elimelech and his sons died, Naomi and Ruth moved back to

Bethlehem, where the nearest male relative was asked to serve as a “kinsman-redeemer.” As a widow without a male heir, Naomi owned rights to the field of Elimelech, and she could transfer it to the nearest male relative. However, he would also have the obligation to marry Ruth [Naomi was apparently past the age of child-bearing, so Ruth was the only appropriate widow.] in order to create a son for the family of Elimelech, and the field would eventually be given to that son (4:5).

The nearest kinsman did not want that part of the duty, so Boaz (son of Rahab and descendant of Tamar) not only bought the field, he also “acquired Ruth...as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property” (verse 10). So his child, Obed, became the legal inheritor of Elimelech’s land.

Everyone in this story behaves honorably. Naomi is faithful to the family she married into; Ruth has the frequently quoted statement of loyalty to Naomi and her God (1:16-17). Boaz is a model of charity, good manners, and proper conduct. Even though everyone did what was right in their own eyes, some people did what was right—and it was from that family that the king eventually came.

### **Samuel & Kings**

The next book explains how Israel received its first king. The story begins with a woman—Hannah. She desperately wanted a son, and “in bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow” to give her son to God (1:10-11). Eli, the high priest, accused her of being drunk, but she explained what she wanted, and he blessed her. God caused her to have a son, whom she named Samuel (verse 20).

Hannah is an example of a woman of faith, of prayer, of sincerity. She made a vow and kept it—and that became a pivotal moment in Israel’s history. After Samuel was weaned, she took him to the tabernacle, gave him

to Eli, and brought sacrifices and offerings. She prayed again, praising God with a psalm that became part of the Bible and therefore part of Israel's public worship (2:1-10). Hannah had an exemplary relationship with God that did not depend on men, but she did not have a leadership role.

1 Sam. 2:22 mentions women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle, but we do not know what role they had.

Women played a prominent role in the story of David. Like men, they were sometimes good, sometimes bad, and sometimes victims of injustice. Interesting character vignettes can be written for Michal, Abigail, Rizpah, Tamar, and Bathsheba, but they are not relevant to our study about women in leadership. [Bathsheba played a key role in ensuring that Solomon would inherit the throne, but the story does not portray *public* leadership.]

The Queen of Sheba was a female leader in her own nation, and there is no hint in the Bible that her leadership was in any way inappropriate (1 Kings 10). [If the king was alive, then the queen was serving as an important emissary to the most powerful nation in the area.]

The widow of Zarephath was an exemplary woman from the region of Sidon. She fed the prophet Elijah, swore by the name of God, and received her son back from the dead (1 Kings 17). Similarly, the wealthy woman of Shunem gave Elisha room and board, and also received her son back from the dead (2 Kings 4).

Jezebel, also from Sidon, set an opposite example—of Baal worship, theft and murder. As queen of Israel, she was an influential civil and religious leader for evil. In the same way, Athaliah (although originally from Israel) usurped the throne in Judah and ruled for six years (2 Kings 11).

An example of good religious influence was given by Huldah, a prophetess. When Josiah's workers found the book of the law and saw that they had violated the covenant with God, they asked Huldah about what they



had found in the book, and she prophesied, giving authoritative words to the high priest and several men (2 Kings 22:14-20). There was nothing inappropriate about asking a woman about the Bible. Even though Jeremiah was then alive, he lived further away than Huldah did. The word of God delivered through a respected older woman, a prophetess, was authoritative.

Later, a woman named Noadiah was hired to prophesy against Nehemiah (Neh. 6:14). Although she was a false prophetess, the fact that she was hired—and her name is mentioned—shows that the people respected the word of a prophetess just as much as the word of a prophet. Women in ancient Israel had less authority when it came to laws, customs, and Levitical worship, but they had equal authority when it came to prophecy. [False prophetesses are also mentioned in Ezek. 13:17-24; Isa. 8:3 mentions a true prophetess.]

### **Other books**

The book of Psalms is almost entirely written from a male (often a warrior's) perspective. When women are portrayed, they are usually mothers, and rarely in the role of worship. Psalm 68:11 is an exception: "The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news [of military victory] are a great host" (verse 11). [Jewish Publication Society translation; some modern translations obscure the fact that the Hebrew word for "host" is in a feminine form.] Women played tambourines in the worship processions (verse 24-25; cf. 148:12-13). [The female singers mentioned in Ezra 2:65 were probably part of the temple choir.]

In Proverbs, women are used to symbolize wisdom (the Hebrew word for "wisdom" is feminine [This in itself suggests that the Israelites did not view women as inherently gullible. Wise women are mentioned in 2 Sam. 14:2-20 and 20:16-22.] ), and are also used to symbolize folly and sin. The Proverbs 31 woman shows that Hebrew society praised highly competent women who were able to teach — but the context is in the family, not the religious

assembly.

Near the end of the biblical period, approximately 478 b.c., a Jewish woman became queen in Persia. Although Esther hid her ethnic identity for a while, she eventually revealed it and thereby saved her people from genocide. However, she had limited formal authority. She was given access to the king only as a special favor, and the official decrees were his. However, she and Mordecai wrote an authoritative letter requiring Jews in the Persian Empire to celebrate a festival (Esther 9:29). “Esther’s decree confirmed these regulations about Purim” (verse 32). She had authority over the Jewish people to institute a new religious festival.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible provides some excellent models for women of faith, as well as some examples to avoid. Some of these involve a woman’s personal relationship with God, and others involve a more public role, including leadership. For our study, the following are notable:

- As prophetess, Deborah spoke the word of God, giving an authoritative message to Barak. Huldah the prophetess gave the king an authoritative message based on Scripture. These women had spiritual authority.
- Deborah wrote a worship song and sang it in public; women were later involved in music at the temple.
- As judge, Deborah had civil authority; Esther also had authority over the Jews.
- These women were given authority by God, and the Bible does not imply that there was anything inappropriate about a female having these roles, even though it was not common for women to have these roles.

However, the New Testament church is a different social and spiritual reality, and it may have different rules about roles. Our next study will examine the ministry of Jesus and the early church.

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## 6

### **Women in the Ministry of Jesus**

Conservative and liberal commentators are generally agreed on this: Jesus treated women well—despite the male-dominated culture in which he lived. He treated them respectfully, was sensitive to their needs, used them as good examples of faith, and included them in his ministry in several important ways. Nevertheless, when it came time to name 12 apostles, Jesus included only men. This fact is an important part of the debate about whether women may lead in the church today.

Women are prominent in the story of Jesus—he was born of a woman, had numerous interactions with women, and was seen first by women after his resurrection. Although these incidents do not tell us much about women *in leadership*, we will survey the Gospels to see 1) what Jesus taught about women, 2) how he interacted with women, and 3) why the apostles were all men.

#### **Jesus' teaching about marriage**

As far as the Gospels report, Jesus did not teach on male and female roles. [Stanley Grenz writes, “Jesus gave no explicit teaching on the role of women in the church. In fact, he left no teaching at all concerning women as a class of people.... He treated every woman he met as a person in her own right” (*Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* [InterVarsity, 1995], 71).] He never explicitly taught women to submit to men, nor did he explicitly say that they were equal in every way. [“Jesus stopped short of ever making any explicit pronouncements about the equality of men and women (even to the extent that Paul does in Galatians 3:28), to say nothing of attempting to overthrow sociocultural conventions on gender roles.... Jesus cannot fairly be co-opted for modern liberationist or egalitarian agendas.... Neither the Gospels nor the book of Acts can prove decisive in

answering the question of whether the first generation of Christians in general or Paul in particular reserved any leadership roles for men. For that one must turn to Paul's writings themselves" (Craig Blomberg, "Neither Hierarchalist Nor Egalitarian: Gender Roles in Paul," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 335-37).]

However, he did teach about marriage. Some religious leaders asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Matt. 19:3). The question concerned the interpretation of Deut. 24:1, which says, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce..." Some rabbis thought that a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him in any way; others thought a man could divorce only if the wife did something indecent.

Jesus responded by quoting Genesis, basically saying that God intended marriage to last for life, and people should not break their vows. Moses allowed divorce, even for "indecency," because the people had hard hearts (Matt. 19:8). Jesus was surprisingly strict: "Anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" (verse 9 combined with Mark 10:11-12). [Under Old Testament law, an adulterous wife would have been stoned. 1 Cor. 7 implies that additional exceptions are sometimes appropriate. However, this is not the place to discuss the ethics of divorce and remarriage. Those who want a more detailed discussion of this issue should see two papers on our website. See <http://www.gci.org/ethics/divorce> and <http://www.gci.org/ethics/divorce2>.]

In the Jewish world, only men could initiate divorce, and women were at a disadvantage. Jesus was removing this male advantage. Further, he said that

*men* could be guilty of adultery if they married another woman—something the laws of Moses did not say. This response dismayed the disciples, and Jesus responded that celibacy was an honorable option for some (verse 12). As Mark 10:12 makes clear, the prohibition on divorce applies equally to women (Roman law allowed women to initiate divorce).

Tom Schreiner writes, “Jesus upheld the dignity of women by speaking out against divorce, which particularly injured women in the ancient world.” [Thomas R. Schreiner, “Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001), 185.] James Borland notes, “In his treatment of divorce...Jesus clearly regards women not as property but as persons. They have legitimate rights and should be respected.” [James A. Borland, “Women in the Life and Teachings of Jesus,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Crossway, 1991), 115.]

Jesus also commented on male-female relations in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Again, Jesus was saying that *men* could commit adultery; although the law of Moses did not prohibit all extramarital affairs, Jesus said it was adultery to even desire another woman, whether she was married or not. Jewish rabbis were well aware of lust, but they usually blamed the women for being seductive. Jesus blamed the man, and the solution to lust is not to restrict women, [“The approach most often taken by rabbinic Judaism to sexual temptation seems to have been the reduction to a minimum of any sort of contact between the sexes” (James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan, 1981], 64). Hurley’s book was an influential scholarly presentation of the conservative position, and has recently been reprinted by Wipf & Stock. Examples of rabbinic teaching:

- “He that talks much with women brings evil upon himself” (*mAb.* 1.5;

cf. *Ned.* 20a)

- “These are the women that may be put away without giving them their dowry: a wife that transgresses the law of Moses and Jewish custom, or if she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man” (*mKet.* 7:6).

The social reality was probably that men did not talk with women unless necessary—see the disciples’ surprise to find Jesus talking with a woman (John 4:27). In this discussion, we do not want to portray Judaism as bad or backwards—in its attitude toward women, it was average for its time. Greek authors generally had worse attitudes, Latin authors slightly better.] but for men to restrict their own thoughts (verse 29).

Although this teaching is stated for a male, as rules usually were, we believe that it also applies to females. That is, a woman who looks lustfully at a man has also committed adultery in the heart, and the best solution is not to segregate the sexes but to control the thoughts.

Last, Jesus mentioned that marriage is not applicable to the age to come (Mark 12:25). This does not explicitly say that males and females will be equal, but that is the probable implication.

### **Women as positive spiritual examples**

“Women were employed by Jesus quite freely as illustrations in His teaching,” Borland notes. [117.] “This is in stark contrast to the rabbis of the day. One looks in vain in their teachings for even one story or sermon illustration that mentions women,” Linda Belleville adds. [*Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Baker, 1999), 48.] In many of Jesus’ illustrations, women are presented as positive role models of faith, which men should follow. For example:

- The Queen of the south, who was wiser than the first-century Jews (Matt 12:42)
- The woman mixing yeast into dough (Matt. 13:33), who is presented as

an illustration of the way that the kingdom of God works [Some scholars interpret the yeast as a bad thing, like tares in the wheat, but most scholars conclude that the parable of the yeast is intended to portray the growth of the kingdom in good ways.]

- Women working when Christ returns, some of who are ready and others are not (Matt. 24:41)
- Ten virgins, of whom five were prepared and five were not (Matt 25:1-13)
- The widow of Zarephath, whom Jesus used as an example of a Gentile that God favored (Luke 4:26)
- The woman who found the coin she had lost (Luke 15:8-10). In this parable the woman plays the role of God, just as the shepherd did in the preceding parable and the father does in the following parable. [Jesus cast himself in the role of a female when he compared himself to a mother hen (Matt. 23:37).]
- A persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), a model for disciples to imitate in prayer
- A widow who gave everything she had (Luke 21:1-4).
- In Luke 11, an anonymous woman called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you” (verse 27). Jesus did not deny that his own mother was blessed, but he said that the real blessing is given to “those who hear the word of God and obey it” (verse 28). A woman’s spiritual worth is based on her response to God, not in performing biological functions. Women are saved by faith, not by bearing children.

“Jesus did two important things” for this woman, Borland writes. “He gave her His undivided attention by listening to her comment, and He mildly corrected her and pointed her toward further spiritual understanding.... Jesus does not deny His mother’s place of importance, but goes beyond it to a wider spiritual truth.” [Borland, 116.]

“Christ never belittled the role of a mother,” JoAnn Davidson observes,



but he “refused to limit a woman’s horizon to nurturing family and cooking.” [ “Women in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Andrews University Press, 1998), 175.]

Jesus made a similar point when people told him that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him (Matt. 12:47). He replied that the disciples were his real family: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (verses 49-50). Spiritual response is more important than biological origin. Jesus expanded the response to include “sister,” even though the original comment did not mention sisters; by doing so he implied that women were spiritually on an equal footing with men.

Shortly before Jesus was arrested and killed, a woman [John 12:3 identifies her as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Luke 7 may report a different anointing.] anointed him with a large amount of expensive perfume. The disciples grumbled about the expense, but Jesus praised the woman: “She has done a beautiful thing to me.... I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Matt. 26:10, 13). What she did is a great illustration for *all* disciples: unrestrained devotion. Jesus said to the woman who anointed him, “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50), and the fact that this story is preserved in the Gospels means that her faith is an example to us today.

Similarly, a Canaanite woman was praised for having great faith (Matt. 15:28). [Jesus’ initial reluctance to help the woman had nothing to do with her sex—it was simply that she was a Gentile. Jesus would have known about her faith from the start, but went through the conversation to help the disciples realize that it was right to heal a Gentile.] As a non-Israelite, she had no claim to any favors from him, but she appealed for grace and mercy. Hurley writes, “He shows respect for the faith of this woman and for her argument. He took women seriously.” [Hurley, 85.]

## Women in the ministry of Jesus

James Hurley writes, “The most striking thing about the role of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is the simple fact that they are there. [Borland agrees: “Jesus regularly addressed women directly while in public. This was unusual for a man to do” (114).] Although the gospel texts contain no special sayings repudiating the view of the day about women, their uniform testimony to the presence of women among the followers of Jesus and to his serious teaching of them constitutes a break with tradition which has been described as being ‘without precedent in [then] contemporary Judaism.’” [James Hurley, 82-83, citing W. Forster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (London, 1964), 124. Some example of Jewish views of women:

- “Any iniquity is small compared to a woman’s iniquity.... From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Sirach 25:19, 24; 2nd century B.C.).
- “Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace” (Sirach 42:14).
- “The woman is inferior to the man in every way” (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:201).
- “A hundred women are no better than two men” (Talmud, *Ber.* 45b) Although the Talmud was written well after the New Testament, in this case it is probably in agreement with first-century attitudes.
- “A man is required to say the following three blessings every day: ‘Blessed are you who have not made me a heathen, who have not made me a woman, who has not made me illiterate” (*bMen.* 43b; *Ber.* 7.18).
- “There is no wisdom in woman except with the spindle” (*bYom.* 66b).]

As Schreiner says, “Jesus treated women with dignity and respect and he elevated them in a world where they were often mistreated.” [Schreiner, 184.] Hurley writes that Jesus did not perceive women “primarily in terms of their

sex, age or marital status; he seems to have considered them in terms of their relation (or lack of one) to God.” [Hurley, 83.] Borland’s summary is a good one:

Numerous healings and the casting out of demons from women display Jesus’ care and concern for women. Several such incidents are only briefly recorded. Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law and allowed her in return to minister to Him (Mark 1:30-31; Matthew 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39). Jesus also was concerned for a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-15). He met her as she was weeping just before burying her only son. With compassion, He spoke to her and raised her son to life.

Later, Christ healed a woman who was hopelessly bent over for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17). Courageously, on the Sabbath and inside the synagogue before hostile religious leaders, Jesus helped and defended this poor woman. He spoke to her, tenderly placed His hands on her, and caused her to stand erect, for which she glorified God. He then acknowledged her equal standing with men in Israel’s religious heritage by referring to her as a daughter of Abraham (cf. John 8:33, 39). [Borland, 115.]

Sheila Graham writes,

Jesus’ honor and respect was...extended to all women—an attitude largely unexpected and unknown in his culture and time. Jesus, unlike the men of his generation and culture, taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God. Women could receive God’s forgiveness and grace. Women, as well as men, could be among Christ’s personal followers. Women could be full participants in the kingdom of God.... These were revolutionary ideas. Many of his contemporaries, including his disciples, were shocked. [“Jesus and Women,” *The Plain Truth* (July 1994): 15, available on our website at <http://www.gci.org/jesus/women>].

**Elizabeth**

We begin our brief survey of women in the ministry of Jesus with a woman whose role occurred before Jesus was born. Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah, was noted to be “upright in the sight of God” and fully obedient (Luke 1:6). [Luke may have stressed this because some people might assume that sin had caused Elizabeth to be barren. She refers to the “disgrace” of being barren in verse 25.] When Mary visited Elizabeth, “the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” and pronounced a blessing on Mary—words that are now part of Scripture (verses 41-45).

### **Mary**

The mother of Jesus set a marvelous example with her words, “I am the Lord’s servant.... May it be to me as you have said” (verse 38). Mary was also inspired to say a poem of praise that is now part of Scripture (verses 46-55). She again set a good example when she “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (2:19, 51). She was instrumental in Jesus’ first public miracle (John 2:1-11). She may have been among the “family” who thought that Jesus had lost his sanity (Mark 3:21). At the cross, Jesus assigned John to take care of his mother, and Mary was counted among the disciples after his resurrection (Acts 1:14).

Borland writes, “The woman whom God chose to have the most extensive association with Jesus was His mother, Mary.... Mary’s life was significant for at least three reasons. (1) She was a first-hand witness of Jesus’ divine origin and true humanity. (2) She was a tremendous model of godliness, faith, dedication, and patience, among other good qualities. (3) She, along with other women, was incorporated into the new life of the church at Pentecost.” [Borland, 118-119.]

### **Anna**

When Jesus was taken to the temple to be dedicated, an elderly prophetess

named Anna “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). Unfortunately, we do not know what she said or how she spread the news.

### **Mary and Martha**

Although the rabbis said that men should not talk with women, Jesus counted women among his friends. “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5). Once when Jesus was visiting Bethany, “a woman named Martha opened her home to him” (Luke 10:38). Since Martha owned a home; she may have been a widow. Her sister Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said” (verse 39). But Martha was busy preparing the meal, and asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her.

The rabbis said that women should not be taught the Torah, [“It is better that the words of the Law should be burned than that they should be given to a woman” (*jSot.* 3.4; 19a). “If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery” (*bSot.* 4.3).] so Mary was shirking a typically female role in order to do something that was normally restricted to males. But Jesus did not “put her in her place.” Rather, he said that she had chosen the right place at the time. “Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (verse 42). Spiritual growth is more important than domestic duties. [This does not mean that domestic duties should never be done. Jesus himself washed feet and cooked fish. Jesus never assigned (nor does the Bible assign) domestic duties to women only.]

Borland notes, “Jesus did not order [Martha] to stop serving but gently corrected her attitude about Mary.” [119.] Graham writes, “Jesus did not feel that women’s work—or men’s work, for that matter—wasn’t important. He was not saying it is wrong to be diligent and careful about our responsibilities. Christ was saying we should get our priorities straight.

Women were called to be disciples of Jesus, just as men were, and women were expected to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, just as men were.” [16-17.]

Borland further notes that Mary set a great example for all of us today:

Women are to learn and apply the Word of God. This is vitally important. But actually, the application is much broader.... Every believer must make countless decisions throughout life, constantly choosing to act as a pupil with Jesus as the teacher. It does not mean that other duties or Christian graces are to be ignored, but it does imply that some things...are more important than other things. There are no role distinctions for learning from Christ. [Borland, 118.]

In that incident, Mary set a better example than Martha did. But Borland notes that Martha should be remembered for another incident as well: “On a later visit of Jesus to Bethany, it was Martha who was taught by Jesus while Mary sat in the house (John 11:20).... Martha gave a superb confession about Christ, saying, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world’ (John 11:27, nkjv).” [Borland, 118.]

### **Samaritan woman at the well**

“The conversation with the woman at the well is the longest recorded discussion Jesus had with anyone—and she, a Gentile woman.” [Davidson, 173.] Further, the lesson Jesus gave her about living water was just as profound as the lesson he gave Nicodemus—and the woman had a better response. Unlike Nicodemus, she was willing to be associated with Jesus. She told her neighbors about Jesus, and many of them believed in Jesus “because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:28-29, 39).

Davidson observes that this implies something *positive* about the reputation of the woman in the community: “It is unlikely that the men of a town would believe a prostitute’s word about the Messiah or anybody, and go openly with her to see him. Perhaps this woman has not been given due credit

for her true social position in Samaria. The narrative seems to indicate that she was a knowledgeable, informed woman. Her discourse with Christ reveals an intelligent familiarity with the foremost theological issues of the day.” [Davidson, 173. Scholars often assume that the woman was immoral. She had five previous husbands, yes, but they may have died or divorced her due to no fault of her own. She was not married to the man she was living with, but the law of Moses did not regulate the sexual behavior of unmarried nonvirgins.]

### **A daughter of Abraham**

When Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, a woman who had been crippled for 18 years came in, and Jesus healed her (Luke 13:10-13). The synagogue ruler criticized Jesus, but Jesus defended himself, saying that the woman was “a daughter of Abraham” (verse 16).

Graham writes, “Before his most venomous critics, Jesus publicly showed his concern and high regard for this woman, someone whom others had probably seen for years as she struggled in her affliction to come to the synagogue to worship God. Someone whom they may well have shunned because she was a woman and because she was disabled.” [Graham, 18.] By using the rare phrase “daughter of Abraham,” Jesus was reminding the people that women were also among the descendants of Abraham and eligible for the blessings.

### **Joanna and Susanna**

Luke tells us that several women who had been healed helped support Jesus “out of their own means” (Luke 8:3). These included “Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others.” [Mary Magdalene is also mentioned, but we will discuss her separately.] Although they were probably involved in meal preparation, Luke indicates that their most significant role was to pay the bills.

Graham writes,

Some of these women—possibly widows—had control of their own finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported. Although Christ worked with the cultural traditions of the first century, he ignored the limitations that had been placed on women by their culture. Women were free to follow him and to take part in his ministry to the world. [18.]

Belleville further observes,

They are the *only* supporters mentioned. Also, they did not merely write a check to cover the expenses but accompanied Jesus and the Twelve as they traveled from place to place.... Jesus welcomed women among his traveling coterie, allowing them to make the same radical commitment in following him that the Twelve did.... That married women would be traveling with Jesus' group is striking indeed." [51.]

"Jesus expected men and women to mix freely," Mary Evans writes. [Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (InterVarsity, 1983), 47.] The solution to lust was not to segregate women, but for men to control themselves.

Matt. 27:55-56 also mentions that "many women...had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" (Mark 15:41 reports that her name was Salome). Luke 23:27 reports that many women from Jerusalem followed him after his arrest, and he turned to them and taught them, saying that even worse times would come for Jerusalem.

### **A woman with bleeding**

While Jesus was on his way to the home of Jairus, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years touched him, and was healed (Mark 5:22-29). She was afraid that Jesus would be angry (rabbis normally avoided women, especially unclean ones), but Jesus was not angry. He said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you" (verse 34)—addressing her with a term



of affection and publicly praising her faith. Similarly, Jesus was not afraid of touching the other unclean daughter, the dead child of Jairus (verse 41).

### **Mary Magdalene**

Luke tells us that Mary of Magdala had seven demons cast out of her (Luke 8:2), but Mary should be better known as the first to see the empty tomb, the first to carry the good news to the disciples. Graham writes:

Mary is almost always mentioned first in a list of the female disciples of Jesus Christ. She may have been one of the leaders of that group of women who followed Jesus from the outset of his ministry in Galilee to his death and afterward. The risen Jesus appeared to her first. It's ironic that in a time when women could not be legal witnesses, Jesus Christ chose women as the first witnesses of his resurrection. [Graham, 15. Josephus wrote, "From women let no evidence be accepted because of the levity and temerity of their sex" (*Antiquities* 4:219).]

Although the men fled for their lives, the women faithfully followed Jesus to the cross (Matt. 27:55-56), and Mary sat nearby while Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus' body in the tomb (verse 61). Mary led the women who came to anoint Jesus early on Sunday morning (Mark 16:2), and an angel told them that Jesus had been raised (verse 6). They then told the news to the 11 disciples (Luke 24:10). Jesus appeared first to Mary (John 20:14), and told her to tell the disciples, which she did (verses 17-18).

Schreiner writes, "Even though the testimony of women was not received by courts...Jesus appeared to women first, showing again their significance and value as human beings. [Schreiner, 185-86. However, Evans writes, "It would be a mistake to over-emphasize the point, as it is quite possible that the women received the message first simply because they happen to have been there first" (p. 54).] Borland, another conservative, comments on the significance:

Why were the women chosen as witnesses of the

resurrection? Was God bestowing a special honor on these women? Was God trying to indicate larger roles for women in His new community of believers? I believe both were intended. All four Gospel writers bestow a great honor on the women who lovingly and with servant hearts came early to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, thus paying their last respects.... These women led the way in proclaiming the gospel.... The duty and high privilege of witnessing for Christ is still open to every believer, without distinction as to gender. [Borland, 120.]

Some scholars have noted that the women were told to bear witness to the fact that Jesus had risen—and this is one of the criteria for an apostle (Acts 1:22). But there is no evidence that any of these women ever functioned as witnesses of the resurrection in the public preaching of the church. Although their role in the resurrection was an important precedent for women speaking with authority, it was a restricted role for a specific need within the church.

### **The all-male apostles**

As the evidence above indicates, scholars are generally agreed that Jesus treated women with respect, as people of the same spiritual significance as men. On this point, scholars who favor women's ordination are agreed with those who oppose it. There is one significant aspect of Jesus' ministry on which they do not agree, and that is the implications of the fact that Jesus chose only men to be among the Twelve. For example, James Borland writes that Jesus

demonstrated a clear role distinction between men and women. Nowhere is this issue seen more clearly than in Jesus' selection of only men for the role of apostle.... When moral issues were at stake, Jesus did not bend to cultural pressure. It was not social custom or cultural pressure that caused Jesus to appoint an all-male group of apostles. Had He so desired, He could easily have appointed six men and their wives as apostles....

Jewish culture did accept women into positions of leadership. Just three decades before Herod the Great took over as king, Israel was ruled for years by Queen Alexandra. The fact that an occasional judge (Deborah, Judges 4-5), or ruler (Athaliah, 2 Kings 11:3) was a woman also demonstrates that female leadership was possible. [Borland, 120-21.]

Since Jesus was willing to break social customs, and Jewish culture sometimes allowed female leaders, Jesus must have had a good reason to choose only men—and that reason, Borland argues, is because church leaders should all be men. “Even though many women have excellent leadership qualities, God still has clear role distinctions in mind when apostleship and eldership are considered.” [Ibid.]

However, egalitarians respond that not only were the apostles all men, they were also all Jewish, and that indicates a cultural limitation that does not apply to church leadership today. Jesus did not pick any Samaritan men to be apostles, either, because of the cultural limitations he worked in.

The Jewishness of the disciples was necessitated by a theological fact: Jesus was sent only to the Jews (Matt. 15:24), and we have good biblical reasons for understanding that to be a temporary limitation. The Bible shows that the church began as all Jewish; it is no surprise that the leaders were all Jewish.

However, Borland points out an important fact: “The church did not start as all male and then later become both male and female. Christ’s followers were both male and female from the beginning,” and yet women were not chosen as leaders. Second, unlike the all-Jewish leadership, “male leadership was perpetuated by those whom Christ initially taught, trained, and to whom He committed the future leadership of His church.” [Borland, 121. Here he cites Acts 1:21; and 6:3, both of which specify males. We also note that Acts 6:3 calls for males even though the immediate need was for people to

minister to women.]

### **Twelve Jewish men**

When Jesus chose only men as apostles, was he reflecting a permanent restriction on leadership within the church, or was it due to a temporary need? Jesus was willing to teach women in public and in private, and women were among his disciples, but he did not include them in the Twelve. There *are* good reasons not to have a Gentile in the Twelve, but why not any women?

Some egalitarians have answered that Jesus was limited by his culture, but as Borland noted, it seems unlikely that Jesus, who broke many religious conventions, was that limited by his culture.

However, Jesus did not challenge *all* the imperfect social customs of his day. He did not attack the Roman government, nor the custom of slavery. Instead, he used slaves in some of his parables without even a hint that such a custom was anything less than what God wanted. Yes, Jesus was willing to challenge culture on certain points, but we cannot assume that he agreed with everything that he let stand. Nevertheless, we must agree that when it came to choosing disciples, Jesus had an opportunity to challenge culture, but did not. He treated women as equals in other respects, but not for being in the Twelve.

Egalitarians often argue that equal worth requires equal access to all roles, but that does not seem to be a valid assumption. The Christian who has the gift of leadership is not more valuable to God than a Christian with the gift of service. One gift is more valuable for certain *functions* of the church than the other gift is, but the persons are of equal value even though the same *roles* are not open to both. The example of Jesus shows that at least in certain situations it is not a sin to discriminate on the basis of gender when choosing church leaders.

Borland summarizes the argument: “We can conclude that in the choice of the twelve apostles...in the pattern of male leadership followed by those whom Jesus taught most closely, and even in the twelve names inscribed on the foundations of the heavenly city, Jesus clearly affirmed an abiding role distinction between men and women and an abiding leadership role for men.” [Borland, 122.]

John Piper and Wayne Grudem write, “We would *not* argue that merely because Jesus chose twelve men to be His authoritative apostles, Jesus must have favored an eldership of only men in the church. But this argument would be at least as valid as arguing that anything else Jesus did means He would *oppose* an eldership of all men.” [John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 67-68, italics added.] In other words, Jesus didn’t directly *talk* about eldership, but what he *did* supports the conservative conclusion. Schreiner writes, “A male apostolate does not prove that women should not serve as leaders, but when combined with the other evidence, it does serve as confirmatory evidence for the complementarian view.” [Schreiner, 196.]

However, there is another factor to consider: the disciples were not only all Jewish, there were exactly 12. When there were only 11, Peter said that it was necessary to bring the number back to 12 (Acts 1:22). Jesus was forming a new people of God, and the 12 disciples represented the 12 tribes of Israel, and for that reason they had to be 12 men. [Davidson, 176, citing Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Women in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 123. The weakness in this explanation is that the disciples were not one from each tribe, and if they did not accurately represent the 12 patriarchs in genealogy, then it could be argued that they did not have to be accurate in gender, either. But the conclusion is still the same: Since one factor is obsolete, the other may be as well. Whether it is obsolete must be discerned

from the epistles.] For the symbolism of this group, it was necessary for Jesus to discriminate against Gentiles and women. One of the discriminating factors is now obsolete, so it is possible for the other to be obsolete, too. The example set by Jesus in this matter is therefore of uncertain significance.

Belleville comments on the biblical symbolism:

Twelve Jewish males...represent the twelve tribes and their patriarchal heads. It is the twelve apostles who will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). The new Jerusalem will have twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve foundations, and on them the names of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:12, 14). It is important not to make a leap from the twelve apostles to male leadership in the church. The leap, instead, should be from twelve apostles to the [entire] church of Jesus Christ. It is not male leaders who will serve as judges in the future, nor, for that matter, is it female leaders. "Do you not know," Paul says, "that *the saints* will judge the world?... Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Cor. 6:2-3). [Belleville, 149.]

Further, the 12 apostles do not set a pattern for future church leadership. ["The Twelve did not constitute or provide the model or framework for leadership or authority in the early church, apart from the very earliest days in the Jerusalem church" (David Scholer, "Women," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [ed. Joel Green et al.; InterVarsity, 1992], 886).] After James was killed, there was no effort to bring the number back to 12. We should not assume that the choice of 12 male Jewish apostles constituted a pattern for future church leaders—we know that it did not establish a pattern in its number or its ethnicity, so we should be open to the possibility that it did not establish a pattern in gender, either. We need to see what the church actually taught about leadership, and what women actually did in the early church.

## **Summary**

In scholarly debates about the ordination of women, scholars on both

sides of the question often try to argue that *every* bit of evidence supports their particular view, and in some cases it seems that they try to make particular scriptures say something they do not clearly say.

Instead, it seems better to acknowledge that some aspects of the argument lean one way, and some lean the other, and we hope that this admission allows us to look at the evidence more objectively, allowing each verse or passage to convey its own message. Here we can summarize some of what we have found in this and previous studies:

- In Genesis 1, men and women alike are made in the image of God, thus favoring but not proving the egalitarian view.
- In Genesis 2, conservatives have a reasonable (although not conclusive) argument that the man was created before the woman and therefore may have authority.
- In Genesis 3, man's dominance over woman is presented as part of the consequence of sin, suggesting that such dominance was not God's original intent.
- In the Old Testament in general, women sometimes shouldered civil leadership roles and sometimes spoke the word of God, which by definition is authoritative. This favors the egalitarian view. However, women were never in the priesthood, supporting the conservative view that God does not allow females to have certain religious roles.

The example of Jesus challenges the view that women are subordinate, but it does not specifically address gender roles in the church. Conservatives are supported by the fact that Jesus *did* make gender distinctions in selecting only males as apostles, but as conservative scholars admit, this does not conclusively prove their view that women may not serve as elders, for other explanations are possible as to why Jesus chose 12 Jewish men as apostles.

In coming chapters, we will turn our attention to what actually happened in the early church, and what the rest of the New Testament says about women in the church.

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## **Women in the early church**

In the following chapter, we survey biblical evidence on the role of women in the apostolic church. We will see that in the New Testament, various women are named as having key roles within the work of the church, but few are given titles, just as few men are given titles. All this evidence is (as we expected from the start) inconclusive for our ultimate goal, which is to decide whether the Bible prohibits or allows women to be ordained as elders in the church.

Let us say a few words about why our study has spent so much time on what seems to be inconclusive research. Although various believers (on both sides of the question) would like for us to “cut to the chase” and deal with the controversial texts first, we believe it would be a disservice to the church and to the question itself for us to do that. It would place readers in the position of having to react to the conclusion without having walked through the steps by which that conclusion was reached.

For example, if we had started with a text such as 1 Timothy 2:12 (which many people *do* see as conclusive), we would still need to confront a whole host of questions: What about Genesis, and what about Deborah, and what about women in the ministry of Jesus? We would still need to deal with all the auxiliary questions anyway, so we thought it best to survey the entire Bible before we focus on specific passages. The question concerns not merely one verse, but the whole message of the Bible.

Further, we cannot conclude whether various bits of evidence are relevant until we have actually studied them. We are sharing this learning process with you so that you can study along with us. This will help people see that the various questions *are* being considered.

The evidence that seems irrelevant to one person is sometimes considered

important by another. You may have no questions about Phoebe, for example, but our chapter needs to deal with her because other people *do* raise questions about her. Therefore, we hope that you are studying along with us.

Women were important in the leadership of the early church, but the Bible does not give us as many specifics as we might like. In many cases we have to read between the lines to see the role that they had. This chapter will survey the evidence in Acts and the epistles. Some of the more controversial passages (1 Cor. 11, 14, and 1 Tim. 2) will be dealt with in later chapters.

## **Acts**

Although Acts is traditionally called “the Acts of the Apostles,” it ignores most of the apostles, focusing instead on Peter and Paul. In keeping with that focus, we catch only brief glimpses of the roles of women in the church, just as we catch only glimpses of John and others.

The first mention of women comes in Acts 1:14, which states that the original nucleus of the church included the apostles, “along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” “The women” may refer to wives of the apostles, or to the women who followed Jesus (see Luke 8:2-3, for examples).

The next mention comes in Acts 2. The disciples were meeting on the day of Pentecost, and “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues” (verse 4). [We have no compelling reason to conclude that the women were absent at this Pentecost meeting. Acts 1:14 says that men and women “joined constantly in prayer.”]

Peter explained to the crowd that this happened in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams, even on my servants, both men and women, will I pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (verses 17-

18).

In this early church meeting, God was causing women to speak in tongues and prophecy in a place where men and women had gathered to pray and worship. Nevertheless, women are not portrayed as public speakers in the remainder of Acts. Jewish and Greco-Roman society had few if any precedents for women to speak in public settings. The attitudes of Jewish men toward women can be seen in the fact that they did not permit women to testify in court. It is therefore not likely that men would view female preachers as credible sources for new religious ideas. Because of those attitudes, women had to support the gospel in other ways.

In one place, Luke describes the growth of the church in terms of “the number of men” (4:4); in another place he mentions both “men and women” (5:14). [This might be explained by the fact that Luke was not there and had to rely on sources. The source for the earlier number may have been a count of men, and Luke did not speculate on what the total number of people might be. But when he wrote Acts 5:14, he was describing growth in his own words, and so he mentioned women.]

Some of the women were widows who depended on support from the church. When Greek-speaking widows were neglected in the daily distributions, seven men with Greek names were chosen to resolve the problem (6:1-6). Luke tells us that the apostles asked specifically for men (verse 3), but we do not see any theological reason to prohibit women from being in charge of a widow-assistance program. We conclude that the apostles asked for men due to sociological reasons.

We next hear of women when Luke tells us that Saul “dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (8:3; 9:2; 22:4). In a society that often ignored women and probably did not have prisons for women, it is striking that Luke tells us three times that Saul persecuted women as well as men.

Saul apparently viewed Christian women as a serious threat to Jewish orthodoxy, probably because they were spreading the gospel to other women.

In Samaria, “both men and women” believed and were baptized (8:12). In Joppa, God used Peter to raise a hard-working disciple named Tabitha back to life (9:36-41). In Jerusalem, the disciples gathered for prayer at the home of Mary the mother of John Mark (12:12). Mary was apparently a widow who owned her own property and was wealthy enough to have a servant girl (verse 13).

After Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch, “the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region” (13:50). Here the women were influential as enemies of the gospel.

In Philippi, women came to the “place of prayer” outside the city (16:13). A wealthy woman named Lydia became a believer and “invited us to her home” (verse 15). Paul and his companions stayed there for some time, accepting her hospitality. [In ancient terminology, Lydia was a patron, with the traveling evangelists as her clients. It was common for wealthy people to support traveling teachers with room, board and salary.]

After Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl, he was beaten, thrown into jail, rescued by an earthquake, and befriended by the jailer. Shortly before Paul and Silas left the city, “they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them” (verse 40). The group of disciples had grown to include men, and the new church met at Lydia’s house. Since Lydia had a successful business and owned the meeting location, it is probably safe to say that she was influential in the church, but Luke does not give her a formal title.

In Thessalonica, Paul preached in the synagogue, persuading some of the Jews and “a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent

women” (17:4, 12). (Ancient writers say that women were socially more prominent in Macedonia than in other parts of Greece. [Craig Keener writes, “It is possible that Philippi allowed more prominence to women because of traditional customs in that region” (*Paul, Women, and Wives* [Hendrickson, 1992], 243). Gordon Fee writes, “Macedonia was well-known as an exception to the norm; from way back women held significant positions in public life” (*Listening to the Spirit in the Text* [Eerdmans, 2000], 73, citing W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization* [World, 1952], 98-99).] ) In Athens, a woman named Damaris became a believer (verse 34).

In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had been forced to leave Rome. They were tentmakers, and Paul worked with them for a while (18:3). They traveled to Ephesus with Paul (verse 19). After Apollos came to Ephesus, “Priscilla and Aquila...invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (verse 26).

When both husband and wife are named in Greek writings, the man is usually named first. Most Protestant scholars conclude that Luke, by naming Priscilla first, is indicating that she was the more prominent of the two. [They are named three times in Acts and three times in Paul’s letters. Priscilla is named first four of those times. Conservative James Hurley writes, “Commentators have, I suspect correctly, inferred that she was the more prominent” (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan, 1981], 119). But John Piper and Wayne Grudem do not agree (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Crossway, 1991], 69).] This suggests that Priscilla was an excellent teacher, well versed in Christian doctrine, but it does not say whether a woman may have a public teaching role.

Luke mentions that four daughters of Philip prophesied (21:9), presumably on a regular basis, but we do not know where or how they prophesied.

## Romans

Most of Romans is a doctrinal exposition, but Paul does give us clues about the believers in Rome when he greets many of them by name in the final chapter. The first person mentioned is Phoebe, whom Paul introduces and commends, probably because she carried the letter to Rome. Paul calls her “a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea” (16:1).

Since *diakonos* can mean either deacon or servant, some translations have chosen “deacon” (e.g., NRSV), while others have chosen “servant” (NIV) or “minister” (NAB). If a man had been called “a *diakonos* of the church,” most translators would have used the word “deacon,” [“If the name in the text were Timothy or Judas, ninety-nine per cent of the scholars would presume that *diakonos* meant ‘deacon’ and a few footnotes would remark that it could mean ‘servant’” (Hurley, 124).] but some translators do not believe that the early church had female deacons and therefore choose “servant.”

When Paul gives a function followed by “of the church in Cenchrea,” it appears that he is giving Phoebe a title. [Origen (3rd century) and Chrysostom (4th century) both understood Phoebe to be a deacon (Belleville, “Women in Ministry,” in James Beck and Craig Blomberg, editors, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [Zondervan, 2001], 101).] However, even if she is a deacon, we do not know what range of responsibilities she had.

As the person who carried the letter to Rome, Phoebe may have been asked to read the letter aloud to the assembled believers, and she may have been expected to convey verbal greetings from Paul and answer questions about what Paul may have meant by any phrases the audience found confusing. [Craig Keener writes, “Since she bears Paul’s letter, she may be called upon to explain anything ambiguous in the letter when the Romans read it, and Paul wishes them to understand that she is indeed qualified to explain his writing” (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, 238).]

Paul asks the Roman Christians to “give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a *prostatis* to many people, including me” (verse 2). What is a *prostatis*? Some translations render it “helper,” but the word usually meant “benefactor” or a patron, a wealthy person who supported other people—a common arrangement in the first-century Roman Empire. [“Phoebe is commended here as a patroness” (Thomas Schreiner, 197). “In the culture of the day, a *prostatis* was a ‘benefactor’ (NRSV, revised NAB)—or as we would say today a ‘sponsor’” (Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* [Baker, 1999], 53). Some people have claimed that *prostatis* meant “to be a leader,” but it is unlikely that Paul would say that Phoebe had been his leader.]

Phoebe was apparently a wealthy woman who helped take care of some of the poorer believers in Cenchrea. She had some business in Rome, and Paul asked her to carry his letter to the believers there, and in turn he asks the believers to help her accomplish whatever she came to do. She was a trusted person, well respected in the church at Cenchrea.

Paul then greets Priscilla and Aquila and calls them “my fellow workers [*synergoi*] in Christ Jesus” (verse 3). He is not referring to their tentmaking work, but to their work in the gospel (he uses the same Greek word for Timothy in verse 21). They had moved back to Rome, and a church met in their home (verse 5).

Paul sends his greeting to “Mary, who worked very hard for you” (verse 6). He does not say when, where, or what the work was, but apparently it was something notable.

Paul greets “Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me” (verse 7). They were Jews, probably imprisoned for preaching the gospel along with Paul. That much is often accepted, but Paul’s next statement is hotly debated: “They are outstanding among the apostles.” Some

take it to mean that they are outstanding in the eyes of the apostles; others say that they are outstanding apostles. [Hurley points out that “It is unlike Paul to make something like acquaintance with the apostles a matter of praise. It is therefore more likely that he intended to say that they were outstanding as apostles” (121). However, Wayne Grudem has recently argued that the Greek construction can legitimately mean “well known to the apostles” (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 224-25). The precise meaning does not affect our study.]

Further, there has been some controversy as to whether Junia(s) was male or female. Some scholars, believing that apostles could not be female, suggested that Junias was a shortened form of the masculine name Junianus. However, there is no evidence that Junianus was ever shortened in that way, whereas there is abundant evidence that Junia was a woman’s name. [Linda Belleville writes that the masculine name “does not exist in any extant Greek or Latin document of the Greco-Roman period. On the other hand, the feminine name Junia is quite common and well attested in both Greek and Latin inscriptions. Over 250 examples to date have been documented in Rome alone” (“Women in Ministry,” 85).]

It is possible that Andronicus and Junia, Jews who came to Christ before Paul did (verse 7b), were known by the original apostles and commended by them. But it is also possible that they were apostles in their own right—apostles in the sense that they were official representatives sent from one church to another (see 2 Cor. 8:23 for an example of that use of the word).

Church history knows nothing of what Andronicus did, so it is doubtful that he could be considered an outstanding apostle in the sense that the Twelve were. The more general sense of “apostle”—messenger—is the more defensible meaning for both Andronicus and Junia. [Hurley points out that if “apostle” designated the most important office in the church, it would be odd



to put these two people in the middle of the list of greetings (122). Fee writes, “The term in this case, as it almost surely does in 1 Corinthians 12:28 as well, refers to a ‘function,’ not an ‘office’” (74).] We conclude that Junia was a notable woman who probably represented a church in some official capacity along with her husband, but the evidence does not permit us to say that she was an apostle in the way that Paul and the Twelve were.

Paul also greets Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis, “women who work hard in the Lord” (verse 12). Paul does not say what their work was, but “in the Lord” implies that they were religious workers of some kind. He also greets Julia, the sister of Nereus, and the mother of Rufus (verses 13, 15). Paul has mentioned 10 women—a high percentage for literature of that era.

### **Other letters**

Paul mentions a report from people “from Chloe’s household” (1 Cor. 1:11), but he does not indicate whether Chloe herself is a believer. For sexual relations within marriage, Paul teaches that a wife has just as much authority as the husband (7:2-5). For that society, this teaching was amazingly egalitarian, but it says nothing about a woman’s role in the church. The same is true of Eph. 5:21-33, where Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives in a self-sacrificial way.

He notes that other apostles were accompanied by their wives when they traveled (1 Cor. 9:5), but he does not say what role the wives had.

In chapter 11, Paul gives instructions about head-coverings for women who prophesy or pray. Because of the complexity of this passage and its importance in the debate, we will address it in a separate chapter. Paul’s comments in 14:34-35 will also be addressed in a future chapter.

Paul does *not* mention the role of women as first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection (15:5). He is probably citing a tradition in the way that it was given to him, and the tradition probably did not include the women because

they were not legal witnesses in Jewish society. [“The testimony of women carried little weight in Judaism, and it was evidently for that reason that they are not included in this earliest extant confession of the Church” (Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 77).]

Galatians 3:28 has been an influential verse in the debate about women: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul has taken three major social divisions of the first-century church and united them. Technically, he is speaking about unity, not equality, and he is speaking of salvation, not leadership. [Mary Evans agrees, but points out that both men and women are given the same status before God: “sons” (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1983], 64).] Even after writing this verse, Paul is able to give different directives to men, women, and slaves.

However, equality in salvation *can* have implications for social relationships. [Thomas Schreiner, a conservative, concedes this: “Klyne Snodgrass argues that Galatians 3:28 cannot be confined to salvation but also has social implications.... I believe Snodgrass is correct” (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, 186, referring to Snodgrass’s article in Alvera Mickelson, ed., *Women, Authority, and the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1986], 161-81). But Schreiner points out that we must read Paul to see what the social implications are, rather than imposing modern ideas about equality. He cites Judith Gundry-Volf as an egalitarian who “rightly argues that Galatians 3:28 does not abolish all gender differences” (187).]

For example, we believe that Jews and Gentiles should have equal opportunity for leadership. It would be wrong to say, “Gentiles are equal when it comes to salvation, but if anyone in the congregation is Jewish, then the pastor must be Jewish, even if he is poorly qualified.” Some people argue

that it is wrong to have similar rules that favor men over women, but personal equality does not *always* necessitate equal roles. When it comes to salvation, the pastor is on the same level as everyone else, but he does not have the same *role* as everyone else. Similarly, Christian business owners and employees are equal when it comes to salvation, but that does not require equal roles in the business. There are limits to the social consequences of our unity in Christ.

Egalitarians generally conclude that Gal. 3:28 is a call for equal roles within the church, whereas traditional scholars usually do not. [Beck and Blomberg observe that neither Keener nor Belleville put much stress on this verse (166), and it seems to be less used in recent egalitarian works. Stanley Grenz notes that “the egalitarian case may be overstated” on this verse (*Women in the Church* [InterVarsity, 1995], 107).]

In Philippians, Paul pleads for two women to agree with one another (Phil. 4:2). They had “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers [*synergoi*]” (verse 3). These women were not just serving behind the scenes—Paul indicates that they were at his side, contending with opponents, apparently doing the same sort of gospel work that Paul, Clement, and other co-workers did. [David Scholer writes,

The term “coworker” (*synergos*) appears to be what in the Pauline churches would be a veritable “official” term for a person who works with leadership and authority in the gospel. Paul uses this term only for such persons, which includes Urbanus (Rom 16:9); Timothy (Rom 16:21); Titus 2 Cor 8:23); Philemon (Phlm 1); Demas (Phlm 24); Apollos (and himself, 1 Cor 3:9); Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3; here is the other instance of the use of this term for a woman); Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25); and Clement (Phil 4:3) (see also the general use of the term in Col 4:11). (“Euodia and Syntyche: Bishops at Philippi?” in *Selected Articles on Hermeneutics and Women and Ministry in the New Testament*

[Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003], 146).]

The fact that Paul takes space in his letter to address the quarrel between these women suggests that their quarrel was affecting other people in the church—that the women were influential in some way. [The women “had gained a position of such influence as to make their present conflict a risk to the well-being of the church” (Evans, 129).] They might have had a formal role in the church, but Paul does not give them a title.

In Colossians 4:15, he mentions that a church met at the home of Nympha, who was wealthy enough to own a house large enough for the church to meet in. In Philemon 2, he greets Apphia, probably the wife of Philemon. [Belleville says, “The fact that she appears in the letterhead indicates she was a leader of the church at Colossae” (53). Paul did not greet women in the introduction of any other letter.]

### **The pastoral letters**

Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus say several significant things about women. The most famous passage, 1 Tim. 2:11-15, will have to wait for another chapter.

In 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Paul gives characteristics of a good overseer. [These should not be viewed as absolute requirements for church leadership, for Paul himself was not “the husband of but one wife,” nor did he have a family to manage well (verses 2, 4). Similarly, in new churches, it would have been necessary to appoint recent converts (cf. verse 6) as leaders. Paul is giving guidelines, not requirements.] In verses 8-10 he lists desirable traits of deacons. In verse 11, he says, “Women must likewise be dignified....” [We have used the fairly literal NASB for this verse. The NIV has “their wives,” but the word “their” is not in the Greek. The TNIV and NRSV have “women.”] Commentators debate whether “women” here means female deacons, or the wives of the deacons described in verses 8-10 and then again

in verse 12.

The use of “likewise” in verse 11, just as in verse 8, could suggest that female deacons are in view. On the other hand, the fact that male deacons are again described in verse 12 could suggest that male deacons are in view throughout the passage. In this latter interpretation, verse 11 gives desirable traits of deacons’ wives, just as verse 4 gave desirable traits of children for the overseers. But it would be odd to specify traits of a deacon’s wife but say nothing about an elder’s wife, unless the deacon’s wife had a special role, such as assisting women in baptism. [“Whichever position is adopted as to whether women are to be ‘deaconesses,’ there is still consensus that women should be involved in ‘diaconal’ or service ministries in the church” (George W. Knight III, “The Family and the Church,” in Piper and Grudem, 354).]

Walter Liefeld concludes, “It is impossible to tell whether these were the wives of the deacons or women who were serving as deacons.” [Walter Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1999), 134. Hurley points out that since the masculine word diakonos was used for both males and females, “the fact that Paul used diakonos to introduce the men in 1 Timothy 3:8 explains the necessity of another word in verse 11 if he wished to turn attention to women deacons” (231-32).

Conservatives who accept female deacons include Thomas Schreiner (in Piper and Grudem, 505, n. 13), Walter Neuer (*Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* [Crossway, 1991], 121), and Ann Bowman (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, 283).] Although historically our denomination has understood this verse as authorizing the role of deaconess, this verse does not prove the point. Rom. 16:1 offers better support, although it has another possible interpretation as well. [There is evidence that the early church had female deacons. In one of the earliest nonbiblical references to

Christians, Pliny the Younger (governor in Asia Minor A.D. 111-113) reported to Emperor Trajan that “I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses” (*Letters* 10.96-97). The text is available online in several places, such as <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>.]

Paul says that “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (verse 12). As we discussed in an earlier chapter, Paul is giving desirable traits for a deacon, not absolute requirements. We allow single men to be deacons or ministry leaders, and similarly, we allow remarried men to be deacons, whether they remarry after a divorce or after their first wife dies. The Greek phrase apparently meant “a one-woman man”—that is, one who did not have a mistress, one who was faithful to the wife he had. [Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 1991), 94.] We do consider *this* to be a requirement.

We also believe that a similar rule should apply for female deacons: They should be faithful. If they are remarried, they should be faithful to the husband they now have. When Paul said that male deacons should be faithful to their wives, it would have gone without saying in that culture that a similar rule would apply to female deacons. As discussed in a previous chapter, biblical rules are often phrased from the male perspective even when they apply to females as well. [A future chapter will discuss whether this might apply to verse 2.] The main point is that female leaders should be of good character.

In 1 Tim. 5:3, Paul addresses another group of women: “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.” He notes that widows should be supported by their families—“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith” (verse 8; cf. Mark 7:11-13). But if the widow did not have family support, the

church apparently provided support.

“No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty” and of good character (verses 9-10). Younger widows should not be put on the list, he says, “for when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge” (verses 11-12).

Timothy already knew what this “list of widows” was, but today we have to read between the lines to see what Paul was talking about. Apparently the widows made a life-long pledge to serve the church in return for its financial support, and remarriage was a violation of that pledge. Paul felt that women under age 60 might be so anxious to marry that they could not be trusted to keep a pledge of celibacy.

How much of this is applicable to the modern church? Did Paul intend for his letter to Timothy to become a manual of church organization for subsequent centuries and cultures? Should churches have a roster of older widows pledged to celibacy? Although it is permissible for churches to have such a list, we do not believe that the Bible requires this. There is wisdom in Paul’s letter, but he wrote to a specific church, and the specific admonitions he gives must be evaluated to see whether they are appropriate in other settings. [We noted in an earlier chapter that the instruction Paul gave in 1 Tim. 3:6 would not apply to the church in Crete (cf. Tit. 1:6-9); he did not intend his letter to be a manual for all churches. The point is that unless we believe that all instructions in 1 Timothy apply to the church today (which we do not), then we must discuss each instruction to ask whether it applies, or how it might be adapted. A later chapter will discuss whether 1 Tim. 2:11-12 is a directive for all subsequent centuries.]

Paul praised the faith of Timothy’s mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5), but we are not told whether they brought Timothy to faith in Christ.

However, Paul also warned Timothy that women were targets of false teachers who “worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim. 3:6). These women had apparently heard the gospel but had not accepted it.

Paul told Titus to “teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live...but to teach what is good. They can then train the younger women to love their husbands and children...and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (Tit. 2:3-5). Paul trusted older women to teach younger ones, and at least one purpose of this instruction is cultural, so that outsiders would have less to criticize about the gospel. [Similarly, he advises slaves to be subject to their masters so that “they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (verse 10). His advice is culturally appropriate, but we cannot assume that it implies an endorsement of the cultural setting in which it was given.]

### **General epistles**

The remaining books of the New Testament say little about women and little about leadership in the church. Hebrews mentions Sarah, though scholars debate whether she is mentioned in passing or is commended as having faith (11:11). The author implies that faith inspired the women who received the dead raised back to life again (verse 35). James mentions that Rahab had exemplary faith (2:25).

Peter, after advising everyone to submit to government authorities, and slaves to submit to their masters, also advises women to be submissive to their husbands (3:1); he cites Sarah as exemplary in this respect (verse 6). He advises men “in the same way” to treat their wives with respect, as the weaker vessel, because they are equal heirs of salvation (verse 7). [Paul is making a general observation—he is not implying that all husbands are



stronger than their wives. Nor is he saying that women are weaker intellectually or spiritually. On average, men are physically stronger than their wives, but, according to Peter, that should lead men to respect their wives, not abuse them.]

John greets a “chosen lady and her children” (2 John 1), but this is usually interpreted as a metaphor for the church (the Greek word *ekklesia* is feminine, and the church is considered the bride of Christ—2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27).

Revelation has both positive and negative imagery of women. The church is described as a woman (12:1-17) and as a bride (21:2)—a bride who joins the Spirit in inviting people to come to Christ (22:17). A more negative view is seen in 14:4, which says that the 144,000 “are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure.” It is debatable whether we can ascertain anything about gender roles in the real world from these apocalyptic symbols.

## **Conclusion**

Women had various important functions in the early church. Some taught, some prophesied, some provided financial support, and many worked in the gospel. Various people are called apostles, but rarely is anyone, whether male or female, given any other title. We know the names of only two men who are called “elder” and one woman who was called a “deacon.” [Peter and John call themselves elders in 1 Peter 5:1 and 2 John 1. As we concluded above, Romans 16:1 probably calls Phoebe a deacon; the seven men of Acts 6:5 are not specifically called deacons. It may have taken some time for terminology to become standardized.]

Since titles are rarely given, it is important to look at what people did, not what titles they had, and it is significant to see that in several cases, women worked alongside men in spreading the gospel, and the same Greek words are

used to describe their work as are used for male leaders.

In our next chapter we will examine 1 Cor. 11, which refers to women in the church at Corinth who prophesied and prayed.

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## 8

### Women Who Pray or Prophecy

#### 1 Corinthians 11:3-16

One commentator wrote, “This passage is probably the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament.” [Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1994), 214. Another scholar writes, “Commentators vary widely in their understanding of the background of the problem” (Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 80). They are trying to guess what kind of situation, and what cultural background, would cause Paul to write what he did. The variety of suggested solutions shows how hard it is to understand the background of the passage.] And Blomberg may be right—but in our denomination, we have had far less controversy about it.

In our fellowship, we have long agreed that women do not need to wear head coverings in church today—these specific instructions do not apply in our culture. Having “solved” that question, we felt little need to dig into the passage any deeper. In decades past, our main use of the passage was to say that men should have short hair and women should not (verses 14-15).

When we asked members to submit papers concerning the role of women in the church, few had anything to say about this passage. Almost no one disagreed with our previous conclusion about head coverings—nor did they disagree with the article we published in January 2001, which observed that the passage permitted women to speak in church. [Michael Morrison, “Women Who Spoke the Word of God,” *The Worldwide News*, Jan. 2001, pp. 23-26, available at <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women>.]

Nevertheless, this passage raises some important questions about how we interpret the Bible, and how to decide whether a particular command is based

in culture, or in creation. [Blomberg writes, “A passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 reveals the need for all believers to have a relatively sophisticated grasp of principles of biblical hermeneutics, so that they can sift through the historical-cultural background, understand the meaning of key terms and grammatical interrelationships within a passage, and fit this passage in with Paul’s other teaching on the topic” (226).] Actually, our old decision about head coverings was probably based more on what made “sense” to us than it was based on a study of the text. We did not have a good explanation for why head coverings were obsolete but hair lengths were not. We were unwittingly basing our beliefs on assumptions that were rooted in modern culture.

In this study, we discuss numerous questions about this passage, but we cannot answer them all—nor do we need to. However, we do try to answer some key questions for us concerning the role of women in the church today.

## **1 Corinthians 11**

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul deals with several problems that the local church had. One of the issues he deals with is whether people should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy. Although he briefly addresses what men should do, most of his comments concern women. [David E. Garland writes, “Paul oscillates back and forth with statements about men and women, but this pattern is broken in 11:13 with a statement about the woman but none about the man.” He also notes that Paul sometimes gives a supporting reason for his statements about women, without giving support for the corresponding statements about men—implying that he expects little resistance to his statements about men. “The best explanation for these breaks in the pattern is that the problem that Paul wishes to correct has to do with what the women were doing with their heads” (*1 Corinthians* [Baker, 2003], 507-8).] We will survey the chapter and examine certain questions in greater detail.

Verse 1 says: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” This is Paul’s conclusion to his comments about meat in chapter 10—he encourages the Corinthians to do everything for the glory of God, to avoid causing offense, “even as I try to please everyone in every way” (10:33). In 11:1, he encourages them to follow this example. In chapter 11, too, he wants them to avoid causing unnecessary offense to the people around them.

Verse 2 says, “I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.” This may be a concluding comment for the previous topic, or it may be a general introduction to Paul’s next topic, but either way, this verse does not seem to help us much in understanding what Paul writes in verses 3-16.

### **Women need a head covering**

The next verse begins with “now,” indicating that Paul is addressing a new topic: “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (verse 3). Paul is using “head” as a metaphor, but the meaning of this metaphor is debated. Traditional scholars say that Paul is using the word “head” (Greek *kephalē*) as a metaphor for authority: Christ has authority over the male, the male has authority over the female, and God has authority over Christ. Other scholars argue that the metaphor means “source” [For example, Mary Evans writes: “‘Head’ used in this context is a metaphor and there is no reason to suppose that the first century use of this metaphor will be identical with its twentieth century use, particularly as in the first century it was the heart not the head that was seen as the source of thought and reason, the head at this time being seen rather as the source of life” (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1983], 65).] or “preeminence.” [Garland, 516.] We will address this question in more detail later.

No matter what the meaning, the sequence of “heads” is odd, since it goes

down at first, and then up: Christ, man, God. [“The odd sequence reveals that Paul has no interest [or at least it is not his main purpose] in establishing some kind of ascending hierarchical order to show the inferiority of women.... His purpose is not to write a theology of gender but to correct an unbefitting practice in worship that will tarnish the church’s reputation” (Garland, 508, 514). Blomberg offers this suggestion: “Since the problem in Corinth involved men and women (but not Christ) dishonoring their heads, it is natural that he should refer to the heads of the man and of the woman first” (209).] Also, some scholars suggest that “woman” means “wife” in this passage, and the verse addresses relationships *within marriage* and not between males and females in general. [The RSV and NRSV read, “the head of a woman is her husband.”]

Paul then moves from his general principle to a more specific application: “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head” (verse 4). It is generally agreed that the second occurrence of “head” in this verse should be taken metaphorically: The covered man dishonors Christ. [“What individuals do to their physical head in worship reflects negatively or positively on their metaphorical head” (Garland, 514). Linda Belleville writes, “A man praying or prophesying with his head covered...disgraced Christ (1 Cor. 11:3-4). We cannot know for certain why this was” (*Women Leaders and the Church* [Baker, 1999], 129).] Paul has begun the discussion by speaking metaphorically in verse 3 so he can use the metaphorical meaning in verse 4.

What does Paul mean by saying “with his head covered”? Literally, the Greek words mean something like “having down from the head.” Is Paul referring to a hat, a turban, [“The fact that Jewish priests officiating in the temple wore turbans makes Paul’s statement doubly surprising (Ezek. 44:18; cf. *m. Yoma* 7.5)” (Belleville, 129). We do not know why a turban would be

appropriate for a priest but not for a man who is praying.] an Arabic *kaffiyeh*, a prayer shawl (such as those used by some Jewish men today when they pray, or something else? [Blomberg says that “the Jewish practice of covering a man’s head during worship did not become widespread before the fourth century A.D.” (221).] ) In some pagan religious rites, Roman men covered their heads with part of their toga. [“The statue from Corinth of a veiled Augustus—with his toga pulled over his head in preparation to offer a libation—may offer an important clue.... Wearing the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices was a familiar practice” (Garland, 517). Ben Witherington III points out that this was a Roman custom, not a Greek one (*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1995], 234). Corinth was in Greece, but a Roman colony, so it is not certain which culture predominated.]

That may be what Paul is referring to—but he does not explain why this custom was dishonorable. [Garland surmises that Paul objects to “the associations of the headdress with pagan sacrifice” (518). However, the Corinthians do not seem to be so naturally opposed to pagan practices that they would automatically agree that this practice was dishonorable (and the fact that Paul does not explain his logic indicates that he expects his readers to agree with his point). Non-Christian Greeks apparently did not think that pagan priests dishonored the gods by covering the head. Rather, they probably assumed the opposite, that the custom honored the gods in some way. “It appears that such headcoverings were worn in Roman contexts to demonstrate respect and subservience to the gods” (Witherington, 234). In Garland’s view, Paul objected to covered men for religious reasons, but bare-headed women for sexual reasons. Blomberg writes, “What the Corinthians did with their heads mattered because of either the sexual or the religious implications of their appearance (or both)” (215).] Some symbolism was

probably involved, but it is difficult for modern readers to know what it is. [Evans writes about customs of head coverings: “The evidence we do have seems to indicate that there was a great deal of variation in different regions and between town and country” (87). It difficult for us to know what the customs were; it is even more difficult to know what the customs meant to the people.]

It is especially difficult for us to know why a covering was considered dishonorable for a male but required for a female. [Hurley argues that the symbol meant “being submissive to the authority of a man”—hence was appropriate for woman but not for a man (170). However, most men are under the authority of, and should submit to, male civil authorities. Women wore a head covering in public but male slaves did not; this suggests that the primary connotation was gender, not authority.]

Some scholars have suggested that the head covering is long hair pulled up and bound on the top of the head [Belleville does not have this view, but she describes the custom: “The typical hairstyle shown in portraits of upper-class Greek and Roman women involved twisting the hair into a roll at the top of the head and then looping it to form a raised ridge” (*Women Leaders*, 128).] ; that when long hair was let down, it suggested rebellion or sexual availability. [“For a Hebrew woman to go out uncovered was widely regarded as a disgrace...because a covered head was a sign of modesty.... To go out with loose hair in public...was a greater disgrace and considered grounds for divorce” (Garland 520, citing the *Mishnah Ketub.* 7:6; and Babylonian *Talmud Ned.* 30b, *Yoma* 47b, and *Ketub.* 72a).]

Support for this is seen in verse 15, which says that a woman’s long hair is given to her *instead* of a veil. [Paul uses a different word in verse 15 than previous verses. Long hair is given to the woman instead of some sort of clothing (*peribolaion*), but she needs to be covered (*katakalypta*, from the



words for down and covered, verse 6). The significance of these terms is debated.] However, it is difficult to make this interpretation work in verse 4: If a man had hair long enough to pull onto the top of the head, it seems that Paul would begin by saying that the long hair was disgraceful in itself—he would not start by criticizing an attempt to pull it up onto the top of the head. [“If an ‘uncovered’ head simply means ‘having her hair down,’ how is ‘the man’s not covering his head in verse 7...the opposite of this?’” (Keener 22, quoting Gordon Fee’s commentary). Witherington writes, “Plutarch uses the same phrase that Paul does, *kata kephalēs*, to refer to something resting on the head, not hair” (233).]

Also, if the hair is pulled up, it would seem inappropriate for the Greek phrase to use the word *kata*, meaning down. And it would be odd to say that if the hair hung down loose, it might as well be cut off (verse 6). [Robert Peterson writes, “In 1 Cor. 11:6, does it make sense to say a woman should have her hair cut short because her hair is already short? No.” (“Women’s Roles in the Church, What Does the Bible Say?” unpublished paper.) Schreiner writes, “The verb translated as ‘cover’ in the NIV (*katakalypto*) occurs three times in verses 6-7...most often refers to a covering of some kind.” [Schreiner, 126. He notes that Philo uses the word for “uncovered” to mean with a cloth removed.] On the other hand, if the hair was covered, there would be little need to specify its length.

In verses 5-6, Paul writes, “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.” [The Greek word for “if” here (*ei*) implies a positive answer—that it is indeed a disgrace for a woman to have a shaved head. But it is not clear whether this disgrace falls on herself, on her

metaphorical head, or both. Gordon Fee writes, “It has often been asserted that the shaved head was a sign of prostitution in Corinth; but there is not a known piece of evidence for such in the literature of antiquity” (*Listening to the Spirit in the Text* [Eerdmans, 2000], 63). He says that a shaved head was shameful because it indicated “the ‘male’ partner in a lesbian relationship.”] Again, it is not clear what type of head covering Paul is referring to—some say it is a woman’s long hair (cf. verse 15b); others say it is a shawl. [In a few denominations today, a small piece of cloth is deemed sufficient even though it is not large enough to “cover” the head or hang “down” from it.]

Paul does not say why it is shameful, and scholars have suggested several possibilities. Garland lists these: “somehow blurs gender distinctions, is a symptom of disorderly behavior, has links to pagan cultic activity, disavows the authority of the husband or paterfamilias, or is a cultural sign of immodesty.” [Garland, 519. Richard Davidson writes, “The wearing of the head covering...was a sign of the wife’s submission to her husband’s leadership, not to the headship of all men” (in *Women in Ministry*, edited by Nancy Vyhmeister [Andrews University, 1998], 275).]

Paul apparently wrote this because some women in Corinth were breaking social custom and speaking without a head covering. [“That Paul is likewise upholding a firmly established social custom seems clear from terms like shameful...proper...disgraceful.... Even so, Paul’s appeal to the creation order of Genesis 2 shows that something more than unbefitting behavior is at issue.... Some sort of sexual identity confusion lurks in the background” (Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 127-28).] Why were they breaking social custom? Several reasons have been proposed: 1) They believed that gender-based restrictions did not apply in the church [“Antoinette Wire’s reconstruction of the situation that generated Paul’s correctives has...gained a fair measure of acceptance and remains plausible. Some Christian women

(and maybe some men!) were interpreting their freedom in Christ to mean that they could flout social convention concerning public appearance” (Blomberg, in *Two Views*, 341; see also Hurley, 170).

Evans suggests that women thought they had to dress like a man in order to prophesy, and Paul explains to them that women did not have to dress or act like men in order to be free, but that they were free to pray and prophesy as women (Evans, 90).] or 2) They believed that when they were in church, they were no longer in public, but in a family, and women did not need to wear head coverings when in their own homes. [“Christian women may not have thought of themselves as going out in public when they worshiped in homes and called one another ‘brother’ and ‘sister’” (Garland 521, citing Fee and Winter). Against this view it can be noted that the Corinthians were not treating one another like family in other respects.]

Craig Keener writes, “Paul calls on them to submit to the head coverings so as not to cause offense”—Paul does not want the women to bring shame on their husbands. [Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Hendrickson, 1992), 21. He notes that Paul used himself “as an example of sacrificing one’s own rights in chapter 9.... The principle he articulates could be applied to any of us. If our dressing a certain way in public will cause discomfort to our spouse, we ought not to do it. Paul is clearly less concerned with the particular apparel worn in a given culture than he is with its effects” (pp. 21, 36).] Others suggest that the women were copying practices found in some other religions.

### **Prophesying in public**

Paul is saying that it is shameful for a woman to pray or prophesy with an uncovered head. We might ask three questions at this point: 1) What does it mean to prophesy? 2) Is this praying and prophesying done in public, or in private? 3) Should the church today require women to wear a head covering?

[If we took verse 6 literally, the church should give haircuts to women who speak without a head covering—but it seems clear that Paul does not intend this literally. “Paul is using here the ancient debating principle of *reductio ad absurdum*: reducing the position of his opponents to the absurd. If they want to bare their heads so badly, why don’t they bare them altogether by removing their hair, thus exposing themselves to public shame?” (Keener, 35).]

To understand what Paul means by “prophesy,” we do not need to refer to Old Testament customs (which are of debatable significance), for Paul himself tells us what he understands the word to mean. In chapter 12, Paul lists prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit. In chapter 14, Paul describes what he means: “Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.... He who prophesies edifies the church” (14:3-4). [The Greek word here (*anthrōpōs*) refers to both men and women. The NRSV accurately avoids the impression that only men are intended: “Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.... Those who prophesy build up the church.” At least in Antioch, prophets were part of the leadership of the church (Acts 13:1).]

Throughout chapter 14, Paul contrasts tongues and prophesying, and he concludes, “in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct [*katecheō*] others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (14:19). [From the Greek word *katecheō*, we get the English word catechism, which refers to an organized system of instruction.] In this verse, he implies that someone who prophesies instructs the church. In verse 24 he says that if people are prophesying, an unbeliever can learn something: “He will be convinced by all that he is a sinner.... So he will fall down and worship God.” In verse 31 Paul says that people learn as a result of prophecy.

Although prophecy is not exactly the same as teaching, it has similar results. [Paul lists prophecy and teaching as separate gifts (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:29; 14:6; Eph 4:11). One possible difference in the gifts is that teaching may involve advance planning, whereas prophecy is spontaneous. As mentioned in previous chapters, there are biblical examples of female prophets.]

According to Paul's definition, prophesying helps people in the church learn. [Blomberg gives this description: "the proclamation of a message given by God to a Christian speaker for the benefit of a particular congregation. It may include both spontaneous utterances and carefully thought-out communication, so long as the prophet is convinced that God has led him or her to preach a certain message" (210). However, Grudem argues that prophecy is always spontaneous, and is not an exposition of Scripture (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 229).] In Corinth, the Holy Spirit was inspiring both men and women to speak edifying messages during worship services. If the words were inspired by God, then they had authority. [People should not assume that every utterance claimed to be prophecy is actually inspired by God. Paul instructs the church to "weigh carefully what is said" (14:29; cf. 1 Thess 5:20-21). Some theologians believe that God does not give the gift of prophecy to anyone in this era, but the example in Corinth still shows that God allows women to speak in worship services.]

Women were speaking in a church meeting—there would be little need for Paul to address proper attire for something done in private. Blomberg gives seven lines of evidence that indicate that the passage is about a public setting: 1) Verses 2 and 17 are paired in content, suggesting that a similar setting is in view throughout, 2) The concern for appearance suggests a public setting, 3) The best analogies about men covering their heads are in a setting of (pagan) worship, 4) Paul discusses spiritual gifts primarily in a

church setting, 5) Women had little opportunity to minister to men in private, 6) The mention of angels in verse 10 makes sense in a worship setting, and 7) Verse 16 refers to the practice of other churches, which suggests a setting within church. [Blomberg, 219.]

Thomas Schreiner gives four slightly different reasons: 1) The subsequent topics concern worship, 2) Prophecy is supposed to edify the community, 3) Meetings in a home would count as a church meeting, and 4) 1 Cor 14:34 is not intended to be a complete prohibition. [Thomas Schreiner, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 1991), 132. That 1 Cor. 11:3-16 concerns worship settings is the consensus of most traditional and egalitarian scholars. James Hurley says that the “women were praying and prophesying, to some sort of meeting of the church” (180). John Piper and Wayne Grudem say that verse 5 addresses “women prophesying in church” (*Recovering*, 69, 85). Walter Neuer also accepts “the church” as the setting for this passage, though he later qualifies it to say it was “small house groups,” not the “whole church” (*Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* [Crossway, 1991], 112, 118). Of course, in many cities, a small house group was the whole church, and it is artificial to try to distinguish them. As Schreiner says, “the distinction between public and private meetings of the church is a modern invention” (*Two Views*, 228).

Harold R. Holmyard argues, based largely on 1 Cor 14:34, that the women were not speaking in a church meeting (“Does 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Refer to Women Praying and Prophesying in Church?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 [Oct. 1997]: 462-73). He agrees that a public setting is meant, but not church: “The issue of head coverings implies a public setting, not prayer in private” (472). He does not address the above lines of evidence. In our own fellowship, Peterson claims that church settings are not discussed until verse 17, but he does not address the evidence given above for a public setting. He

also argues that women still need to wear a shawl when praying. We reject that, and believe that the evidence favors a church setting.]

Paul had to address the issue in this letter because some Corinthian women had been speaking in church without a head covering. [“While it not likely that the Corinthian men were in fact putting coverings on, it would seem quite likely that the Corinthian women had concluded that, having been raised with Christ (1 Cor. 4:8-10), their new position in Christ and their resultant freedom to participate in the worship by prayer and prophecy was incompatible with wearing a sign of submission to their husbands” (Hurley, 170). They thought that something in the gospel had liberated them from gender-based social conventions. However, Witherington speculates that some men were following Roman custom and wearing a headcovering, while women were following Greek practice, and the variations were causing controversy (Witherington, 238).]

In some societies, a head covering is a sign of submission or modesty; in others (e.g., Saudi Arabia) even the king wears a head covering in public. No matter what the head coverings symbolized in Corinth, it is clear that they do not symbolize the same thing in all cultures, and we conclude that they are not required as a sign of submission for all Christian men and women in all regions and centuries. There seems to be a consensus [Hurley concludes that “her hair is a sufficient sign; no shawls are needed” (184). Neuer likewise does not advocate coverings today, although he notes that women who “think that they should follow Paul’s instruction about covering the head...should not be made fun of, but respected for their stand” (114).

Piper, Grudem, and Schreiner all conclude that Paul commanded head-coverings for the culture he was in, but that they are not required today (75, 138). They see a timeless principle behind Paul’s teaching: a requirement to “use culturally appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity.”] that

Paul's instruction here was based primarily on culture—he was applying a general principle to a specific situation, and although the principle is still valid, the specific application is not. But what *is* that “general principle”? Scholars debate whether it is to maintain a distinction in *authority* between males and females, to maintain a distinction in *appearance* between the sexes, or simply to avoid doing something the surrounding culture considered scandalous.

### **The glory of man**

Paul now gives a reason for men to uncover their heads: “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man” (verse 7). Unfortunately, we do not understand Paul's reasoning here. We note the following questions:

If being in the image and glory of God means that a man should not cover his head, then this would apply to *all* situations, not just speaking in church. In other words, the reason given here proves more than Paul intended, and we cannot make the same argument today. We do not know why it would be inappropriate for “the image and glory of God” to wear a hat, whether on the job or in the church.

Further, we do not know what Paul means by woman being “the glory of man.” [Schreiner says that “the focus here is on the word glory.... Paul's point is that one should always honor and respect the source from which one came” (133). Garland suggests that “if a woman were to appear in worship with her head uncovered, the splendor of her tresses (11:15) should bring honor to her husband” (523). The idea is that each gender brings honor to the metaphorical head, but in worship it would be inappropriate for a woman to bring glory to her head, man. So by wearing a head covering, she can point to God rather than man. However, others argue that the problem with her tresses is lust, not misdirected glory. William Webb writes, “This proposition related



to the question of how much of a woman's beauty/glory should be visible in a worship setting—an issue of modesty" (*Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality*, 274).

Hurley suggests that "the glory of a thing is...that which points to or manifests its dignity, honour, or station. Man is relationally the glory of God when he is in an appropriate relation to him: under God, thereby pointing to God's dominion" (174). He suggests that a man gives God glory "as he exercises his leadership role and the woman is the glory of the man as she appropriately responds" (206). But this definition of "glory" seems to be tailored for Hurley's interpretation of this passage, rather than being based on the way the word is used elsewhere.] Paul's next verse says that the female came from the male, but the male's role in her creation was totally unlike God's role in the creation of the male. Is man the "pride and joy" of God, and woman the "pride and joy" of man? Perhaps that is what Paul means, but that would not explain why one must cover the head and the other must not. Blomberg notes that "in verses 14-15 'glory' is the opposite of 'disgrace,' so in both places it probably carries the sense of 'honor.'" [Blomberg, 211.]

Last, we note that women are also made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), a point that Paul did not mention. It seems clear that he is using the evidence from Genesis selectively, not in a comprehensive way. He is not trying to present a theology of gender behavior—he is simply dealing with one particular practice. [Hurley suggests a narrow context: "The woman is not called to image God or Christ in the relation which she sustains to her husband. She images instead the response of the church to God.... There need be no implication whatsoever that women are not the image of God in other senses" (173, italics in original).] But it is not clear why he brought the word "image" into the argument at all.

In verses 8-9, Paul appears to explain the way in which woman is the

glory of man: “For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” The man was the source of the woman, and the woman was created for the man. [As we covered in a previous chapter, the woman was made for the man because he was alone and did not have a mate, unlike all the animals. She was made to be his companion, not his servant. The man did not lack for creatures to have authority over—what he needed was someone who was like himself.]

Is woman the glory of man because she *came* from man? If so, then all of creation, including the woman, would be the glory of God, for everything came from him. Paul seems to be reasoning on the basis of which sex was created first, but we do not understand how he goes from his reason to his conclusion. Moreover, in verses 11-12 Paul seems to modify the argument (just as he clarified his statement in 1 Cor 1:14), perhaps because the evidence does not say as much as his first comment might imply. [Paul says one thing in 1 Cor 1:14 but retracts it in verse 16. He is thinking out loud, and his secretary wrote it down, and rather than delete the incorrect statement, Paul added a correction. It would be a mistake for us to focus on the first statement and not on the correction.]

In the next verse, Paul goes back to his main topic—the need for women to have a head covering. “For this reason [because woman was created from man and for man], and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a *sign* of authority on her head” (verse 10). Scholars do not know what the angels have to do with this subject. Paul is alluding to something, but we do not know what it is. [Scholars have made a variety of suggestions, such as 1) angels attend worship meetings and are sensitive to misbehavior in the worship service, 2) some angels are sexually attracted to women and the head coverings keep the angels in line, 3) the head covering is a sign that woman has authority over angels, or 4) angels are an example of beings who refused

to submit to their place in creation. The Corinthians might have known what Paul meant, but we do not.]

The word “sign” in the last part of the verse is a traditional translation, and the traditional interpretation is that the covering is a sign that she is *under* authority, but the Greek literally says “the woman ought to have authority on her head.” In all other uses, *exousia* means having authority; it never means “a sign of being *under* authority.” [Hurley writes, “The term does not mean ‘sign of (someone else’s) authority.’ It has instead an active sense and, apart from the context, would be taken as pointing to the authority of the woman herself” (176). He suggests that the appropriate hairstyle “marked her as one possessing authority, as viceregent of creation, one who would join in the judgment of rebellious angels” (177). However, Schreiner gives a vigorous defense of the traditional view, saying that the word “ought” signals “an obligation, not a freedom” (135).]

If we take the verse literally, it means that the head covering *gives* the woman authority to speak—that by putting on the appropriate attire, she is permitted to pray and prophesy. [Neuer writes, “If the women pray or prophesy before other members of the church, then they possess the spiritual authority to do so only if they do it obediently, accepting the position assigned to them at creation” (115). Richards writes, “The most natural meaning would be that a woman has ‘authority,’ that is, the freedom to act or to worship, simply by following proper decorum” (320). A point against this view is that Paul tells the woman what she “ought” to have; it does not appear that he is extolling her freedom.] Because she was created from and for the man, she needs this head covering to authorize her to speak in the worship assembly. [Against this view, Garland notes, “The introductory phrase ‘because of this’ means that Paul is drawing a conclusion from what has been argued in 11:3-9, and these verses emphasize the woman’s secondary place

as the glory of man, not her authority to pray and prophesy” (525).]

Another possible interpretation is that the phrase means “to have authority over”—that she is “to have control over her head” by wearing the customary covering. [Blomberg, 212, and Garland, 525. A similar thought may be in 14:32, where Paul uses different Greek words to say that prophets should control their spirits.]

In verses 11-12, Paul appears to qualify or clarify part of his previous argument. [“He backtracks lest the Corinthians become confused and think that he implies that women are inferior to men” (Garland, 508). “These two verses clearly form a tension on a theoretical level with his previous arguments” (Webb, 87).] He writes, “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” Just as the original man was the source of the first woman, all subsequent men have come from women, and God is the source of everything. This verse seems to reduce the strength of the argument from priority or source.

Why does Paul say that this interdependence is “in the Lord”? Why does he begin the sentence with the contrastive word “however”? This seems to imply that aspects of the previous argument were *not* based “in the Lord.” [Blomberg suggests that the contrast is between Christ and creation: “‘In the Lord,’ that is, among Christians, the nature of creation is substantially qualified but never erased altogether” (216). But it seems problematic to posit a large difference between creation and Christ, as if Christ changed God’s original design for humanity. This may instead be a hint that Paul’s argument, although it alludes to creation, is actually based in culture. The word “however” in verse 11 implies that he is giving a contrast or correction, not reinforcing the previous point.] Belleville draws this conclusion: “In the final analysis, whatever meaning we attach to the man is ‘the head of the

woman' (1 Cor. 11:3), this state of affairs does not hold true 'in the Lord.' Mutual dependence is what should characterize life in community, for 'in the Lord' a 'woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman' (1 Cor. 11:11)." [Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 131. Webb writes, "Not only do his 'in the Lord' comments take the abrasive edge off of the patriarchy of Paul's day, but resident within them are seed ideas for future development" (278).]

After this, Paul gives another reason for his instruction that women should wear a head covering when they speak in church: "Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering" (verses 13-15).

Paul apparently believes that he has given the Corinthians enough information to make the answer obvious. Even though Corinth was saturated with sin, he appeals to the Corinthians' own sense of propriety, as if they would all sense the disgrace of a woman speaking without anything on her head. [Paul's purpose throughout this passage, Neuer notes, is to preserve female honor, not to demean her. "The woman upholds her dignity and glory by preserving her womanly character and her position in the creation" (Neuer, 115).]

When Paul writes "the nature of things," he uses the word *physis*, which usually referred to the way the physical and biological world was, but sometimes referred to social custom. [The BDAG lexicon lists four meanings: "1) condition or circumstance as determined by birth.... 2) the natural character of an entity.... 3) the regular or established order of things....

4) an entity as a product of nature" (Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English*

*Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition [University of Chicago Press, 2000], 1069-70).]

Paul apparently uses it in the latter meaning here, for biological facts do not teach people that long hair is a “disgrace” for one sex and a “glory” for the other. [Hurley says that it means “God’s design for nature rather than simply the way things happen to be” (178). By defining the word as “God’s purpose,” Hurley can then say it means whatever he wants it to mean. Schreiner says that Paul “is referring to the natural and instinctive sense of right and wrong that God has planted in us” (137)—but it is doubtful that gender-based hair lengths are an instinct found in all cultures. Cultures do have concepts of right and wrong, and of “masculine” and “feminine” behavior and attire, but discrimination by hair length is an illustration of how the instinct is applied in some societies; it is not an instinct in itself. Hair does not grow very long in either sex in some ethnic groups, and there is nothing “feminine” about the long braids of early Native American warriors.]

Rather, our physiological nature teaches us that a man’s hair grows as much as a woman’s. The word “disgrace” indicates a social stigma and a cultural convention. [Blomberg takes the word *physis* to refer to a “long-established custom” (213). Keener is not sure, saying that Paul may have believed that “women’s hair naturally grows longer than men’s” (43). He finally concludes, “Whether Paul’s argument is that women by virtue of creation have longer hair than men, or that the social norms of his day demand women’s hair to be longer under normal circumstances, does not in the end need to be decided. In either case, Paul would seem to be making an argument that addresses symbolic gender distinctions, and requiring men and women to recognize those differences between them” (45).]

Paul is not trying to say that men who took a Nazirite vow were a disgrace—he was writing to the Corinthian situation and not trying to make a

universal, timeless statement. [“When he speaks explicitly of length of hair, he grounds his arguments in what is proper (verse 13), normal practice (verses 14-15) and contemporary custom (verse 16). None of these verses... implies a timeless, transcultural mandate” (Blomberg, 215).]

Since Paul can appeal to the Corinthians’ own sense of what is proper and natural, it is apparent that he is asking for behavior in conformity to normal custom—for women to have their heads covered while speaking in the church, and for men to avoid the custom that was appropriate to females. [Witherington concludes that it is “unlikely that Paul would impose any foreign or specifically Jewish custom on the ethnically mixed *ekklēsia* in Corinth” (235).] Although some of the Corinthian women had apparently concluded that the gospel freed them from gender-based restrictions, Paul says that they should conform to this particular custom. [“When a wife converts to Christianity and learns that she is set free in Christ so that she can pray and prophesy in public, it does not mean that she can disregard social conventions” (Garland, 509). She is not free to bring shame and dishonor on her husband.]

In verse 16, he gives one more reason: “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.” None of the churches threw social custom to the wind and encouraged women to act like men, and vice versa, so the Corinthians should not, either. Garland writes, “His comment has the same force as that of Josephus’s conclusion to an argument: ‘None but the most contentious of critics, I imagine, could fail to be content with the arguments already adduced.’” [Garland, 532, citing *Against Apion*, 1:21.]

## **Conclusion**

Paul has given six reasons for women to wear a head covering:

- The head of the woman is man (verse 3).

- Speaking without a covering is as dishonorable as shaving the head (verse 5).
- Woman was made from and for man, so she should wear a head covering (verse 9).
- Because of the angels (verse 10).
- It is not socially proper for a woman to speak uncovered (verse 13).
- The church has no precedent for breaking this tradition (verse 16).

Today, we cannot confidently use any of these reasons. Even if we could agree about the meaning of “head,” we cannot explain why it has to be symbolized by a head covering in one case but the lack of a head covering in another case. In most modern societies, there is little or no stigma attached to women speaking without a head covering, and we cannot say that it is as shameful as shaving the head. Third, we cannot offer any reason why the priority of creation should be forever symbolized by a head covering. Fourth, the presence of angels in this list makes it obvious that we do not have a complete understanding of the context in which Paul was working. Fifth, what is “socially proper” is different today than in first-century Greece. And today, there are many precedents against this tradition.

Paul’s arguments do not make sense to us primarily because his reasons are based in beliefs found in first-century Corinth; they are not designed for cultures like ours that do not share those same beliefs. [“Paul, a pastor and a missionary, is concerned about getting his point across to his people, not with impressing modern Western readers with arguments that would work transculturally. Paul employs a transcultural argument only when he is making a transcultural point” (Keener, 31-32).] Although Paul cites biblical evidence and spirit beings, it appears that the real basis of his argument is cultural—he was explaining the attire that was appropriate for women and men *in that culture*. We further suspect that if Paul knew of a reason that



would apply in all cultures and all ages, then he would have used it, rather than ending up with social custom and “we’ve never done it that way before.” [“Had any one of his arguments here been an absolute, unambiguous, universal proof, Paul could have settled for one argument instead of four” (Keener, 22).]

Our doctrinal review team concludes that women are permitted to speak in church without head coverings. [In making this decision, it was not necessary for us to rule on the exact meaning of *kephale*, the precise nature of the head covering, or the significance of “authority” in verse 10. We do not have the expertise in Greek literature and language to provide conclusive answers to those questions. We also note that this passage is not about ordination or appointing people to church leadership. We want to base our policies on scriptures that are clear, and this passage is not clear.]

Paul apparently believed that men and women should respect social conventions about gender-specific attire. [“Most interpreters agree that one timeless principle that may be deduced from this passage is that Christians should not try to blur all distinctions between the sexes” (Blomberg, 214). “The fundamental principle is that the sexes, although equal, are also different” (Schreiner, 138). “Paul takes issue not with what women are doing but with how they are doing it. Women (and men for that matter) can pray and prophesy in the church, but they must not flaunt the social conventions of the day in so doing” (Belleville, Women Leaders, 153). “Paul’s view is that the creation order should be properly manifested, not obliterated, in Christian worship.... Male-female differentiation is part of what God intends to redeem, not transcend or supersede” (Witherington, 236-37).] Men should not try to look like women, nor should women try to look like men. God created male and female different, and he declared that to be good, but the Bible does not specify (nor will we) the characteristics of masculine and

feminine attire. That changes from one nation to another, from one culture to another, and from one century to another. In Paul's day, it meant that women should wear head coverings when speaking in public, but it does not mean that today.

In conjunction with this conclusion, we also make the following observations about the *reasons* that Paul offered:

Someone might argue that we should accept Paul's arguments even though we do not understand them. Angels are the same today as when Paul wrote, so we should accept his argument as valid today, and women should be covered by cloth when they speak in church. We reject that approach to Scripture. Paul gave *reasons* for his directive; he did not demand obedience without understanding.

The fact that Paul's arguments do not make sense to us is a hint that he was basing his arguments on cultural customs. Even in a city renowned for sin, he appeals to the readers' sense of propriety and disgrace. His argument from "nature" in verse 14 is actually an argument from custom; the "glory" that Paul speaks of in verse 15 is also a cultural matter.

Whether Paul uses *kephalē* in the sense of authority, or to refer to source, either way, women are allowed to pray and prophesy in church. Whether she has a sign of authority on her head, or has a sign of being under authority (everyone is under *some* authority), the most significant part of this passage is that women *do* have the authority to speak spiritual words in public worship. This passage does not restrict her words in any way; it is only a matter of attire.

Paul is apparently applying a general principle to the situation in Corinth. However, from the passage, it is not clear what the principle is. Here are some possibilities:

All women are under the authority of all men, because woman was

created from and for man. Women should therefore wear a symbol of submission, which in Corinth was a head covering, but in other cultures may be something else. However, this does not explain why it is wrong for men to wear a head covering, because they are also under authority. Nor do we believe that all women are under the authority of all men.

Married women are under the authority of their husbands, because woman was created from and for man. Therefore all women, married or not, should wear a symbol that they are submissive to that principle. [Keener responds to this by saying, “Nothing in this passage suggests wives’ subordination. The only indicator that could be taken to mean that is the statement that man is woman’s ‘head,’ but ‘head’ in those days was capable of a variety of meanings, and nothing in the text indicates that it means subordination.... The only clear affirmations here, besides that men and women are different and should not conceal that fact, is the equality and mutual dependence of men and women” (47).] Again, this does not explain why it would be disgraceful for men under authority to wear a head covering, and it does not explain why Paul is concerned about head coverings only when people pray and prophesy. The head coverings apparently had significance in public worship, but not in a woman’s private relationship to God.

Men and women should dress in ways appropriate to their gender in that culture, and when they are speaking in public, they should not dress in such a way that distracts from the words they speak. This would explain why Paul is concerned about attire of both men and women *when speaking*. [Keener concludes, “We can notice some transcultural points in his argument: one should not bring reproach upon one’s family or upon the Christian gospel; one should not seek to destroy symbolic gender distinctions by pioneering unisex clothing styles; one should respect custom and do one’s best to avoid causing someone to stumble” (46).] We conclude that this suggestion has the

most merit.

Since we conclude that women do not have to wear head coverings in church today (a conclusion we have held for decades), we also conclude that Paul has alluded to evidence from Genesis to support a cultural custom. The fact that Paul is selective in his use of the evidence from Genesis shows that he is not starting with Genesis and trying to explain its application in Greco-Roman society. Rather, he is starting with a custom in his culture and trying to find as many lines of support as he can think of for the people he was writing to. Since he was a rabbi steeped in Scripture, he begins with an illustration from Scripture, but he later has to qualify it, and he gives several comments based on what society considers honorable or disgraceful.

The important point is that women are permitted to pray and prophesy in church. Women may speak about spiritual topics and instruct the church as God leads them. Even if we use the most restrictive meaning of prophecy [that is, infallibly inspired words], and even if it rarely if ever happens today, the precedent is still set that God allows women to instruct and edify the church according to their gifts.

However, the mutual dependence of males and females does not mean that they must behave in identical ways. Paul made restrictions on *how* women prophesied in church—he required them to wear attire appropriate to women. We uphold this principle today, acknowledging that in most nations today, this does not mean a headcovering, but means that women should not try to look like men. The authority of their words does not rest in external appearance, but in conformity with the gospel of God.

## Appendix 8A: The meaning of *kephalē*

Garland writes: “Three views commend themselves. First, ‘head’ has been traditionally understood to designate hierarchy and to imply authoritative headship.” [Garland, 514.] In support of this view, Hurley writes, “The Greek versions of the Bible used *kephalē* (head) to translate the Hebrew word *r’osh*, which also means ‘head.’ The Hebrew word, however, was used to indicate one in a position of authority or command as well as origin or ‘priority.’” [Hurley, 164. Unfortunately, Hurley left out an important point. Keener writes, “The Septuagint rarely translates *ros* (in the sense of leader) literally as ‘head’; most often it uses other Greek words that mean ‘leader.’ It retains ‘head’ for leader less than one tenth of the time, despite the Hebrew usage” (32). Alan Redmond, a pastor in Winnipeg, has studied the words in some depth. He writes, “There are 547 occurrences of *ros* that I found in a Hebrew (BHS) search with Gramcord.... The instances where *ros* has the meaning of chief or ruler are of special interest to us. These number about 180. The majority are translated as *archē*.... I found 9% of the time that *ros* has the sense of chief or ruler where it is translated by *kephalē*.” Although it is not a common meaning, it is a possible meaning of *kephalē*, and he concludes: “The sense of authority could not likely have been excluded from the metaphor without special comment from Paul.”]

Hurley argues that although *kephalē* may mean origin in some contexts (e.g., Col. 1:15-20), it does not mean that in marital contexts. “If ‘head’ means ‘source’ in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul’s parallelism is poor and he virtually teaches that God made Christ.” [Hurley, 166. Schreiner argues strongly for the meaning of “authority” (127-28).]

Blomberg agrees: “Its two main [metaphorical] meanings were either ‘source’ or ‘authority.’... The other passage in which Paul calls a man ‘head’ over a woman refers as well to wives’ subordination to their husbands (Eph.

5:22-24), so ‘authority’ seems somewhat more likely here too.” [Blomberg, 208-9.] Egalitarian W. Larry Richards admits that although the meaning of “source” is attractive, Paul elsewhere uses *kephalē* “in the sense of authority, not source.” [Richards, in *Women in Ministry*, 318. He limits that authority to marriage. “Paul never, here or elsewhere, widens the wife’s subordination to her husband within the family circle to a general subordination of women to men’s authority, in the church or in society” (319). Witherington has a similar view:

Paul does not simply equate the family structure, which in the household codes is somewhat patriarchal, with the structure of the family of faith” (238, n. 26). He argues that *kephalē* probably connotes authority, but notes: “Paul’s vision of headship or leadership involves the leader in being the head servant.... It is difficult to come to grips with a Paul who is neither a radical feminist nor an ardent patriarchalist.... Paul, like Jesus, was a man who was not and is not easily pigeonholed (240).]

Part of the difficulty in the discussion is that commentators who support the meaning of “authority” generally conclude that the male has authority because he is the *source* of, or is prior to, the woman. “Source” and “authority” are related concepts, so “source” often makes sense. However, they argue that the primary connotation of *kephalē* is authority (the result) rather than source (the cause). Blomberg says that no one has shown that *kephalē* can mean source “without simultaneously implying some dimension of authority.” [Blomberg, *Two Views*, 342.]

However, Perriman questions the logic, “The question of authority is irrelevant to a discussion of the proper manner in which men and women should pray and prophesy; nor is it a valid deduction from the idea that man has authority over the woman that she should veil herself in worship.” [A. C. Perriman, “The Head of a Woman: The Meaning of *Kephalē* in 1 Cor. 11:3” (*Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 620.)] It is not clear why the

woman must honor the man by being covered, when the man has to do the exact opposite in order to honor Christ. The passage is not about authority *per se*, and although verse 10 uses the word “authority,” the meaning there is not clear.

The second suggestion is that *kephalē* means “source.” Mary Evans writes, “In Colossians 1:18 Christ is spoken of as ‘the head’ of the church in the context of his being before all things and the source of creation.” [Evans, 66. She also points out that earlier in this letter, Paul has balanced the authority of the husband and the wife (1 Cor 7:4, using the verb form of *exousia*); he does not seem to be combating a problem of women trying to exert authority over men.] However, “the ‘paucity of lexicographic evidence’—no Greek lexicon offers this as an option...makes this meaning for ‘head’ highly suspect.... Although the idea of source may fit the account of the woman’s creation from the man’s rib, it does not fit God as the source of Christ.” [Garland, 515-16.] Some egalitarians respond that God is indeed the source of Christ in his messianic role, and Paul is speaking only of a function, not the source of being. [“This objection fails if the text refers to Jesus’ source as the Father from whom he proceeded at his incarnation as a human being” (Keener, 33-34). Keener also makes a suggestion about the unusual order in verse 3: “If the incarnation is in view, then 11:3 is in chronological sequence.”] They also point out that “source” is clearly part of the context (see verses 8-9).

Garland agrees with Perriman in supporting a third view: “The best option understands *kephalē* to mean ‘that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, pre-eminent’ (Perriman 1994).... The ‘head’ denotes one who is preeminent, and though it may result in authority and leadership, that is not its basic denotation. It is not linked to ideas of obedience or submission.” [Garland, 516. Belleville agrees: “*Kephalē* is rarely used to describe the

relationship of one individual to another.... Prominent is by far the most common [metaphorical] usage.... Source and leader, on the other hand, are quite rare—although examples can be found.... What all this means is that Paul’s uses of *kephalē* must be decided on a case-by-case basis” (*Women Leaders*, 123). She also notes that “Now I want you to know that” is the way that Paul introduces new information (130). We cannot assume prior knowledge on the part of the Corinthians of man being the head of the woman. And since the metaphor had several possible meanings, the original readers would have to use the context to tell them which meaning was intended—and the context is not about authority and submission.]

But Blomberg notes, “It is unclear if an entity can be most or even more prominent without implying some functional superiority.” [Blomberg, *Two Views*, 343.] Although Paul does give a requirement for men, the emphasis of this passage is to give a requirement for women, to stop women from doing something they had begun to do, and that requirement is based on the fact that the male is the *kephalē* of the female.

In short, it seems that most interpreters choose a meaning for *kephalē* based primarily on their beliefs about what *other* verses say about male authority. The interpreters are influenced by their own culture, either in assumptions about what it means to be a “head,” or in beliefs about what it means to be “equal.”



## **Appendix 8B: Head coverings in the Greco-Roman world**

Craig Keener gives some detailed information about head coverings in the ancient world:

The practice of women covering their heads in public may be related to the old Greek tradition that restricted women in many ways to the domestic sphere. In theory, at least, women in fourth century bce Athens could not go to the market and were not to be seen by men who were not their relatives.... This ideal seems to have continued to some degree in conservative parts of the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world [which would probably not include Corinth]....

Roman women were, however, much less secluded, although some moralists wished them to be more secluded than they were. It was reported that in an earlier period a husband might have divorced his wife for going into public unveiled, or disciplined his wife or daughter for conversing publicly with another man.... Plutarch goes on to explain that a woman's talk should also be kept private within the home...she 'ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband.'... We cannot suppose that all levels of society hearkened to the moralists (the moralists themselves were well aware that this was the case)....

Why would the Corinthian Christian women's uncovered heads have caused offense? One recurrent suggestion is that an uncovered head was the traditional garb of prostitutes. Dress could indeed sometimes indicate that a woman was a prostitute.... But the evidence for *head coverings* distinguishing wives from prostitutes is slender.... Head coverings typified married women in general in Jewish Palestine, so that an uncovered head could indicate a virgin seeking a husband as easily as it could connote a prostitute....

Others...have suggested instead that Paul may have been thinking of the 'uncovered and disheveled heads' of pagan prophetesses.... In most Greek religious activities women uncovered their heads, and this may be significant. But it is

doubtful that Paul or the Corinthians would have thought specifically about pagan prophetesses' hairstyles; such prophetesses...were generally secluded from public view....

In general, Greek women were expected to participate in worship with their heads uncovered.... Men were also to worship bareheaded. In contrast, Roman women had to cover their heads when offering sacrifices.... Roman men would also pull the toga over their head at sacrifices. Corinth was a Roman 'colony' in Greece during this period....

Covering one's head was sometimes associated with mourning; the practice was a standard sign of grief, for both men and women.... During the funeral procession itself, Roman sons would cover their heads, while daughters would 'go with uncovered heads and hair unbound.'...

It is unlikely that most Palestinian Jews viewed the head covering as a symbol of women's *humiliation*, but at the least a head covering was a necessary sign of public *modesty* for all Palestinian Jewish women who could afford it. One story tells of a woman so destitute that she could not afford a head covering, so she had to cover her head with her hair before going to speak with Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai.... A Jewish woman who ventured into public with her hair down and exposed to view, or who otherwise could be accused of flirtatious behavior, could be divorced.... Jewish teachers permitted loosing a woman's hair only in the case of an adulterous woman, who was publicly shamed by exposure to the sight of men....

Veiling customs varied geographically. Veiling seems to have prevailed in parts of the eastern Mediterranean.... Evidence for this custom in Greek life, however, is sparse....

It is probable that some well-to-do women thought such restrictions on their public apparel ridiculous, especially if they were from parts of the Mediterranean world where head coverings were not considered necessary. But to other observers, these women's uncovered heads connoted an invitation to lust.

The issue in the Corinthian church may thus have been a clash of [class-related] cultural values concerning modesty, and Paul wants the more [wealthy] liberated elements within the church to care enough about their more conservative colleagues [the poor] not to offend them in this dramatic way.... Most women in Greco-Roman statues and other artwork from this period [generally the wealthy] have uncovered heads.... Nothing in 1 Cor. 11 suggests a practice that requires women's heads to be covered all day long. [Keener, 22-30; see also Cynthia L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *Biblical Archaeologist*, June 1988, 99-113.]

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## 9

### **“Women Should Remain Silent”— a study of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35**

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul wrote: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (verses 33-35).

If we take this literally, it would mean that women are not allowed to sing in church nor respond when the pastor asks for comments or questions from the audience. Moreover, it would contradict what Paul said in chapter 11, where he said that women *could* pray and prophesy in church if they had the appropriate attire.

Common sense, church custom, and good principles of biblical interpretation all say that we should not take these verses literally—and almost no one does. Paul is not making a blanket prohibition that says that women can never speak in church. Rather, he was addressing his comments to a certain situation, and his comments are limited in some way. The question is, What are the limits of Paul’s prohibition? In the following chapter, the doctrinal review team examines the context and looks at the details of these verses.

#### **A call to order**

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul begins to instruct the Corinthian church about their somewhat disorganized worship services. As we studied in our previous chapter, he says that women should wear a head covering when they pray and prophesy; then he corrects the Corinthians on the way they had been observing the Lord’s Supper. In chapter 12, he addresses the proper use of spiritual gifts in the worship service. He describes a number of gifts, and

insists that all gifts are important to the Body of Christ; the variety of gifts calls for mutual respect and honor, not vanity or shame.

In chapter 13, he describes love as the best way, and in chapter 14 he makes an extended contrast between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophesying. Apparently some people in Corinth were extolling the gift of tongues as a mark of superior spirituality. Paul did not tell them to stop speaking in tongues, but he did put some restrictions on how tongues should be used in the worship service:

- There should be two or three speakers (14:27).
- They should speak one at a time (verse 27).
- There should be an interpretation (verse 27b). If no one can interpret the tongues, “the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God” (verse 28).

However, this requirement should not be lifted out of its context to create a complete prohibition on the person ever speaking, singing or praying. [Paul uses the same Greek word that is translated “silent” in verse 34. James Hurley notes that “there is no intention that the first [person] should speak no more in the worship service. He or she may certainly sing hymns, pray, etc.... Paul left it to his readers to grasp the context” (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan, 1981], 190).]

Paul is apparently trying to give some organization to what had been a rather chaotic worship meeting—several people speaking at once, speaking words that no one could understand.

Paul recommends the gift of prophecy as a far more helpful gift, but he gives similar guidelines for those speakers, too:

- Only two or three should speak (verse 29). If someone else has something to say, the first speaker should be quiet. [The NIV translation again obscures the fact that Paul has used the same Greek word for silence. And again, Paul did not intend to prohibit all subsequent speaking by the person—he called for silence only for the

immediate situation.]

- They should speak one at a time (verse 31).
- People should “weigh carefully what is said” (verse 29; cf. 1 Thess. 5:21).

Paul notes that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32). That is, the speakers are able to stop; they cannot use “God made me do it” as an excuse for adding to the commotion. [This point probably applies to tongues-speakers, too. The Greek verb is *hypotassō*, here translated as “subject to the control of,” but more commonly translated as “submit.”] When God gives a gift, he also gives the person the responsibility to make decisions to use that gift in an appropriate way. Simply having the gift is not an excuse to use it whenever and wherever the person wants to. Paul explains his reason: “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (verse 33).

[Gordon Fee and a few other scholars have suggested that Paul did not write these verses—a small number of old manuscripts have these verses in a different place, as if they have been added to the text from a marginal comment. However, all manuscripts DO have these verses, and we accept them as part of the canonical epistle. Scribes occasionally made mistakes when they copied manuscripts, and corrections were written in the margin, and these corrections were sometimes incorporated into the text on subsequent copying, not always in the right place.

A few scholars have suggested that Paul is here quoting some Corinthians, and disagreeing with them, but this seems unlikely. These verses are neither stylistically or theologically like the other places where Paul probably quotes the Corinthians (e.g., 6:12-14). Neither hypothesis is necessary, for there are adequate explanations for why Paul would write these words.]

Paul then tells the women to be quiet, and to ask their questions at home: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (verses 33-35).

Let’s examine some of the details in these verses.

### **Observations**

1) The first thing we notice is that women are not the only people Paul tells to be “silent.” He uses the same word in verses 28 and 30 to tell tongue-speakers and prophets to be silent when others speak. In both of those verses, he is calling for a temporary silence, not a complete and permanent prohibition. [“The question is, what kind of ‘silence’ does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 14:34? It cannot be silence of all speech... Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, just three chapters earlier, that women who pray and prophesy should have their heads covered, which assumes that they could pray and prophesy aloud in church services” (Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 232-33). Similarly, Craig Keener writes, “Once you protest that Paul did not mean to prohibit all speaking, you have already raised the interpretive question of what he actually did mean in his historical context and how it might be applied in our context today” (“Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 41).]

2) The word for “speak” (*laleō*) does not necessarily mean a formal role in the pulpit—it is a general word that can also be translated “talk.” Paul used a general word to say that women should not talk, and we have to make an interpretive choice: Was he prohibiting formal speaking roles, or talk in the audience, or something else? [Craig Blomberg suggests this possibility:

“Perhaps they were ‘chattering,’ or even gossiping, as some Jewish women... reputedly liked to do” in the synagogues (*1 Corinthians* [NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1994], 280).]

3) Paul says that instead of speaking, women should be in submission. This implies that the Corinthian women were speaking in an insubordinate way. The fact that Paul said in chapter 11 that women could pray and prophesy, and in chapter 14 that two or three people could prophesy in a worship service, shows that women are allowed to have a slot in the speaking schedule. It is not insubordinate for them to speak prophecies; it is therefore likely that Paul is prohibiting some less-formal speaking, such as chatter or comments from the audience. [Grudem writes, “There is nothing in 1 Corinthians that says women were being disruptive” (243). That is technically true—but it is also true that nothing in the epistle says that tongue-speakers were causing problems, either. Paul describes that problem in conditional clauses: “If I did this... If everyone spoke in tongues... If you are praising God with your spirit...” Despite this style of argumentation, scholars generally agree that Paul is dealing with a real situation. His instructions imply a problem that he was trying to correct; so also with his comments about women.]

4) Paul says that “the Law” requires submission. There are several options for what kind of submission is meant:

First, submission of all women to all men. However, as we saw in previous studies, the Old Testament does not require all women to submit to all men, nor does it require them to be silent. Nevertheless, some scholars believe that Paul is alluding to a “principle” derived from Genesis. [Josephus says that Scripture taught women to submit (*Against Apion* 2:24), and it was probably widely assumed that it did, though specific verses could not be cited. The idea is that the male has authority over the female either because



he was created first (Genesis 2) or because subordination was part of the curse against the woman (Genesis 3). Historically, most scholars have cited the curse, but traditional scholars today generally base their explanations on Genesis 2, perhaps because they do not want to say that women in Christ are subject to the curse. Garland writes, “Gen. 3:16 is predictive, not prescriptive, and Jewish exegetes did not ground the subordination of women in the creation narrative” (*1 Corinthians*, 672). Hurley says that Paul “uniformly appealed to the relation of Adam and Eve before the fall rather than after it, to Genesis 2 rather than to Genesis 3” (192).

However, even if the first man had authority because of being created first, it is far from clear in Genesis whether 1) all subsequent males have authority over all subsequent females, or 2) their authority is limited to spiritual matters, or 3) is limited to marriage. The Old Testament gives examples of women who had some authority over men in civil and religious matters.]

Second, submission of wives to their husbands. [The Greek words for man and woman often mean husband and wife; the meaning is determined by the context. Gordon Fee notes that one ancient manuscript adds “to their husbands,” but he comments, “It is not at all clear that this is what the author intended” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New International Commentary on the New Testament; Eerdmans, 1987], 699).] Although this command is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, the presence of the command in the New Testament suggests that it was based on Old Testament principles. [e.g., Eph. 5:22. As discussed earlier, Paul balances this command with the admonition for husbands to love their wives in a self-sacrificial way (verse 25).] Further, verse 35 indicates that Paul may have been dealing with a husband-wife problem. However, if Paul is alluding to a rule about family relationships, it would not necessarily apply to authority in the church.

Third, submission to a Roman law that restricted women's roles in pagan worship. ["Official religion of the Roman variety was closely supervised. The women who participated were carefully organized and their activities strictly regulated" (Linda Belleville, "Women in Ministry," in Beck and Blomberg, 119). Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger cite Plutarch, Cicero, and Livy for evidence that Rome had laws regulating the behavior of women in worship ("Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth," *Reformed Journal* 28 [June 1978], p. 9). References are Plutarch, *Lives, on Solon*; Cicero, *Laws*, II.xv; Livy, XXXIX.xv; and Phintys, *Stobaeus*, IV.23.61.] Although Paul normally means the Mosaic law when he uses the word *nomos*, it is possible that he meant civil law in this verse; the Corinthians would know by context which law he meant.

Fourth, submission to themselves. Just as Paul told the prophets to control themselves (verse 32), he uses the same Greek word in verse 34 to say that women should be in submission; the proximity of these two uses suggests that Paul means for women to control themselves. The New American Standard Bible translates verse 34b in this way: "let them subject themselves, just as the Law says." ["'Submission' and 'silence' are two sides of the same coin. To be silent is to be submissive—and to be submissive (in the context of worship) is to be silent. Control over the tongue is most likely what Paul is talking about" (Belleville, 119). The idea is that when Paul told women to be in submission, he meant the same thing as when he told prophets to be in submission. Ralph Martin writes, "What Paul is rebuking is the way women were upsetting the good order of the worship.... The merit of this view is that it enables us to take 'be in subjection' as referring not to their husbands but to their own spirits" (*The Spirit and the Congregation* [Eerdmans, 1984], 85).] In this case the "law" could be either Roman law or general biblical principles of decency and order.

5) Paul addresses the problem by saying, “If they want to inquire about something...” This implies that the problem in Corinth concerning the asking of questions with a desire to *learn* something. [The Greek word is *manthanō*, usually translated “learn.” The NASB translates it literally: “If they desire to learn anything...”] Blomberg suggests, “Perhaps the largely uneducated women of that day were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes.” [Blomberg, 280. Although some first-century women were well-educated, most were not. They married young and stayed at home. Keener advocates this as the primary problem—the women were

speaking up, asking questions to learn what was going on during the prophecies or the Scripture exposition in church.... The women are interrupting the Scripture exposition with questions. This would have caused an affront to more conservative men or visitors to the church, and it would have also caused a disturbance to the service due to the nature of the questions....

Plutarch says that it is important to ask lecturers questions only in their field of expertise; to ask them questions irrelevant to their discipline is rude. Worse yet are those who challenge the speaker without yet understanding his point.... This principle is particularly applicable to uneducated questioners who waste everyone’s time with their questions they have not bothered to first research for themselves.... So also those who nitpick too much, questioning extraneous points not relevant to the argument.

It was rude even to whisper to one another during a lecture, so asking questions of one another would also have been considered out of place and disrespectful to the speaker. Why would the women in the congregation have been more likely to have asked irrelevant questions than the men? Because, in general, they were less likely to be educated than men. (Keener, *Paul, Women and*

Wives, 81-83)

Schreiner also notes that Plutarch encouraged students to interrupt lectures with questions, and says that Paul would have been unfair to silence only the women (350-351). But Paul said that only one person should speak at a time; he probably did not want anyone to interrupt the speakers; he was not following the advice Plutarch gave for lectures.] Belleville says, “Their fault was not in the asking per se but in the inappropriate setting for their questions.” [Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Baker, 1999), 161.]

6) Paul says that the women “should ask their own husbands at home.” [Grudem notes that this does not necessarily imply that the women were asking other men. “When Paul says that wives should ‘submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord’ (Ephesians 5:22), does that imply that the wives at Ephesus were all submitting to other women’s husbands? Of course not” (244). However, 1 Cor. 14 is a more corrective passage than Eph. 5 is.] This may imply that the problems were caused primarily by women who were married to Christian men. [D.A. Carson asks, “We must ask why Paul then bans all women from talking. And were there no noisy men?” (“Silent in the Churches,” in John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Crossway, 1991], 147). Grudem has a similar objection: “To say that only women and no men were disorderly is merely an assumption with no facts to support it” (246). However, we could equally ask why Paul forbids all questions, even though not all questions are disrespectful. See below for evidence that Paul sometimes gives commands to an entire class of people when only some are the problems.

We can see in chapter 11 that Corinthian women had some behavioral problems that men did not have, and we have to consider the possibility that this might be true in chapter 14, too. We do not think that Paul unfairly singled women out; we therefore (in response to Carson’s question) conclude

that women were the ones who happened to be causing a problem in Corinth by talking and asking questions. Since Greco-Roman culture gave men many opportunities for public meetings, but women had few, it is to be expected that women would have the most problems in what was for them a new situation. L. Ann Jervis writes, “Paul evidently singled out ‘the women’ here simply because in his eyes, they were the culprits in the situation” (“1 Corinthians 14.34-35: A Reconsideration of Paul’s Limitation of the Free Speech of Some Corinthian Women,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 [1995]: 71).]

Grudem is probably right in suggesting that Paul “assumes that the Corinthians can make appropriate applications for single women [or those married to pagans], who would no doubt know some men they could talk to after the service.” [Grudem, 235. 1 Cor. 7 shows that the congregation included widows and other single women. We should not expect Paul to address every possible situation when that is not his main point.] Paul is giving “husbands at home” as an illustration, not as a limitation on who can answer and where they must be. For example, it would be permissible to ask questions while walking home, or of other women, or of other men. [If Paul is using “husbands at home” as an illustration, not as a prescription, which seems likely, then he is not dealing with a husband-wife problem.] Paul’s main point is, Don’t talk in church, not even to ask questions.

7) Paul says that it is “disgraceful” for women to talk in church. This word appeals to the Corinthians’ own sense of social propriety. He is saying that church custom (verse 33b), the law (verse 34), and social expectations (verse 35) all prohibit women from talking in church. [Craig Keener notes, “Whereas questions at public lectures were expected, ancient literature testified that unlearned questions were considered foolish and rude—and women generally possessed inadequate education and were most often

unlearned” (51). Noisy or disorderly women would not be considered “in submission,” even if they were not breaking any particular command. “It would be particularly embarrassing to a husband for his wife to transgress social boundaries and question him in public. This behavior still makes persons uncomfortable in cultures that have an unwritten rule between spouses that one does not shame or embarrass the other in public” (David Garland, *1 Corinthians* [Baker, 2003], 670).] The questions themselves are not wrong, for they can be asked at home, but it is disorderly to ask them in the worship service.

8) It is not clear whether “as in all the congregations of the saints” (verse 33b) introduces this topic, or concludes the previous one. Linda Belleville notes that in the other places Paul appeals to the practice of other churches, it is at the *end* of the discussion (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16), and it is redundant to have “in the churches” both in the introductory clause and at the end of the same sentence. As she notes, “‘Let the women...’ is a typical Pauline start to a new paragraph.” [Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 157-58. Garland expresses the majority view: “The repetition of *ekklesiai* seems clumsy, but it is easier to understand how church custom applies to a wife...than it does to the statement that God is a God of peace” (669-70).] However, this does not seem to affect the interpretation of the verses. Either way, it seems that other churches were already doing what Paul wanted the Corinthians to do.

### **Church, law, and society**

Paul has already indicated that women can pray and prophesy in church (chapter 11), and a worship service includes two or three people prophesying in turn (14:29-32). This means that it is permissible for women to have formal speaking roles in the church. Paul was apparently forbidding some other type of speech. Just as he did not allow tongue-speakers or prophets to speak out of turn, he did not want women to speak out of turn, saying things

in such a way that they were breaking social customs about what is appropriate.

Paul appealed to church custom, the law, and cultural expectations; we will consider how each of these is relevant to the problem that Paul is dealing with.

1) We know very little about how first-century churches functioned, except for what the New Testament tells us—and the picture is one of variety. Some churches were led by apostles and elders; others by prophets and teachers; some by overseers or elders or deacons. Although we know the names of a number of influential men and women, we can associate those names with specific titles in only a few cases. We know even less about how a typical worship service was conducted; 1 Cor. 14 is the primary evidence.

2) We have surveyed the Old Testament, and find no prohibition on women speaking in public. [Grudem suggests that Paul “seems to be referring to the Old Testament generally as ‘the Law,’ probably especially the Creation order in Genesis 2, and understanding it as teaching a principle of male leadership” (234). But as we discussed in an earlier chapter, it is far from clear that Genesis 2 teaches a hierarchy based on sequence of creation. When scholars say that women are not allowed to have spiritual or ecclesiastical authority, they are basing that conclusion on 1 Tim 2:12. It may or may not be a valid conclusion (we will discuss that in our next chapter), but it is exegetically incorrect to say that this is taught in Genesis 2, which makes no such limitation.

Hurley writes, “It is difficult to figure out how it could be said that the Law (i.e., the Old Testament) taught that women should be silent at all times in worship. It teaches the opposite (Ex. 15:20-21; 2 Sa. 6:15,19; Ps. 148:12). It is not difficult to see that the Old Testament would support the silence of women in the judging of prophets, as its whole structure teaches male

headship in the home and in worship” (191-192). Hurley appeals to a generality because there is no particular verse that says what he wants it to say.] Scripture provides examples of women who had leadership roles in civil government, in publicly praising God, and in giving authoritative answers about spiritual matters to male civil leaders (e.g., Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah). Scripture does not require all women to submit to all men.

The problem in Corinth probably involved either a) wives speaking against or dishonoring their husbands, [Blomberg observes, “If ‘women’ is better interpreted as ‘wives,’ then these restrictions would not bar single women from the eldership, nor husbands and wives from positions of joint leadership, nor wives from offices of oversight in churches in which their husbands are not members” (286)—because none of those situations would involve wives ruling over their own husbands. He later suggests, “In Presbyterian or Episcopalian forms of church government, even senior pastors submit to larger structures of authorities over them, so presumably women’s subordination could be preserved even with a female senior pastor” (291).] or b) more generally, women acting disorderly and for that reason considered “not in submission.” The “law” that Paul mentions may be a civil law, or a New Testament rule.

3) In Greco-Roman society, women were given authority in the household, but rarely had opportunity for public speaking. Craig Keener notes a typical expectation: “Plutarch goes on to explain that a woman’s talk should also be kept private within the home...she ‘ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband.’” [Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Hendrickson, 1992), 23.] The average woman was less educated and had little experience in public assemblies; this may have contributed to the problem in Corinth. [Blomberg writes, “If one of the cultural explanations for Paul’s silencing the women is accepted, then contemporary Christians



will silence women only where comparable problems—lack of education, interfering chatter, or the promotion of false teaching—still exist. And they will impose silence on men who fall victim to one of these problems as well” (286).]

It is sometimes suggested that synagogues had separate seating for men and women, and that the early church continued this custom—hence when women asked questions of the men, it was necessary to shout across a barrier, and that is why Paul prohibited such questions in church. Although the hypothesis is attractive because it would provide a motive for Paul’s directives, there is little proof for gender-separated seating for first-century synagogues. [Keener, 76. Donald Binder writes, “Our only clear evidence for the division of the sexes in a synagogue comes from Philo’s writings about the practices of the Therapeutae.... We can only guess to what degree these customs reflected those held outside this specialized community” (*Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* [Society of Biblical Literature, 1999], 378-9). The Therapeutae were a religious sect and their practices were not necessarily representative of other synagogues.]

### **Weighing the prophecies**

Several scholars have argued that Paul is saying that women should not be involved in the “weighing” of prophetic messages (verse 29)—only men may determine whether a message is in accordance with sound doctrine. [The view was suggested in 1965 by Margaret Thrall, professor at Cambridge, in a small commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. It was defended in detail by three Cambridge students: James Hurley in a dissertation in 1973, Wayne Grudem in a dissertation in 1978, and by D.A. Carson (Ph.D., Cambridge, 1975) in a book in 1987.

Thomas Schreiner, another traditionalist scholar (Ph.D., Fuller, 1983),

expresses reservations about this view (in a book review in *Trinity Journal* 17 [spring 1996]: 120). More recently, he notes that “the specific situation that called forth these words is difficult to identify” (in Beck and Blomberg, 231). Blomberg adopts Grudem’s view, but admits, “The obvious drawback of this approach is that it must infer a meaning for ‘speaking’ which Paul never spells out. But that problem afflicts all of the views that take Paul’s words as less than absolute” (ibid.).

Richard M. Davidson opts for his view, but restricts it to marital relations: “Paul’s call for the wives to ‘be silent’ (*sigāō*) was a particular silence while their husband’s prophecies were being tested, and did not indicate total silence in the worship service” (“Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry* [ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Andrews University Press, 1998], 277). Mary Evans suggests the same: “What is being prohibited is not the questioning of any man by any woman, but a wife taking part in the judging of her own husband” (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity 1983], 99).]

In this view, men and women may prophesy, but only men may comment on the validity of the prophecies, because only men have that authority. This interpretation has the advantage of keeping verses 34-35 on the same subject as the rest of the chapter: the orderly use of spiritual gifts. [“The discussion of women has a natural place and does not appear as a sudden intrusion or as a shift of topic” (Hurley, 190). Scholars who have a different view admit that the verses “seem to rudely interrupt the topic at hand” (Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 155). Keener refers to “the awkward way it fits its context,” and explains: “Paul frequently digressed, and digressions were a normal part of ancient writing” (*Paul, Women and Wives*, 74).] In keeping with this view, they say that women may speak in church but (based largely on 1 Tim 2:12) may not have authority.

This interpretation has become almost unanimous among traditionalist scholars. They argue that prophecy (an unplanned comment) is not as authoritative as teaching (an explanation of Scripture); women can speak prophecies but should not have “ecclesiastical authority” in which they have the responsibility to teach or judge in an official way what men say.

Several points may be noted against this view:

1) When Paul says that “the others” should weigh what is said (verse 29), he may mean the entire congregation or the other prophets—either of which would have included females. Keener suggests that the “others” who weigh (*diakrinō*) the prophecies would be people with the gift of discernment (*diakrisis*) (12:10), but he notes that nothing suggests that only males are given this gift. [Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 79.]

2) When Paul wrote that they should “weigh carefully what is said,” it is by no means clear that he is advocating a formal discussion and pronouncement by leaders of the church. Rather, his meaning might more simply be that each person should *think* about whether the saying is true, much as people today might during sermons. [Indeed, Grudem admits that verse 29 implies that the women should be “silently evaluating the prophecies in their own minds” (“Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No” (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 [1987]: 21). There is no indication in the text that the evaluation is ever done out loud. Paul said that only two or three tongues-speakers should speak, and only two or three prophets should speak; he would therefore not be likely to invite an unlimited number of men to comment verbally on the prophecies. He makes no regulations for prophecy-evaluators, which suggests that this was not a formal part of the worship service.] Verses 34-35 are hardly an adequate explanation of “how to proceed with ‘let the others weigh what is said.’” [Grudem claims that verses 33b-35 explain how to judge prophecies (234).]

3) There is no evidence that “all the congregations of the saints” had any procedure for evaluating prophecies—or that this was done in *any* other church. None of the early interpreters suggested that verses 34-35 are guidelines for evaluating prophecy. [Most early interpreters emphasized the silence of women, without providing for exceptions. The common complementarian interpretation and the common egalitarian interpretation are both relatively modern; both recognize that the traditional approach ignored the context.]

4) Paul nowhere suggests that the weighing of prophecies, or discerning of spirits, is more authoritative than prophecy. Rather, throughout 1 Cor. 14 he extols prophecy as the most useful gift.

5) These scholars have reversed the natural meaning of verse 35, which suggests that the women want to *learn* something by asking questions. In contrast, these scholars say that the problem is that the women were expressing a judgment. It would be of dubious value for a woman with the gift of discernment to withhold her reservations about the message until she got home, where she would share her thoughts with her husband, who might not have the gift of discernment. [“If Paul is here referring to the ‘weighing of prophecy’ he would be advising ‘the women’ to carry out that function at home. Such private judging of prophecy would be in contravention both of the method Paul has just prescribed (the other prophets are publicly to discern prophecies) and the function of true prophecy as a community edifier (14.4) and public witness (14.24)” (L. Ann Jervis, “1 Corinthians 14.34-35,” 61).]

6) It seems that worship services in Corinth were chaotic; they probably did not have a time designated for evaluating prophetic messages, so it is doubtful that Paul is addressing problems that the Corinthians already had with this evaluation time—nor is there evidence that Paul is anticipating a hypothetical objection. Verses 34-35 indicate that the problem concerned

comments and questions that the women were making, perhaps to everyone at once, or to specific men. [Grudem suggests that “Paul anticipates an evasion of his teaching” (234), as if women might say, If we can’t evaluate the prophecies, can we at least ask questions? But throughout chapter 14, Paul seems to be addressing real situations, and there is no hint in verse 35 that he is switching to a hypothetical question. He does not anticipate “what if” questions about tongues-speaking, for example. If he simply wanted to silence women, verse 34 would have been sufficient.]

7) In the Grudem-Hurley view, it would not be insubordinate for a woman to ask questions or make comments about the prophecy given *by a woman*. But Paul does not address such a possibility.

8) Paul’s call for women to be quiet comes five verses *after* he says that prophecies should be evaluated, and it uses a different verb. Paul does nothing to connect verse 34 with verse 29. Verses 34-35 may not be on the topic of spiritual gifts, but they *are* about order in the worship service, and it is not unreasonable for Paul to include these verses in this chapter, and then conclude his discussion of spiritual gifts in verse 36.

It is reasonable to suggest that Paul is prohibiting the same kind of speech that he prohibits for tongues-speakers and prophets: out-of-turn speaking. While someone has the podium, the others should be quiet, not making loud comments, not calling out questions (no matter how well intentioned [Keener says, “Paul here actually opposes something more basic than women teaching in public...he opposes them learning too loudly in public” (*Paul, Women and Wives*, 80).] ), and not having their own conversations, for any of those would be disgraceful in the eyes of the public, contrary to what God wants, and contrary to the way that other congregations functioned. [Grudem says that if Paul is addressing a problem unique to Corinth, then it would be pointless to say that “women should remain silent in the churches” (245). But it makes

perfectly good sense to say that people should not interrupt worship services, no matter what church we are talking about, no matter whether it is a problem in other churches.

Grudem also objects to the idea that Paul's main concern is order in the church: "Paul himself says that his concern is the principle of submission" (247). Paul mentions submission, yes, but he does not say that it is his primary concern. His concern throughout the chapter is on order, and it is not unreasonable to think that this might be his primary concern in verses 34-35 as well. Carson, writing in a volume that Grudem helped edit, says: "Although the focus in the second part of the chapter is still on tongues and prophecy, it is still more closely related to the order the church must maintain in the enjoyment of those grace gifts" (152).

In verses 34-35, Paul's concern is the behavior of women, and his reference to submission and the law is only one of his lines of support. As we saw in 1 Cor. 11, Paul could gather support from several lines of evidence (including Scripture) for head coverings, a custom based in culture. His primary concern in that passage was not a doctrine of headship, or of God's image, or of angels in worship services (although he mentions them), but his primary concern is women's appearance. We should not confuse a supporting argument with the primary purpose of the passage. In 1 Cor. 14, order is the primary concern; submission is a supporting argument.]

Ben Witherington suggests the following possibility: "It is very believable that these women assumed that Christian prophets or prophetesses functioned much like the oracle at Delphi, who only prophesied in response to questions, including questions about purely personal matters. Paul argues that Christian prophecy is different: Prophets and prophetesses speak in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, without any human priming of the pump. Paul then limits such questions to another location, namely home. He may imply

that the husband or man who was to be asked was either a prophet or at least able to answer such questions at a more appropriate time.” [*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1995), 287. Similarly, Richard Longenecker writes, “Paul’s words here pertain to the topic of charismatic excess discussed in chapters 12-14, are meant to restrict certain aberrations which arose within the worship of the Corinthian church, and should not be turned into a general ecclesiological principle” (*New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 86).]

### **Noisy women**

We believe that the “noisy meeting” theory makes sense of the biblical data: Women were disturbing the meeting in some way. [Paul does not provide enough information for us to be sure about the exact nature of the problem. It might involve rude comments, chatter, noisy questions, or ecstatic shouts (which characterized women in some Greek mystery religions). As Blomberg notes, “Egalitarians and hierarchicalists alike need to stop accusing each other of being unbiblical and instead acknowledge more humbly that the biblical data simply aren’t clear enough to permit dogmatism on either side” (292).] However, Hurley criticizes this view, and we will respond to his objections:

1) “There is no indication elsewhere in the letter that the women in particular were unruly.” [Quotes from Hurley are from page 188 of his book.] We believe that this objection is not valid. An analysis of chapter 11 shows that women were the primary problem; Paul gives fewer supporting arguments for the way that men should appear, suggesting that he believes there is a greater need to correct the way women pray and prophesy.

2) “Paul does confront unruly situations in the letter (11:33-34; 14:27,29,31). He meets them by establishing order rather than by silencing

the unruly completely.” This is true, but it says nothing against the noisy meeting theory. No one believes that Paul silenced women completely. [Grudem has a similar objection: “If women were being disruptive, Paul would just tell them to act in an orderly way, not to be completely silent.... If noise had been the problem in Corinth, he would have explicitly forbidden disorderly speech, not all speech” (245). But not even Grudem believes that Paul tells people to be “completely silent.” His objection can be turned on his own view: If Paul meant judging prophecies, then he would have said that, rather than forbidding all speech. Actually, it is not fair for people to object to proposed interpretations by saying that the text doesn’t explicitly indicate that particular problem, because the text doesn’t pinpoint any particular problem. It is unavoidable that we have to guess what problem best accounts for Paul’s response.] The silence he commanded for women was a temporary silence, just as it was for prophets and tongues-speakers; the goal of all these commands was an orderly worship service.

3) “The rule which Paul sets out is one which he says applies in all his churches (14:33b). It seems unlikely that the problem of noisy women had arisen in all of them.” However, Paul does not say that a *rule* had to be given in all the churches—it is enough that the churches were already doing what theology and culture said was proper. No matter how the problem is defined, it seems unlikely that the same problem had arisen in all the churches—if it had been that common, Paul would have given the Corinthians some guidance on it when he established the church in Corinth, and on this matter he does not allude to any prior teaching. [“We may assume that the problem was specific to Corinth and perhaps a few other cities like it. After all, his other instructions in this chapter address specific abuses of the gifts at Corinth; had they obtained generally, we can be sure that Paul would have already given these regulations during his extended stay with them” (Keener,



*Paul, Women and Wives*, 73). Verse 36 also implies that Paul is dealing with problems that are unique to Corinth.]

Most churches were already orderly. [Grudem has a similar objection: “His rule cannot be restricted to one local church where there supposedly were problems.... Paul directs the Corinthians to conform to a practice that was universal in the early church” (245). But Grudem’s objection applies to his own view, as well: There is no evidence that other churches were having problems with a prophecy-evaluation time in the worship service, nor evidence that most other churches had insubordinate women. Paul implies that a “rule” was not necessary in most churches; they were already doing what they were supposed to do. Everyone agrees that Paul is telling the Corinthians to conform to what other churches did; the question is whether the deviation at Corinth was disruption, or that women might be tempted to ask questions about the prophecies.]

4) “It seems unlike Paul to silence all women because some are noisy or disruptive. His actual handling of other disorderly people provides concrete grounds for arguing against wholesale action when only some individuals are in fact violators.” This objection is groundless. Paul sometimes gives commands to an entire group even when it is unlikely that *every* member of the group had a problem:

In 1 Tim. 5:11, he writes as if *all* younger widows are unable to control their desires to be married; in Titus 1:12 he writes as if everyone on Crete is a lazy glutton. In 1 Tim. 2:8, he instructs *men* to pray “without anger or disputing.” Apparently the problem about prayer in Ephesus was caused only by men, and probably only by some of them, so Paul gave instructions only for the men; in the same way, the problem with talking in Corinth happened to be caused by women. Paul was writing to specific churches, dealing with specific situations, not trying to write manuals for all churches in all times.

Paul sometimes wrote principles that are of universal validity, but other instructions are an application of timeless truth to a specific situation.

Even in Hurley's interpretation, Paul was too sweeping in his prohibition—he forbids all questions because *some* of them might not be submissive. However, Paul's command is quite reasonable if we understand Paul to be addressing a general commotion: People should not disrupt the service. Paul assumed that the Corinthians could figure out, just as we do today, that whispering is permissible, and that a woman can ask the pastor, not just her own husband. It is not disgraceful for women to pray and prophesy in church, but it is disgraceful for them (or anyone else) to cause a commotion, and that is Paul's main concern.

## **Conclusion**

Although we cannot answer all questions about the specific situation Paul was addressing in Corinth, we do conclude that he was addressing a specific situation rather than making a general prohibition on women speaking in church. His intent was to prohibit disruptive and disrespectful questions and comments that were part of the chaotic Corinthian meetings—and in Corinth, these particular practices were coming from the women. Just as he told the disorderly tongues-speakers and prophets to control themselves because God is not a God of disorder, he also told the women to control themselves because the law teaches self-control. If they want to learn something, they can ask questions somewhere else. [Eugene Peterson gives this paraphrase in *The Message*: “Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could more appropriately be asked of their husbands at home. God's Book of the law guides our manners and customs here. Wives have no license to use the time of worship for unwarranted speaking.”]

Only one person should speak at a time. Everyone else, whether male or

female, should be quiet, for it is disgraceful for people in the audience to be talking while someone else is speaking to the group. Just as Paul's call for tongues-speakers or prophets to be silent should not be turned into a demand that they never say anything at all, so also his call for women to be quiet should not be turned into a demand that they never give messages of spiritual value in church. That is something that Paul specifically allows in chapter 11.

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## 10

### Questions About 1 Timothy 2:11-15

For many people, 1 Timothy 2:12 is concise proof that women should not have authority in the church. Paul did not allow women to teach or have authority, they say, and neither should we.

However, it is obvious that we do not insist on the last part of the verse: “she must be silent.” Not even Paul believed that women should be silent *at all times*, even in church. So in this chapter, we examine this verse more carefully in its context to see what Paul is really prohibiting. As we look more carefully, we discover questions about how we should apply these words to the church today.

These verses are important, so we must study them carefully, with prayer, to try to avoid mistakes. As we noted at the beginning of this series, we want to base our beliefs and practices on Scripture. We do not want to twist the Scriptures.

At the same time, we want to recognize that there are genuine difficulties in understanding this passage. One scholar wrote, “It is sometimes implied that the hierarchicalist’s argument all boils down to 1 Timothy 2. This is patently not the case.... If anything, this passage complicates matters because the exegetical questions are so complex.” [Craig Blomberg, “Neither Hierarchicalist Nor Egalitarian: Gender Roles in Paul,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001), 357-58. Craig Keener writes, “It would be surprising if an issue that would exclude at least half the body of Christ from a ministry of teaching would be addressed in only one text” (*Paul, Women, and Wives* [Hendrickson, 1992], 101).]

Because of the difficulties in this verse, this study is quite long, even when some of the important supporting material has been moved into

bracketed notes. We encourage you to read it carefully, and at least read the summary at the end. We pray that we can all examine this passage of Scripture with a sincere desire to hear what God is saying to us through it.

### **Observations and questions**

1 Tim. 2:11-12 says: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” We will begin with a few observations about these verses, noting areas in which we need further clarification:

1. Paul did not believe that “a woman...must be silent” *at all times*. He says that women can pray and prophesy in a worship service (1 Cor. 11). There may be a difference between *prophecy*, which Paul allowed, and *teaching*, which he did not—or a special situation in Ephesus may have called for silence.
2. The Bible does not teach that females can *never* have authority over males. Scripture allows women to have civil authority over men, and to have authority over male children, male teenagers, and possibly others. [God gave Deborah authority as a prophetess and judge, and Esther as a queen.] Again, we must find out what situation Paul was dealing with, and whether it applies to the church today.
3. When Paul says, “I do not permit...,” he is stating his policy for churches in his jurisdiction. This may imply that all churches in subsequent centuries should have a similar policy—or it may not.
4. 1 Tim. 2:11 says that a woman should learn in “full submission.” However, Scripture does not teach that a woman must be in total submission to *all* men. So we need to find out what kind of submission Paul is talking about.
5. 1 Tim. 2:12 does not use the normal Greek word for authority (*exousia*)—it uses the rare Greek verb *authenteō*. We need to find out whether

there is a difference in meaning between these two words.

6. In verses 13-15, Paul appears to give *reasons* for what he says in verse 12. But the reasons given create additional questions:
  - a. verse 13 says that Adam was formed first, but it is not clear why that should be a reason for women to avoid authority specifically in church, when women can have authority in civil government.
  - b. verse 14 says that Adam was not deceived—thereby suggesting that he sinned deliberately. It is not clear why this is a reason for men to have authority.
  - c. verse 15 says that “women will be saved through childbearing,” but this does not make sense for spiritual salvation *or* physical protection.
7. 1 Tim. 2 addresses several cultural matters: for people to pray for kings, for men to lift their hands when they pray, and for women to avoid braids, jewelry and expensive clothes. We need to find out whether we can take verse 12 as a permanent guideline when we do not take verses 8-9 as permanent guidelines.
8. Paul’s letter gives pastoral advice on a variety of topics to Timothy as he grapples with a controversy in Ephesus (1:3). Some of the advice seems applicable for any church in any age, but other remarks seem specific to Timothy’s situation. [For example, 1:18; 4:12-14; 5:23.] We need to find out whether we should take 2:12 as a permanent policy when we essentially ignore Paul’s advice in 1 Tim. 5:9 to maintain a list of widows over age 60.
9. In 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Paul counsels slaves to submit to their masters, especially if the masters are Christian. We need to find out whether Paul’s advice for *women* to be submissive is also rooted in a cultural situation that is no longer universally true.

Most of these observations and questions have come from people who disagree with the traditional interpretation. That is not surprising, because on almost any subject, people who are happy with the traditional view have little incentive to ask for more details. However, the requests for clarification are legitimate, and we need reasonable answers. We will start by presenting the traditional or complementarian view. [The “complementarian” view is that men and women are complementary, having different roles in the family and in the church. The “egalitarian” view stresses the equality of men and women, saying that there is no role in the church restricted to one sex or the other. Both terms are less than perfect, since complementarians believe that men and women are equal in worth, and egalitarians believe that men and women have different and complementary strengths.] Then we will present the egalitarian objections to that view, and finally a discussion of whether the objections are reasonable.

### **The traditional view**

[In some churches, “tradition” is that women never speak from the podium. Hurley, Moo, Piper, Grudem, and Schreiner present a moderated version of tradition, in that they argue that women may speak in church in some circumstances.] James Hurley argues that 1 Timothy was designed to give instructions that would apply in all churches, in all ages:

It is universally accepted that 1 Timothy was intended to provide a clear statement concerning certain issues which its author, whom I take to be Paul, felt needed attention.... [Some scholars do not believe that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles, or that he had someone else formulate the wording. The exact authorship does not affect our study, since we accept these epistles as canonical and therefore authoritative for faith and practice. We will proceed on the basis of Pauline authorship.]

Paul wrote...“how it is necessary [*dei*] to conduct oneself” [3:15]. *Dei* is an impersonal verb meaning “one must” or “one

ought.”... Paul’s use of *dei* here is presumptive evidence that he considered what he said normative beyond the immediate situation.... Paul’s abstract language indicates that his instructions should have a general rather than closely limited application..... He delivers “trustworthy sayings worthy of full acceptance.”... Only the last section of the fifth chapter is pointedly restricted to Timothy. [James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Zondervan, 1981), 196.]

Hurley ignores 1 Tim. 1:18 and 4:12-14, and says nothing about any modern application of 5:9-14.

Thomas Schreiner, another traditional scholar, is more cautious: “The letters should not necessarily be understood as timeless marching orders for the church but must be interpreted in light of the specific circumstances that occasioned them.” [Thomas Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church* (2nd ed.; edited by Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner; Baker, 2005), 87.] Although parts of the letters deal with deviant teachings found in specific situations, he says that the letters as a whole “reflect the pattern of governance that he expected to exist in his churches.” [ibid.] T. David Gordon writes, “The Pastoral Epistles are... written with the purpose of providing instruction of ordering churches at the close of the apostolic era.” [T. David Gordon, “A Certain Kind of Letter,” in Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds, *Women in the Church* (1st ed., Baker, 1995), 59.]

Hurley notes that 1 Tim. 2 deals with prayer and worship. Referring to “the prayer posture of the day,” Paul exhorts the men to pray in a peaceable way. In particular, he wanted them to avoid anger and an argumentative spirit. [Schreiner writes, “When Paul calls on men to pray ‘in every place’... this is probably a reference to house churches” (91). First-century Jews sometimes recited various curses against apostates in their prayers. It is possible that some early Christians used similar curses against government



officials or their religious opponents, and Paul tells them to stop.] Paul then advises the women to avoid ostentatious hair and clothing styles. “Both sexes are to live holy lives of obedient works. The difference between the commands to the two sexes gives us some indication of besetting sins of the day.” [Hurley, 198.] Paul’s instructions “are, to a certain extent, culturally relative,” but they are based on timeless principles: humility and good behavior.

Paul does not forbid *all* braids and jewelry, Hurley says.

He refers instead to the elaborate hair-styles which were then fashionable among the wealthy.... He probably meant “braided hair decorated with gold or with pearls.”... Obedience to this command of Paul’s requires no subtle exegetical skill or knowledge of the customs of Paul’s day; it requires only an assessment of what adornment is excessively costly and not modest or proper. Christians...have no need to set aside Paul’s instructions as somehow “culture bound.” [Ibid., 199].

We agree that women may wear braids, gold, and pearls today, and should avoid flaunting their wealth. Schreiner writes, “The similar text in 1 Peter 3:3 supports this interpretation, for read literally it prohibits all wearing of clothing, which is scarcely Peter’s intention. The words on clothing provide help in understanding the instructions on braids, gold, and pearls. Paul’s purpose is probably not to ban these altogether, but to warn against expensive and extravagant preoccupation with one’s appearance” (95).

Paul then addresses another aspect of behavior appropriate for women: They should learn quietly and submissively. Douglas Moo observes, “That Paul wants Christian women to learn is an important point, for such a practice was not generally encouraged by the Jews.” [Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?” in John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 1991), 183. But he also notes that the stress is on the manner, not the command to

learn. “It is not the fact that they are to learn, but the manner in which they are to learn that concerns Paul” (183; similar comment by Schreiner, 97).]

Paul is not just stating a personal preference, Hurley argues—Paul gives verse 11 as a command. The Greek word “does not mean silence but carries with it connotations of peacefulness and restfulness.... Paul is not...calling for ‘buttoned lips’ but for a quiet receptivity and a submission to authority.” [Hurley, 200. The Greek has a third-person imperative: “have a woman learn.” He also claims that the verb in verse 12 is not just a personal preference, “but has overtones of command” (201).] “Not absolute silence but rather a gentle and quiet demeanor is intended.” [Schreiner, 98.]

Why did Paul feel it necessary to write this verse? Moo says, “Almost certainly it is necessary because at least some women were *not* learning ‘in quietness.’... The facts that this verse is directed only to women and that verses 12-14...focus on the relationship of men to women incline us to think that the submission in view here is also this submission of women to male leadership.” [Moo, 183. “We can also be fairly certain that women were functioning as teachers in the Ephesian community; otherwise, Paul would have no need for a corrective” (Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* [Baker, 1999], 169).] “It is certainly possible that the prohibition is given because some women were teaching men.” [Schreiner, 112.]

Why silence only the women? Was it because the average woman was not as educated as the average man? No, because Greco-Roman society had some educated women and many illiterate men. [Steven M. Baugh writes, “To say that Ephesian women were uneducated because they did not appear in ‘graduate schools’ of philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine is misleading. Few people in antiquity advanced in their formal education beyond today’s elementary school levels, including men like Socrates, Sophocles, and Herodotus.... There were wealthy women in the Ephesian congregation. At

least some of these women were educated” (“A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century,” chapter 1 in *Women in the Church*, 2nd ed., 34).] If education was the problem, then it would be inconsistent for Paul to silence women but say nothing about uneducated men. [Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Multnomah, 2004), 293.]

Some inscriptions in Asia Minor show that women functioned as high priests in some temples—therefore there was no *cultural* scandal involved in women being in authority, which leads Wayne Grudem to conclude that Paul’s directive must have been based on God’s law, not cultural sentiments. [Grudem notes that “some women had prominent roles in pagan religions in Ephesus.... The idea that women could not hold church office because it would have been unacceptable in that society does not square with the evidence” (324). Nancy Vymeister notes, “On the western coast of Asia Minor there was a tradition of dominant women” (*Women in Ministry* [Andrews University Press, 1998], 339). Clinton Arnold and Robert Saucy suggest that in Ephesus, “women were converting to Christianity and desiring to attain leadership roles in the church similar to what they held in society. Aware of this situation, Paul addressed this issue because he did not want these churches to cave in to the cultural pressures of the day and violate a deep-set theological conviction about order between men and women” (“The Ephesian Background of Paul’s Teaching on Women’s Ministry,” chapter 12 in *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective*, ed. Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof [Moody, 2001], 287).]

However, this does not mean that women should not speak in church. Hurley writes: “Women were certainly free to speak in the Pauline churches (1 Cor. 11). Paul is speaking only of teaching situations here in 1 Timothy 2.” [Hurley, 201. Similarly, Piper and Grudem write, “Paul endorses women prophesying in church (1 Corinthians 11:5) and says that men ‘learn’ by such

prophesying (1 Corinthians 14:31).... Teaching and learning are such broad terms that it is impossible that women not teach men and men not learn from women in some sense.... The teaching inappropriate for a woman is the teaching of men in settings or ways that dishonor the calling of men to bear the primary responsibility for teaching and leadership” (“An Overview of Central Concerns,” in Piper and Grudem, 69-70).]

In support of this interpretation, he notes that verse 12 is a conceptual repetition of verse 11. Learning corresponds to not teaching, and submission corresponds to not having authority. Just as Paul wants women to learn in a submissive manner, he does not want them to teach *in an authoritative manner*. [“Both verses have the same situation in mind, one in which women are not to teach authoritatively but are to learn quietly” (Hurley, 201). Blomberg also combines the two as “authoritative teaching” (364). However, Grudem (317) and Moo separate them: “We think 1 Timothy 2:8-15 imposes two restrictions on the ministry of women: they are not to teach Christian doctrine to men and they are not to exercise authority directly over men in the church” (Moo, 180). He says that these two prohibitions show us what Paul means by “full submission” (184). “Paul treats the two tasks as distinct elsewhere in 1 Timothy” (187). The fact that Paul twice calls for female silence (verses 11-12) suggests that he did not allow any form of teaching. Teaching, by its very nature, normally involves some form of authority.]

Hurley concludes that the verse means “that women should not be authoritative teachers in the church,” and he associates that with the office of elder. Paul did not forbid *all* teaching by women, Hurley claims. “What Paul disallowed therefore was simply the exercise of authority over men.” [Hurley, 202.] Werner Neuer writes, “Paul excludes women from the office of teaching because teaching the assembled congregation would necessarily place them over men.” [Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian*

*Perspective* (Crossway, 1991), 119. “Authorised teaching belongs... to the leadership and direction of the congregation and carries with it an obligation on church members to obey it” (ibid.).]

Moo acknowledges that the present-tense form of the verb “permit” *could* allow for a temporary situation, but a present-tense verb can also be used for a permanent command (e.g., Rom. 12:1). [“As far as the present tense of the verb goes, this allows us to conclude only that Paul was *at the time of writing* insisting on these prohibitions” (185).] Whether Paul indicates a temporary prohibition or a permanent rule cannot be decided by the grammar, but only by the context. Moo notes, “Paul’s ‘advice’ to Timothy is the word of an apostle, accredited by God, and included in the inspired Scriptures.” [Moo, 185. Moo does not explicitly draw conclusions from his statement, but he insinuates his conclusion. However, temporary commands such as “use a little wine” are also apostolic, inspired, and biblical.] Even an indicative verb—a statement—can be used to imply a command, as Paul does in verses 1 and 8. [Schreiner, 99-100. He notes that this does not prove that the verb in verse 12 is a permanent command, but that the form of the verb does not prove that it is temporary.]

What sort of “teaching” is not allowed? The Greek word for “teach” *can* refer to a ministry that any believer might do (Col. 3:16), but it more often refers to a special gift associated with church leadership (Eph. 4:11). “In the pastoral epistles, teaching always has this restricted sense of authoritative doctrinal instruction” (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:2). [Moo, 185, and Schreiner, 101.] Teaching was an important part of the function of an elder (1 Tim. 3:2).

However, in Protestant churches, authority is based in Scripture, not in the preacher. Does modern preaching involve the same sort of authority? Moo argues that it does, since “the addition of an authoritative, written norm is unlikely to have significantly altered the nature of Christian teaching.... Any

authority that the teacher has is derived...but the activity of teaching, precisely because it does come to God's people with the authority of God and His Word, is authoritative." [Moo, 185-86. Moo notes that "evangelistic witnessing, counseling, teaching subjects other than Bible or doctrine—are not, in our opinion, teaching in the sense Paul intends here" (186). Piper and Grudem say, "We do not think it is forbidden for women to tell the gospel story and win men and women to Christ" (77)—although that is a form of teaching, and it may involve doctrines about Jesus and salvation. They admit that there is a hazy line between a Priscilla-type role and an official teaching role (76, 85).

Moo says that women can vote in a congregational meeting, presumably even when women are the majority. He reasons that voting "is not the same thing as the exercise of authority ascribed, e.g., to the elders" (187). He thinks that women can perform administrative duties, and notes that the passage is only about the Christian community; it does not address business, government, and education. Neuer is more restrictive: "Women may give instruction, so long as it is not public teaching of the congregation, but takes place among small groups of women" (121).]

What is the difference between prophecy (which women may do, according to 1 Cor. 11) and teaching (which they may not, according to 1 Tim. 2:12)? Neuer says, "In contrast to prophecy, which is related to specific situations and according to Paul is subject to assessment by the congregation, teaching is binding and of general validity, so that the congregation must submit to it (cf. Rom 6:17; 16:17; 1 Cor 4:17; 15:15ff.; Col 2:6-7; 2 Thess 2:15)." [Neuer, 119. However, pastoral teaching should also be subject to assessment by the congregation, and if it violates Scripture, the congregation does not have to submit to it.] Grudem says that teaching is based on transmitting apostolic teachings, whereas prophecies may have errors and

must be evaluated. [As summarized by Schreiner, 102.]

Schreiner is reluctant to accept Grudem's definition of prophecy as "mixed with error," but he argues that it is different from teaching, vertical rather than horizontal, and more spontaneous. "Prophecy applies to specific situations and is less tied to the consciousness of the individual." [Schreiner, 102. This definition seems more speculative and precise than the biblical evidence warrants. Schreiner notes that the prophecies of women are just as authoritative as the prophecies of men, but they may nevertheless be given "without overturning male leadership, whereas 1 Timothy 2:11-15 demonstrates that women cannot regularly teach men" (ibid). One scholarly study of prophecy in the New Testament gives a broader definition: "What all manifestations of this gift have in common is the speaker's sense that they have a 'word from the Lord,' but a preacher who has meditated on a text or theme long enough to have had such an experience may well then qualify as one prophesying when he or she speaks to a Christian gathering or congregation" (David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* [Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979], 213, cited by James Beck and Craig Blomberg, "Reflections on Complementarian Essays," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 308).]

What sort of authority is not allowed? Paul does not use the normal word for authority here (*exousia*), but a rare word (*authenteō*). Traditional scholars argue that the meaning is the same: to have authority over. [For more on the meaning of *authenteō*, see the appendix at the end of this chapter.] "The two words are used synonymously in at least eight different contexts." [Schreiner, 103.] Köstenberger analyzes all the "neither...nor" constructions in the New Testament, and finds that in all cases, both words are positive, or both are negative. [Andreas Köstenberger, "A Complex Sentence: The Syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12," chapter 3 of *Women in the Church*, 2nd ed., 71. He notes that

this observation has been accepted by egalitarian scholars such as Padgett, Keener, Marshall, and Giles, although some of them, in order to keep *authenteō* as negative, try to see “teaching” as also negative in this verse. Belleville objects to the principle, expressing some reservations about the method of Köstenberger’s study, but not offering any counterexamples of her own.]

Paul views “teaching” as a positive function. [“The verb *didaskō* (I teach) has a positive sense elsewhere in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2). The only exception is Titus 1:11, where the context clarifies that false teaching is the object” (Schreiner, 104). Saucy writes, “Further evidence for the positive understanding is seen in the fact that the prohibition of exercising authority is specifically said to be ‘over a man.’ Only a positive meaning makes sense of this addition, as surely the apostle would have prohibited women from ‘domineering’ or ‘flaunting authority’ over all people, not just men” (“Paul’s Teaching on the Ministry of Women,” chapter 13 in Saucy and TenElshof, 294).]

This therefore suggests that Paul also viewed *authenteō* as a positive function: to lead, direct, or exercise authority. Although teaching is good, Paul said that women should not teach men; in the same way he said that women should not exercise authority over men even though authority in itself is not bad. Paul is making restrictions not because the activities are bad, but because the people are female. This is simply the counterpart to what Paul said in the earlier verse, that women should be submissive.

What “men” are in view here? Since the Greek words *gynē* and *anēr* can mean either woman and man, or wife and husband, depending on context, some have suggested that Paul did not make restrictions on all women, but only on women exercising authority over their own husbands. But Moo notes that Paul speaks of men in general in verse 8, and women in general in verse



9, and if he wanted to shift the meaning to wives in particular, he would need to supply a verbal indicator, such as by saying that he did not allow women to exercise authority over *their own* men. [Moo, 188; see also Grudem, 296-99; Schreiner, 92-94; Belleville, 121.] Lacking such an indicator, and since the surrounding context is about church rather than family relationships, it seems best to conclude that Paul is speaking of men and women in general—or more specifically, the men who had authority in the church. As Schreiner writes, “The context of verse 12...suggests that the submission of all women to *all* men is not in view, for not all men taught and had authority when the church gathered.” [Schreiner, 99.]

Paul’s comments were motivated by a particular problem in the church at Ephesus, but that in itself does not mean that his advice does not apply to other situations. He addressed the specific situation in verse 11, Moo says, and then supports it in verse 12 with a general statement about the way he wants all of his churches to function. [Moo, 189.] He is restricting women not because they are uneducated or deceived (a temporary situation); he is restricting them because they are women (a permanent situation). They are allowed to teach, but not to teach men. [Schreiner, 101.] They can have authority, but not authority over men.

### **Reasons for the prohibition**

Hurley argues that Paul bases his view on Scripture, not on the cultural situation. By following his instructions with *gar* (usually translated “for”), Paul is expressing reasons for his command. [“When a command or other instruction is given in paraenetic material, it is highly unlikely that the expression *gar* is to be taken in any other way than causal” (Gordon, 61). “When Paul gives a command elsewhere in the Pastoral Epistles, the *gar* that follows almost invariably states the reason for the command.... Even in ordinary speech reasons often follow commands” (Schreiner, 105). Note the

qualifying phrase “almost invariably,” which suggests that a different use is possible. Egalitarians often argue that verses 13-15 are illustrations, not reasons. Philip B. Payne writes, “It makes good sense to take gar in 1 Tim. 2:13-14 as explanatory since the example of Eve’s deception leading to the fall of mankind is a powerful illustration of how serious the consequences can be when a woman deceived by false teaching conveys it to others” (“Libertarian Women in Ephesus: A Response to Douglas J. Moo’s Article,” *Trinity Journal* 2 [1981]: 176, citing Robertson’s Grammar).]

Paul makes no reference to social customs, or to the idea that most women did not yet have enough education to be teachers, or the idea that they were the chief proponents of false doctrine. Rather, he says that Adam was created before Eve, thereby giving him authority over her, just as the firstborn son eventually “became the head of his father’s house and leader of its worship.” [Hurley, 207. He cites scriptures about inheritance by the firstborn son, but even though he is seeking an application for worship situations, he cites no evidence that the firstborn son necessarily had authority in worship. He does not attempt to explain why Adam’s priority would give males authority over females in religious matters but not always in civil government. As evidence that priority is linked with authority, Hurley notes that Col. 1:15-18 connects Christ’s authority with him being firstborn, before all things, and the beginning. Hurley argues that it is reasonable to conclude that Paul connected being first with implying authority.]

Moo writes, “For Paul, the man’s priority in the order of creation is indicative of the headship that man is to have over woman.” [Moo, 190. “Paul maintains that the Genesis narrative gives a reason why women should not teach men: Adam was created first and then Eve. In other words, when Paul read Genesis 2, he concluded that the order in which Adam and Eve were created signaled an important difference in the role of men and women”

(Schreiner, 105-6).] He writes:

By rooting these prohibitions in the circumstances of creation rather than in the circumstances of the fall, Paul shows that he does not consider these restrictions to be the product of the curse and presumably, therefore, to be phased out by redemption. And by citing creation rather than a local situation or cultural circumstances as his basis for the prohibitions, Paul makes it clear that, while these local or cultural issues may have provided the *context* of the issue, they do not provide the *reason* for his advice. His reason for the prohibition of verse 12 is the created role relationship of man and woman, and we may justly conclude that these prohibitions are applicable as long as this reason remains true. [Moo, 190-91.

If the logic is extended, it would imply that women will be subordinate to men in all eternity, since verse 13 will always be true, but this is probably more than Moo wants to say. It does cast doubt on the validity of his reasoning.]

Eve rather than Adam was deceived, Paul writes in verse 14—but how does that support a rule that women cannot teach men? Hurley asks, “Would you rather be led by an innocent but deceived person, or by a deliberate rebel?” [Hurley, 215. Hurley never suggests how we should answer the question. Schreiner notes that this “would seem to argue against men teaching women, for at least the woman wanted to obey God, while Adam sinned deliberately” (113-14). But he never answers the question, either.] He dismisses the idea that women are too gullible to be teachers (cf. Titus 2:3, 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15). [Hurley (215) notes that Paul blames Adam for the entry of sin into the world (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:21-22).]

However, that interpretation is found in the early church fathers, and it is the simplest reading of the text. [If verse 14 gives a reason for verse 12, these verses say, in short, that women should not teach men because Eve was

deceived. The easiest way to get from one concept to another is to assume that the characteristic mentioned for Eve is relevant to the prohibition because it somehow applies to all subsequent women. William J. Webb notes that the traditional teaching of the church is “that women are more easily deceived than men due to an inferior capacity to understand and make sound judgments.... The traditional rendering is the most supportable reading of the text” (*Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* [InterVarsity, 2001], 225). Blomberg notes that the “common Jewish and Christian belief throughout history” is “that women are ontologically inferior to men” (365-66). He further notes, “Attempts, however sophisticated, to defend the view that women are inherently more gullible fly in the face of all contemporary social-scientific analysis and do not fit the context of 1 Timothy” (366).]

Neuer refers to “the greater susceptibility of women to temptation,” and says that Paul, rather than oppressing women, is simply keeping them out of a situation they could not handle. [Neuer, 120.] Grudem is not clear on this point, but says that Paul refers “to a characteristic of Eve that he sees as relevant for all women in all cultures.” [Grudem, 296.] Grudem writes, “Some complementarians understand this verse to be referring to the fact that Eve wrongfully took leadership in the family and made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit on her own, and other complementarians understand this to refer to a woman’s ‘kinder, gentler nature’ that makes her less likely to draw a hard line when close friends are teaching doctrinal error.” [Ibid. The fact that these ideas are proposed, despite not being in the text, suggests that people are not comfortable with what the text seems to imply. Blomberg faults Schreiner for suggesting, without any biblical or contemporary evidence, that women are less able to discern doctrinal errors (366). Webb notes, “The revised historical position ‘cleans up’ the traditional view based

upon their own social-scientific awareness” (227). He notes that since the text does not say how verse 14 is related to verse 12, some speculation is inevitable.]

Both of these ideas seem far from what the text actually says—it specifies deception, and says nothing about leadership or gentleness. [Webb notes, “The role-reversal interpretation is convoluted; it requires the reader to bring unnecessary and unwarranted information to the text” (114).]

Does the text imply that women are more easily deceived? Moo thinks that this interpretation is possible, but unlikely. “There is nothing in the Genesis accounts or in Scripture elsewhere to suggest that Eve’s deception is representative of women in general.” [Moo, 190. In 2 Cor. 11:3, Eve provides an example for both men and women.] Moreover, Paul allows women to teach other women—they are capable of teaching correctly. Schreiner also argues against female gullibility: “This interpretation should be rejected since it implies that women are ontologically and intellectually inferior.” [Schreiner, 114.]

Schreiner notes that “all sin involves deceit,” and Adam was therefore deceived; what verse 14 means is that Eve was deceived *first*—the word “first” is understood from an implied parallel with verse 13. [Ibid. Blomberg faults this view also: “There are no well-known principles from antiquity... that would make the order in which one was deceived in any way significant” (366).] Schreiner writes:

Paul’s purpose is...to focus on the fact that the serpent approached and deceived Eve, not Adam.... The serpent subverted the pattern of male leadership and interacted only with Eve during the temptation. Adam was present throughout and did not intervene. The Genesis temptation, therefore, is indicative of what happens when male leadership is abrogated. [Schreiner, 115].

If this is Paul's thought, he picked a roundabout way of expressing it, one that requires the readers to fill in several steps of logic. Schreiner wants to cast blame on Adam, but the text says that Eve is the one who "became a sinner." Schreiner admits that his interpretation is weak, but says that the egalitarian view is weaker. "The verse is difficult" (112). "I can scarcely claim that I have given the definitive and final interpretation of this passage" (120). "The complementarian view stands on the basis of the clarity of verse 13 so that resolving the interpretation of verse 14 is not crucial for the passage as a whole" ("Women in Ministry," in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 225).]

In effect, Schreiner is blaming Adam for sinning first, for he failed to protect his wife from the serpent. Hurley also wants to blame Adam: "Paul seems to be saying that Eve was not at fault; she was deceived.... Could it be that his point in verse 14 is that Adam was the one appointed by God to exercise religious headship?" [Hurley, 215-16. In this interpretation, too, readers would have to supply several steps of missing logic. "The headship of men in domestic and religious affairs continues from the pre-fall period through the time of Christ's advent" (220). Note that Hurley again specifies religious headship, without any evidence from Genesis for this specificity. Schreiner makes a similar unwarranted qualification: "The creation of Adam before Eve signaled that men are to teach and exercise authority in the church" (120, italics added).]

Moo makes a slightly different suggestion: Verse 14 "is intended to remind the women at Ephesus that Eve was deceived...precisely in taking the initiative over the man.... If the women at the church at Ephesus proclaim their independence...they will make the same mistake Eve made and bring similar disaster on themselves and the church." [Moo, 190. Note in this view that Eve was not deceived into eating the fruit, but into taking initiative. But

Genesis has the opposite emphasis: It is clear about the fruit but says little if anything against Eve taking the initiative.] In short, there is no widely accepted view among traditional scholars.

Finally, we will consider verse 15, which is not a reason for Paul's prohibition, but a qualification for verse 14. [Schreiner, 115.] Nevertheless, it is part of the paragraph. Hurley says that if the verse "refers to salvation from sin, it is a flat contradiction of Paul's view of salvation by trust in Christ." Another option is that the woman will be kept safe in childbearing (implied in the NIV), but "this seems almost totally irrelevant to the context." [Hurley, 221. Moo notes that this would entail an unusual meaning for *sozō*, normally translated "save" (192). Keener argues, "The most natural way for an ancient reader to have understood 'salvation' in the context of childbirth would have been a safe delivery, for women regularly called upon patron deities...in childbirth" (*Paul, Women, and Wives*, 118). Payne writes, "Paul's obvious concern is to highlight the role of woman both in the fall (2:14) and in salvation (2:15)" (178).] Moreover, as Schreiner says, "the fact that Christian women have often died in childbirth raises serious questions about this interpretation." [Schreiner, 115. He also argues that the verb always has the meaning of spiritual salvation in the Pastoral Epistles.]

The grammar allows another possibility: She (singular, referring to Eve) will be saved through *the* childbearing (the Greek text has the word "the," possibly referring to the birth of Christ), if they (plural, referring to all later women) remain in the faith. It is not that Eve's salvation is dependent on later women's faithfulness, but the thought is elliptical, requiring readers to supply a verb: Eve will be saved through the birth of Christ, and subsequent women *will be saved*, too, if they remain in the faith. This is a possible interpretation, Hurley says, but "it breaks with the flow of the passage." [Hurley, 222. Hurley suggests another possibility: Women will be "kept safe from wrongly

seizing men's roles by embracing a woman's role." This seems to read something into the text that is not there, and others have not accepted this meaning of "save." Schreiner notes that "verse 12 is too far from verse 15 for this latter interpretation to be plausible" (116).]

Schreiner argues against it: "Those who posit a reference to Jesus' birth have subtly introduced the notion that salvation is secured as a *result* of giving birth to him, whereas the text speaks not of the result of birth but of the actual birthing process." [Schreiner, 116.]

Moo suggests that the verse designates "the circumstances in which Christian women will experience their salvation—in maintaining as priorities" the role that Scripture assigns to women. [Moo, 192. He speculates that "false teachers were claiming that women could really experience what God had for them only if they abandoned the home and became actively involved in teaching and leadership roles in the church."] Paul has simply mentioned one role—bearing children—as a way of designating the female role in general.

Schreiner agrees, saying that childbearing "represents the fulfillment of the woman's domestic role as a mother in distinction from the man." [Schreiner, 118. "A woman should not violate her role by teaching or exercising authority over a man; instead, she should take her proper role as a mother of children." Paul is not saying that barren women cannot be saved—he is simply citing a common role of a woman that a man cannot possibly have.] He notes that the verse mandates more than childbearing: "It is not sufficient for salvation for Christian women merely to bear children [i.e., accept the female role]; they must also persevere in faith, love, holiness, and presumably other virtues.... Women will not be saved if they do not practice good works." [Ibid. Good works cannot merit salvation, but they "are a necessary consequence of salvation (e.g., Rom. 2:6-10, 26-29; 1 Cor. 6:9-11;



Gal. 5:21).... Since Paul often argues elsewhere that salvation is not gained on the basis of our works (e.g., Rom. 3:19-4:25; Gal. 2:16-3:14; 2 Tim. 1:9-11; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7), I think it is fair to understand the virtues described here as evidence that the salvation already received is genuine” (ibid., 118-119). In other words, Schreiner wishes that Paul had stated things the other way around: women will be saved by faith, if they continue in good works.]

1 Tim. 4:15-16 provides a parallel—Paul says that Timothy will save himself by being a good pastor. An insistence on good behavior does not negate the doctrine of salvation by grace and faith. The point is that women do not need to take on a man’s role in order to be saved. Despite what the false teachers might say against childbearing, women will be saved by staying in their traditional role.

There are some difficulties in this interpretation: First, it ignores the change from singular to plural, requiring that women in general be represented first by a singular and then by a plural. Second, it makes the verse an odd tangential idea nearly irrelevant to the context: I do not permit women to have authority over men, because men were created first and Eve was a sinner, and oh, by the way, women will be saved by being good women. [Susan Foh (who supports the traditional view) calls the verse “a sort of *non sequitur*.” Schreiner criticizes her for that (115), but his interpretation also amounts to a non sequitur, an aside designed to refute something that may have been a false teaching in Ephesus. Paul apparently feels no need to say that men will be saved by staying in their traditional role, rather than abdicating, as Adam supposedly did.]

Third, if Paul wanted to refer to the female role in general, he would have been clearer if he had used a principle he had already mentioned—submission—rather than introducing the specificity of childbearing. Last, it speculates that the false teachings at Ephesus included a criticism of

childbearing. This is a plausible suggestion, since the heresy included a rejection of marriage (4:3), but this speculative reconstruction of the setting is precisely the method that traditional scholars have criticized egalitarians for using. [Schreiner comments: “Egalitarian scholars have been busy remaking the background to the situation in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, but their reconstructions have been highly speculative and sometimes wildly implausible” (223).]

If verse 15 can best be explained by suggesting that it is a response to a particular false teaching in Ephesus, perhaps that approach can be used for the statements in verses 13-14, too. [Catherine and Clark Kroeger suggest that Paul was combating some Gnostic heresies taught by women: 1) That Eve was created first, 2) That Eve enlightened Adam with her teaching, and 3) Sex and childbearing is bad. Verses 13-15 can thereby all be explained as refutations of specific erroneous teachings. Schreiner criticizes the Kroegers for using documents written after the New Testament (88). Admittedly, it cannot be proven that these ideas existed when Paul wrote, but since ideas often circulate before they are put into writing, it is plausible that such ideas existed in the first century. As Schreiner’s own approach to verse 15 indicates, it is legitimate for scholars to try to understand difficulties in the text by speculating about an unusual need in that specific setting.

Bruce Barron notes that “the internal examination of 1 Timothy points us toward Gnosticism and makes the connection between the two less ‘tenuous’” (“Putting Women in Their Place: 1 Timothy 2 and Evangelical Views of Women in Church Leadership,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 [1990]: 454). This epistle addresses various ideas that were later called Gnostic.]

Overall, we might find Paul’s logic hard to understand, Gordon admits, but this is not a reason to reject what he says. [Gordon, 63.] Moo concludes

that “we are justified in requiring very good reasons *from the text itself* to limit the application of this text in any way. We find no such reasons. Therefore, we must conclude that the restrictions imposed by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 are valid for Christians in all places and all times.” [Moo, 193. By “the text itself,” Moo apparently means the entire Bible, for he allows women to teach some subjects, and to be in authority in some situations, such as civil government, concepts not specifically allowed in 1 Tim. 2.]

### **Questions remain**

In the previous section, we presented the “traditional” view. However, as Proverbs 18:17 says, “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.” It would be foolish for us to decide the matter before we have heard the other side ask questions about the conclusions. We began this chapter with a number of observations, and the traditional interpretation addresses some of them better than others.

1. The text twice calls for women in particular to be quiet; it does not allow for *any* form of teaching. [Vicente Bejo, Jr. argues that the passage covers behavior not just in church, but “in every place” (verse 8). It would not be appropriate for men to pray with anger anywhere, and it would not be appropriate for women to wear ostentatious clothing anywhere. Paul’s call for submission and quiet demeanor were not intended to apply only to church settings. See “Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:8-15,” unpublished paper.] However...
2. Women can prophesy in a worship service, saying things that instruct others (1 Cor. 11). Paul believed prophecy and teaching to be different activities, but it is difficult to prove any difference *in the results*. Men might learn something from either form of speech, and both types of speaking need to be evaluated. It is not clear why women should be allowed to speak spontaneously, but not with advance preparation.

3. Females can *sometimes* have authority over males. Paul was dealing with teaching in the church setting; he was not addressing civil government, business, public schools, or evangelism. However, the rationale that complementarians sometimes use to support male authority based on Genesis 2 is not valid when it comes to civil authority, and this inconsistency suggests that the rationale itself may not be valid.
4. Was Paul stating his own policy, or a permanent rule for all churches? Traditional scholars may claim that everything in the letter is permanently applicable, but this is not true. [“The pastoral epistles were not written to be manuals of church government. Rather they were written to combat false teaching and heresy. Approximately one-fifth of the 242 verses in the pastorals explicitly treat false teaching.... In 1 Timothy 1:3 the concern to prevent false teaching is expressed as the reason Timothy was left in Ephesus” (Evangelical Covenant Church, “Policy on Women in Ministry,” 5). “The entire book of 1 Timothy seems to have been written...with six key problems in mind, each of which is referred to in the first eight verses and is elaborated throughout the epistle: false teaching, controversies, people leaving the faith, meaningless talk, antinomianism, and Judaizers.... Women were involved in each of the first five problems” (Payne, 185). Due to the situation the letter was written for, it should be no surprise that some aspects of the letter do not seem to fit the church today.]

Or they may say that Paul’s restriction is permanently valid because Paul supports it from Genesis, but this ignores the fact that Paul used Genesis to argue for a cultural custom in 1 Cor. 11. Paul’s policy *might* be appropriate in all churches at all ages, but the fact remains that it was inspired to be written as his *policy*, and his preferences are not

always permanently valid (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:7). [Keener observes, “What is most significant about the wording of the passage, however, is that Paul does not assume that Timothy already knows this rule. Had this rule been established and universal, is it possible that Timothy, who had worked many years with Paul, would not have known it already?” (*Paul, Women, and Wives*, 112). Had the situation never arisen before that women wanted to teach? The situation in Corinth suggests that this is unlikely. As noted earlier, the reason that Paul felt it necessary to write this passage may have been because women were already speaking and seeking leadership.]

5. A woman should learn in “full submission,” but women do not have to submit to *all* men. In church, a woman’s submission should be to God first, Scripture second, and the sermon third. [In the Septuagint, the Greek word for “permit” always “refers to permission for a specific situation, never for a universally applicable permission.... The vast majority of the NT occurrences...clearly refer to a specific time or to a short or limited time duration only” (Payne, 172). Vymeister writes:

The women are to “submit,” but the text does not say to whom.... The text itself seems to be discussing attitudes in worship rather than the marriage relationship. The Bible does not elsewhere teach that all women are subject to all males. Submission to the teaching elder in 1 Tim. 3:2 does not fit the text. A natural understanding of the verse would be that the women are to submit to the gospel, to the teaching of Jesus, not to an unnamed person. Theirs is to be a receptive attitude. (342)]

If the pastor says something that contradicts Scripture, a woman should not submit. It is doubtful that this type of submission can be described as “full.” Since modern preaching may contain erroneous ideas and must be evaluated, it is *not* more authoritative than prophecy was. Perhaps the role of the pastor and the preacher’s authority in the

church is different today, significantly altered by the existence of the New Testament as *the* authoritative record of church teaching. [2 Tim. 2:2 suggests that “teaching” is the accurate transmission of apostolic sayings. However, most preaching today is not an attempt to transmit the apostolic teachings (members already have a copy), but is an attempt to explain them and persuade people to apply them in modern situations.] People in the pews now have an objective standard by which to judge what is taught, whereas before they did not.

6. 1 Tim. 2:12 uses the rare Greek verb *authentēō*. Although it is tempting to see a difference in meaning for a different word, there would be little point in Paul saying that he had a policy against allowing one group of people to exercise a wrong kind of authority against another group; the verse more naturally says that Paul did not allow women to do something that was permissible for men. [However, a negative meaning is possible: Paul did say that males in particular should not pray with anger (2:8). The doctrinal team does not have the technical expertise to resolve the meaning of the word, and we cannot build our conclusions on what would surely be a debatable point.] It is not clear whether he prohibited teaching *an* authority, or teaching *with* authority, and it does not seem necessary to choose between these two—either way, the verse seems to contradict Paul’s policy of allowing women to prophesy in the Corinthian church. [“It is...safe to say that Paul does not want women to teach at this time” (Vymeister, 346).]

7. In verses 13-15, Paul gives unusual *reasons* for what he says in verse 12.

- a. Adam was formed first, and that might give him authority—but there is nothing in Genesis to say why it would give him (and by implication all males) exclusive authority in doctrine but not in

civil government. Traditional interpreters do not explain why one applies but the other does not; they base their belief on 1 Tim. 2:12 rather than Genesis 2, and it is erroneous to say that Genesis 2 gives males authority specifically in matters of worship. [“If there had been no doubt about whose creation came first, the assertion of verse 13 would not have been necessary” (ibid., 347). Vymeister reports Gnostic teachings that gave Eve priority: Adam addresses Eve: ‘You are the one who has given me life.’ Eve is said to have ‘sent her breath into Adam, who had no soul.’ Eve...declares herself the ‘mother of my father and the sister of my husband,...to whom I gave birth’” (340, citing *Hypostasis of the Archons* 2.4.89.14-17, *On the Origin of the World* 115, and Thunder, *Perfect Mind* 6.2.13.30-32).

Douglas Moo, a complementarian, offers support: “Some later gnostic texts interpret Eve’s eating the fruit in the garden as a positive step—for by doing so, she gains access to knowledge (*gnosis*), the central feature of the gnostic system and the means of salvation.... Could it be that some of the Ephesian false teachers were arguing in a similar manner, stimulating Paul’s categorical assertion: ‘Eve was deceived and became a sinner’?... It may be that this tradition was partially responsible for the statement” (“The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Rejoinder,” *Trinity Journal* 2 (1981): 204).]

- b. Adam was a rebel. Traditional interpreters do not explain why this has any relevance to church authority, and it suggests that there was something going on behind the scenes in Ephesus that we do not know about. [Ann Bowman summarizes: “Historical reconstructions generally fall into three categories. First, women

may have been seeking to improperly assert authority over men in the worship assembly. Second, women may have been teaching heretical doctrine. Third, women generally were doctrinally untaught and thus in greater danger of falling into heresy” (“Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 288).] The readers knew why this was relevant to Paul’s prohibition because they had information that we do not. Otherwise, the structure of the verse implies that Eve’s gullibility is relevant to contemporary women, but some complementarian scholars distance themselves from this traditional interpretation.

- c. Verse 15 says that “women will be saved through childbearing.” Interpreters agree that this is a difficult verse, and it again suggests that we are missing some crucial information. This increases the possibility that Paul is addressing a situation that is unusual. [“While the sparseness of the information and the complex construction of the passage make it difficult for modern readers to know precisely what Paul had in mind, it is clear that he was addressing some current concern that Timothy and the Christians in Ephesus would have readily understood” (Vymeister, 350).]

- 8. 1 Tim. 2 addresses several cultural matters. Traditional scholars say a) we can see a universal principle behind verses 8-9, but verse 12 is a universal principle, and b) Paul supports verse 12 with evidence from Scripture, thereby indicating that it is a universal rule. [Schreiner writes, “The prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 is grounded by an appeal to creation, indicating that the command has universal validity” (109).] However, 1 Cor. 11 shows that Paul *can* use Scripture even when



arguing for a cultural custom, and he could have cited a scripture to support verses 8-9, too, without making them universal. The principle behind verse 12 may be a general one, just as it is for 5:9 or 6:1.

9. Some of Paul's advice seems specific to Timothy's situation, without any specific "application" required today, so we cannot assume that every passage must be applied today—for example, 1 Tim. 5:9. Traditional scholars do not address the inconsistency very well. [Schreiner acknowledges the problem of inconsistency when he writes, "Perhaps we have not been serious enough about applying 1 Timothy 5:3-16 to our culture" (109). He offers a tentative application, but it still allows numerous exceptions. The Evangelical Covenant Church paper notes,

Those who are quick to argue against women in ministry on the basis of texts like 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11,12 need to ask why they do not imitate the kind of church service described in 1 Corinthians 14:26-36 or why they do not institute widows' roles and care for widows according to the instructions of 1 Timothy 5. Using proof-texts out of context and using only the parts of the text that we like are not suitable practices for a church claiming to believe the Bible. (6)]

10. In 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Paul counsels slaves to submit to their masters for the sake of the gospel. [The evangelistic purpose of slave submission is explicit in 1 Tim. 6, but Eph. 6:5-9 shows that Paul can issue similar commands without any acknowledgement that they are given for expedience in a temporary cultural situation. Indeed, in this passage he seems to deal with slavery as if it were a legitimate social structure, like marriage and family. In Eph. 6:8, Paul gives a timeless reason for slave submission: because God will reward everyone for the good they do. The fact that the supporting reason is timeless does not change the fact that the initial command had a temporary application.

Some scholars argue that Paul taught female social conformity for the sake of the gospel. “Paul’s missionary strategy provides the rationale for this approach. This is most succinctly described in 1 Cor 9:19-23, where Paul states that he conforms his behavior to those around him so that he can win as many as possible” (James G. Sigountos and Myron Shank, “Public Roles for Women in the Pauline Church: A Reappraisal of the Evidence,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 [1983]: 293). Sigountos and Shank show that Greek culture accepted women in priestly roles—prophesying and praying—but not teaching roles.]

Paul’s advice is not a permanent approval of slavery, and in the same way, his policy for women may be a temporary need, not a permanent approval of authority restricted to males. Paul did not directly command slavery, but his policy was that slaves should submit to their masters. By doing this, Paul “taught something less than God’s ideal in order to advance the gospel”—which means that he *might* have done something similar for women. [Contra Grudem, 323. Paul made some comments that could be interpreted as criticisms of slavery, but none are clear denunciations. 1 Cor. 7:21 merely makes an allowance for specific situations; it could be claimed that Gal. 3:28 addresses salvation but not social roles, and Philemon 16 may apply only to Onesimus.]

## **Hermeneutics**

The question in this passage is not just one of exegesis (what *did* it mean?), but also one of hermeneutics (what does it mean *for us*?). We want to understand what Paul wrote, but we also want to understand whether and how we should *apply* it in churches today. That is a question of hermeneutics, the art of interpreting the text for modern application. Paul said that younger

widows should get married (5:14), but does this advice apply to all younger widows today? Do cultural expectations make the situation of widows significantly different today? (In many cultures, they probably do, and in some, perhaps not.)

When Paul told slaves to submit to their masters, was he endorsing slavery? Christian slave-owners often said he was, but when other Christians perceived the injustice involved in owning a human being, they began to ask more questions of the texts. It is generally only when people see problems in the way that a text is applied, that they begin to ask more probing questions of it. People who are happy with the status quo don't see the need for questions, but when questions arise, we all need to look at the text more carefully. Sometimes the objections are valid; sometimes they are not.

Scholars on both sides of this controversy agree that 1 Tim. 2:12 puts certain restrictions on women: Paul did not allow women to teach or to have authority over men in the functioning of the church—he told them to be quiet. [James Beck and Craig Blomberg note that some primarily American egalitarians have proposed “hermeneutical oddities” in an effort to show that these verses are not restrictive. Egalitarians in the British Commonwealth tend however “to argue that these texts did imply rather widespread prohibitions on women’s leadership in the first-century world, but they were due to specific circumstances within that world that largely no longer obtain today” (“Reflections on Egalitarian Essays,” 164).] The question is whether these restrictions were based on the situation in Ephesus, the culture in the Greco-Roman-Jewish world, or a principle rooted in the way that God wants men and women to interact with one another in worship.

Craig Keener presents an egalitarian view, but begins with this admission: “I believe that Paul probably prohibits not simply ‘teaching authoritatively,’ but both teaching Scripture at all and having (or usurping) authority at all.”

But he then asks, “Is this a universal rule? If so, it is a rule with some exceptions.... But it is also possible that this text is the exceptional one, which can be argued if it can be shown to address a particular situation. After all, if it were to be a universal rule, one might have expected... Timothy...to be aware of this rule already.” [Craig Keener, “Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001), 53.] [The choice is more complicated than Keener suggests, because a command can be local and temporary even if we cannot demonstrate the situation that prompted the command, and a command can be universal even if it was prompted by a local situation. For example, Paul says that men should pray without anger or disputing (1 Tim. 2:8). This admonition seems universally appropriate, yet prompted by some situation that we have no specifics on.]

Keener then gives evidence that there are exceptions, and he notes, “The one passage in the Bible that specifically prohibits women from teaching is addressed to the one church where we know that false teachers were effectively targeting women.” [Ibid., 53-54. He writes, “False teachers targeted women in the households (2 Tim. 3:6), who were proving incapable of learning correctly (2 Tim. 3:7; cf. 1 Tim. 4:7).” Nancy Vymeister writes, “Not only are women carried away by the false teachers, some of them ‘learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not’ (1 Tim 5:13), evidently spreading false teaching” (*Women in Ministry*, 337).]

Many egalitarians do not argue about what 1 Tim 2:11-15 says—they disagree about its significance for the church today. Although there are a few disagreements about specific words in the text, much of the egalitarian case focuses instead on evidence that the text was not written “for all churches in all subsequent centuries.” Much of this effort has been an attempt to show

that Paul was addressing an unusual situation—they have tried to sketch a situation that motivated Paul to write these verses. [Some suggest that the situation involved a culture that rejected female leadership, but this seems contradicted by archaeological evidence and by the role that Paul permitted women in 1 Cor. 11. Others suggest that Paul was concerned that women were generally poorly educated, and he told them to learn in silence—implying that they would not have to be silent after they had been taught. “If he prohibits women from teaching because they are unlearned, his demand that they learn constitutes a long-range solution to the problem” (Keener, *Paul*, 112).]

These reconstructions are speculative, sometimes implausible, and sometimes contradictory. Since the original situation cannot be proven, we will not spend much effort along these lines. However, we will address some evidence that may suggest that Paul’s policy is *not* intended for all time.

First, there is evidence that some commands in Scripture do not apply today. For example, as we saw in a previous chapter, women do not need to cover their heads when they pray in church today, nor do believers have to greet one another with a kiss. We do not have to pray for Paul to be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, nor encourage virgins to avoid marriage. Some commands in Scripture *are* based in culture; the question here is whether Paul’s policy on the conduct of women is one of them. [Grudem argues that governance is an essential aspect of the church, not a cultural matter (323). But this misses the point—egalitarians are not arguing against all governance, but saying that governance restricted to males is a cultural matter that is not essential to the church, just as greeting one another with a kiss is a cultural matter. We can have the core function without insisting on the specific form found in the New Testament.]

There is evidence within the Pastoral Epistles, too, that even though these

letters give guidance on church matters, some commands are situation specific—even though the original readers might have assumed the commands to be universally true. When Paul says that older widows should be put on a list and younger widows should remarry, Timothy may well have thought the rule applicable for all time. When Paul commands Christian slaves to serve their Christian masters well, there is nothing in the text to indicate that Paul expects this situation to be a temporary one. Therefore, although we base our beliefs and practices on the Bible, this does not mean that we have to follow every instruction that the Bible contains; we have to see whether it applies to us. This does not prove that 1 Tim. 2:12 is a temporary admonition—it simply shows that it *may* be.

### **Summary**

To put the matter in simple terms, we see in 1 Cor. 11 that Paul permitted women to speak in worship meetings, but in 1 Tim. 2:12 he said they should be silent—they cannot teach or have authority. There are two basic ways to address this difference:

1. Complementarian scholars try to resolve this contradiction by saying that 1 Cor. 11 permits a form of speaking that is not authoritative. Although they cannot prove that modern preaching is more authoritative than ancient prophecy, they believe that this distinction best resolves the problem, and Paul's prohibition is still valid. In brief, "We know that women cannot have authority, so the speaking that Paul permitted in Corinth must not be authoritative."
2. Egalitarian scholars try to resolve the problem by saying that 1 Tim. 2:12 was a temporary restriction based on circumstances in Paul's churches at the time he wrote, a situation that apparently did not exist when he wrote to Corinth. Although they cannot

prove what that situation was, it is not necessary to reconstruct it. The fact that Paul allowed women to prophesy in Corinth shows that the restriction was not a rule for all time. In brief, “We know that Paul permitted women to speak, so the prohibition in 1 Tim. 2:12 (which includes speaking) must be temporary.”

We believe that the second approach has more merit, for these reasons:

- Prophecy, by its very nature, seems to involve authority, for it means to speak words inspired by God. Prophecies must be “weighed” (1 Cor. 14:29), [Complementarian scholars have suggested that churches had a designated time for evaluating prophecies. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is unlikely.] but this is done not to disagree with God, but to ascertain *whether* the words are from God. If they are words of God, they should be heeded. Modern preaching does not have more authority than first-century prophecy, and it is inconsistent to argue that women may be inspired by God to speak in church about everything *except* the Word of God. [Some scholars seem to focus on the question of authority, but leadership in the church depends more on personal example, and the truth of Scripture, than on bare assertion. “One is hard-pressed to find a biblical link between local church leadership and ‘authority’ (exousia). The New Testament writers simply do not make this connection.... It is the church that possesses authority and not particular individuals” (Linda Belleville, “Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James Beck and Craig Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 104-6).]

In Corinth, Paul allowed women to speak with authority in church, [Paul commended women as fellow workers in the gospel. Although he does not give them specific titles, the implication is that they had significant influence in his churches—and that probably involved some speaking, although we do not have enough details to be more precise.] which indicates that the prohibition in 1 Tim. 2:12 should not be taken as a universal or permanent rule. The inconsistent attempts by complementarians to draw lines between what women can do and what they cannot suggests that the task is impossible. [Beck and Blomberg note that conservative churches often allow female

missionaries to have considerable authority in the mission field but not at home—this “often remains an embarrassing double standard that undermines some of the credibility of the hierarchicalist position” (310).]

- Paul was inspired to write this prohibition as his own policy, not as a command. True, his policies might sometimes be taken as a command, but we have also learned to discount the policies he describes in 1 Cor. 7, for example. When Paul wrote to Timothy, he had a policy against women in authority—but God does not seem to have that policy. [Assuming that Paul was in agreement with God’s policies, we conclude that his restrictive policy was necessitated by the situation his churches were in. As we saw in the previous chapter, that is the most likely explanation for the restriction that Paul gave in 1 Cor. 14:34.] He gave Deborah authority as a prophetess and judge—and there is no logical reason why the creation priority of man gives males exclusive authority in the religious sphere but not in civil government. The Bible clearly shows that although women rarely had civil authority, God does allow it, and the primary passage that would seem to limit female authority in the church is introduced as a policy rather than a command.
- Considering the nature of 1 Timothy, it is not surprising that Paul is describing a policy that was of temporary validity. It was written to help Timothy combat some heresies that were causing problems in Ephesus; its directives include cultural matters such as the posture of prayer and the way in which women might adorn themselves. Paul’s advice concerning widows, despite being issued with commands, is not applicable to the church today. Although the letter is about church administration, it was written for a specific situation, and we should not assume in advance that its instructions are timeless truths. [Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart writes,

That 1 Timothy 2:11-12 might be culturally relative can be supported first of all by exegesis of all three of the Pastoral Epistles. Certain women were troublesome in the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:11-15; 2 Tim. 3:6-9) and they appear to have been a major part of the cause of the false teachers’ making



headway there. Since women are found teaching (Acts 18:26) and prophesying (Acts 21:8; 1 Cor. 11:5) elsewhere in the New Testament, it is altogether likely that 1 Timothy 2:11-12 speaks to a local problem” (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [Zondervan, 1982], 69).]

Complementarians argue that Paul’s policy must be universal, because he supports it from Scripture. However, we see in 1 Cor. 11 that Paul uses Scripture to support his command for women to wear head coverings, too. He can use Scripture to argue for a temporary policy. His use of Scripture is not an attempt to explain what Genesis means—it is simply a use of one part of Scripture to add support to one part of his argument. [Paul uses Scripture selectively (saying that men are in the image of God, not saying that women are, too). Paul’s use of Scripture in support of this policy is no proof of permanence, just as his use of a timeless truth in Eph. 6:8 does not mean that his policy for slaves was permanent. Keener writes,

In the polemical context of Galatians 3:16, where Paul may be responding to his opponents by using their own methods, he employs a standard interpretive technique of his contemporaries: Apply the text the way you need to in order to make your point. While some of us may not want to accept that Paul uses Scripture in an ad hoc way at times (it makes it more difficult for us to teach sound hermeneutics to our students), respect for Scripture requires us to revise our preconceptions in light of what we find in the text, rather than forcing the text to fit philosophical assumptions about what we think it should say” (61).]

Moreover, the obscurity of 1 Tim. 2:13-15 suggests that Paul was dealing with an unusual situation, and that we do not understand the relevance of his arguments because we do not know the details of the situation. It is not clear why Adam being formed first would give all subsequent men authority in the church but not in civil government; it is even more obscure why men should have authority if Adam sinned deliberately. [Paul’s policy would be

appropriate under the following scenario: False teaching was sweeping the congregation, targeting women in particular, with the ideas that Eve was created first, that Adam was deceived, and that women should avoid marriage and giving birth. There is evidence for the first and fourth points in 1 Timothy itself; points two and three are speculative, but this scenario becomes more plausible when we see that these doctrines were later taught in this very area.

“It is now known that Ephesus was a major center for Mother Goddess worship...., major tenets being that a female goddess gave birth to the world, that Eve was created before Adam, and that to achieve highest exaltation woman must achieve independence from all males and from child-bearing” (JoAnn Davidson, “Women in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry* [ed. Nancy Vymeister; Andrews University Press, 1998], 178). Although the evidence comes from the second century, the teachings may have circulated before Paul wrote. Barron writes,

1 Tim 2:13-14 makes very good sense as a coherent counter-argument to a specific problem—namely, a false interpretation of Genesis by heretical women. Paul refutes the Gnostic arguments by reasserting that Adam was created first and that he was created perfect, not ignorant.... It is not simply that some women are teaching error. Rather, the placing of any woman, whether qualified or not, in authority, may be undesirably reinforcing pagan cultural baggage (Barron, 455-56).]

In short, it is difficult to take this passage as a permanent command restricting all women from all leadership positions in all churches. It indicates that women should not speak in church, and yet Paul himself permitted women to speak authoritative words in church. His prohibition should therefore be seen as based on the situation at the time, not a rule that applies in all circumstances. It is not even written as a command, so it is preferable to take it as a policy of temporary validity, given because of a temporary need.

The early church had a different view. [Dissenting voices may be found as early as the 17th century, but they became much more prominent in the 20th century. It was certainly not the modern feminist movement that caused Margaret Fell to write her book *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures* (London, 1666). Beck and Blomberg note that “secular cultural forces have in part contributed to the ascendancy of hierarchicalism” as well as egalitarianism (168). All interpreters are influenced by their culture, sometimes in ways they do not realize.] We respect church history, but in this case we believe that Scripture, our standard for faith and practice, has been misunderstood—just as it was often misunderstood in the matter of slavery, and of salvation by grace. The culture of previous interpreters had blinded them to questions they should have asked but did not. Scholars of *all* persuasions today recognize errors in the historical interpretation of passages about women.

In our next chapter, we will conclude this series of studies with some policy recommendations for the diverse situations found within our denomination.

## Appendix 10A: *Authenteō*

“A precise consensus as to the meaning of the word has not been achieved among well-known lexicographers.” [H. Scott Baldwin, “An Important Word: *Αὐθεντέω* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church*, 2nd ed., 40.] The word sometimes had a negative meaning, sometimes a neutral meaning of exercising authority. The lexical question is what it meant when Paul wrote the Pastorals. Did it have a negative meaning—to use violence, to domineer, to usurp authority—or a neutral meaning, to exercise authority in general, in a way that might be either bad or good?

Baldwin analyzed 85 occurrences of *authenteō* and found only three uses before Paul. Philodemus used it in the sense of “to rule”; a private letter used it in the sense of “to compel,” and Aristonicus used it to mean “instigate.” [Ibid., 49-50.] Some of the most negative meanings suggested have been based on the fact that the noun *authentēs* can mean murderer, but there is no evidence that the verb was used to mean “murder,” and the noun may not necessarily be derived from this verb.

Two examples from Chrysostom (A.D. 390) are particularly interesting: “Eve exercised authority once wrongly.” Baldwin comments: “The implication...is that Chrysostom could not make the negative force felt without the addition of *kakōs* [“wrongly”], and he therefore did not regard the verb *authenteō* as negative in itself.” [Ibid., 46.] However, in the second example Chrysostom uses *authenteō* with a negative meaning *without* adding any word: Do not try *to have your own way* with unbelievers, but redeem the time (he is commenting on Col. 4:5). Baldwin concludes that in this instance, the word means something like “domineer.” [Ibid., 47, and see the first edition of Köstenberger et al., p. 286. Wayne Grudem is not as certain that the word has a negative meaning. “The sense could be, ‘Don’t just give orders all the time because your wife is subject to you.’... On the other hand,

the parallel with telling the wife not to be puffed up (proud) argues for a more negative sense for the verb in this instance. In any case, it is still over three hundred years after the time of the New Testament” (308).]

Baldwin concludes that the word *most often* has a neutral meaning, but as with any word, the final determination of meaning must be based on the context in which it is used.

## **Appendix 10B: Three key questions about 1 Timothy 2:12**

This appendix provides a simpler approach to the problem. We identify three key questions that can help us clarify what this verse means.

### **1. Was this Paul's permanent policy, or was it a temporary policy?**

Answer: It was apparently a temporary policy, needed for the situation that Timothy was in. This can be seen by looking at 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. In this passage, Paul said that women should have something covering their head whenever they prayed or prophesied. Scholars do not agree on precisely what this head covering was, and for our purposes it does not matter. What is important is that Paul was allowing women to speak.

Where were the women speaking? Paul would not need to give instructions about how women appeared when they were in private. This was some sort of public setting in which male and female believers gathered, prayed, and spoke to one another. This sounds like church.

What were the women speaking about? We know what prayer is, but what were the women doing when they prophesied? Paul tells us what prophecy is in 1 Cor. 14:3: a message spoken to strengthen, encourage, and comfort other people. It might concern the future, but need not. It might be like modern preaching, or might not. The important thing is simply that the women were speaking in a church meeting. Verse 5 says that these messages edify or build up the church.

So the women in Corinth were being inspired by God to give messages that helped men and women in the church. Paul allowed some sort of speaking in Corinth, but in 1 Timothy 2:12, he said that the women should be silent. So to avoid contradiction, at least one of these verses must be seen as temporary. If silence was a permanent policy, then Paul violated his own policy when he allowed women to speak in Corinth. But if permission was the normal policy, it would still be possible for Paul to issue a temporary

restriction due to some need in Timothy's situation.

So this line of analysis tells us that 1 Timothy 2:12 should be seen as a temporary policy. Indeed, that is the way that Paul himself describes it: "I do not *permit*..." This was his policy at the time he wrote.

## **2. This was Paul's policy at the time; was it also God's policy?**

In question 1, we focused on the *silence* that Paul commanded, and saw that Paul did not always require women to be silent in meetings of believers. Now we can look at the issue of *authority*. When Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he did not allow women to have authority over men. So we must ask, are we today supposed to have the same policy as Paul did? Or we can ask it another way: Does God have this policy? Does he ever allow women to have authority over men?

Yes, he does. Judges 4:4-6 gives a clear example. Deborah was a prophetess God used to lead the nation of Israel. She "held court under the Palm of Deborah," which was a public place that people could come to. God spoke to her, gave her commands, and she gave those commands to Barak, the military leader of Israel (verse 6). God gave her authority over Barak and the other Israelites.

This was not a worship service, but it is a clear case in which God allowed a woman to have authority over men. However, when Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he did not allow women to have authority over men—and he made no distinction about civil and religious authority (Deborah made no distinction in the two types of authority, either, since in her case they were combined). In question 1, we saw that Paul's policy about women speaking in church was apparently a temporary policy. Here, we see that his policy about authority is also temporary, since God does not make that sort of restriction permanently.

## **3. Is 1 Timothy a manual for how churches ought to operate today?**

Sometimes people assume that if Paul had a particular policy, then we ought to, too, because he was inspired by God. But if we take a careful look at his letter, we will see that parts of it don't apply to us today. It was, after all, written to Timothy in first-century Ephesus, not directly to all of us. The letter has a lot of good material in it we *can* apply today, but is also has some things in it that we don't.

The best example is in chapter 5, verses 3-16. Paul is telling Timothy to put widows on some sort of list (apparently a list for financial support) only if they were over age 60. He says that younger widows are probably going to want to get married and will end up breaking "their first pledge" (apparently some sort of vow they took in order to be on the list for financial support).

Nowadays, we do not maintain this sort of list, and we do not put age restrictions on which widows we will help. Our social and economic circumstances are quite different, and almost all church leaders and biblical scholars recognize this. Nevertheless, Paul gives several commands in this passage that we ignore—even *commands* can be limited to the culture they were given in. How much more so the *policy* that Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:12?

Paul also commands in verse 8 that men should lift their hands when they pray. We do not enforce this as a command today, nor do we greet one another with a holy kiss, as several letters command (for example, 1 Thessalonians 5:26). The principle of friendly greeting is good in today's church, but Paul went beyond generalities and commanded a specific *form* of greeting that is not appropriate in our culture today.

Clearly, there are some things in Paul's epistles that do not apply in our culture. The question that we should ask is, Is 1 Timothy 2:12 one of those temporary instructions? From our analysis above, apparently so. This does not mean that it is less inspired, or that we are choosing to ignore the Word of



God—no more so than when we decide not to command kissing in church, or commanding women to wear head coverings, or when we decide that men do *not* have to raise their hands when they pray. We are not ignoring the Word of God when we recognize that some of it was written for ancient Israel, or for the ancient church, and it does not necessarily apply today in all its details.

Not all Christians agree on this matter. Some people believe that the church should restrict women from having leadership roles in the church. We believed that for a long time, but we believe that we have now come to a better understanding of the scriptures—more like what Paul really meant, and what God really meant, and what the epistle really is. We believe that when God gives pastoral gifts to women—the ability to teach, to encourage, and to inspire people to follow Christ—then those women may be recognized as elders or leaders within the church.

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## **Women in Church Leadership, Conclusion**

Many people can probably agree with Thomas Schreiner when he writes, “The role of women in the church is probably the most emotionally charged issue in American evangelicalism today.” [Thomas Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church* (2nd ed.; edited by Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner; Baker, 2005), 85.] It is being debated among Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox as well as among Evangelical Protestants. It is a difficult subject, sometimes filled with bitter accusations, sometimes with claims about the Bible that are not biblically substantiated or justified, and sometimes with fears about what might happen if a change is made, or fears about what might happen if one isn’t.

Over the past nearly three years, we have been studying this issue cautiously, with prayer, with a desire to understand what the Bible teaches us to do. At each stage of our work, we shared the preliminary results with pastoral supervisors and then pastors, seeking comments and feedback. After revising the study papers based on their input, we published them in print or on our website. We did not want to ignore any evidence, nor any important question. Sometimes we had to acknowledge that there is not sufficient information available to be completely certain about a few issues, but this does not, in the final analysis, prevent a conclusion about the overall question.

In this final paper, we summarize what we have found, and then tackle some questions about how we will apply these findings in the church today. It is our prayer that we all approach this subject with the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of God’s Spirit.

## **Biblical teaching and modern application**

In the previous ten chapters, we surveyed the teaching of Scripture as it pertains to women in leadership. Here is a summary of each chapter:

Chapter 1: “Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction.” The question is complex, and scholars with equal allegiance to the Scriptures come to different conclusions on the matter. It is not a question over which Christians should condemn one another, nor a question about which we need to break fellowship with people who come to different conclusions.

Chapter 2: “The Nature of Leadership in the Church.” Leadership in the church entails service—it is not a right, nor a personal privilege. People should not be seeking positions of leadership (or defending them) in order to get respect or any other personal benefit. People do not have to become leaders in order to be fully human, fully Christian, or equal to others. People can have leadership gifts without necessarily being leaders *in the church*.

A leader in the church must set a good example, have a good reputation, and be able to teach. The effectiveness of a person’s leadership in the church is largely dependent on whether members actually look to that person for spiritual leadership. With authority comes responsibility, and authority must be used to serve others.

Chapter 3: “Men and Women in Genesis 1–3.” In the beginning, God created male and female in the image of God, as persons who could be equal heirs of eternal life as his children. God gave both male and female authority over Earth and its creatures (Gen. 1:26-27). Genesis 2 tells us that God created the man before the woman, but it does not draw any conclusion about authority from this. The point being emphasized in Genesis 2 is that it is not good for a man to be alone.

The apostle Paul uses Genesis in a selective way. He notes that men are made in the image of God without mentioning that women also are (1 Cor.

11:7); he notes that men were created first when he argues that women should wear head coverings when they prophesy in church (verses 8-10). Paul is not commenting on the meaning of Genesis itself, and the fact that he uses Scripture in his argument does not automatically mean that his conclusions about head coverings apply in all cultures.

The first biblical mention of the rule of men over women comes in Gen. 3:16, in which God describes the consequences of sin. The verse indicates a *change* in the relationship between men and women—that man’s rule over woman is a result of sin. This suggests (but does not prove) that when men and women are in the Lord, authority is not based on gender.

Chapter 4: “Men and Women in the Books of Moses.” Old Testament laws sometimes mentioned women specifically, but they were normally written as if only men were involved. Both in custom and in law, men had advantages over women. As Jesus noted, the laws of Moses did not prescribe an ideal society, but those laws were often concessions to an imperfect society (Matt. 19:8). The fact that only men were priests (only from one tribe, we should note), therefore, carries no weight in the question we have regarding leadership in the church. It was a rule for a different culture and a different covenant.

Chapter 5: “Women in Ancient Israel, From the Conquest to the Exile.” Although Israelite culture gave advantages to men, there are examples of women who had important roles. God chose Deborah to be a prophetess and a judge; the people “came to her to have their disputes decided” (Judges 4:5). She was a civil leader, and as a prophetess, she gave orders from God to the male leader of Israel’s army. God gave this woman authority over men—an authority that was both religious and civil.

God used Huldah the prophetess to give authoritative words to Hilkiah the priest and other men (2 Kings 22:14-20). She had spiritual authority. Later,

God gave Esther civil authority over Jews in the Persian Empire. These examples show that, even in a patriarchal society, God permitted certain women to have significant civil and/or spiritual authority.

Chapter 6: “Women in the Ministry and Teachings of Jesus.” Jesus treated women with more respect than was common in that culture, and women had important roles in his ministry, traveling with him and providing for him. Jesus did not try to correct every social wrong. It would have been nearly impossible for women to function as apostles in that society, and the fact that all twelve apostles were men may also be due to the fact that they corresponded to the twelve sons of Jacob. Further, the twelve did not set a pattern for future church leaders—not in ethnicity, not in number, and therefore possibly not in gender.

Chapter 7: “Women in the Early Church.” Women had important roles in the early church—influential enough that when Saul persecuted the church, he imprisoned women as well as men. After Saul’s conversion, women were some of his most-praised co-workers. Paul mentioned women who worked “at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Phil. 4:3). This indicates that women had a significant role in evangelism. Gal. 3:28 mentions three prominent social divisions in the first-century world, and proclaims that these disparate social groups become one in Christ. This equality should affect relationships among believers, although it may not require identical roles.

Chapter 8: “Women Who Pray or Prophecy: 1 Cor. 11:3-16.” In 1 Cor. 11, Paul argues that women who pray or prophecy in the church should wear a head covering. Although we cannot be sure what this covering was, or its role in Greco-Roman society, we conclude that Paul was telling the believers to conform to certain cultural customs. He uses several supporting arguments, some of which do not apply in our culture, and others that are not clear today because he was arguing for a custom of his own culture.

Although the custom was based in culture, Paul uses Genesis as one of his supporting arguments (verses 7-12), showing that an argument from Scripture does not necessarily indicate a normative or permanent conclusion. Paul's instructions were appropriate for his society, but the specific details are not necessary today. However, this passage clearly shows that women may prophesy in church, and Paul later describes this type of speaking as something that strengthens, encourages, comforts and edifies the church (1 Cor. 14:3-4).

Chapter 9: “‘Women Should Remain Silent’: 1 Cor. 14:34-35.” In 1 Cor. 14, Paul calls for orderliness in the worship service. He says that people should speak in turn, and then be quiet. He says that women were not allowed to talk, but should be quiet and ask their questions later. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul has already acknowledged that women were speaking in church; he does not mean here that they cannot speak at all. Since we assume that chapter 14 does not contradict chapter 11, we conclude that Paul prohibits some other form of talking. He calls for women to be quiet not as a universal rule, but apparently because they were causing problems with disruptive questions in Corinth.

Chapter 10: “Questions About 1 Timothy 2:11-15.” When Paul wrote 1 Tim. 2:12, he again wrote that women should be quiet; he did not permit them to teach or to have authority over men. The reasons he gave for this policy are less than clear, since it is not self-evident that males should have exclusive authority in church simply because the man was created before the woman. [Scripture allows women to have authority over men in civil government, and it is not self-evident why this would be allowed in civil matters but not in religious matters. It is not self-evident that temporal priority should be connected to authority in one sphere but not the other.] The obscurity of verses 14-15 suggests that Paul was addressing erroneous ideas

that were being taught in Ephesus at the time.

Paul clearly permitted women to speak edifying messages in the Corinthian church; his prohibition here should be seen not as revoking that permission, but as a policy needed for the situation that Timothy faced. [In the Old Testament, the office of prophet was open to women as well as men. It had more spiritual authority than the office of priest, which was restricted to men. Priests had authority only to carry out rituals and teach previous laws, but prophets could give new information and new directives with divine authority. In the New Testament, too, prophecy can involve information newly revealed by God; teaching requires that old material be repeated accurately. This again suggests that prophecy requires a greater authority than teaching does, and since women can have the authority to prophesy, they can also have the lesser authority, to teach; the prohibition in 1 Tim. 2 is best seen as a temporary prohibition.] We believe it is not a universal rule that must govern all churches for all time. It was, just as Paul stated, a *policy*, not a permanent restriction based on gender.

Just as Paul counseled slaves to be obedient without endorsing slavery itself, he counseled women to be submissive in Ephesus without intending to make that social situation permanent. Just as we accept his policies about widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16) as temporary, so we accept his policies about women in church leadership as temporary.

### **An elder must be a husband?**

We will add here a further comment on 1 Tim. 3:2—“The overseer must be...the husband of but one wife.” There are a number of questions about this verse, but we will focus on one: Does this mean that elders must be husbands, and therefore male? No. There are five responses.

1. Paul wrote to the situation that Timothy was in, and that situation did not then allow female elders, so Paul did not cover possibilities that

were not viable options at the time, just as he did not discuss what pastors should do with widows after social situations had changed.

2. We do not believe that elders must be married only once. Single men, and widowers who remarry, may also be elders. The focus of the passage is that *if* the elder is a husband, he should be faithful to his wife. The verse covers the most common situation, and Paul assumed that Timothy could figure out the other situations.
3. Paul did not intend his list to be interpreted in a legalistic way—his recommendation that new Christians not be appointed as elders (1 Tim. 3:6) would not apply in new churches (and consequently Paul does not include this requirement in Titus 1:6-9).
4. Biblical laws are often phrased in the masculine even when they apply to women as well. (Paul’s frequent use of “brothers” includes female believers, too.) Throughout 1 Tim. 3, Paul stresses that an elder should be a good example; verse 2 simply gives details about what this means for a husband: *If* the elder is a husband, he should be a good one. It does not address all other possible situations.
5. Even though Paul told Timothy that “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (verse 12), it is still possible to have a female deacon (verse 11; Rom. 16:1)—this rule was written in the masculine even though a similar rule would apply to women. In the same way, verse 2 may apply to women even though it is written in the masculine.

### **Difficulties in application**

In our detailed examination of the Bible, we did not find any scripture that forbids women from being recognized as spiritual leaders in the church; there is no verse that makes a permanent restriction on women. Our understanding is that the question of whether women may serve as elders and pastors is a cultural question on which the Bible doesn’t set forth a permanent restriction.



The scriptures concerning this question are cultural and social in character, concerning the leadership of the church in the first century. In most parts of the world, today's cultural context is not the same as it was in the first century. For example, in the first century the church allowed slavery, something we would not allow today. And the role of women in the public sphere was different in the first century than it is today.

Selection of elders and pastors should be based on seeking out the best person to fill the responsibility, according to the principles in the Scriptures, the needs of the congregation, how the congregation sees these issues, the cultural environment, and whom God can be seen using, without regard to whether the candidate is male or female.

Just as we consider the holy kiss, footwashing, the widows' roster, and headcoverings to be rooted in culture and not required today, we conclude that Paul's restrictions on women in leadership were rooted in culture or based on specific circumstances in his churches, and it is not necessary for the church to consider that restriction permanent. Since we do not want to forbid something that the Bible does not forbid, we will no longer forbid women from being ordained as elders and appointed as pastors. We want churches to be led by the best personnel available, without making unnecessary restrictions on who that might be.

However, we recognize that there are a number of practical considerations involved in applying this change in policy.

First, not all members will agree with our conclusion. Reasonable, well-trained scholars sometimes come to a different conclusion—perhaps by concluding that 1 Tim. 2:12 is the “clear” scripture and 1 Cor. 11 is the unclear one. [They may be influenced by their culture, or their fears of cultural change, in ways they do not realize, just as we may be influenced by our culture in ways we do not realize. Despite the inability of anyone to

achieve complete objectivity, we all have to make conclusions as best we can, without condemning those who come to different conclusions. Evangelical churches began ordaining women in the 19th century, long before the modern push for women's rights.]

We respect honest differences of opinion, and do not want to impose leaders on congregations in which most of the members will resist their leadership. [Conservative Thomas Schreiner writes, "Some women unquestionably have the spiritual gift of teaching. Men should be open to receiving biblical and doctrinal instruction from women.... Moreover, women should be encouraged to share what they have learned from the Scriptures when the church gathers. The mutual teaching recommended in Colossians 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 14:26 is not limited to men" ("Women in Ministry," in Beck and Blomberg, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [Zondervan, 2001], 191).]

Second, not all women are suited for leadership, just as not all men are. Only people who have the spiritual gifts needed for leadership should be appointed as leaders. We expect that if spiritual gifts are present and the need exists within the congregation, they will be recognized by the congregation.

Ordination of elders emerges out of the local congregational situation where a person's recognized spiritual gifts and heart for ministry, regardless of gender, determine aptness for ordination.

Third, there are local situations (just as there was in Ephesus) in which it would be counterproductive to have female leaders. Some cultures and subcultures around the world view female leadership as offensive. Although cultures sometimes surprise us in allowing exceptions to tradition, it is still necessary to assess which leaders will have "a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Tim. 3:7).

In short, our position is that women may be ordained as elders and

appointed as pastors. This is a permission, not a requirement. We do not plan to seek female candidates for the office of elder or pastor merely on the basis of their being female, but elders and pastors may from henceforth be chosen from among males and females alike. Elders and pastors, whether male or female, should be ordained and/or appointed based on 1) whether the person has the appropriate leadership gifts, 2) whether members of the congregation affirm these gifts by looking to that person for spiritual leadership, and whether the congregation needs another elder or a pastor.

### **Questions and concerns**

What happens when a woman ordained as an elder in a given congregation moves to a different congregation within our denomination? When an elder, male or female, moves to a different congregation, the ordination continues to be valid, but the person is not automatically licensed as an elder in the new congregation. [In the same way, someone who leads worship in one congregation should not assume that the same ministry position should be available in another congregation.] Leadership in our congregations depends on congregational need and the approval of denominational supervisors. A candidate for ordination, male or female, is thus affirmed through recognition of that person's ministry and leadership capabilities. If the person has leadership gifts, those gifts will presumably be apparent as they are used in other roles, although it may take some time. [Since the style of leadership can differ considerably from one culture to another, subtle in one and blunt in another, it is possible that the spiritual gifts that helped a person lead in one congregation are simply not useful in the other.]

Functional titles for ordained personnel vary locally. Some elders function as ministry leaders, some as assistant pastors, etc. Some pastoral spouses may function informally in a sort of "co-pastor" role; others may not, according to

their own spiritual gifts. To avoid a conflict of interest, elders should not initiate the ordination of their own spouses, nor be on the committees that make such recommendations. A pastor's spouse who wishes to be a candidate for ordination as an elder will be subject to the same selection process as any other potential candidate.

Some members, even if they have a male pastor in their own congregation, may be troubled that a congregation in some other part of the world has a female pastor. If they are troubled by this, we believe that they are looking for conformity in the wrong place. Just as we can have differing opinions about what the Bible says about soul-sleep, the millennium, or the rapture, we can also have different opinions about what the Bible says about women in leadership.

Often the matter boils down to how a person prefers to resolve Paul's statements: in one place Paul permits women to speak, and in another he prohibits it. Which policy is more likely to be the permanent one? Is the prohibition temporary in the same way as his policy on widows is? [As another example of a temporary policy, Paul tolerated slavery, even though it was less than ideal, due to its prevalence in the first century.] We believe that there is room in our denomination for people of either viewpoint regarding female ordination, and that this is not a matter on which people should accuse, condemn, or break fellowship.

Some people are worried that if churches allow women as well as men to be leaders in church, then they are unwittingly contributing to the gender confusion found in Western society. This is a "fear of the consequences" argument that touches deep emotional concerns, but is not logically or biblically valid. [A few people have expressed concern that the principles used in reaching our conclusions about the ordination of women might also lead us to revise our teaching about the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

In our view, arguments in favor of the ordination of homosexuals, while perhaps overlapping in a few ways with arguments about ordaining women, are nonetheless substantially different from the arguments about ordaining women, and it is our position that the former cannot be argued to from the latter.]

The fact that God called women to leadership roles in ancient Israel is evidence against this argument. People could just as easily claim that female civil leaders create gender confusion, but we have to acknowledge that God raised up a female civil leader for ancient Israel. [Some say that God raised up Deborah only because of exceptional circumstances. We could also note that there are exceptional circumstances in some of our churches today.]

We believe that Scripture allows society to have females as schoolteachers, doctors, and political leaders without causing gender confusion; the church can also have female leaders without causing confusion. [The presence of female leaders does not—and cannot—do away with the obvious biological and reproductive differences between males and females. Our study has not addressed the question of the role of men and women in families.] The church teaches that we are all made in God’s image and are equal heirs of salvation. The gender confusion found in society today is regrettable, but it cannot be solved by the church making restrictions that are not supported by Scripture.

We have dedicated several years to an in-depth study of the role of women in church leadership—specifically focusing on the question of the ordination of women as elders and the related topic of women serving as church pastors. All along the way, input has been sought, received and carefully considered from our members, our pastors, our pastoral supervisors, our doctrinal review team and other church staff. We based our study on the Bible, not contemporary culture or experience.

While we have read and weighed the writings of many authors on this topic, we have done so with the purpose of gaining a clearer understanding of the Scriptures, surrendered to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Not wanting to forbid what the Bible does not forbid, and desiring to allow all our members to use their God-given gifts to their fullest potential for the benefit of the church, our position is that, based on local circumstances and an individual's characteristics, women may be ordained as elders and appointed as pastors.

We conclude with a statement from a complementarian scholar:

God did not assemble that body [the church] and give gifts to its members so that we may quarrel or pass our time contemplating who shall be greatest in the kingdom. He has done these things so that both men and women, joint heirs of the gracious gift of life, may use all their talents and gifts in his service to spread his kingdom and to call humans of all sorts from death to new life in Jesus Christ. —James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Zondervan, 1981), 253.

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## About the Author

For this publication, Michael Morrison wrote the initial draft (in 2004-2006), and as explained in the preface, this was edited by a committee of GCI leaders based on input from members, pastors, and pastoral supervisors. Dr. Morrison also edited the study papers to form this book in 2012.

**Michael Morrison** received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006 and is Dean of Faculty and Instructor in New Testament for Grace Communion Seminary. He is the author of:

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*Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews*

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