

BURIED TALENTS

In Search for a New Consensus

Second Edition
Revised and Expanded 2014

by Jay Guin

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

This book began as class notes for a series of adult Bible classes I taught at the University Church of Christ, Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1994, some 20 years ago, back at our old University Boulevard location. I taught in the basement in a room shared with the children's church – and the room was packed for a semester as we went through these materials together – with the students who arrived late forced to sit in chairs in the back sized for first graders. Well, they really sat on top of the child-sized desks and tables. (We have a much nicer building now.)

Since then, I've added materials to the book as I've learned more about the scriptures and as I've encountered new questions and new arguments.

In 2007 I began the One in Jesus blog (oneinjesus.info). Early on, I posted the entire book as a freely downloadable eBook, and many thousands of copies have been downloaded and distributed.

I also posted the book in bits and pieces as a series of blog posts extending over several months in 2008. It's the nature of a blog that readers are invited to comment and discussions ensue – and ensue they did. We had some great conversations. Some were so excellent that I felt obligated to re-write my materials on 1 Corinthians 11 dealing with head coverings for women.

Over time, I posted additional materials on the role of women as readers asked questions and new material became available. In fact, a great many books and Internet articles have appeared dealing with the role of women over the last several years – far too many to actually compile everything said.

In particular, there have been important additions in the Churches of Christ world – my own religious tribe – and beyond. I've tried to include some of the more prominent voices in this edition.

In short, I'm a great believer in group exegesis – that is, reading the Bible in genuinely active conversation with others. Iron sharpens iron. And I've learned a lot from my readers and from other authors. I've had to make some corrections. And it's time for the book to reflect my new learning.

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The Christian community has struggled with understanding the Bible’s teachings on the role of women in the church since the First Century. The Restoration Movement,¹ of which I am a part, has struggled with these teachings since its inception. In fact, the Restoration Movement’s long insistence on congregational autonomy and the right of each Christian to interpret the scriptures for himself (or herself)² has resulted in quite a divergence of opinion over the years. And yet, while it is easy to document a wide variety of opinions among the leading thinkers of the Restoration Movement, our practices within the Churches of Christ have been remarkably uniform. Our uniformity is all the more remarkable given how very little biblical support there is for much of what we do (and don’t do).

Consider this: There are only a handful of verses that deal particularly with what women can and can’t do in the church:

(1 Cor. 14:33-35 ESV) As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. **For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission**, as the Law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.³

(1 Tim. 2:11-15 ESV) ¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² **I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man**; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

¹ An American religious movement beginning around 1800 resulting in the present-day Churches of Christ, the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), with combined U.S. membership of around 4,000,000. The author’s background is Churches of Christ, distinguished from the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ primarily by their practice of a *cappella* congregational singing and non-use of conventions and missionary societies.

² I have not consistently changed references to “brothers” or “he” to non-sexist terms like “siblings” or “he” to “he/she.” Such changes tend to make the reading very tedious. We’ll just have to agree that such “male” references are of indefinite gender unless the context otherwise indicates, as is always the rule in Standard English. While I must concede the bias inherent in our language, no one has come up with a readable alternative.

³ In scripture quotations, boldfaced emphases are the author’s. Italics are from the original translation, normally indicating an English word supplied where there is no equivalent Greek or Hebrew word.

Additionally, the familiar passages in 1 Timothy and Titus setting forth the qualifications for elders and deacons state that an elder or deacon must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).

Certainly, if one considers these verses to pronounce laws that are independent of local culture and that thus remain in effect today, we should not have female elders and we should not allow women to speak in the assemblies or to teach or to have authority over a man. But where in all this do we find a command denying women the privilege of silently distributing the Lord’s Supper? Where does the Bible say that teenage boys – and not girls – should silently pass out handouts during the services? Or that only men should pass out the announcement sheets? And what scripture denies women the right to attend church business meetings? Even if they must be denied the right to vote on church business to prevent their exercise of authority, why isn’t their input worthy of consideration?

Where does the Bible permit a woman to confess Jesus during a church service? Why don’t we wait until church is over to take her confession? How can we allow a woman to head the pre-school department when there are some men who volunteer for nursery or Vacation Bible School work? And how can we have women as non-deacons taking on greater responsibility and authority than many men take on as deacons? If a man must be a deacon to be in charge of cutting the grass, locking the building, or counting the collection, how can a woman be in charge of the pre-school or taking food to the bereaved?

Surely, we must admit that our practices do not strictly comply with our doctrine. We impose non-biblical restrictions on women out of traditions born out of nothing but the sexism of the past, while at the same time granting women authority as program heads and administrators that we would require a man to be a deacon to undertake.

While we claim to teach a strict interpretation of these passages, we are not really all that strict. After all, while we don’t let women ask questions during the assembly (and rarely men!), we do allow women to ask questions in Sunday school class. Moreover, we *never* require women to ask their husbands at home. We freely allow them to ask the preacher questions about his sermon at church – just not during the service. Paul did not say for women to wait until after services to ask questions – he said the women should ask their husbands at home.

And, of course, we allow women to teach men – in our colleges, junior colleges, and high schools – so long as the subject is not the Bible. But Paul did not say that women should not teach men the Bible. He said that women should not teach men. Similarly, we don’t require our wives to give up non-church jobs that involve having authority over men. If one of our wives is promoted from grade school teacher to principal, her husband will gladly cash the increased paycheck even though this promotion puts her in authority over male teachers, custodians, bus drivers, and lunchroom workers.

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But Paul did not limit his command limiting a woman's authority to church affairs. Indeed, our traditional interpretation is that Paul bases his command on the relationship of men and women founded in the Garden of Eden, millennia before there were churches, Sunday schools, or church colleges. If God put men over women, he did not do so only in their marriages and in church.

Osburn cites a thoroughly researched argument that until the last few decades the near unanimous view of the Christian community was that women could not exercise authority over men in any circumstance, including in the workplace, due to the innate inferiority of women.⁴ Those who contend that women are to be subordinate to men at church but may supervise men at work have produced an interpretation just as novel to Christianity as the view that women are not required to be subordinate to men.

Clearly, we have some hard thinking to do in this area. And certainly the problem is not limited to the Churches of Christ or even the Restoration Movement. I've seen Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Baptist Churches fight and divide over these very same issues.

I must add that cultural issues such as Women's Liberation, the Equal Rights Amendment, or "equal pay for equal work" do not cause the controversy. Any honest church historian knows that these questions were being debated long before women could vote or even own property.

The purpose of this book is not to pursue a personal agenda. Rather, I only insist that we teach a doctrine that we are willing to practice and can defend from the pages of scripture. We should impose no restrictions on women that the Bible does not impose, and we should grant them no power that the Bible disallows. We should stop pretending that we "speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent"⁵ and actually do what we say we do.

I began my investigation into this area with just such thoughts in mind. Clearly, we are tradition-bound – but what does the Bible really say? Is it possible to discover the truth of the matter despite our layers upon layers of tradition, orthodoxy, biases, and all?

And perhaps not so surprisingly, I have found my position changing over the years. I can recall teaching a series of Sunday school classes on this topic three times before composing the first draft of this book. The first two times I taught, I concluded that, although we are not true to the scriptures, such passages as 1 Timothy 2:11-15, while seemingly somewhat arbitrary, are binding today because Paul based his conclusions on eternal principles that he says are found in Genesis.

⁴ *Women in the Church* 2. p. 232 and following pages, citing Kevin Giles, "A Critique of the 'Novel' Contemporary Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Given in the Book, *Women in the Church*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000).

⁵ One of the defining slogans of the Restoration Movement, coined by Thomas Campbell.

The third time I taught the subject, I decided to prepare more carefully and to pay particular attention to what the accounts of the Creation and Adam and Eve in Genesis 1-3 really say. Paul finds his commands in Genesis (he doesn't re-write Genesis or add his commands to Genesis). Therefore, before coming to any conclusion, I set as a standard that a true understanding of Genesis would yield a true understanding of Paul's commands. If someone were to present an interpretation of Paul's writings that is not found in Genesis 1-3, that interpretation must be false.

With this insight reached before knowing the conclusions that it would lead to, I undertook my study. I was, quite frankly, surprised at the results.

A. Definitions

Some definitions will prove helpful. When I refer to an opinion or practice as "traditional" or those holding to the tradition as "traditionalists," I do not imply that such opinions are wrong. Rather, I am referring to those views that have been typically taught by mainstream Churches of Christ in the southeastern United States over the last several decades.

When I speak of the "Churches" I am normally referring to the Churches of Christ. I do not thereby intend to judge the salvation of those outside the Churches of Christ.

By "conservative" I normally mean "believing in the inspiration of scripture and that Christ literally became flesh." This is what the word means in theological circles. If I ever say "liberal," I mean not conservative, that is, denying the inspiration of scripture and the incarnation.⁶

Unfortunately, when we in the Churches of Christ say "conservative," we usually mean legalistic, that is "inclined to find a rule." When we say "liberal," we usually mean "not a legalist," that is, "not inclined to find a rule." Because I know what a "liberal" really is, I do not call any of my brothers in Christ liberals, no matter how much I disagree with them. To do so would be to slander them, which would be a sin. Because I know what "conservative" really means, I will not call those who find rules in the Bible that I cannot find conservatives. I am a conservative. I try not to be a legalist.

Thus, when I speak of "legalists," I refer to those who are inclined to find a law when there is doubt. The term will take on differing shades of meaning as we learn more about legalism.

⁶ The Bible's teaching that Christ, a member of the Godhead, became literally human in literal space-time in the form of Jesus, son of Mary.

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B. Further reading

I must give due credit to the works of many authors who have guided me through this wilderness of conflicting opinions. I strongly recommend the following sources for further reading:

Carroll D. Osburn, editor. *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, vol. I & II*. College Press Publishing Co. 1993 & 1995 (hereinafter “Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women*”). These volumes collect essays by faculty members of Abilene Christian University, David Lipscomb University, Harding University, Harding Graduate School of Religion, and other schools as well as a few prominent preachers. These (needless to say) conservative authors consider the major passages and biblical issues dealing with women.

Carroll D. Osburn. *Women in the Church – Refocusing the Discussion*. Restoration Perspectives. 1994 (hereinafter “Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*”). Osburn wrote the book to encourage productive discussion of the women’s issue, based on a reasonable, intellectually sound approach to Bible study, rather than emotion, traditionalism, or Pharisaism. This book should be considered required reading for all who approach the subject.

Carroll D. Osburn. *Women in the Church – Reclaiming the Ideal*. ACU Press. 2001, is a substantial rewriting of *Women in the Church 1*, reflecting much of the research found in *Essays on Women* (hereinafter, “Osburn, *Women in the Church 2*”).

Everett Ferguson wrote a review of *Women in the Church 2* that questions many of Osburn’s conclusions, providing one of the more responsible and useful critiques of Osburn’s egalitarian views. *The Christian Chronicle* (2001)⁷ (hereinafter, “Ferguson *Christian Chronicle*”). Ferguson, a professor at Abilene Christian University, is well known for his book *Early Christians Speak*. Sweet Publishing Co. 1971.

Ferguson later published *Women in the Church*. Yeoman Press. 2006, regarding his interpretation of the key New Testament passages (hereinafter “Ferguson *Women in the Church*”).

Craig S. Keener. *Paul, Women & Wives*. Hendrickson Publishers. 1992 (hereinafter “Keener”). This is a thorough, conservative discussion of the primary texts and is very well documented.

Robert H. Rowland. *“I Permit Not a Woman ... To Remain Shackled.”* Lighthouse Publishing Co., Newport. 1991 (hereinafter “Rowland”). No other author does as good a job of pointing out the inconsistencies of the traditional positions of the Churches of Christ. He’ll surely persuade you of wrongness of many of our traditionally held views.

⁷ Available at <http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/what-about-women-in-the-church>.

J. Stephen Sandifer. *Deacons: Male and Female?* Self-published. P. O. Box 35296, Houston, Tex. 77235-5296. 1989 (hereinafter “Sandifer”). This is a scholarly, very well researched book. Sandifer is a minister of a Church of Christ and has written what must be considered the definitive resource in this area.

My earlier book, *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* (Power Source Productions. 1995 (hereinafter “HSRG”), sets forth in much greater detail the views on God’s grace expressed here.⁸

I have searched out and read books by authors from schools of thought that I ultimately chose to disagree with, including Goebel Music. *Behold the Pattern*. Goebel Music Publications. 1991, F. LaGard Smith. *Men of Strength for Women of God*. Harvest House Publishers, Inc. 1989,⁹ and *The Cultural Church*. 20th Century Christian. 1992. Those arguments of authors such as Smith that are not dealt with in the text are dealt with at length in the previously cited texts, especially Osburn and Keener.

Of particular value to my own study is Jack Cottrell. *Gender Roles & the Bible: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption: A Critique of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. College Press Publishing Co. 1994 (hereinafter “Cottrell”). This is the most intellectually honest work by those insisting on the subordination of women to men that I have found. Indeed, because Cottrell is a professor at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, affiliated with the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, I am sure that his book will soon become a standard source for many with traditional views within the Churches of Christ.

Cottrell carefully reviews and criticizes the writings of the egalitarian (women are not subordinate to men) school of thought. Where the arguments of the hierarchicalist school have been shown wrong by the egalitarians, Cottrell often admits the error. Cottrell carefully lays out the basis for his views, generally refusing to hide behind purely emotional appeals or to question the integrity or salvation of those with whom he disagrees.

C. Additional Abbreviations

“BDAG” refers to the *Bauer-Danker Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press. 2001, widely considered the premier dictionary of New Testament Greek available.

“LXX” refers to the Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament into *koine* Greek written around 300 BC to 150 BC. In Hellenistic (Greek speaking) portions of the Roman Empire, this is what many Jews meant by “the scriptures.” It was to them what the

⁸ Now available as a free eBook at <http://oneinjesus.info/books-by-jay-guin/the-holy-spirit-and-revolutionary-grace/>.

⁹ Republished in 1998 as *Male Spiritual Leadership*. 21st Century Christian. 1998.

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KJV has been the church for so many years. Paul often quotes from the LXX. (Scholars use LXX as an abbreviation because, according to legend, the Septuagint was translated by a 70-member committee.)

“Thayer’s” refers to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti*, translated, revised and enlarged by Joseph Henry Thayer (1889), long among the most respected dictionaries of New Testament Greek.

“Vine’s” refers to W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Fleming H. Revell Co. 1966.

D. I make no claim to be free from error.

This material is offered for your consideration. Despite my best efforts, because I’m human and thus imperfect, it probably contains some mistakes. I’d be delighted to get your input. It is offered to help you understand the Bible better and to allow the church to better serve our Lord. Please approach it from that standpoint. Take nothing personally. Consider only what is best for the work of the Lord. Our own needs are subordinate to the needs of the work of the church, the need to reach out to others, and the need to help the poor.

If you find any mistakes or think of any way to improve the book, or if you have questions, please pass them along to me. I will not be offended by your pointing out my mistakes! I’d far rather fix them so that I don’t repeat them.

This book does not reflect the “official” or accepted position of any congregation or any person other than the author.

INTRODUCTION

A. Avoiding Biases and Bad Habits

We all have a tendency to find in the Bible what we expect to find. The Pharisee finds plenty of commands to impose on his brothers. The liberal finds language that excuses just about any conduct. The male chauvinist pig finds verses putting down women. The feminist finds verses putting down male chauvinist pigs. This is why the world likes to say that you can prove anything by the Bible, and certainly it must seem that way to many.

The reason anything can seemingly be “proved” by the Bible is that we often only look for what we want to find, and we thus accept as proof anything that supports what we like. If this is not so, then why are there so many denominations all studying the same Bible, using many of the same reference materials, with 2,000 years of research and scholarship available for all who will look, and yet disagreeing about so very many things? Why can’t members of even the same Sunday school class or eldership agree on every point?

To avoid simply studying to prove ourselves right, we must first look at ourselves squarely in the mirror. After all, no one reads the Bible consciously intending to misunderstand it. Those who misunderstand it do so for reasons that are invisible to themselves. They think that they are applying logic when they are actually applying their personalities, culture, and traditions to the task. Anyone reading this who feels that he or she is not guilty of such bias is actually guilty of the worst bias of all – having so little self-awareness that he can’t do anything about his biases. I am not foolhardy enough to believe that we can shed all our biases like an old overcoat. But we should all be honest enough to at least admit that we have some biases.

A critical step toward shedding our biases is disciplining ourselves to read, and even study, the opinions of those who disagree with us. We should study those with whom we disagree because it is, after all, those who disagree with us who have the most to teach us. If we only listen to those within our own party, we will soon consider ourselves virtually inspired, because we will have not been proved wrong for years! But testing our views against the steel of those we disagree with (and I mean the most talented of our opponents) allows us to match our reasoning against someone with very different biases from our own.

And we must study our opponents first hand. If I study, for example, the views of Creation Science by reading the criticisms of Creation Science written by those who disagree with it, I will only understand Creation Science as distorted by those who disagree with it. If I study evolution by only reading the works of those who disagree with it, then I will only understand it well enough to disagree with it. We must have the courage and the integrity to study both sides – not one side and propaganda about the other side.

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Only an intellectual coward would refuse such a test, and yet we do not routinely study commentaries, books, or articles by those we disagree with, even within our own Restoration Movement. I cannot believably contend that I have reached a conclusion based on logic and the facts without having even bothered to study the views of any side but the side that I decided should win – before I began my study.

To be truly honest students of the Bible, we must be as open to persuasion as we ask others to be. If I ask a Presbyterian friend to study predestination with me, I should not only expect him to be willing to change his views based on the evidence our study produces, I should be willing to do the same. Of course, I think that I'm right, and I'm sure that I've studied the question very carefully. But so has he. I have no monopoly on strongly held opinions. I am nothing but a pompous, self-righteous hypocrite if I think that everyone is wrong except me and that everyone except me should be willing to reconsider his views.

This bit of insight did not come to me in a flash. Rather, I figured all this out by being humbled over the years. I once thought that I knew all the answers. As I grew older, I found my positions changing. Before each change, I knew to an absolute certainty that I was right, but I later learned that I was wrong. I am still certain of my positions, but I now know that I am capable of being wrong regardless of how sure I am. But as I gain experience, I am slowly peeling off the layers of biases, intellectual laziness, and just plain bad habits that have clouded my thinking in the past. And I am sure that I am picking up a new set of biases in the process, but hopefully some that aren't quite as Pharisaic as my last set! And so I must continually rededicate myself to ridding myself of these corrupting influences, but never imagine that I have totally done so. I must be vigilant against cowardice, bigotry, and catering to culture and even to the editors of influential church periodicals.

So, what are our biases? What should we look for in ourselves before beginning this study? The following are some of the ones that I've encountered, in myself and in others:

Change. We are very, very afraid of change. Even the slightest variation in our practices will throw many of our members into a panic. We struggle with children's church, decorating the auditorium with a cross, skipping the invitation, and singing unfamiliar or "trendy" songs. I've read letters and articles condemning singing during the Lord's Supper (we can't have two acts of worship at once), baptizing at home instead of at church (we must make converts loyal to the church), clapping (where is that in the Bible?), multiple song leaders (someone might think that it's a quartet), men serving at the Lord's Table without coats and ties (disrespectful), men serving at the Lord's Table with coats and ties (pretentious; tending toward clerical garb), and even a preacher having a gold pen in his pocket while speaking (distracting). There are biblical arguments to be made on a few of these points, but the reason that these sorts of things are as emotional as they are is our fear of change. Any change at all. And that feeling is a bias. To become Christians, we had to accept change. To mature as Christians, we must continue to change.

The past. We venerate the past. The way we did things when we were children or how daddy used to do it is often more important to us than how Jesus said to do it. Some of this comes from our Southern heritage. Most members of the Churches of Christ live in the southern United States, and we Southerners all have strong attachments to our families and our collective past. Nonetheless, none of us wants to go back to the horse and buggy or even black and white TVs – or to give up our air conditioning. Southerners celebrate the past, but we don't really try to live in it. And yet in the Churches, we tend to think that we'd be more comfortable if we could just conduct church just like we used to, with seven-day long meetings, an occasional tent meeting with sawdust on the floor, and preachers who never preach on anything we don't already believe in.

Conformity. While the Churches of Christ take a certain pleasure in not conforming to the practices of other churches, among ourselves, conformity is the name of the game. One false sermon and the church down the road will disfellowship you, someone will publish an article declaring you “marked,” and your preachers will never be able to get a job anywhere else. We practice church autonomy in theory only. Too many churches claim the right to judge the positions of every other church on whatever issue is in fashion and visit God's wrath on all whom they disagree with by the severest peer pressure. God says, “Vengeance is mine!”¹⁰ but far too many of us are self-appointed angels of retribution, and we routinely arrogate to ourselves the judgment of God Almighty.

Modern culture. We cannot escape the society in which we live. This is the 21st Century whether we like it or not. We are all being forced by events beyond our control to deal with questions of homosexuality, divorce, extra-marital sex, abortion, and the like. In the 1950's such matters were not even discussed in polite society. Now they fill the headlines and TV news reports.

We can hardly be surprised that these times influence our views on the role of women, worship, and such. And the influence cuts two ways. Some of us are too tied to the present, and we expect God's church to be just like the world. If society accepts a homosexual couple, then so must the church, we feel. Others are contrarians. Such people feel that if society is pushing for a greater role for women in the church, then we must not. We sometimes go out of our way to differentiate ourselves from the world, even if it means being wrong. Both views are wrong. We must define our beliefs by the Bible only – neither by society nor by opposition to society.

Pandering to the right wing. As a group, we are guilty of pandering to those more legalistic than us. It is considered fair game to call those on the left wing (less legalistic) “liberals” and to question their acceptance of the inspiration of scripture. However, it is considered bad taste and divisive to call those on the right wing

¹⁰ Rom. 12:19 (KJV), paraphrasing Deut. 32:35. “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath”

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“Pharisees” (at least in print) or to criticize them as divisive. We are anxious to maintain good relations with those more legalistic than us, but we take wild swings at those less legalistic. We see unity as a virtue only if it is with someone more legalistic than ourselves. Not surprisingly, those more legalistic than us apply the same unwritten rule, declare us to be liberals and make little effort to be united with us. Unity across doctrinal lines is a one-way street, and therefore exists much more in theory than in practice.

In our sermons, we are very careful to say nothing that will offend those on the right. I have heard sermons that were designed to teach a broad view of grace or the indwelling of the Spirit preached in such watered down terms that the more legalistic members of the church were convinced that the preacher agreed with them on every point. We rarely state plainly why the Pharisees are Pharisees, for fear that they will be “offended” at the criticism. But in so doing, we also fail to persuade them of their error or to effectively rebuke their false teachings.

This bias of ours gives the legalists a platform and opportunity to be heard, while those less legalistic than us often get no hearing at all. Not surprisingly, this bias puts strong pressure on the Churches toward legalism and away from grace. We lop off our leftward members and kowtow to our rightward members, and so the church as a whole continually drifts toward its legalistic side.

And yet Christ spent far more of his brief time on earth preaching against the Pharisees, the legalists of the day, than preaching against the Sadducees, the “liberals” of the day. And his condemnation of the Pharisees was not just that they were hypocrites, but that they insisted on a salvation based on rules made by men, binding unbearable interpretations in an effort to be safe from the wrath of God. We should heed this warning:

(Joh. 12:42-43 ESV) ⁴² Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Safety. We are now getting to the heart of the matter. We want to be saved, and to be saved, we must be safe. Thus, when in doubt, we do the most legalistic thing possible – we make a rule. When we are discussing some controversial point of doctrine in class, doesn’t the class nearly always end with someone saying, “Well, those arguments are all well and good, but the safe thing to do is what we have always done”?

When in doubt about what the Bible says, the safe thing to do is *not* to make a rule. *Adding to God’s Word is just as wrong as taking away from it.* The *safe* thing to do is trust God’s grace and lean on the great, overriding principles of scripture – God’s love for us, his forgiveness, the personality and example of Jesus, the cross, God’s grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our relationship with Jesus.

Rules upon rules. We often assume without proof that the Bible has a rule for whatever concerns us. For example, many believe that the Bible plainly teaches about how to use the church building. They open their Bibles, go looking for such rules, and – sure enough! – they find them. This is so even though church buildings weren’t even built until the Bible had been finished for nearly 300 years!

We find safety in the cross and graciousness of our Lord. Rules don’t save and rules don’t condemn. Jesus saves, and we are in Jesus by faith – that is faith that he is the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:8-9).

Conclusion. Certainly, not all congregations are guilty of the biases and misconduct that I am describing. I’m sure that only a minority of churches behave as I describe. I hope that is the case. But enough of our brothers behave in this manner that we always take their condemning attitudes into account in making decisions, and subconsciously, even when we read our Bibles. Even in those congregations where such attitudes do not predominate, there will nearly always be enough members steeped in such attitudes that the leaders feel compelled to consider their intolerance in setting policy. Given the contentious, divisive attitudes of so many of our brothers, no leader within the churches would look forward to finding some biblical command that compels him to lead his church away from conformity.

B. Escaping Our Biases

Ridding ourselves of our biases is very hard, of course, but the Bible provides key insights into this problem.

Accept one another. The answer to many of our difficulties is plainly stated in the Bible. For example, Romans 15:7 states,

(Rom. 15:7 NIV) Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

We are to accept one another. And the standard for whom to accept is plainly stated. We are to accept¹¹ just as Christ accepted us. How did Christ accept us? First, note that this part of the command is in the past tense – as Christ *accepted* us – not *accepts* us. Christ *accepted*¹² us when we were saved. And we were saved in five familiar steps: by hearing, believing, repented, confessing, and being baptized. Period. No one asked us our position on the role of women, or kitchens in the building, or divorce and remarriage when we were baptized. We were asked whether we believed that Jesus is the Son of the

¹¹ The Greek word translated “accept” is in present tense, which in Greek indicates that we are to *continuously* accept.

¹² The Greek word translated “accepted” is in the aorist tense, indicating that acceptance occurred at a single point in time.

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Living God. We were asked whether we repented. We were baptized. And we were accepted by God. We must, therefore, accept (present tense!) all those who have done the same and who have not repudiated their belief that Jesus is the Son of the Living God or their repentance (1 Joh. 4:3; Heb.10:26).

Thus, we should put behind us our willingness to reject any fellow Christian who disagrees with us on any issue that we happen to feel strongly about. We have been commanded to accept all those who have been accepted by God. We can set no higher standard than that set by God Almighty.

Grace reaches even the saved. Now let's look at a closely related passage in Romans 5:6-8:

(Rom. 5:6-8 ESV) For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul tells us that God saved us while we were powerless, ungodly, and sinners through the death of Christ. We have always well understood the power of God's grace at the moment of our baptism. We are saved! Our sins were washed away, our souls were made "whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7), and our sins were removed "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

But we have a tendency to believe that our condition after salvation is less certain. We feel that some of our sins committed after salvation may still be charged against us. We feel that we sometimes fall away, lose our salvation, and must be restored. This kind of thinking makes us afraid that any mistake, any error in doctrine at all could be enough to separate us from the love of God. But Paul, by inspiration, tells us differently in the next two verses:

(Rom. 5:9-10 ESV) ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Having already been saved, Paul says we shall now be "much more" saved than we were even at the point of baptism! You see, at the point of baptism, we were God's enemies and we were saved through Christ's death. We are now in God's family, and we are saved through the life of the resurrected Jesus! Indeed, we are "much more" saved through his life! In other words, God's grace "much more" effectively washes away our sins now that we are saved than when we were baptized.

Now, this language is very, very plain. It tells us much about our relationship with God, and it tells us about the relationship that other Christians have with God. It tells us why we must accept other Christians (those who've been saved) – God accepts them. Indeed, God's acceptance of them is now "much more" effective and powerful than it was at the time of their baptism.

I am not teaching once saved, always saved, and neither is Paul, but the passage quoted above is not limited to exceptional cases or to the most holy of Christians. It applies to every Christian. This how Paul can speak the literal, absolute truth in Romans 8:

(Rom. 8:1-2 ESV) There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

How can there be lost Christians if there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? Obviously, it would be impossible and this passage still speak the truth.

But Christians can lose their souls. They do so by no longer being Christians. They give up their salvation by giving up the things that allowed God to save them in first place – faith and repentance.

(1 Joh. 4:2-3 ESV) ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

In this and many other verses, John tells us that those who give up their belief that Jesus Christ came in the flesh will be lost. The Hebrews writer explains that those who give up their repentance are also lost:

(Heb. 10:26-27 ESV) For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Giving up one's repentance is not the same as disagreeing with some self-appointed gospel policeman with a printing press. Being wrong on some subject or even having sinned is not deliberately keeping on sinning. Committing an intentional sin is not deliberately keeping on sinning. Rather, one must no longer make Jesus his Lord.

If I disagree with you about the role of women in the church, I have not lost my soul. This is plainly so because, even if I'm wrong, I'm not intentionally wrong. I'm really trying to get this right! If a congregation allows women to have authority or speak

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in a manner that you consider sinful, even if you're right, they are not deliberately sinning. They think that they're right. And you should take considerable comfort from God's promise that you will be saved despite being wrong on the subject – if you're the one that's wrong.

It is unconscionably arrogant to believe that all who disagree with you are intentionally sinning by doing so. And yet we have brothers who feel called by God to condemn to hell all who disagree with them on any number of subjects that have very little to do with faith in Christ as the Son of God come in the flesh or deliberately continuing to sin. We must be grown up enough to concede that there may be people who have been saved and who are continuing in their faith and in repentance and who honestly disagree with us.

Jesus speaks very plainly to the issue.

(Mat. 7:1-5 ESV) "Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians,

(1 Cor. 10:29b ESV) For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?

Paul plainly declares that our salvation is not determined by someone else's conscience. In the same vein, Paul says in Romans,

(Rom. 14:4 ESV) ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Paul's point is not just that we are hypocrites for damning fellow Christians who disagree with us on some point, but that those who disagree "will stand," that is, be saved – not by being right, but by being in grace. God will make those who disagree with me stand, even if they're wrong! This is grace.

**PART I
PRELIMINARIES**

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CHAPTER I THE ROLE OF WOMEN

A. Beginning Thoughts

Before we begin this study in detail, we must remind ourselves of certain key principles:

1. **Grace extends to this area too.** A Christian will not be lost if he or she in good conscience violates God's will regarding women. Such a Christian will be wrong, will have sinned – and will be forgiven. Nowhere does the Bible say that God will not forgive or will apply a stricter standard in this area.

2. **The biases we discussed earlier, being the biases that we all have, are particularly strong in this area.** The relationship of men and women is very, very strongly influenced by culture, and it is very hard to avoid reading popular or church culture into our interpretation of the Bible.

I remember reading an article first published in the *Gospel Advocate*¹³ in the early part of this century written during the Women's Suffrage Movement. The author was convinced that it would be sin for a woman to vote, because submissive women should not be allowed to decide things that may affect men. He then pointed out that a submissive wife would have to vote as her husband voted, and therefore giving the women the vote would only double the votes received by each candidate, but could never change the outcome! When was the last time you heard a sermon against women voting? Or instructing women to vote as their husbands vote? Has the Bible changed, or our culture?

Similarly, when I was a child, the Bible taught that women must wear hats in church. Now it no longer does. Did the Bible change, or did we? Did we change due to closer Bible study or due to a change in popular fashions? If our reading of the Bible in the 1950's was influenced by the latest fashions from Paris, why should we suppose that we are now immune from such influences?

3. However, **the scriptures are true without regard to culture, and the truths in them can be ascertained.** Our difficulty is often not the vagueness of the scriptures, but the fact that we often try to find answers to problems that are not really problems. If we read the Bible looking for the limit on what women can do, we have *assumed* that there is such a limit! If we read the Bible looking for the rules on how to conduct a Sunday morning assembly, how to handle church funds, or what institutions a church may support, we have *assumed* that there are such rules. Do I deny that such rules exist? The answer is that I have no opinion at all – until I read the scriptures. The life of a Christian

¹³ For many years, the leading publication and doctrinal standard-bearer for the Churches of Christ in the southeastern United States.

presents enough problems without us inventing new ones of our own. Let's please be careful not to assume that there are rules and then go looking for them. The rules that matter are indeed discussed in the Bible, and they are discussed plainly enough. If we can't find a clear answer to the doctrinal problem, maybe – just maybe – there isn't a problem.

4. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a part of the doctrine of grace – and not an exception to grace.** If what we believe about women contradicts the Bible's teaching on grace, our beliefs about women are wrong. We should find that the Bible's teachings on women are a natural, spiritual consequence of God's good gift of grace.

5. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a natural consequence of the perfect law of love.** We must be able to derive our conclusions about women from "Love thy neighbor" (Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:13-14; James 2:8). It is not enough to claim that our conclusions are consistent with "Love thy neighbor," rather they must *derive* from the command to love (Mat. 22:37-40). Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets "hang" from the command to love (KJV; NIV). Paul says that nothing else matters (Gal. 5:6). We cannot add to the Bible.

6. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a natural consequence of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is mentioned hundreds of times in the New Testament. Paul repeatedly refers to the Spirit as the basis on many of his teachings. The Bible's doctrine of women cannot contradict the doctrine of the Spirit.

B. Principles of Interpretation

While I would not wish to burden the reader with an essay on hermeneutics, we should pause briefly to reflect on just how we test one competing interpretation of scripture against another.

We have already stated the first rule of interpretation – **know your own biases** and avoid interpreting to satisfy them. It is far too easy to find a shallow, too-convenient argument that just happens to support what you want to believe and then persuade yourself that the argument is God's own truth.

Second, we must not take the most difficult passages, impose our preferred views on them, and then use our human conclusions to reinterpret (or just ignore) the plainer passages that don't suit our prejudices. For a seeker of the truth, the path is clear. **Start with the basics**, meaning what the Bible says are the basics. And then work toward the more ambiguous passages.

It is easy to unconsciously reason in circles. For example, suppose that we read 1 Timothy 2:11-15 to conclude that women cannot have authority over men. This passage bases its teachings on Genesis 2. We then turn to Genesis 2 and interpret it to say that

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women cannot have authority over men – basing our interpretation on 1 Timothy 2:11-15. We then turn back to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and argue that our interpretation must be right because it is supported by our interpretation of Genesis 2! This would be circular reasoning – and prove nothing.

To avoid this, we must first look at the scripture that is not so difficult. Does the Bible support our position from unambiguous passages interpreted without benefit of the difficult passages? **Or do the unambiguous passages actually contradict our proposed interpretation of the difficult passages?** If so, to avoid reasoning in a circle, we must discipline ourselves to reject the proposed interpretation and to accept an interpretation that is consistent with the rest of the Bible.

Third, and most importantly, the “basics” are not just the plainer passages. Rather, we must **begin with the first principles**, that is, what the Bible says are the first principles. Anything that contradicts the New Testament’s teachings on salvation by grace is false doctrine, no matter how appealing the arguments may be. Any interpretation that contradicts the New Testament’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit and his working within each Christian is a lie. Of course, there is much more.

And yet we immediately see one of the biggest problems facing the Churches of Christ today. We don’t even agree on the principles that form the basis of *all* New Testament doctrine. The Holy Spirit is mentioned in nearly every opening of the New Testament from John through Jude (and in the other books, but just not as often), and yet we are still debating whether the Holy Spirit has done anything since AD 100! If we can’t agree on what all the verses dealing with the Spirit mean, how can we hope to reach agreement on the other verses? They can’t be interpreted independently of an understanding of how God works in our lives as Christians today! And for that matter, we still struggle with the nature and scope of grace. Grace permeates every Christian doctrine. In fact, everything we are told in the New Testament is a logical corollary of a sound understanding of grace and the workings of the Spirit. And yet we still find our brothers bickering over whether Christians are saved by faith or works.

Until we reach a common understanding of how we’re saved, why we’re saved, and even whether we’re saved, we are in no position to discuss much of anything intelligently – or more importantly – spiritually. To speak plainly, discussing any difficult issue, such as the role of women, with someone who deeply misunderstands the workings of the Holy Spirit or the power of God’s grace is like trying to explain space travel or the theory of gravity to someone who believes in a flat Earth. You simply do not have enough of a common understanding of the nature of things to converse on the subject.

I do not mean that you and I must agree on every nuance of theology to be able to talk about women and the Churches. Far from it. But the answers to the hardest questions, such as those regarding women, ultimately are found in a deep, rich awareness of our relationship with God and what he has done and is doing for us. The failure of the Churches of Christ to reach a consensus on these elements has quite naturally resulted in disputes in many other areas. But studying the role of women, and even reaching an

agreement on the subject, if that were possible, would only be treating a symptom and not the cause of the problem. When we are all more spiritually minded, many things that seem very hard today will appear trivially easy, and much of what seems easy will prove to be very hard indeed.¹⁴

I will make many arguments that draw support from my understanding of grace and the Holy Spirit, and these arguments will appear senseless to those who see things fundamentally differently. But here is where the test of truth is found: **is my position grace-filled and Spirit-filled? or is my position law-filled?**

(2 Cor. 3:5-6 ESV) ⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Finally, we will often be forced to **decide whether a command is binding today or was imposed due to temporary circumstances that no longer apply**. Some will feel very uncomfortable with such considerations and will even wonder whether such an approach is “liberal.” But such questions are far from liberal. In fact, we have traditionally taught that very many commands no longer apply.

Traditionally, those within the Restoration Movement have found commands and authority for practices in direct commands, necessary inferences, and binding examples. But we often forget that we don’t insist on all commands, even the direct ones, or all inferences, or all examples. Thus, we must have some guidelines for determining just which commands, inferences, and examples are binding today.

For example, we don’t greet one another with the Holy Kiss, despite the New Testament’s repeated commands to do so (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). We correctly reason that people always greeted one another with a kiss in the First Century (much as Arabs and Southern Europeans do today). Therefore, we conclude that the choice of greeting – kissing – is a feature of the local culture, rather than an eternal command. We determine whether kissing is to be an eternal ordinance for the church by looking not just at the command itself, but also at the reason behind the command. Clearly, there is good reason to urge a warm greeting among brothers and sisters (“Love your neighbor.”) Is there a good reason to make kissing the forever-form of the greeting? Finding none, we conclude that the command to greet warmly is to last for the life of the church, whereas the means of greeting depends on the local and temporary culture. Thus, we “culturally limit” the command, and this is sound Bible scholarship.

¹⁴ HSRG deals extensively with exactly this problem.

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So even **“direct commands” do not always bind Christians today**. We must always look at the reason behind the command and ask whether the reason is eternal and whether the way that the command is to be honored is also eternal. The command to greet one another warmly is eternal. The means of so doing was temporary.

We feel very comfortable with this approach in areas that preserve our traditions. But we feel uncertain, even unsafe, when this approach is applied to challenge our traditions. But the principle is sound, and the Churches of Christ have followed this principle since our beginnings.

CHAPTER II
FOUR ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

In *Women in the Church I*, Osburn reviews the literature on the role of women in the church and states that the positions of the authors may be summarized in four categories (I really have to apologize for the hard to pronounce – and hard to type! – words):

1. Radical feminism
2. Paternalism
3. Evangelical¹⁵ egalitarianism¹⁶
4. Complementarianism or evangelical hierarchicalism.¹⁷

The **radical feminist** considers his views on women as overriding any contrary scriptures. Such feminists are liberal in the true sense of the word. Many would consider 1 Timothy as uninspired and not truly written by Paul purely on the evidence of Paul's command that women not teach or exercise authority over men in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Some would question Paul's inspiration in general, arguing that no inspired man could have so demeaned women.

We need not spend much time with this approach to the Bible. I devoutly believe in the inspiration of scripture and am writing this book for the benefit of those with the same conviction. The radical feminists are not invited to this discussion.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse those feminists who challenge the inspiration of scripture with those non-radical interpreters who find equal rights for the sexes in the scriptures. It is easy for those who believe that women are subordinate to men to ridicule the views of those who find equal rights in the Bible by treating all egalitarians the same. There is, of course, a very large difference between those who accept the Bible

¹⁵ "Evangelical" is a word coined by Martin Luther and refers to the gospel (*euaggelion* in the Greek). It should not be confused with "evangelistic." An evangelical church is a Protestant church that is grace and Christ centered and not liberal. The word has come to be used in contrast to fundamentalism, which, in the context of American Protestantism, refers to rule-based churches. Many Churches of Christ are in transition from fundamentalism to evangelicalism.

¹⁶ Cottrell uses the term "biblical feminism." Osburn refers to the egalitarian school of thought as "evangelical feminism."

¹⁷ I will later suggest that "complement" is an appropriate term for the role of wives as to their husbands, based on Genesis 2's account of the creation of Eve. "Complement" does not carry any connotation of subordination. It is ironic that those who call themselves complementarians have chosen to refer to themselves by a term that is inconsistent with their defining viewpoint.

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as inspired and those who accept only those parts of the Bible that happen to suit their biases.

Paternalism is a view of women that is equally as wrong as radical feminism. A paternalist not only believes that women should be subject to men, but a paternalist often feels free to legislate rules in addition to those found in the Bible to assure that the church will operate as he wishes. It is, of course, just as wrong to add rules to the Bible as to take rules away. Thus, the paternalist is just as wrong as any true liberal.

Osburn cites F. LaGard Smith as an example of those writing with a paternalistic view. In *Men of Strength for Women of God*, Smith struggles to bring his traditional views on women to a practical conclusion:

I don't mean to cop out on this point, but it is the main principle about which I am most concerned.

Smith then mentions the difficulty in finding any verse or biblical principle that would condemn allowing women to serve communion in a silent role or to hand out church bulletins. He then concludes,

Somewhere along the line, the biblically mandated principle of male spiritual leadership is eroded. And *somewhere* along the line, the participation of women in the life of the church is contrary to God's way This is why women participating even in relatively neutral activities, such as passing the communion or leading the singing or reading the Scripture, is dangerous – even if they do not lead ultimately to headship roles. ... Crack the door open in biblically neutral areas of service, and we will soon find it to be a threshold to the biblically ordained leadership roles themselves.¹⁸

It is hard to imagine how one can seriously argue that it is wrong to allow women to perform “biblically neutral” roles. You and I might well disagree over what is biblically neutral, but surely we can agree that no one has the right to legislate against women taking on a role that the Bible itself does not deny them.

One of the fundamental principles on which the Restoration Movement – and, indeed, the Protestant Reformation – is based is the All-Sufficiency of Scripture. (*Sola scriptura* is the famous Latin slogan used by the Reformers for this principle.) It is simply the idea that the Bible is all that we need and it is wrong to invent rules in addition to the Bible itself. This is much of what we mean when we say that we are to be “silent where the Bible is silent.” We readily criticize the Catholic Church for seeking to bind rules imposed by popes and church councils, but we are every bit as wrong when we state

¹⁸ pp. 292-294 (italics in original).

that – even if the Bible does not condemn the practice – women cannot silently pass communion!

Another characteristic common to paternalists is a tendency to demean both women and men. For example,

On the plus side, women are more open to the supernatural and spiritual realm – more willing to trust in the mystical and miraculous. On the minus side, many women go too far and succumb to fraudulent spiritual leaders and emotionally appealing but spiritually deceptive ideas.

... On the plus side, men are ideally suited to be in positions of spiritual “authority.” They provide a rational, cautious stability which, if sometimes overly entrenched, prevents spiritualism from running unbridled to its own destruction.¹⁹

This kind of argument is not only insulting to many women; it is also downright silly. After all, the “fraudulent spiritual leaders” that women are supposedly inclined to follow are men. How does this make men better qualified to lead? Some men are rational and cautious. Some are foolish and impetuous. Some elders are very emotional. Others very studious. Do congregations that have no male leadership characteristically run unbridled to their own destruction? I’ve seen some of our congregations do exactly that. They were all headed by an exclusively male eldership. Why does being “overly entrenched” make men “ideally suited” for authority? Isn’t this plainly self-contradictory?

Burton Coffman, who is normally a very sensible commentator, in a note captioned “On the Deceivableness of Women,” states,²⁰

It is a gross mistake to view the natural capacity of women for being deceived as in any manner whatever a reflection upon womankind. It is positively her most adorable characteristic. ...

But are there not historical examples of strong-willed, powerful women, impossible to deceive, who now and again have held the rod of empire or the affairs of state with great ability? Yes, indeed! But exceptions do not make the rule. Wherever such leadership

¹⁹ F. LaGard Smith, *Men of Strength for Women of God*. p. 264.

²⁰ James Burton Coffman. *Commentary of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus & Philemon*. Firm Foundation Publishing House. 1978. p. 172.

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exists in women, it is still a masculine trait. ... Nature produces a two-headed calf now and then, but that is not the rule.

Also consider F. LaGard Smith's analysis:²¹

Far from men being spiritually superior to women, and therefore exclusively entitled to occupy positions of spiritual leadership in the home and the church, I believe the reason is just the opposite. I suggest that men may be put in positions of functional leadership because they are *less* inclined to be spiritual than women, because they are not *naturally* as spiritually oriented as women. Therefore God thrusts them into leadership roles so that they may maintain spiritual strength through the ongoing exercise of spiritual responsibility.

Excuse me? Smith is saying that God wants men to be elders because they aren't very spiritual, but by being elders, maybe they'll catch up with the women. If Smith's opinion of men is close to true, we can only pray that we will have women elders soon! How can we justify appointing the *least* qualified to positions of authority? Does this comport with God's teachings on the use of our talents and gifts?²² And how can Smith simultaneously contend that men are ideally suited for church leadership and that men are less inclined to be spiritual than women?

Such views of men and women insult *both* sexes. Whatever God's will for men and women may be, it is not based on such a misunderstanding of the human condition. The paternalistic views of men and women being published today would not have made much sense in the 1950's, and are absurd in light of recent experience. Who would call Margaret Thatcher, Sandra Day O'Connor, Golda Meir, Elizabeth Dole, Condoleezza Rice, or Indira Gandhi "gullible" or incapable of leadership – not to mention Elizabeth I and Catherine the Great? Are we to dismiss all such women as "two-headed calves" and freaks of nature, or does God have a place in his Kingdom for women with the gift of leadership? Certainly any view of the Bible that leads to demeaning God's creations is wrong.

While never so intended by its adherents, paternalism results in serious cases of abuse of wives and children. Far too many men find in this school of thought a rationale to dominate their wives to the point of abuse. The abuse is often psychological rather than physical, and often the only scars are a loss of the woman's self-esteem and personhood. And yet the problem is real – ask any experienced Christian counselor.

²¹ Smith at 267 (*italics in original*).

²² See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12. This question will be addressed in more detail later.

Being in a college town, my congregation often has to deal with emotional scars left on the daughters of church members who found in this mode of thinking a ready excuse to emotionally ruin their children. I assure the reader that the percentage of daughters of church members who arrive at college with serious emotional problems resulting from physically or emotionally abusive homes is far higher than most would imagine. While the men who teach this view of scripture never intend that their view be distorted in this manner, the fruit of the tree is apparent to the counselors and therapists.

Subtler but just as troubling is the lack of self-esteem that many of our older women suffer from. The older women in church beg to hear lessons on self-worth over and over again, and yet cannot persuade themselves that they have value in the eyes of God. No one ever preached that women have no value – not as such – and yet very many of our older women have *learned* that they are unimportant. This is why I am unimpressed by the assertion of many authors who state that their paternalistic views are supported by many of the older women in their home congregation. While I don't doubt for a minute that many older women would strongly avow that the paternalistic view of the world is their own view and the view that they are happiest with, these same women will often have very deep emotional scars and adjustment problems resulting from a lack of self-esteem.

The problem is real and cannot be rationalized away. Denial is easy, but denial only condemns our daughters and wives to continuation of a serious and severe problem. Neither can the problem be solved by telling men not to abuse their wives and children. Too often the men think that they are not being abusive at all, but are simply insisting on God's plan for female submission. And too often our daughters leave home and arrive at college either taking the notion of submission to men far too literally or fleeing the church to escape this notion altogether. There must be a better approach.

And yet the Bible repeatedly teaches submission. Nothing that I've said or experienced changes that. But we are not teaching the true, biblical view of submission. If we were, our mothers, wives, and daughters would be far better adjusted and happier, and far freer of emotional damage.

Finally, I must add that not all who agree with the paternalists are guilty of these errors. Many have been influenced by these teachings without having independently considered their merits. Thus, I do not intend to characterize all who believe this way. Rather, I am speaking only of the intellectual champions of this school of thought that has had such a great influence over the Churches's practices.

This leaves for consideration the “moderate approaches”: **hierarchicalism** and **egalitarianism**. The two views differ markedly in some areas but also find much common ground.

The egalitarian school of thought finds that the Bible teaches that in Christ “there is neither ... male nor female” (Gal. 3:28), such that, although men and women are

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not the same, those passages that limit the role of women in the church should be understood as speaking only to the cultural circumstances to which they were written. Thus, these passages are no more binding today than the commands to greet one another with the Holy Kiss, to wash one another's feet (John 13:1-11; 1 Tim. 5:10), to forsake the wearing of jewelry (1 Tim. 2:9), to lift holy hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8), to maintain a list of widows over the age of 60 to serve as church officials (1 Tim. 5:9-10), or to abstain from the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29. Cf. 1 Cor. 8).

The hierarchicalist school of thought finds that God's creation of Eve as Adam's "help meet" (KJV, Gen. 2:20) or "suitable helper" (NIV) denies to women any role as leaders of any men for all time.²³ Hierarchicalists point to numerous New Testament passages as affirming the subordinate role of women while simultaneously contending that the subordination of women does not make women in any way inferior.

While not universally the case, hierarchicalists tend to consider 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 as applying only in the cultural situation in which it was written but consider 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as still binding.²⁴ Some hierarchicalists would permit women to take on any role, even limited public speaking, that is not a "headship" role (see 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Thus, women could publicly read scripture or give testimony but could not teach, preach, or be elders.

Egalitarians, however, believe that the Bible requires each Christian to be allowed full use of his or her gifts and talents in the service of God.

Common to both is a strongly held belief in the inspiration and authority of scripture. While some falsely accuse the egalitarians of rejecting scripture, in fact, unlike the radical feminists, egalitarians insist on holding to the inspiration of scripture – although they refuse to be bound by traditional interpretations of scripture.

Also common to both is a tendency to bring their own biases to the consideration of scripture. As is true of all four positions, it is easy to assume that the Bible supports a particular view without seriously and objectively considering the text of the Bible in textual and historical context. It is easy to find blatant examples of this error in all schools of thought. Thus, we must carefully discipline ourselves to avoid this error. And we cannot reject a school of thought by pointing to the errors of some of its adherents. All schools of thought have made bad arguments and false accusations at some time or other.

²³ Cottrell admits that this argument doesn't hold up to scrutiny and instead relies on the fact that Adam was created before Eve as creating an eternal hierarchy. See the later discussion on 1 Tim. 2 for a discussion of that argument.

²⁴ See, for example, Rubel Shelly. "A Responsible Challenge to Traditions." *In Search of Wonder* Howard Publishing Co. 1995 (Lynn Anderson, ed.), pp. 90-92.

CHAPTER III THE GENESIS ACCOUNTS

The most important scriptures dealing with the role of women are found in Genesis. In a number of places, Paul refers to the Creation accounts as the basis for his teachings regarding women (see 1 Cor. 6:16; 7:4; 11:8-9; 14:34; Eph. 5:31; 1 Tim. 2:13-14). Other times he refers simply to the “Law,” but we understand that Jews refer to the first five books of the Old Testament as the Law – not just the Law of Moses (found primarily in Leviticus and Deuteronomy). In fact, there is nothing in the Law of Moses commanding that women be subject or even submissive to men. Therefore, we take it that Paul is referring to the Creation accounts.

Because of this, the key to finding the truth of the matter is Genesis 1-3. We must first look to Genesis and find out what God’s plan for men and women really is. Only then can we look to Paul’s references to these accounts and determine the point that Paul was intending to make. And we must interpret the New Testament to be consistent with the Old Testament. We start at the very beginning. We read the Genesis accounts for the truths that are in them. And we rigorously apply those truths to every passage that deals with men and women. We will not find a contradiction, but we may find some surprises.

A. Genesis 1

Genesis 1 and 2 describe the world as it was before sin entered it. We study Genesis 1:26-28 first:

(Gen. 1:26-28 ESV) Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This passage describes God’s final creative act, occurring on the sixth day. What does it tell us about men and women?

1. Both are created in God’s image and likeness.
2. Both have the rule over the Creation.
3. God made man male and female.

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4. Man (that is, male and female) is to be fruitful.

So far as can be told from this passage, there is no distinction between men and women. The passage deals with the authority of man (male and female) to rule God's Creation, but does not give the male authority to rule the female. Not only is the female not declared to be inferior to the male, both are declared to be made in God's image.

B. Genesis 2

Genesis 2 contains a more detailed account of the creation of woman.

(Gen. 2:16-25 NIV) ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

¹⁸ The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Now, what does this teach us about males and females?

1. The male is incomplete and inadequate by himself. It is "not good" (v. 18) for him to be alone. Indeed, the only part of the creation declared "not good" is Adam – until God's creation of Eve to complete the creation of man.

2. Neither God himself, who walked with Adam in the Garden nor any of the animals were helpers suitable for Adam. The lesson is that man's helper could neither be superior (God himself) nor inferior (an animal), but rather must be flesh of his flesh.

3. God chose to make woman out of a rib. First, this teaches us that woman and man are the same flesh. God certainly could have made woman from scratch, just as he

did Adam. But God chose to teach a lesson by making her from the identical material as Adam – Adam himself.

The Jewish rabbis have taught since before the time of Jesus that God's choice of a rib is significant. God did not make woman from Adam's head, as though she were to rule over him, or from his feet, as though to be in subjection to him, but from his side, to be close to him. We frequently teach this lesson in our wedding ceremonies.

Moreover, the ideal of "one flesh" is eternal as well. In the case of Adam and Eve, it means that the two were of literally identical flesh. But for us, it must mean that the husband is required by God to recognize his wife as a part of himself. He must love her as though her body were his body. He cannot treat her as an inferior or as a part of his domain.

5. Adam called Eve "woman" because she "was taken out of man." In the Hebrew, the words for "woman" and for "man" – "*adam*" and "*adamah*" – are very similar, and Adam's choice indicates and emphasizes the similarity between man and woman. After Eve was made, Adam referred to her as *ishshah* (woman or wife) and to himself as *ish* (man or husband) (Gen. 2:23). Again, the similarity of the names indicates their unity and similarity. In fact, Eve wasn't called "Eve" until after the Fall (Gen. 3:20), with the new dissimilarity of the names indicating the new barrier between husbands and wives.

6. God made man before woman. Some argue that woman is subordinate to man because Adam was made before Eve. But cows and birds were made before man, and yet man (male and female) is plainly given rule over all that was created before them (Gen. 1:26). Being made second does not, in and of itself, indicate subordination. Rather, the lesson is that the male was incomplete – not good – until the female completed the Creation. In other words, the Creation order is from incompleteness toward increasing completeness, and hardly from superior to inferior.

7. God made woman to be a suitable helper. This concept is far too important to be passed over lightly. Many within the paternalistic or hierarchicalist schools of thought consider this verse the linchpin of their position. It is, they contend, God's designation of Eve as a "helper" that makes women subordinate to men for all time.

C. What does "helper" really mean?

The word translated "helper" is the Hebrew word *'ezer*. Following are all the other occurrences of the word in the Old Testament:

(Exo. 18:4 NIV) [T]he other was named Eliezer, for he said, "My father's God was my **helper**; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh."

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(Deut. 33:7 NIV) “And this he said about Judah: “Hear, O LORD, the cry of Judah; bring him to his people. With his own hands he defends his cause. Oh, be his **help** against his foes!”

(Deut. 33:26 NIV) “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to **help** you and on the clouds in his majesty.”

(Deut. 33:29 NIV) “Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and **helper** and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places.”

(Psa. 20:2 NIV) May he send you **help** from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.

(Psa. 33:20 NIV) We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our **help** and our shield.

(Psa. 70:5 NIV) Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my **help** and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.

(Psa. 89:19 NIV) Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: “I have bestowed **strength** on a warrior; I have exalted a young man from among the people.

(Psa. 115:9-11 NIV) O house of Israel, trust in the LORD – he is their **help** and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD – he is their **help** and shield. You who fear him, trust in the LORD – he is their **help** and shield.

(Psa. 121:1-2 NIV) A song of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my **help** come from? My **help** comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

(Psa. 124:8 NIV) Our **help** is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

(Psa. 146:5 NIV) Blessed is he whose **help** is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

(Isa. 30:5 NIV) [E]veryone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither **help** nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace.”

(Ezek. 12:14 NIV) I will scatter to the winds all those around him – his **staff** and all his troops – and I will pursue them with drawn sword.

(Dan. 11:34 NIV) When they fall, they will receive a little **help**, and many who are not sincere will join them.

(Hos. 13:9 NIV) “You are destroyed, O Israel, because you are against me, against your **helper**.”

In the vast majority of cases, *‘ezer* refers to God himself. In a few cases, the enemies of God’s people are criticized as not being the helper that God is. Indeed, *‘ezer* is seen as a central element of God’s relationship with his people.

Obviously, God’s calling Eve *‘ezer* does not mean that Eve is subordinate to Adam or that women are subordinate to men. If that were so, then God’s inspiring Moses, David, and the prophets to call God *‘ezer* would mean that God is subordinate to Israel! Calling Eve “helper” certainly means that Eve was Adam’s complement. She completed what was lacking in Adam. But there is no basis in the scriptures to find subordination or a principle of male leadership in this word.

Perhaps our difficulty in interpreting *‘ezer* can be better seen by noticing how we use “helper” in English. We speak of “mother’s little helper,” a “plumber’s helper,” being a “good helper.” In current English, “helper” carries the connotation of a subordinate – even a child.²⁵ Thus, if I were drowning, I’d call out, “Help!” But I wouldn’t refer to the person who rescued me as my “helper.” My rescuer truly helped me, but calling him “helper” would be too condescending – even belittling.

But these thoughts are utterly foreign to the Hebrew *‘ezer*. There is no condescension in the Hebrew word at all, so that “helper” (or “help meet,” as in the KJV) is truly a clumsy translation to modern ears.

In other verses, *‘ezer* is used in the sense of “rescuer” or “liberator.” The word is also used in the sense of “one who fights alongside against a common foe.” “Comrade” or “ally” would come close to the sense in many contexts. Thus, the psalmist sings that God is Israel’s help, not a mere helper – but an ally so powerful that Israel must prevail.

When the United States’ armed forces came to the rescue of Kuwait, we were there to help, but we were not mere helpers – the U.S. military was an ally, a comrade,

²⁵ *Roget’s International Thesaurus*. 5th ed. Harper Collins. 1992. p. 919, lists “subordinate” as the first choice for synonyms for “helper.” The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Random House, Inc. 1993, lists as synonyms of “helper” aid, assistant, supporter, backer, auxiliary, and ally. Of these, only “ally” does not connote inferiority.

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and an overwhelming superior to any military capability that Kuwait could have mustered. This is the sense *'ezer* used with respect to God and his relationship to his people.

Therefore, because Eve was unto Adam as God was unto Israel, *'ezer* carries with it no notion that a “helper” is inferior or subordinate. An *'ezer* is one who helps another, but not one who necessarily helps from a position of inferiority.

“Complement” is therefore a proper if not excellent translation. The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*²⁶ defines “complement” as

1. something that completes or makes perfect: *A good wine is a complement to a good meal.* ... 3. either of two parts or things needed to complete the whole; counterpart. ... To **complement** is to provide something felt to be lacking or needed; it is often applied to putting together two things, each of which supplies what is lacking in the other, to make a complete whole.²⁷

Now *'ezer* does have a deeper significance. God’s declaring Eve as complement means that God gave Eve a special role in relationship to Adam. She is to complete, finish, and make God’s creation of man good. Clearly, therefore, a wife may not, consistent with her God-given role, belittle her husband or injure his reputation. Neither may she act as an independent agent, free of concerns for the impact of her behavior on her husband. She must act as part of a whole.

D. The curse on Creation

Genesis 3:1-24. The subordination of women did not begin in Genesis 2, but in Genesis 3 (NIV).

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Italics in original.

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then 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. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. ***Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.***”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

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“cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil 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.”

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree

Let’s first look at the particular curses.

The curse of the serpent. First, God cursed the serpent. The “seed” of the woman is prophesied as bruising the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15 KJV, NASB; “offspring” in ESV, NIV). The use of “seed” here is very unusual. The ancients normally used “seed” to refer to the male element of reproduction, likening the sex act to the man planting seed in the woman. In fact, until only a few centuries ago, it was believed that babies were contained in the sperm. If a baby was born looking like its mother, the resemblance was considered to be because the baby’s development was affected by the mother’s characteristics while in the womb. The ancients never spoke of a woman’s seed.

Thus, many Christian commentators take this use as the first prophecy of the Messiah and his virgin birth. Jesus bruised the head of the serpent by delivering a truly severe blow to Satan’s kingdom. But the serpent bruised Jesus’ heel by being a constant opponent and, thus far, preventing the Kingdom of Heaven from including the entire Creation.

The curse of Eve. The curse and prophecy as to the serpent are followed by a curse on Eve (Gen. 3:16). God tells her that her pain in childbearing will greatly increase. The significance of this cannot be understated. Until very recently, there was a very high death rate in childbearing. The pain of childbearing before modern antibiotics, sanitation, Cesarean sections, and such was many times greater than it is now.

God next curses the woman by causing her husband to rule over her. Notice these things:

1. *This was a change.* If Adam already had the rule over Eve, then why did God say he was doing this to her because of her sin? Thus, nothing in Genesis 1 or 2 can support an argument for male rule over women.

2. God states that *husbands* rule over *wives* – under his curse. He does not curse all women with being under the rule of all men.

3. God also states that the wife’s desire will be for her husband. This curse has been interpreted many different ways.

a. Some suggest that this refers to sexual desire, the idea being that the woman cannot avoid the pain of childbearing due to her sexual desires. But this makes sexual desire by a wife for a husband a curse, which is clearly not God’s plan. Adam and Eve were commanded on the Sixth Day to be fruitful and multiply. Sex was a part of the plan from the beginning and is not a result of sin.

b. Others suggest that wives are cursed with wanting to do their husband’s will. But this suggestion fails for lack of evidence.

c. A third group suggests an interpretation based on the close similarity of the language of the curse to Genesis 4:7:

(Gen. 4:7 NET) ⁷ Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must subdue it."

In the King James Version, this verse says that “unto thee shall be [sin’s] desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” The NIV translators have paraphrased this passage to interpret “unto thee shall be his desire” to mean “it desires to have you.” The NET Bible translates: “It desires to dominate you.” Thus, in Genesis 3:16, the virtually identical phrasing, only a few verses away, must mean that woman’s desire for her husband is her desire to *rule* her husband. God is saying that although the wife may want to rule her husband, under his curse, the husband will rule the wife.

A result of Adam’s and Eve’s sin is strife in marriage. Both husbands and wives will want to be in charge, but in the ordinary case, the husband will succeed in ruling over his wife. And certainly the last several thousand years have proved this to be very true indeed.

The curse of Adam. God next curses Adam for his sin. Adam will be required to earn a living by the sweat of his brow, and the ground will produce thistles and thorns.

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The curse of mankind. Finally, God makes man mortal. We all die because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

E. The meaning of the curses

Genesis 3 is known to students of the Bible as the Fall of Man. It is the account of the first sin and marks the beginning of the separation of mankind from God. It is exactly this separation that Jesus died to cure. Jesus came to earth to undo the curse. Man sinned, both male and female, and therefore death came into the world. Paul explains this in Romans:

(Rom. 5:12-18 NIV) Therefore, just as **sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men**, because all sinned – for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. ... For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. **Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.**

But the Fall of Man affected much more than our own mortality and our relationship with God. The entire Creation was corrupted by man’s sin.

(Rom. 8:20-23 NIV) For **the creation was subjected to frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We see, therefore, that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are only examples of the complete corruption of the Creation. Everything decays. Nothing is permanent. All that is living will die. This corruption affects our marriages, our work, our childbearing, our relationships with God, and everything made.

(Eph. 4:22-24 NIV) You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being **corrupted** by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and

to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

(1 Pet. 1:22-23 NIV) Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of **perishable** seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

(2 Pet. 1:4 NIV) Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the **corruption** in the world caused by evil desires.

The italicized word in each quoted passage is from the same Greek root as “decay” found in Romans 8:22. Because of sin, Paul says in Romans that we are in bondage to decay (or corruption, or perishability). He says in Ephesians that we had been corrupt before our salvation, but our new self is to be like God (that is, not corrupted by sin). Peter tells us in 1 Peter that by being saved we have relinquished our perishable, fleshly nature (that is, our corrupted nature) and replaced it with an imperishable nature. In 2 Peter he tells us that God gives each of us a part of his divine nature (the Holy Spirit, immortality) that allows us to escape the corruption of the world. But we know from Romans and 1 Corinthians that the corruption of the world came from the curse in Genesis 3, which followed the entry of sin into the world. Thus, we are instructed to *escape* these curses, not to impose them on one another!

We are all going to keep sinning, but sinning is still sinning, and we are bound to our Lord to try to stop and to rid ourselves of sin so far as it is within our abilities.

(1 Cor. 15:21-26 NIV) For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**

We see in 1 Corinthians that death, which came through Adam, is Christ’s enemy and will be the last enemy destroyed. Moreover, we see that Paul describes the corruption of Creation as the enemy of God.

Therefore, we must understand that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are curses and not commands – far from it. They are evidence of the decay and corruption produced

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by sin and the frustration Creation has been subjected to while awaiting the end of time. How then can we command our women members to obey a “command” that is not a command but a description of the consequence of sin?²⁸ Douglas Campbell explains,²⁹

As a result of humanity’s first transgression, Sin enters creation permanently, taking up residence within the very constitution of humanity, that is, in the Flesh. And the entry of Sin facilitates the arrival of the still more powerful and oppressive Death, creating a fundamental human condition of slavery within a kingdom ruled by evil forces. Indeed, the whole of creation has been joined to humanity’s enslavement and shares in its screams and groans. ... Paul’s solution to this plight centres on the story of a protagonist, God’s “Son,” Christ Jesus, who enters the oppressed state of humanity in obedience to his Father’s wishes, assumes its enslaved nature, and then dies. However, he is raised to new life by the divine, life-giving Spirit, and exalted to the Father’s right hand, where he now reigns, judges and intercedes.

The results of sin are evil. We are not called to obey the new order brought about by sin, but to escape it through Jesus!

The man is cursed to work by the sweat of his brow. Does this mean that air conditioning is a sin, because it is contrary to God’s eternal design? Are anti-perspirants wrong? Is it wrong to use herbicides and pre-emergents to prevent the growth of weeds? Didn’t God intend that we work the fields by hand to rid them of weeds? Must all men work in the fields? Is office work a sin?

Is it a sin to use anesthesia to relieve the pain of childbearing? Or is that also part of God’s eternal plan? For that matter, why should we resist any of the world’s corruption? God corrupted it, who are we to oppose it?

In fact, this very idea used to be taught in Western Christianity. Lynn Winters explains³⁰ –

²⁸ “Adam’s rule over Eve (3:16) was not God’s original design in Creation, but the curse God placed on Eve for her disobedience. It is a perversion of God’s intentions for the relationship between a man and wife, and never has been his real desire.” John T. Willis, “Women in the Old Testament,” published in *Essays on Women I*. p. 35.

²⁹ Douglas Campbell. *The Quest for Paul’s Gospel*. T & T Clark International. 2005. pp. 57-58.

³⁰ *Our Judaic-Christian Heritage, An Inquiry into the Ideas and Forces that Link the Thought of Our Time with Our Religious Past*, <http://www.mac-2001.com/philo/crit/DOCTOR.TXT>. See also Jo-Ann Tsang (1996). Book review of Robert Wuthnow’s *Learning to Care. Review of Religious Research*, 38, 181-182., quoting Gundry, P. (1986) “Why We’re Here” in A. Mickelson, editor, *Women, Authority, and the Bible*.

During all this time, there was no tradition of using painkiller to relieve the pain of women going through labor. (Opium can halt the progression of labor, although alcohol does not). Women midwives could be accused of witchcraft if they employed such drugs. One such case occurred in 1591, when a woman of high social standing, Eufame Macalyane, asked Agnes Sampson to help relieve her pain during the births of her two sons. Agnes Sampson was later arrested and tried before King James for this heresy. She was condemned as a witch and burned alive at the Castle Hill of Edinburgh.

It was not until 1846, that ether was successfully administered as an anesthetic during an operation. In 1847, Dr. James Y. Simpson, professor of obstetrics at the University of Glasgow successfully used chloroform to relieve the suffering of a woman patient in childbirth. After he published a report on his success, he was denounced because the pain of childbirth was claimed by many to go against God's plan for mankind – i.e. that women “deserved” to suffer due to Eve's crime in the Garden of Eden. ...

One clergyman for example argued: “chloroform is a decoy of Satan, apparently offering itself to bless women; but in the end it will harden society and rob God of the deep earnest cries which arise in time of trouble for help.” (Haggard, *Ibid*, p 108) ...

In 1853, when Queen Victoria, announced she wanted to use chloroform during the delivery of her seventh child, Prince Leopold, the Archbishop of Canterbury warned her that this was unbiblical – and reminded her of the verse, “In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children!”

We are quite properly repelled at the thought of punishing a laboring woman for taking painkillers. We instinctively know that pain in childbirth is a curse, not a command, and a curse that we should try to overcome. But we can't consistently reject the views of the 16th Century English church and at the same time insist that Genesis 3:16 commands husbands to rule over their wives.

Adam and Eve corrupted the world, not God, and we are God's children charged with working to undo the curse. We do this by bringing others to Jesus to escape the curse of death, by alleviating suffering, by struggling against the corruption of this world any way we can – and this certainly includes doing so within our marriages. We are compelled as Christians to work to rid our marriages of sin, including the quest for dominion over our spouse.

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At this point, many readers will wonder how this interpretation of Genesis can be reconciled with New Testament passages on the role of women. We will be getting to these other passages, and we certainly don't believe that Paul or any other Bible author contradicts the lessons of Genesis 1, 2, and 3. But the meaning of the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 is plain. They simply are not commands, and should not be taught as commands.

**CHAPTER IV
BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF GODLY WOMEN**

Any doctrine of women that we consider must pass several stern tests. First, it must measure up against the passages dealing with the relationship of men and women, and not just the ambiguous ones.

Second, whatever position we take on the role of women must be consistently adhered to in all passages, and we can't change interpretations depending on the course title. When we study the Fall of Man while studying Romans, we must treat the curse of Eve the same as when we teach Marriage, and the same as when we teach The Role of Women in the Church. Read the literature in your Sunday school classes on these topics over the last few years, and you will find that we often change interpretations with the course title.

But third – and this may be the hardest one – we must be able to measure the interpretation against God's own application of the rule. If we insist that a rule is eternal, then we have all of history to see whether God agrees. How has God dealt with women throughout time?

We must remember that the curse on Eve (Gen. 3:16) was squarely in effect throughout the Old Testament, and even today the domination of wives by husbands continues even in some Christian homes. Thus, when we look at history, we don't expect to see men and women treated equally. Rather we expect that men will dominate women. But because Genesis 3 is a curse rather than a command, we also expect there will be notable exceptions from the general rule, pointing us toward a better way – the way of Jesus.

A. Patriarchal Age

During the Patriarchal age, so far as is recorded, God spoke primarily to the heads of households – who were invariably male. This is hardly surprising considering the male-dominant culture that arose after Adam and Eve left Eden. In fact, we will find that all society outside the church has been male-dominated ever since the Fall of Man, and even the church has been male dominated in most locations. But this fact merely proves what we already know – that following God's curse of Eve, men would dominate women.

B. The Mosaic Age

After the Law of Moses was given, things changed. The Law of Moses normally treats men and women exactly the same. There are some places, however, where men are preferred over women.

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For example, only a man may divorce his spouse (Deut. 23:21-4), but Jesus reversed this bias (Mark 10:1-12). In fact, even before Jesus, the rabbis had begun to allow women to divorce their husbands in appropriate cases.³¹

In the temple, there was a Holy of Holies that could be entered only by the high priest (always a man) and only on the Day of Atonement. But the writer of Hebrews tells us that these rules have been eliminated. All Christians may now enter the Holy of Holies itself (Most Holy Place, in the NIV):

(Heb. 10:19-22 ESV) Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

All Christians are able to enter the Most Holy Place, regardless of what position they would have had under the Law of Moses. Moreover, Peter teaches us that we are now *all* priests. The church is a “holy priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5). And so we see that even the most “sexist” rules of the Mosaic Age have been reversed and eliminated in Jesus!

The women’s courtyard. Many of us grew up with King James Bibles with a collection of multicolored maps in the back. Inevitably, one map showed the temple as rebuilt by Herod during the time of Jesus. This temple had an outer court for Gentiles, an inner court for female Jews, and an even more inner court for male Jews.

But this design is taken from rabbinic teaching, not the scriptures. God gave very particular instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple, and there is nothing in the Bible specifying that women may not come as close to the presence of God as men.

Miriam. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was subject to Moses, as was all Israel, and yet she was a prophetess.

(Exo. 15:20 ESV) ²⁰ Then Miriam the **prophetess**, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.

In fact, the Bible also calls her a “leader” of all Israel.

³¹ David Instone-Brewer. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2002.

(Mic. 6:4 NET) In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I delivered you from that place of slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you.

Miriam was certainly lower ranking than Moses, but no distinction is made between her and Aaron. Aaron was the high priest, and while Micah subordinates the prophetess and the priest to Moses, he subordinates neither to the other.

Deborah. The Law of Moses ushered in the Period of the Judges, during which God ruled Israel through individual judges. Notable among the judges is Deborah.

(Jdg. 4:4-5 NET) Now Deborah, a **prophetess**, wife of Lappidoth, was **leading Israel** at that time. ⁵ She would sit under the Date Palm Tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the Ephraimite hill country. The Israelites would come up to her to have their disputes settled.

Plainly, Deborah was literally a judge. She decided disputes and thus had authority over men and women. Moreover, the Bible calls Deborah a prophetess and a leader. How could this be true if God has decreed for all time that women can have no authority over a man and cannot teach a man? How silent was Deborah when men were present?

(Jdg. 4:6-14 NET) ⁶ **She summoned Barak** son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali. She said to him, "Is it not true that the LORD God of Israel is commanding you? Go, march to Mount Tabor! Take with you ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun! ⁷ I will bring Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to you at the Kishon River, along with his chariots and huge army. I will hand him over to you." ⁸ Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go. But if you do not go with me, I will not go." ⁹ She said, "I will indeed go with you. But you will not gain fame on the expedition you are undertaking, for the LORD will turn Sisera over to a woman." Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. ...

¹⁴ Deborah said to Barak, "Spring into action, for this is the day the LORD is handing Sisera over to you! Has the LORD not taken the lead?" Barak quickly went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him.

Here we see that Deborah gave orders to the general of Israel's army, and he obeyed. She was obviously the highest-ranking person in the nation. She was a married woman, and yet God granted her a role of genuine authority and leadership over men.

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To celebrate the victory won at Deborah's command, Deborah wrote the Song of Deborah with Barak, which is an inspired writing that comprises the fifth chapter of Judges. And so we add to her accomplishments: author of a chapter of the Bible.

F. LaGard Smith argues that Deborah is an apparent exception to the universal, eternal rule of female subordination only because God could find no man in Israel to act as judge. God thus called Deborah to urge "a return to *strong* male leadership."³² The problem with Smith's interpretation is that nothing in the Bible indicates that God was unhappy with existing male leadership. God was unhappy that Barak refused to honor Deborah's command to attack without Deborah's going with Barak (Judges 4:8-9), and thus Deborah declared that Barak would not have the honor of the victory. But nowhere does God declare that he is displeased with male leadership in general or that Deborah was called to be a judge to teach the men a lesson. Moreover, the evidence that Smith relies on, the reluctance of Barak to go to battle without Deborah's presence, occurred well after Deborah was made a judge and leader – indeed, after Deborah had command over Barak. *Most importantly, Barak's mistake was in failing to take orders from a woman, not in failing to give orders!*

Moreover, there are numerous cases where God raised up a male leader who initially refused to take on leadership. For example, Gideon was reluctant to honor God's call to leadership (Judg. 6:11-15) if not downright cowardly.³³ But God made Gideon into a mighty warrior. Similarly, Moses was very reluctant to honor God's call to leadership (Exo. 4:1-17), and yet God raised Moses up as the greatest of all leaders. Plainly, God can raise up male leadership when he wishes, regardless of the willingness of men to lead, and therefore God did not make Deborah a leader for lack of men to lead.³⁴

William J. Webb³⁵ points out that the judge Shamgar ruled at the same time as Deborah,³⁶ so that God clearly had a male judge available had he preferred a male ruler.³⁷

³² *Men of Strength for Women of God*, pp. 114-118.

³³ Jdg. 6:11. It has often been suggested that Gideon chose to thresh his wheat in a winepress to hide from the Midianites, rather than confronting the enemies of God's people.

³⁴ Remarkably, Cottrell never mentions Deborah in his 319-page critique of egalitarian thought!

³⁵ *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals – Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. InterVarsity Press. 2001.

³⁶ The text says that Shamgar ruled "after Ehud" (Judges 5:6, compare to 3:31 and 4:1). It is clear that many of the judges had overlapping terms of office.

³⁷ Harrison, *ibid.* p. 180, points out that "whether the Judges were tribal heroes or national leaders, it is quite possible that their careers were sometimes contemporaneous and not generally in continuous succession, as a casual perusal of the narrative might seem to imply." He further finds, p. 692, that "the Hebrew text does not warrant the assumption that all the Judges exercised consecutive periods of leadership, whether or not the individuals concerned were local or national heroes. At least three principal groups appear to have been partly concurrent"

The Kings. Many have suggested that the fact that Israel's kings were all men indicates that women are to be subordinate to men forever. But this argument fails. First, Israel has kings at a time when the curse of Genesis 3 was in full effect. Second, God opposed the establishment of kings, and thus the nature of kings (inheritance of the throne by the oldest male child) cannot be considered a part of God's eternal design.

We see from the following passage that God replaced the system of judges with male kings only grudgingly, saying that asking for kings was equivalent to rejecting God:

(1 Sam. 8:4-8 NIV) So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD.

And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you."

Clearly, the rule of Israel by judges was God's preferred method. Moreover, God individually selected each judge – even Deborah – while after David, kings were selected either by birthright or by coup.

Old Testament Prophets. While the kings of Judah were all men, during the period of monarchy God's prophets, who were called directly by God, included women.

(2 Kings 22:14-20 NIV) Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to *the prophetess Huldah*, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.

She said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me,

'This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.'

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Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.’”
So they took her answer back to the king.

In response to this prophecy, Josiah, king of Judah, led his nation in its last reformation before being taken into Babylonian captivity. Even the king – among the godliest of all the kings – heeded the words of Huldah the prophetess.

The Good Wife. God’s vision of the ultimate women in Old Testament times is found in Proverbs 31:10-31, which describes the “good wife” in a frequently quoted passage.

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Interestingly, the proverb states that the husband “has no lack of gain” and is known at the city gates due to his wife’s industry. She is, therefore, not only a working wife, but also a wife active in community affairs. She develops a mercantile business on her own initiative and engages in very successful agricultural ventures.³⁸ Moreover, “faithful instruction is on her tongue.” She is a teacher. For all these things she is praised by her husband, her children, and her community.

While she is a homemaker, she is not just a homemaker. To be honest students, we must ask, why does God describe as the ideal woman a woman who is not only a homemaker, mother, and wife, but also a business woman and teacher?

Esther. Near the end of the book of Esther, Esther, a Jewess and a Queen of Persia, is given all authority over the Jewish people in Persia.

(Est. 9:29-10:1 ESV) Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim.³⁰ Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth,³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting.³² **The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.**

If God intended women to be subordinate to men, to have no authority, and to be silent in their public presence, why is Esther a book in the Bible?

³⁸ Willis, *ibid*, at 36.

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References to God as Female. There are also a number of Old Testament passages where God refers to himself as a mother: Isaiah 46:3; Isaiah 49:15; Isaiah. 66:12-13.

(Isa. 46:3 NET) ³ "Listen to me, O family of Jacob, all you who are left from the family of Israel, you who have been carried from birth, you who have been supported from the time you left the womb.

(Isa. 49:14-15 NET) ¹⁴ "Zion said, 'The LORD has abandoned me, the sovereign master has forgotten me.' ¹⁵ Can a woman forget her baby who nurses at her breast? Can she withhold compassion from the child she has borne? Even if mothers were to forget, I could never forget you!

(Isa. 66:12-13 NET) ¹² For this is what the LORD says: "Look, I am ready to extend to her prosperity that will flow like a river, the riches of nations will flow into her like a stream that floods its banks. You will nurse from her breast and be carried at her side; you will play on her knees. ¹³ As a mother consoles a child, so I will console you, and you will be consoled over Jerusalem."

Indeed, Jesus cries,

(Mat. 23:37 NET) "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it!"

Thus, both God and Jesus refer to themselves with female imagery. According to John T. Willis, professor of the Old Testament at Abilene Christian University,

To be sure, OT writers frequently compare God with a father ..., but God is not a sexual being. "Father" is simply one of many human figures that may appropriately be used to denote certain attributes or characteristics of God. ... There are ways in which God is like a father; there are also ways in which God is like a mother. The OT writers do not hesitate to call attention to these latter, but in doing so, they indicate their highest regard for woman.³⁹

The Gospel Prophetesses. Before the birth of Jesus, three prophetesses were inspired by God to speak and to instruct men. The first is Elizabeth, mother of John the

³⁹ Willis, *ibid*, at 38.

Baptist (Luke 1:42-45). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also inspired to praise God in response to learning that God had selected her to bear the Messiah (Luke 1:46-55).

Anna the prophetess also prophesied about Jesus, and did so in the temple courts, the most public place of worship in all Israel (Luke 2:36-37). Moreover, she testified about Jesus in the temple courts “to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). The words of all three prophetesses are preserved in scriptures as inspired speech. Anna was not only prophesying, she was teaching. Her words were the teaching of men in public.

The women at the tomb. N. T. Wright explains –

Among the many things that need to be said about the gospels is that we gain nothing by ignoring the fact that Jesus chose twelve male apostles. There were no doubt all kinds of reasons for this within both the symbolic world in which he was operating and the practical and cultural world within which they would have to live and work. But every time this point is made – and in my experience it is made quite frequently – we have to comment on how interesting it is that there comes a time in the story when the disciples all forsake Jesus and run away; and at that point, long before the rehabilitation of Peter and the others, it is the women who come first to the tomb, who are the first to see the risen Jesus, and are the first to be entrusted with the news that he has been raised from the dead. This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles. We should not be surprised that Paul calls a woman named Junia an apostle in Romans 16.7. If an apostle is a witness to the resurrection, there were women who deserved that title before any of the men.⁴⁰

Wright further points out how astonishing it is that all four Gospels recount that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women in a culture where women were not considered competent to testify in court. And yet the church relied on their testimony for the most important fact in the history of the world!

[I]t will not do to have [Mark], or anyone else at that stage, making up a would-be apologetic legend about an empty tomb *and having women be the ones who find it*. The point has been repeated over

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, “Women’s Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis,” a conference paper for the Symposium, ‘Men, Women and the Church’ St John’s College, Durham, September 4 2004 (italics in original). http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm.

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and over in scholarship, but its full impact has not always been felt: women were simply not acceptable as legal witnesses. We may regret it, but this is how the Jewish world (and most others) worked. The debate between Origen and Celsus shows that critics of Christianity could seize on the story of the women in order to scoff at the whole tale; were the legend-writers really so ignorant of the likely reaction? If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding, reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact the first on the scene, or that the early church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both. Would the other evangelists have been so slavishly foolish as to copy the story unless they were convinced that, despite being an apologetic liability, it was historically trustworthy?⁴¹

C. Christian Age

In the New Testament, the women are given even greater honor than the women of the Old Testament.

Jesus. Jesus said much that relates to the theme of this book, and his words will be referred to as we work through the key passages. We should note, first, that Jesus never talked down to or subordinated women. He uniformly honored women. His attitude toward women would be considered liberated today, but it was revolutionary in the First Century. Women were a part of his inner circle.

As is discussed in more detail later, the Jews in the First Century believed that it was wrong to teach women about God's law (except for the penalty for adultery!), and yet he taught women (such as Mary and Martha) even when men weren't present. He dealt with the Samaritan woman as a sinner but a significant person worthy of his time and effort. His dealing with the woman taken in adultery repudiated the hypocritical sexism of the day. After all, the man she was with was not taken out to be stoned! Just as important, Jesus never taught the subordination of women to men or even wives to husbands. Jesus never denied women the right to speak, to teach, or to exercise authority.⁴²

⁴¹ N. T. Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. 2003. pp. 607 - 608 (italics in original).

⁴² Ferguson argues out that "Jesus described the end of distinctive functions based on sex as abolished in the resurrection, not in the present (Luke 20:34-36)" (Ferguson Christian Chronicle). But Luke writes,

Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection."

[Continued next page]

Regarding the familiar account of Mary and Martha, N. T. Wright comments,⁴³

[F]ar more obvious to any first-century reader, and to many readers in Turkey, the Middle East and many other parts of the world to this day would be the fact that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet *within the male part of the house* rather than being kept in the back rooms with the other women. This, I am pretty sure, is what really bothered Martha; no doubt she was cross at being left to do all the work, but the real problem behind that was that Mary had cut clean across one of the most basic social conventions. It is as though, in today's world, you were to invite me to stay in your house and, when it came to bedtime, I were to put up a camp bed in your bedroom. We have our own clear but unstated rules about whose space is which; so did they. And Mary has just flouted them. *And Jesus declares that she is right to do so.*

She is 'sitting at his feet'; a phrase which doesn't mean what it would mean today, the adoring student gazing up in admiration and love at the wonderful teacher. As is clear from the use of the phrase elsewhere in the NT (for instance, Paul with Gamaliel), to sit at the teacher's feet is a way of saying you are being a *student*, picking up the teacher's wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn't do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself. Like much in the gospels, this story is left cryptic as far as we at least are concerned, but I doubt if any first-century reader would have missed the point.

Less frequently observed are the compliments Jesus paid to women.⁴⁴ The sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears "loved much" (Luke 7:47). The Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter had "great faith" (Mat. 15:27). The widow who gave two very small copper coins "put more into the treasury than all the others" (Mark

Jesus is plainly not discussing "the end of distinctive functions based on sex" but rather, the end of sex. Sex ends, of course, because death is eliminated in the afterlife and there is no further need to propagate the race. Thus, contrary to Ferguson, Jesus does not declare that the sexes will have distinct functions until the resurrection, only that sex itself will end in the resurrection.

⁴³ N. T. Wright, "Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis," a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church' St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004 (italics in original). http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm.

⁴⁴ From a sermon by Buddy Jones at University Church of Christ, Tuscaloosa, Alabama on September 11, 2005.

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12:43). On the other hand, Jesus accused the apostles themselves of being of “little faith” (Mat. 8:26). It was Peter who had to declare his love for Jesus three times after denying Jesus three times. It was a rich young ruler who refused to surrender his wealth for Jesus. Jesus had an extremely high view of women.

Pentecost. Jesus’ inclusion of women among his disciples begins a pattern that is reflected in the conduct of his apostles. Women disciples were with the apostles at the very beginning:

(Acts 1:12-14) Then [the apostles] returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, **along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus**, and with his brothers.

The text is ambiguous as to whether the women were present when the Spirit descended, but clearly Peter understood that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were for women. He quoted the prophet Joel in his sermon that day –

(Acts 2:17-18) 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**, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

The passage emphasizes the equal rights of men and women to the gifts of the Spirit. We know that prophecy is more than predicting the future. It includes “forth telling” as well as “foretelling.” Thus, Joel prophesied that women would have the miraculous power to speak words of encouragement, rebuke, exhortation, and condemnation. The prophets of the Old Testament are still legendary for their ability to so vividly declare the word of God that even kings trembled, and Joel prophesied that the Messianic age would be ushered in with this gift – in women! Thus, it is not surprising that in Acts 21 we read of the four daughters of Philip the evangelist who prophesied or that in 1 Corinthians 11 we read of women prophesying in the presence of men in the assembly. Paul rebukes their failure to cover their heads, but not their prophesying.

It therefore appears probable that women were among those who received the Spirit at Pentecost. After all, the essence of Peter’s argument is that those listening to his sermon were seeing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. And the essence of Joel’s prophecy is that the gift of prophecy will be given to women! Peter could have picked any of numerous other Old Testament prophecies of the Spirit arriving in the age of the

Messiah, but Peter chose as his text the only passage that emphasizes women having the gift of prophecy.

Women and persecution in Acts. N. T. Wright relies on Ken Bailey for this salient observation:⁴⁵

It's interesting that at the crucifixion the women were able to come and go and see what was happening without fear from the authorities. They were not regarded as a threat, and did not expect to be so regarded. Bailey points out that this pattern is repeated to this day in the Middle East; at the height of the troubles in Lebanon, when men on all sides in the factional fighting were either hiding or going about with great caution, the women were free to come and go, to do the shopping, to take children out, and so on. (I think this tells us something as well about the age of the Beloved Disciple, but that's another story.)

But it's then fascinating, by contrast, that when we turn to Acts, and the persecution that arose against the church not least at the time of Stephen, we find that women are being targetted equally alongside the men. Saul of Tarsus was going to Damascus to catch women and men alike and haul them off into prison. Bailey points out on the basis of his cultural parallels that this only makes sense if the women, too, are seen as leaders, influential figures within the community.

Junias. Junias (Junia in the KJV), a feminine name, is described by Paul as outstanding ("of note" (KJV)) among the apostles (Rom. 16:7). Even the early church fathers⁴⁶ (hardly an egalitarian group) considered her to have had an apostolic role.⁴⁷ Certainly she was not one of the Twelve, nor must we conclude that she was of the same order as Paul, and yet her role as an "ambassador"⁴⁸ must have been quite important to earn such a title, especially from Paul, who defended his rights as an apostle vigorously.

⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, "Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis," a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church' St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004. http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm.

⁴⁶ Uninspired Christian leaders from the 1st through 4th centuries, whose writings have been preserved but not as part of scripture.

⁴⁷ James Walters, "Phoebe and Junia(s)," published in Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women 1*, pp. 185-190. Walters is an associate professor of New Testament at Harding University.

⁴⁸ The literal translation of the word normally translated "apostle."

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The Bible also refers to Titus (2 Cor. 8:23),⁴⁹ Andronicus (Rom. 16:7), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25),⁵⁰ James (Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 15:7),⁵¹ and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) as “apostles.”⁵² This is certainly a worthy group, and we must acknowledge the teaching and leadership roles of all the members of this group whom the Bible describes in any detail at all. The title must imply some role analogous to the apostles themselves.⁵³

The notion of a woman being referred to as an apostle by Paul is so foreign to many that two arguments have been offered to avoid the implication of the statement. First, many have suggested that Junias was a man, despite the plainly feminine form of the name.⁵⁴ However, all early Christian writers commenting on the passage considered Junias female, with the first suggestion that Junias was a man not appearing until the late 14th Century.

Second, some suggest that “outstanding among the apostles” means “considered outstanding by the apostles,” thus avoiding the sense that Junias was an apostle. However, scholars are virtually unanimous in interpreting Paul as referring to Junias as an apostle. “This is the way the phrase was understood by all the patristic writers,⁵⁵ by most all modern commentators, and by virtually all English translations.”⁵⁶

John Chrysostom, writing in the late 4th Century, states the view typical of the early Christians –

To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles – just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title apostle.⁵⁷

Phoebe. Phoebe, a woman, is described by Paul as a deacon of the church at Cenchrea (not as a deaconess, the word being masculine).⁵⁸ Some would translate

⁴⁹ The NIV translates “apostles” as “representatives.”

⁵⁰ The NIV translates “apostle” as “messenger”.

⁵¹ This James is the brother of Jesus, not the apostle, and the author of the book of James.

⁵² The translators sometimes obscure these references. For example, the NIV does not consistently translate *apostolos* as “apostle.”

⁵³ Walters, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ In Greek, “-as” is a feminine ending.

⁵⁵ Early Christian writers.

⁵⁶ James Walters, “‘Phoebe’ and ‘Junia(s)’ – Rom. 16:1-2, 7,” in Osburn, *Essays on Woman*, at p. 187.

⁵⁷ Translated by Walters, *ibid.* p. 185.

⁵⁸ Romans 16:1. There was no Greek word for deaconess until many centuries later.

diakonos in this passage as “servant” rather than deacon. This issue will be taken up later when we discuss deacons in particular.

Priscilla. Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila are a familiar pair. Contrary to the customs of the day, the wife is often mentioned first. Of the Bible’s six references to Priscilla, she is mentioned first four times. “Evidently, she was an outstanding person in her own right.”⁵⁹ This would occur in the First Century only if everyone, including the husband, understood that the wife held the more important or prominent position. Moreover, Priscilla is specifically referred to as having taught Apollos – a man.⁶⁰

Other Women. Paul’s many other references to particular women as being among his circle of evangelists and worthy of honor are too numerous to list.

D. Summary

We see that men certainly held most of the leadership roles throughout biblical times. And yet the record plainly contradicts any notion that God prohibits women from leading men, having authority over men, teaching men, or speaking in the presence of men, as we have traditionally interpreted these commands.

Neither the Law of Moses nor Jesus ever commanded women to be submissive to men, except in the sense that we are all to submit to one another or that wives are to be complements to their husbands. If God made an eternal law that women are forever subordinate to men, you would think that Moses or Jesus would have said so plainly.

⁵⁹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Wm. B. Eerdmans. 1978. p. 246.

⁶⁰ Acts 18:26. Priscilla is mentioned first in this passage.

**PART II
HUSBANDS AND WIVES**

CHAPTER V
1 CORINTHIANS 7 – SEX AND THE MARRIED CHRISTIAN

Many good Christians argue from 1 Timothy 2:12⁶¹ that women can have no authority over a man and no wife may have authority over her husband. But Paul explains the relationship of a husband and wife very differently in 1 Corinthians 7:

(1 Cor. 7:1-7) Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.

Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Notice, first, how carefully Paul treats husbands and wives exactly the same.⁶² There is no distinction in this passage. And notice the application of the Genesis 2 principle. While Paul does not explicitly mention Genesis or the Law, what better example is there of the ideal of a husband and wife being one flesh? The wife's body does not belong to her alone, and neither does the husband's body belong to him alone. Each has given up so much of themselves that even their bodies belong to the other!

Does this mean that the wife has authority over the husband? Absolutely! He may not deny her his marital obligation, and she has authority over his body! In the most intimate of biblical passages, there is not a hint of subordination or submission, other than *mutual* submission. This is what "one flesh" means, but we understand rightly that one flesh involves much more than sex. Rather, a mutually submissive sexual relationship must be the product of a mutually submissive relationship at all other levels.

⁶¹ (1 Tim. 2:12 NIV) "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

⁶² We will not consider the rest of chapter 7 in detail, but the remainder of the chapter continues Paul's precise language treating men and women equally.

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The critical points are these. First, Paul goes to great lengths to point out that wives and husbands have an identical duty to the other. The one flesh principle is perfectly symmetric. A duty owed by one is necessarily owed by the other – a concept dramatically contrary to both Jewish and Greek culture of the day. Second, there is no reference to the curse of Eve still being in effect. Men aren't allowed to dominate their wives. Rather, each has the same rights – but without being the same.

CHAPTER VI
1 PETER – CO-HEIRS OF GRACE

We next note 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, a passage very similar to Ephesians 5:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. **Submit yourselves** for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. **Show proper respect to everyone:** Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of

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gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.⁶³

In the next-to-last paragraph, Peter commands wives of non-Christians to be submissive to their husbands. More precisely, wives of non-Christians are to submit in the same way that slaves are to submit to brutal masters. Does God approve masters of slaves beating them or treating them unjustly? Hardly. A command to submit does not mean that the relationship being submitted to is just or sinless. Thus, the command for a wife to submit to her non-Christian husband "so that they may be won over" does not condone dominance of a marriage by the husband.

Peter's allusion to Sarah calling Abraham "master" (Gen. 18:12) doesn't change this conclusion. Sarah and Abraham hardly had an "Ozzie and Harriet" marriage. Recall Sarah's lack of faith in God's promise evidenced by having Abraham father a son by the handmaiden Hagar (Gen. 16:1-4), Sarah's abuse of Hagar after the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16:6), and her laughter at the Lord's promise of a son and her lie in denying it (Gen. 18:10-15). Sarah hardly suits our stereotype of submission.

Peter uses Sarah as an example of how a wife is to live with a *non-Christian* husband. Peter may well have had Abraham's sins against Sarah in mind. He twice allowed his wife to be taken into the harem of a local king (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18) – not the sort of conduct that most women would easily forgive. And where the husband is not a Christian, Sarah's submission to Abraham's at-times outrageous behavior is an appropriate example indeed. When the husband is not a Christian, Peter cannot command him to become united with his wife. Rather, the wife must make do in an unequal relationship, and Peter's counsel is wise and consistent with what has been said before.

But Peter takes a very different tone toward Christian husbands. He doesn't tell them to claim the throne that God gave them in Eden. He urges them to be considerate "in the same way." "In the same way" clearly refers to the command to slaves to submit to their masters, the example of Christ's submissive suffering, and the command to wives to submit to their husbands. Peter's command to husbands is to be submissive. Yield to the

⁶³ NIV.

needs of your wife, he commands. He then says to recognize that your wife is a co-heir of salvation.

The term “co-heirs” is poorly translated in the ESV as “heirs with you.” The term literally refers to two people who each simultaneously inherit the same property from a deceased parent.⁶⁴ The term is one of equality – equal legal rights to the same shared piece of property. It is also a very precise term. 1 Peter is considered to be written in some of the best Greek in the New Testament. The author is noted for his expertise in language. This choice is no mistake. Moreover, we must remember that under the Law of Moses, daughters generally could not inherit from their parents – only sons.⁶⁵ Thus, Peter is declaring a dramatic change – women are heirs of the Kingdom on the same terms as men!

Peter also describes women as the “weaker partner.” Certainly, Peter did not have moral character or intelligence in mind. Clearly, he was referring to the physical distinctions between the sexes. In fact, it has often been the greater size and strength of men that made it possible for men to take such a dominant role in society and in their marriages. Peter says to men, “While your size and strength may allow you to dominate your wife, to do so would be sin. Her weakness compels you to be considerate and to honor her as a fellow, not an inferior.” No other interpretation is fair to the command to treat the wife as a fellow heir of grace.

Peter says that being a co-heir of grace has significance beyond just access to salvation – it affects how we should treat one another. Thus, Peter tells us that mutual submission is a necessary consequence of equal access to salvation.

⁶⁴ “A joint heir, co-inheritor,” Vine’s. *p.* 212.

⁶⁵ Num. 27:1-8. Daughters inherited only if there were no sons.

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CHAPTER VII TITUS 2:3-5 – “BUSY AT HOME”

Paul wrote his letter to Titus at about the same time and under similar circumstances as his letters to Timothy. Titus was a missionary to Crete. Paul also addresses the role of women in this letter:

(Titus 2:3-5 NIV) 3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. 4 Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled and pure, **to be busy at home**, to be kind, and **to be subject to their husbands**, so that no one will malign the word of God.

We first note that the King James Version translates “busy at home” as “keepers at home,” which sounds very much like a command for women to be housekeepers. But even the NIV’s “busy at home” is not entirely accurate. The term really means “to manage the home.”⁶⁶

We should also note that “be subject to” mistranslates the word better translated as “submit” in Ephesians 5 and 6. The command for wives to be submissive to their husbands is no different from the teachings that we’ve already studied in other passages. The wife is to be a suitable complement to her husband.

Moreover, we can’t help but notice the contrast between the translation “busy at home” with Proverbs 31’s teachings of the ideal woman. The ideal woman is not only busy at home but she also buys land and plants a vineyard, produces and sells goods in the marketplace, and is noted for her instruction. Does Paul intend to overrule Proverbs 31? Is he condemning Lydia, the dealer in purple dye whom he converted in Acts 16:14-15?

As is always true in interpreting the scriptures, we must look not only at the commands, but the reasons for the commands. Sometimes these reasons are either not stated or are incompletely stated. In this case, however, the reason is clear – women are to be busy at home “so that no one will malign the word of God.” Plainly, Paul’s concern is not for an eternal rule that women may only be housewives – rather Paul’s concern is for the reputation of the Christian community in First Century Crete. Crete was predominantly Grecian in culture, and as we studied earlier, it would have been considered outlandishly immoral for a married woman in a Grecian community to take on any role other than being busy at home.

⁶⁶ “The word denotes, then, a position of some authority and responsibility. In neither 1 Tim. 5:14 nor Tit. 2:5 are women urged to stay at home, but to supervise their households with discretion and responsibility.” Stanley N. Helton. “Titus 2:5 – Must Women Stay At Home?” Osburn. *Essays on Women I*. p. 376.

We should also note that Paul is concerned for the reputation of such women to those *outside* the church. Paul was not counseling Titus to satisfy the scruples of the church’s membership. How ironic it is that today we are often more concerned with the attitudes of those *within* the church than those that we should be seeking to convert. Given a choice between making our members comfortable and making visitors comfortable, we too often consider only the members’ feelings. But Paul places emphasis on living so that *outsiders* will not “malign the word of God.”

Today, unconverted people (and many of those converted!) consider our traditional treatment of our women members immoral – even wicked. Potential converts are often offended at the notion that some of our churches have men’s business meetings – at which women not only cannot vote, they cannot attend! Similarly, while our refusal to allow women to teach or speak to the congregation may please those within the church, it deeply offends those outside the church, who consider such traditions to be sexist and insulting to women.

We had better be sure that the Bible truly requires us to limit women’s roles, because we deeply injure Christ’s appeal to the unconverted by such practices. We will be accountable for the souls we fail to reach, and I suspect that God will be much more concerned with lost souls than with our obedience to commands never intended to apply to 21st Century America.

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CHAPTER VIII EPHESIANS 5 – MUTUAL SUBMISSION

While this book is primarily concerned with women's roles in the church, we cannot untangle this issue without also delving into the relationship of husbands and wives. After all, the Genesis accounts that we've already studied deal with marriage, not church governance.

Paul's most thorough discussion of the relationship of husbands and wives is found in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Because Paul deals very particularly with the subject, we must begin our New Testament study here.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the **head** of the wife as Christ is the **head** of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise – “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve

wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.⁶⁷

This familiar passage is often taught in our Sunday school classes, most often when marriage is being studied. In fact, I have observed that those teaching this scripture in the context of how to have a good, Christian marriage often interpret it differently from those who are teaching regarding the role of women in the church. Certainly, we must understand it the same way in both contexts.

A. Headship

Before interpreting the passage, we must first come to an understanding of the meaning of “head” in 5:23. In First Century Greek, what might “head” – *kephalē* in the Greek – mean when used figuratively of a person? In the literature on the role of women, the scholars love to debate whether *kephalē* means “ruler” or “leader” or “source.”

After some years of consideration, I’ve concluded that none of these meanings is sufficiently well established that either side can insist on that meaning just from the choice of the word. There are other possibilities in the lexicons. Nor is it even essential that the meaning of a metaphor be found in a dictionary, as Paul is quite capable of creating a new metaphor to suit his purposes.

1. The Septuagint argument

The Septuagint is a translation of the Old Testament into Greek issued in parts from the mid-third century BC to the mid-first century BC or so. Paul typically quotes the Old Testament from the Septuagint (often abbreviated “LXX”), so he was clearly very familiar with its wording. Many of Paul’s Jewish and God-fearing Gentile readers east of Israel would not have known Hebrew, and so, for them, the Septuagint was their scriptures.

The Hebrew word *ro’sh* means both the head of a person and a ruler or leader – as is true of “head” in English. If *kephalē* had the same double meaning in Greek, you’d think the translators of the Septuagint would have chosen *kephalē* as the *customary* translation of *ro’sh*.

⁶⁷ NIV.

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There are 16 places where the Hebrew *ro'sh* is translated *kephalē* and means something like “ruler” or “leader.” However, there are a total of about 180 places in the Septuagint where *ro'sh* means something like ruler or leader.⁶⁸ Of these 180 uses, only 16 use *kephalē*. The rest are generally translated with *archon* or the like, Greek words that mean “ruler” or “leader” but not a person’s head.

Therefore, it’s unlikely that Paul’s readers would have taken *kephalē* to mean “ruler” purely from the word choice. On the other hand, it was certainly possible – just not conventional or typical – for *kephalē* to mean ruler or leader, and Paul would have surely been aware of that usage.

2. The use of *kephalē* as “ruler” or “leader” in other sources

Wayne Grudem has shown that *kephalē* is sometimes used to mean “ruler” or “leader” in non-Biblical Greek sources, particularly the Patristics. He has also convincingly argued that *kephalē* often means “beginning” but virtually never means “source.”⁶⁹ Of course, “beginning” and “source” can be virtual synonyms in some contexts, and Grudem concedes that the meaning “source” is possible in a context where “beginning” can mean “source.” But if “beginning” doesn’t fit, “source” is not to be assumed. Grudem also shows that *kephalē* can mean “life.”⁷⁰

Hence, we seem to see a shifting of the usage of *kephalē*, where it was not routinely used to mean ruler or leader before the New Testament, but that metaphor became much more common afterwards, with the New Testament being written during a transitional period. Indeed, Grudem shows that pre-First Century lexicons do not include “ruler” or “leader” as possible meaning of *kephalē*, whereas lexicons based on the Patristics do.

3. Application to the New Testament

Manifestly, context controls. *Kephalē* did not have one unique metaphorical meaning in the First Century. One cannot presume the meaning of “ruler” but neither can the meaning be excluded as impossible. Moreover, we don’t simply plug in meanings out of a dictionary and pick the one that fits our preferred outcome best.

⁶⁸ Berkeley and Alvera Mickelson. “What Does *Kephalē* Mean in the New Testament?” *Women, Authority & the Bible*. pp. 97-117, cited by Osburn, *Women in the Church*, at 164 and following pages.

⁶⁹ Wayne Grudem. “The Meaning Of *kephalē* (“Head”): An Evaluation Of New Evidence, Real And Alleged,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001) p. 25-65 <http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/kephale.pdf>; and Wayne Grudem, “Does Kefalh (“Head”) Mean “Source” Or “Authority Over” in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* ns 6.1 (Spring 1985): 38-59 http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tj/kephale_grudem.pdf.

⁷⁰ Grudem, *ibid.*, Trinity Journal.

Consider the line from the psalm: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” Go to a dictionary and try to fit the various meanings of “pasture” into the poem to see what “pasture” means in that sentence. *Strong’s Dictionary* says,

a home; fig. a pasture: – habitation, house, pasture, pleasant place

The dictionary that hardly tells you the psalmist is saying. Figurative language just isn’t that mechanical. Context rules.

In short, the meaning of “head” in Ephesians 5 must be determined by context. Its meaning is not limited to its dictionary definition. In fact, Paul frequently coined new metaphors, as is true of any excellent writer.

B. The meaning of *kephalē* in Ephesians

And so, let’s see how Paul uses “head” in context, in Ephesians.

1. Ephesians 1-2

(Eph. 1:20-23 ESV) 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as **head** over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Paul refers to Christ as “head” over everything. But clearly Christ’s relationship with the church, his body, differs from his relationship with “everything.” Christ is head – not *over* the church – but *for* the church. His headship is for a purpose, and that purpose is for the benefit of the church. Moreover, we see the church referred to as Christ’s “body.” Paul then says that the church is the “fullness” of Christ “who fills everything in every way.”

As Peter O’Brien explains,⁷¹

This still leaves the difficulty of how to interpret ‘head’ in relation to the body. Perhaps if Old Testament notions of ‘head’ are combined with Greek medical ideas regarding the function of the head in relation to the body and its members, then the head is to be

⁷¹ Peter T. O’Brien. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Test. Commentary. Eerdmans. 1999. p. 148.

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understood as ‘inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power, the mainspring of its activity, the centre of its unity, and the seat of its life’. Instead of separating Christ from his body, the head is shown to be ‘the cohesive and enabling factor for the body’. Accordingly, ‘Ephesians (and Colossians) highlights the personal presence of a powerful one who strengthens the individual through the concept of Christ as “head”’. This interpretation provides the best explanation for Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19 (‘from it [the head] the whole body grows’) and is also consistent with the thought of the head ‘nourishing’ the body (Eph. 5:19).

The conclusion that Christians are not viewed in this passage as being *under* Christ as a “head” is confirmed by Ephesians 2:6-7:

(Eph. 2:6-7 ESV) 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

First, we are shown a picture of Christ sitting on his throne in heaven at the right hand of God. God “seated him ... in the heavenly realms.” We now read that all Christians are seated *with* Christ in the heavenly realms.

The present tense – as though we are presently on the throne even though we are obviously still here on earth – is only partly proleptic. Prolepsis is a figure of speech in which a future event is considered so certain that the speaker can use the present tense. And that’s part of what Paul intends, I’m sure.

But Paul is also saying that we were baptized *into* Christ. We are now part of his body here on earth, and somehow this gives us a mystical presence with him in heaven. What is true of his body on earth is somehow true of his body in heaven. We sit on his throne with him and therefore are *already* above the powers that he defeated – because he really just has one body, a body that exists on earth through believers and his church, and the same body has a present heavenly existence on the throne. We are both not-yet and already there. (Sorry. This is not easy, but it’s what Paul says.)

So, as this chapter speaks of his quickening us together with Christ, it goes on to say that he raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. In 1:3 the apostle says that God has ‘blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.’ Now he says more specifically that our life has come to be there, enthroned with Christ.

If this is not explicitly stated elsewhere in the Pauline letters, the meaning is implicit in such a passage as Colossians 3:1 – 3.

Humanity, by virtue of Christ's conquest of sin and death and by his exaltation, is lifted 'from the deepest hell to heaven itself' (Calvin). Citizenship is now in heaven (Phil. 3:20); and there, and not under the limits imposed by the world, nor in conformity to its standards (Rom. 12:2), true life is found.⁷²

In this mystical language, the thought is not that Christians (the body) are ruled by Christ (the head). Rather, the thought is that we Christians rule *with* Christ! This is not to say that Christ has no authority over Christians – only that Christ's authority over the church is not the thought contained within the metaphor "head" as used in Ephesians 1.

Thus, the church is pictured, not so much as in subjection to Christ, as an extension of Christ. And being a part of Christ, there is no question of being "under his feet." After all, the church cannot be both under Christ's feet and his body!

In this light, the following otherwise-obscure passage starts to make better sense –

(1 Cor. 6:2-3) Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!

We customarily think of Jesus judging *us* at the end of time. Paul here says that *we'll* be the judges – which only makes sense in light of Paul's metaphor of the church sitting on Christ's throne with him!

However, Jesus, as head, is said "to be *head* over everything for the church." "Over" translates *huper* (over) whereas "for" translates *te* (to). Hence, "head" in this verse has a double meaning. Jesus (head) and church (body) sit on the throne (symbolic of authority) and, together, rule "everything," but the rule of Jesus, as head, is for the benefit of the church, which is also above "everything." The head has two relationships. As to the church, the head is acting for the church. As to all else, it is ruling over his enemies.

2. Ephesians 4

The next occurrence of "head" in Ephesians is in chapter 4 –

(Eph. 4:15-16 ESV) 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way **into him who is the head, into Christ**, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint

⁷² Francis Foulkes. *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. InterVarsity Press. 1989. p. 82.

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with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Once again, Paul refers to Christ as “head” and the church as his body. But we also see the image of the body growing “from him” with the “head” being seen as the source of growth and building up.

We modern folks know that thought and control come from the brain, that is, a part of the head. First Century Greeks thought of thought as coming from the midriff.

Bedale reminds us that the functions of the nervous system were not known to the ancients, who, accordingly, did not view the head as we do (they held that man thinks with the midriff, the *phren*).⁷³

While the ancient Greeks did not have the understanding of anatomy that is familiar to 21st Century readers, it would have been easy enough for a First Century reader to see the “head” as the source of nourishment for the body, and this certainly seems to be Paul’s image. And once again we see the image of the body as the extension of the personality of Christ, with each part doing its own work as part of a single living organism.

In short, just as is stated in 1:21-23, the image is Jesus, as head, acting *for* the church, not *over* the church.

3. Ephesians 5

(Eph. 5:23 ESV) 3 For the husband is the **head** of the wife even as Christ is the **head** of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Which meaning of “head” does Paul have in mind? That the husband has rule over the wife as Christ has rule over his defeated enemies? Or the husband is to be the source of support, nourishment, and growth? Is the husband head “over” the wife or head “for” the wife?

The answer is obvious enough from the fact that Paul specifically says that it’s the relationship of Christ to the church that he is comparing to. Moreover, the prepositions are not *huper* but *te*, which proves the parallel.

The point is further affirmed by verses 29-30, plainly parallel to Eph. 4:15-16 (quoted above) –

⁷³ Leon Morris. *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. ibid.* pp. 151-152.

(Eph. 5:29-30 ESV) 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

Therefore, the notion that *kephalē* means ruler or such like in Eph. 5 misses the context entirely. Rather, Paul is specifically contrasting Christ's two roles – as ruler of over his defeated enemies and as sustainer of the church. Therefore, husbands are to be “heads” of their wives in the sense of being sustainers – the sources of sustenance and of strength.

4. The mystery of Christ and church

(Eph. 5:31-32 ESV) 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

To this point, therefore, we see that Christ has the entire universe under his feet, and that he sits on his heavenly throne as a king, and yet we see the church made a part of the person of Christ himself – not so much ruled as a part of the ruler! The church can hardly be in rebellion to Christ, because it is a part of him. Indeed, the church, as part of Christ, will judge the universe and angels!⁷⁴

Paul declares in Ephesians 5:31-32 that the language of Genesis 2 applies to Christ and the church – they are “united” and “one flesh.” Of course, Paul often speaks of the church as the bride of Christ, as well as the body of Christ. To our way of thinking, these are two different metaphors, but Ephesians 5 indicates that Paul sees them as one – as the bride is “one flesh” with her husband, she is his body. This is the ontological unity of Christ and the church that he pictures in Ephesians and Colossians.

And, of course, this tells us much of the relationship Paul wants for husbands and wives.

5. “Head” as ruler/sustainer

And so, for purposes of Ephesians, I suggest that “head” is a double metaphor. As to the universe, particularly his enemies, and not the church, the head is ruler (not spiritual leader). As to the church, the head is sustainer, the source of growth and nourishment.

⁷⁴ 1 Cor. 6:3.

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It's not a dictionary definition, but it's not far from "life" or "beginning," and Paul offers plenty of explanation in context to make his meaning clear. He is free to coin his own metaphors and doesn't have to consult the dictionary makers to make his point clear if he explains himself.

The church sits on Jesus' throne with him, judging the universe along with him. His rule is with and for the church, not over the church. And this is the sense of his teaching of husbands in Ephesians 5. They are put their wives on the throne with them and act for them, not over them.

C. Digging deeper into Ephesians

We need to dig a little deeper into "head" as Paul uses the word in Ephesians. You see, in Ephesians 5 Paul compares the relationship of husbands with wives to the relationship of Christ with the church. And we routinely misunderstand how Christ and the church relate – and so we get the relationship of husbands and wives wrong, and then we get the role of women in the church wrong. It all begins with a flawed Christology.

So let's look at Ephesians again, but this time we'll focus not just on the "head" passages, but the entire book as it teaches us about how Christ and the church should relate to each other.

(Eph. 1:22-23 ESV) 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Jesus is "head over all things" The NET Bible translators helpfully translate –

(Eph. 1:22 NET) And God put all things under Christ's feet, and he gave him to the church as head over all things.

The two phrases are a Hebraic parallel. That is, "God put all things under Christ's feet" parallels "gave him to the church as head over all things." Paul is repeating his image from Ephesians 1, where he pictures Christ on his heavenly throne, with all rule, dominion, power, authority, and rule under his feet, and with the church seated on the throne with Christ, as his body.

"Head" certainly refers to authority, but the emphasis is on Christ's authority over all who opposed him for the sake of the church. That doesn't mean that Jesus isn't Lord over the church – he is! – but Paul is making a different point.

Obviously enough, if Jesus has been placed over all rule, dominion, power, and authority, his reign must be contrasted with the reign of those defeated by God and placed under his feet. The point isn't just that Jesus has greater rule, dominion, power, and authority, but that *the cross defeats its antitypes, that submission and service overcome worldly power.*

1. Unity with God and Christ

In Ephesians, we're repeatedly told to imitate Christ, so that we might enjoy a spiritual unity with Christ.

(Eph. 4:13 ESV) 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

The goal is unity and knowledge of Christ, maturity that allows us to become like Christ – in full measure.

(Eph. 4:15-16 ESV) 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

We are to “grow up ... into him who is the head, into Christ ... [who] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” We are to become more united with Christ, the head, as Christ builds up and nourishes his body.

(Eph. 4:20-24 ESV) 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ! – 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

We are to “put on the new self” that has been “created after the likeness of God” (a reference to Genesis 1:26-28), so that we are like the true righteousness and holiness of God himself.

(Eph. 4:30-32 ESV) 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

We are to forgive us as Jesus forgave us. We are to become like Jesus.

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(Eph. 5:1-2 ESV) Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.
2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

We should imitate God, just as earthly children imitate their earthly fathers. And *we are to imitate Christ – by becoming like him in his sacrifice to God.*

We become like God by becoming like Jesus by learning to sacrifice ourselves as Jesus sacrificed himself. That is, *Jesus most truly reveals the nature of God in his self-sacrifice*, and in this respect, we are to imitate him.

(Eph. 5:18-21 ESV) 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

We should allow God's Spirit to fill us. If we do this, the Spirit will produce in us singing, thanksgiving, and submission – because it is the nature of Christ to submit and to acknowledge God's gifts in all things.

(Eph. 5:25-27 ESV) 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Christ's purpose is to present the church to himself as his bride in splendor – a splendor acquired by Jesus' sacrifice for her, so that she might be holy. The bride of Christ gains her holiness by the cross.

(Eph. 5:28-30 ESV) 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

The church is the very body of Christ, beloved by Christ as his bride, and so he nourishes and cherishes the church.

(Eph. 6:5-8 ESV) 5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of

Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

We are to obey Christ from the heart, rendering service in good will, because we know that Christ rewards those who do good.

2. Submission

Is there submission in our relationship with Christ? Well, yes, there is. But it is not a relationship of power built on fear or punishment. Rather, it's about being transformed to become like Jesus. It's not merely obedience, but being changed to be united with him. As we imitate God and follow the example of Jesus, they strengthen and empower us by the Spirit, who fills us and empowers us.

Nothing could be more unlike earthly power relationships. It's not about getting my way but having my way conformed to the way of God. It's not about being *under* power, authority, dominion, and rule, but *defeating* those things by the cross and grace.

Therefore, whether we are discussing Ephesians or 1 Corinthians 11, when we are told that Jesus is the “head,” the point is never merely that he is king and we are his servants. It is that *he is the ultimate Servant, and we follow him as servants*.

But it's also that he is King and that we follow him as kings.

3. Kings

While the idea of being on the throne with Jesus seems strangely foreign to modern Christians, it was an important theme for First Century Jews – who knew their scriptures better than we often do.

Paul had already introduced the idea in 1 Corinthians –

(1 Cor. 6:2-3 ESV) 2 Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

Remember that in the ancient world the king was also a judge. That's why we read of the greatness of Solomon in terms of his wise rulings as judge.

Paul is likely referring back to –

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(Dan. 7:21-22 ESV) 21 As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came, and **judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.**

But there seems to be an inconsistency between –

(Dan. 7:13-14 ESV) 13 “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven **there came one like a son of man**, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 **And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him**; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

– and –

(Dan. 7:27 ESV) 27 And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

Dominion is given *both* to the “one like a son man” – Jesus – and to the people of the saints of the Most High. Both Christ and Christians. *Both* have dominion – the rule of kings.

This parallels,

(Gen. 1:26-28 ESV) 26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

God created man – male and female – to “have dominion ... over all the earth.”

This passage is echoed in Psalm 8 –

(Psa. 8:3-4 ESV) 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what

is **man** that you are mindful of him, and **the son of man** that you care for him?

(Psa. 8:6-8 ESV) 6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; **you have put all things under his feet**, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

But Paul finds a double meaning in this passage. While at first glance it seems to be speaking of humanity, Paul interprets this passage in terms of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15. Notice the parallel –

(1 Cor. 15:27-28 ESV) 27 For **“God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”** But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

While Psalm 8 is plainly a reflection on the creation of mankind in Genesis 1, Paul takes it to speak of Jesus as well. This is not ignorance, but a deep understanding that there is a spiritual unity of the saints – re-created to be restored into the image of God – and Christ – who is the very image of God.

Again, dominion is given by God to *both* Christ and Christians, culminating in –

(Rev. 22:3-5 ESV) 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and **his servants will worship him**. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and **they will reign forever and ever**.

God’s servants “will reign forever and ever” in the new heavens and new earth, where God and the Lamb sit on the throne of God. As explained by Mounce in the New International Commentary series⁷⁵ –

⁷⁵ Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997. p. 401.

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This will take place when the children of God are brought into the glorious future prepared for them (Rom. 8:19 – 21). Although sin has marred the history of the human race, God has, through the redemption wrought by his Son, set into motion a new humanity. In the present age he rules the hearts of all who have turned to him in faith: in the age to come that reign will find its full completion. Sin will be forever removed and the design of Eden will be totally realized.

And so in Ephesians, Paul places the church on the throne with Christ as the body of Christ.

(Eph. 1:20-23 ESV) 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and **gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body**, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This passage is plainly built on the preceding passages. And so, it's no surprise to read –

(Eph. 2:6-7 ESV) 6 [God] raised us up with him and **seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This is a truly astonishing declaration, especially when we see that Paul is referring to –

(Psa. 110:1 ESV) The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

God seats Jesus above his enemies, and then he seats us with him! And this is the nature of the headship of Jesus with regard to the church.

Does this mean Jesus isn't Lord of the church? Of course, not. But the point Paul is making is that the church is to be so conformed to the will of Jesus that a unity is created, allowing the transformed church to rule as a part of Jesus.

The language is proleptic, that is, Paul speaks of the future as though it were present – because the future is assured, having been prophesied by Daniel and the Psalms. God will certainly bring it to reality.

Thus, Paul looks forward to the day when the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17 is realized, the church is transformed by the Spirit to will and to do the will of God, and the church becomes truly the body of Christ – united with its Head on the throne of heaven, judging angels and reigning over the new heavens and new earth. Man – male and female – will finally be restored to their purpose given in Genesis 1:26-28, to have dominion over the creation.

4. *Theosis*

A closely related scriptural teaching is the unity of mankind – male and female – with God. It's rarely taught by Catholics or Protestants, but it's a major theme of Orthodox Christianity – because it's part of the scriptures.

(Joh. 17:20-23 ESV) 20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, **that they also may be in us**, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 **I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one**, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

Jesus prays “that they also may be in us” as “you, Father, are in me, and I in you.” It's not just “that they may all be one” but also that they may be one *while in Jesus and God*. Jesus prays that his followers that “they may be one even as we are one.” He is praying for what we might call horizontal unity. But then he also prays, “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.”

To be perfectly one, the unity must include having Jesus “in” his followers, and God in Jesus. It's more than horizontal unity. It's the church in Jesus and Jesus in the church. It's the unity of the church with its Savior, of the body with its Head, of the bride with her Husband.

It's the same message found in such passages as –

(Mat. 5:44-48 ESV) 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 **You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

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For us to be like God – to be perfect as God is perfect – we must also love both the just and unjust, the evil and the good. And this is not so much about a command as a transformation into unity. To be one with God, we must become like God.

It's not a new teaching –

(Lev. 19:1-2 ESV) And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, **You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.**”

We were created in the image and likeness of God. We sinned and so fell from Eden. And beginning with Abraham, God has been at work to restore us to image and likeness of God.

By the Law of Moses, God's people were commanded to become like him. But in Christ, the Spirit provides the transformation –

(2 Cor. 3:17-18 ESV) 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being **transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.** For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

(Rom. 8:29 ESV) 29 For those whom he foreknew **he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

(2 Cor. 4:4-6 ESV) 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, **to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** 5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 **For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**

In short, the goal of the grand narrative of all of scripture is for God's children to be restored to his image. Jesus is the perfect representation of God's image. And so our goal is to become like Jesus.

But it's not about mere obedience or mere example following. It's about God's work within us to transform us into the image of God. And this leads toward unity – with each other and with God himself.

5. Hierarchy

I know I've wandered far afield, but it's necessary. You see, we have a tendency to revert to our childhood understanding when we take a text out of context – the context of all of scripture. And so it's easy to imagine that “head” requires a hierarchical relationship of power and dominance, even though the rest of scripture points us in the opposite direction. We have to remember the big lessons before we start inserting our preconceptions into the text.

6. Image

And we have to cover one more essential truth before we return to “head.” What is the image of God? What does God really look like? If we were to be restored to his image, what would that be like?

We've already covered some of the key verses. For example,

(Eph. 5:1-2 ESV) Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.
2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

To imitate God is to become a sacrifice as Jesus is a sacrifice.

(Joh. 13:34 ESV) 34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

Again, we love as Jesus loved – meaning all the way to the cross.

(1 Joh. 3:16-18 ESV) 16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Again, we are called to sacrifice, emulating Jesus on the cross.

(Mat. 20:26-28 ESV) 26 “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Just so, as we emulate the sacrifice of Jesus, we do so through service for others.

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(1 Pet. 2:18-24 NASB) 18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. ... 21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Peter teaches servants to be submissive to their earthly masters because Jesus, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, submissively suffered so that we might “live to righteousness.”

In short, the essence of Christian living is not obeying an arbitrary list of rules that test our faith; it’s sacrifice, service, submission, and even suffering as we follow the example of Jesus, as we are transformed into his image, as we become perfect as God is perfect, as we become united with each other and with God.

To be united with each other, we must learn submission. To be united with God, we must learn submission. And we learn submission because we’re taught by the Spirit.

(Heb. 2:10 ESV) 10 For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

(Heb. 5:7-9 ESV) 7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him

Should we submit to Jesus? Of course. *Why? Because he is submissive.* He submitted to God but also to us. His sacrifice defined his ministry and purpose on earth. *We don’t just follow his example; we reciprocate his service and submission and suffering on our behalves.* We obey because he obeyed. We serve because he served. We submit because he submitted – not just to God but to us.

7. Reconciling theosis with Lordship

Our instinctive response to this teaching is that it makes no sense because it contradicts the Lordship of Jesus. After all, if we are to submit to Jesus as Lord, how can

we be united with him? How can we live in a relationship of mutual submission? Surely, as between us and Jesus, Jesus is in every way our Lord and Master!

Think of it like parent and child. I have four sons, and they are all adults now. And as they've grown older and matured, our relationship has changed. A lot. When they were babies, I was an absolute autocrat. I didn't ask their opinion or want their opinion – and we often disagreed. But I still wasn't going to let them play in traffic or stick their tongues into electric outlets.

When they grew a little older, they could express their feelings, and we'd sometimes talk about why I made a decision. It wasn't necessary that they understand me for them to have to obey – but it helped. I wanted them to understand so that they'd learn to make decisions for themselves – and so I often (not always) explained why I made the rule I made.

But even into their teenage years, sometimes I imposed my will by virtue of controlling the car keys and video game minutes. We'd discuss the rules, and I'd listen to their opinions, but it was ultimately my call (along with my wife, of course).

As adults, I no longer make rules for them, and yet they obey the rules I taught them when they were children – because they've internalized not just the rules but the reasons behind the rules. They don't want to tie in traffic or to be electrocuted by a wall outlet – and they require no teaching or persuasion. They've become a lot like me, and so the principles they've internalized govern them far more than I do.

In our walk with God as Christians, he gives us his Spirit to shape our hearts and transform us to become like Jesus. And so –

(Gal 5:16-18 ESV) But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

As Christians, we can so yield to the Spirit that the law is no longer needed to guide us. We are, rather, led by the Spirit and so need no law. In other words, our consciences and habits and desires have become so trained that we take pleasure in and find joy in serving, submitting, sacrificing, and even suffering for the sake of Jesus.

(Rom 8:13-14 ESV) ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

The Spirit helps us “put to death the deeds of the body” – sin! – and leads us, and because we're led by the Spirit, we're sons of God.

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In short, as we grow and mature in Christ, equipped and empowered by the Spirit, we are less and less subject to external laws and more and more simply doing what our new nature finds joy in doing – serving God.

Jesus submits to us in that he came to earth as a human, suffered as a human, submitted as a human, and learned obedience (Heb. 5:8) so is now able to teach us obedience through the Spirit. As we obey, we emulate Jesus and so become more like him – and so become more united with him.

But it's the obedience of fear which does this. When we obey out of fear, we are seeking our own good, not the good of Jesus. No, but as we learn to love Jesus and serve him out of love, not by compulsion or fear but due to our passion to honor our Lord, we become like him.

In short, the contrast between serving in a hierarchy and growing into Jesus as head and being joined with the ligaments of love and mutual submission is the contrast between the babe in Christ and the mature in Christ. And it's not so much that rules go away as they become unnecessary – guardians and guideposts to something better, which is being so close to Jesus that we want what he wants. And then we can be truly united with him.

D. Conclusions

To be united with God, we must become like God. To be united with each other, we must become like God. To become like God is to become like Jesus. And Jesus is defined by his service, his sacrifice, his submission, and his suffering on behalf of his followers.

Thus, Jesus is not like an earthly king. He rules through submission and service. He compels obedience by obeying. He is above dominion and power and rule and authority, but he does not partake of such things. He *defeats* the powers, dominion, rule, and authority through his sacrifice.

(Col. 2:13-15 ESV) ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

He disarmed, shamed, and triumphed over the rulers and authority by the cross. His resurrection demonstrated that their powers are not powerful at all.

And we rule with Jesus on the throne because Jesus' reign is a different kind of reign. It's not about power but transformation through the Spirit, about setting things right, and the cross – sacrifice and self-giving as a means to victory.

Therefore, when we serve, sacrifice, submit, and suffer, we become not only like Jesus, but we show ourselves worthy to sit on the throne, to have dominion, to be perfect as God is perfect. God happily shares heaven with those who give of themselves for others for the sake of Jesus.

Kingship in the Kingdom is not about getting your way or asserting power over others, but servanthood.

(2 Cor. 12:8-9 ESV) 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

And this makes sense of such passages as –

(Gal. 2:20 NET) 20 I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

"Crucified" in v. 20 is literally "co-crucified." I have been co-crucified with Christ, and so I've become like Christ – and he is now living in and through me. Because Jesus was faithful, I am faithful.

It's not just about being forgiven or going to heaven when we die. It's about being fixed, our brokenness being repaired, our hearts being softened, about being changed to be worthy of the throne of the universe – by becoming like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

And these teachings define our relationship with God and Jesus – whether we're studying Pauline theology or Jesus or Christology or the role of women.

CHAPTER IX SUMMARY

Thus far, while there is a great deal more to consider, we have laid a foundation and built the scaffolding for our study of the role of women in the church. When we get to the church itself, we must remember that the passages that cause such controversy must be consistent with the other passages that deal with closely related issues. Genesis 1, 2, and 3 say the same thing whether we are discussing marriage or deacons.

Genesis 2 describes the perfect marriage. Genesis 3 describes what sin does to a marriage.

1 Corinthians 7 describes the relationship of men and women, how husbands and wives as Christians are to act when not limited by cultural restraints. There are no cultural limitations in the bedroom – only equality!

In 1 Peter 3 we see that the sinfulness of the world, where the curse of Eve still prevails, can sometimes place restraints on Christians who are freed from the power of the curse. Women married to non-Christians must contend with the fact that their husbands are not subject to the command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 start with the Genesis 3 concept of marriage and correct it by calling men into a Genesis 2 relationship with their wives. This is why Ephesians 5 spends much more time instructing men than women. It is the men who most need to change!

And we've spent a lot of time in Ephesians to learn about God intended relationship between the church and Jesus. After all, when we seek to define what it means for Jesus to be "head" of the church, we can't just borrow "ruler" from the English idiom. In fact, this is quite the opposite of the intended meaning.

Again, Peter T. O'Brien sees this very clearly⁷⁶ –

Instead of separating Christ from his body, **the head is shown to be 'the cohesive and enabling factor for the body'**. Accordingly, 'Ephesians (and Colossians) highlights **the personal presence of a powerful one who strengthens** the individual through the concept of Christ as "head". This interpretation provides the best explanation for Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19 ('from it [the

⁷⁶ Peter T. O'Brien. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar NT Commentary; Accordance electronic ed. Eerdmans. 1999. p. 148.

head] the whole body grows') and is also consistent with the thought of the head 'nourishing' the body (Eph. 5:19).

Francis Foulkes explains it this way⁷⁷ –

There is given to the church, and for the church's benefit, a head who is also head over all things. **The church has authority and power to overcome all opposition because her leader and head is Lord of all.** Jesus himself had authority because he was under the Father's authority; he was doing his will and therefore had all the authority of God (see Matt. 8:9 – 10; 11:27; John 17:2). **Such authority he passes on to his disciples, in as much as they go out in his name, in obedience to him, and to do his work** (Matt. 28:18 – 20; Mark 3:14 – 15; John 20:21 – 23).

Jesus is head of the church in this sense, whether we're considering Ephesians 1:22 or marriage or the role of women in church. *As between Jesus and his church, it's not about dominion, power, and control. Therefore, because the relationship of husbands and wives is like the relationship of Jesus and the church, neither is the relationship of husbands to their wives. Rather, the relationship is about enabling, strengthening, and empowering.*

⁷⁷ Francis Foulkes. *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale NT Commentary 10. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. InterVarsity Press. 1989. p. 73.

**PART III
WOMEN IN THE ASSEMBLY**

CHAPTER X

1 CORINTHIANS 11 – THE HEAD OF THE WOMAN IS THE MAN

The first part of 1 Corinthians 11, dealing with veils, hair length, and such, is a puzzlement. No, “puzzlement” is not strong enough. This chapter is a *consternation*. Commentator after commentator throws up his hands in frustration at trying to reach a clear sense of Paul’s meaning. Our respect for inspiration and the brilliant Paul is too great to even imagine that Paul was unclear to his readers in Corinth, but today the chapter is indeed very challenging – and it’s challenging to those who take any position on the women’s issues. It is not made hard by my view of things. It’s just hard.

(1Co 11:2-16 ESV) Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

6 For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.

8 For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.

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A. Background

Corinth was a Roman city built in Greece. When Rome began expanding eastward, toward Greece, the Grecian cities formed an alliance to resist Roman aggression. And so, to demonstrate the futility of resistance, Rome conquered Corinth and burned it to the ground.

Many years later, Rome re-founded Corinth as a Roman colony populated by retired Roman soldiers. Their pensions included a land grant because Rome liked to place retired soldiers throughout the Empire to help remind people who is in charge.

Because of Corinth's location on a land bridge to the Peloponnesian Peninsula with harbors on both sides of Greece, it quickly became a wealthy city. Greeks, Jews, and many others moved there to build businesses and make a living.

Greek was the language of commerce and literature, but Latin was often heard on the streets. Some of the Jews may have spoken Aramaic at home, but the language of commerce was Greek and their scriptures were the Septuagint – the Old Testament translated into Greek.

B. Veils

In a recent book, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities*,⁷⁸ Bruce Winter explains that the veil was a sign of modesty among Romans, the founders of Corinth.

The veil was the most symbolic feature of the bride's dress in Roman culture. Plutarch indicated that 'veiling the bride' was, in effect, the marriage ceremony. Other writers in the early Empire confirm that the bride's veil was an essential part of her apparel.⁷⁹

By deliberately removing her veil while playing a significant role of praying and prophesying in the activities of Christian worship, the Christian wife was knowingly flouting the Roman legal convention that epitomized marriage. It would have been self-evident to the Corinthians that in so doing she was sending a particular signal to those gathered (11:13).

It is also clear from the comments that, if she wished to appear as an adulterous married woman, she should bear the full consequences of the shame associated with that, i.e., have her hair

⁷⁸ Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. 2003.

⁷⁹ p. 78.

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cropped or shaved off (11:6). From the text it appears that she was not only indifferent to looking disreputable by first-century standards but, by deliberately removing the marriage veil, she was being contentious – as were the men in the Christian gathering (11:4, 16).

If, according to Roman law, she was what she wore, or in this case, what she removed from her head, then this gesture made a statement in support of the mores of some of her secular sisters, the new wives, who sought to ridicule the much-prized virtue of modesty which epitomized the married woman.⁸⁰

In short, the absence of a veil would have been seen as immodest for a married woman. However, single women did not cover their hair. But when a Roman woman married, the marriage ceremony included the veiling of her hair – a sign that only her husband would be permitted to enjoy the sight of her uncovered head from then on.

Jewish mores were similar, but it's likely that Greek culture did not expect married women to wear a veil. And so, in a cosmopolitan city filled with a wide range of cultures, which culture gets to have its way? Well, what does love require?

C. Hats?

Plainly, there is nothing here about wearing hats or a bit of lace on a woman's head. The purpose of the veil was to cover the married woman's *hair*, as a matter of modesty. It wasn't submission so much as modesty – but for a married woman, a refusal to be modest would, of course, be an insult to her husband.

As La Follette observed, wives 'depicted on tombstones are most typically in the pose called *pudicitia* (modesty), in which they have the mantle (*palla*, i.e., the veil) up over their heads, holding part of it in front of their faces.' Therefore, it can be confidently concluded that the veiled head was the symbol of the modesty and chastity expected of a married woman.⁸¹

Plainly, modern hats and other Western head coverings have nothing to do with modesty or with submission to husbands.

⁸⁰ p. 96.

⁸¹ pp. 79-80.

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D. Shaved heads

Dio Chrysostom ... recorded that Medea's own daughter became an adulteress and had her hair cut off according to the law. It is clear that part of the punishment for adultery was cutting off the offender's hair.⁸²

For a woman to have her head shaved was a shame – a mark of adultery as well as the removal of one of her most attractive features, to make her less tempting to men.

E. Husband or man? Wife or woman?

So we see that Paul is not announcing a law from God's handbook of how to do church. Rather, he is insisting that Christian wives – not women generally – must adhere to societal norms so that they don't bring shame to themselves, to their husbands, or to the church.

And this helps solve a translation difficulty. The Greek words *anēr* (husband or man) and *gunē* (wife or woman) are completely ambiguous, and so whether a spouse is in mind has to be taken from context. And Winter's research demonstrates that we should prefer "husband" and "wife" in this passage.

If Paul is referring to spouses, rather than men and women generally, we can expect him to use Genesis 2 as his standard of conduct, just as he did in 1 Corinthians 6:15-18 and 7:3-4. After all, except in Genesis 2, the Torah says very little about marriage, husbands, and wives and nothing about any requirement for women in general to submit to men in general.

F. Prophecy and prayer

Plainly, the wives in the Corinthian church were speaking in the assembly. They were praying and prophesying. While we can easily imagine a silent prayer, silent prophecy is quite impossible.

To avoid this result, some commentators argue that this was not the worship assembly but some other event. And yet this passage is immediately followed by a discussion of the Lord's Supper, grammatically linked to the passage on women:

(1 Cor. 11:2 ESV) 2 Now **I commend you** because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ... [Discussion of what wives should wear while praying and prophesying.]

⁸² pp. 82-83.

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(1 Cor. 11:17 ESV) 17 But in the following instructions **I do not commend you**, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. [Discussion of the Lord's Supper].

Paul plainly links the two passages, and indeed continues to discuss the assembly until the end of chapter 14. In fact, we see in chapter 14 Paul drawing conclusions from chapters 12 and 13 about how to engage in prophecy, prayer, and tongues in the assembly. He brings up his lessons on the church as a body and on love as the greatest gift to teach the Corinthians how to conduct themselves in the assembly.

There is no evidence in the scriptures or in early Christian writings that the early church engaged in separate meetings just for the display of spiritual gifts. There are Pentecostal congregations that do that today, but this was not First Century practice. And chapter 14 plainly shows that Paul is discussing the same assembly in that chapter as he is discussing in chapter 11.

The women were praying and prophesying in the Christian assembly and in the presence of men. After all, if men weren't there, there'd be no need to wear veils!

Prophets. The role of prophet in the early church was one of authority. After all, prophetic speech was inspired by God! Thus, we read –

(Eph. 4:11-12 ESV) 11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ...

We would consider apostles, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers as all having some measure of authority. Indeed, many congregations deny to women all of these roles for that reason, and yet in 1 Corinthians 11, we have women prophets speaking in the assembly, in the presence of men – and Paul lists prophets as second only to apostles in 1 Corinthians 12 –

(1 Cor. 12:27-28 ESV) 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

– in the same multi-chapter discussion of the assembly. And many consider the reference to “administrating” a reference to elders. The root word refers to a helmsman or pilot of a boat – someone who steers the vessel. And yet these pilots of the church are secondary to prophets.

Hence, it's really hard to argue with a straight face that women may not have authority in the church or that they must be silent. They spoke in the assembly to “build

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up the church” (1 Cor. 14:4). (When we get to chapter 14, we’ll consider how to reconcile this teaching with 1 Corinthians 14:34: “the women should keep silent in the churches.”)

We can’t just wish away chapter 11. Paul shows no signs of discomfort with the fact that the women prophesied in church. And then in the next chapter, he declares prophets second only to the apostles. And then in chapter 14 he encourages the use of prophecy in the assembly (vv. 1-5). It’s not until the end of chapter 14 that he expresses concerns about the silence of women. But we’re not yet to chapter 14.

G. The translation of *anēr* and *gunē*.

Notice that the ESV translates *anēr* as “husband” and *gunē* as “wife,” contrary to the NIV. This is for a couple of reasons. First, as pointed out earlier, the subject of the passage is veils, and only wives were expected to wear a veil.

Second, there is nothing in the Old Testament or in the sayings of Jesus that suggests that women, as a group, are required to submit to the headship of men as a group. If that is Paul’s intended teaching, he is announcing an entirely new rule found nowhere else – and yet up to this point, Paul has always based his teachings in 1 Corinthians on the gospel or on scripture – never on just announcing a new rule without explanation.

On the other hand, Genesis 2 teaches that Eve, as wife, is created as the “suitable helper” for Adam, her husband. This does not indicate inferiority, as the Hebrew word, *‘ezer*, is usually used of God as Israel’s helper. In English, “helper” often indicates inferiority or subordinate status, but this is just not the case in Hebrew.

If this is what Paul has in mind, then he can say, based on scripture, that husbands are the “heads” of their wives, in that wives are created by God as suitable helpers – complements – to their husbands. Therefore, they may not bring them shame – such as by refusing to wear their veils in a culture where this is not only immodest but a virtual invitation to adultery! It goes against a duty owed by wives to their husbands from the beginning.

As Paul had earlier written,

(1 Cor. 6:15-16 ESV) 15 Do you not know that **your bodies are members of Christ?** Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? **For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”**

We are married to Christ, and therefore a member of his body (not “member” like on a roll sheet but “member” like an arm or a leg). When we have sex with a prostitute, we are joining the body of Christ to her – making Christ one flesh with a prostitute. The unity is more than a momentary physical connection. It’s a profaning of the sacred.

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(Gen. 3:25 ESV) ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

The relationship of husband and wife is one of purity and seeing beyond the mere physical. It's not that Adam and Eve had perfect, newly made bodies and so looked good, but that they'd become a unity and therefore had no shame at each other's appearance – whether 20 years old or 90.

And so, Adam is the head of the wife, not merely the source from which she originated, but part of the same unity. Just as Jesus is the head of the church, which is his body, Adam is the head of the unity which is marriage, and of which Eve is the body. They are one.

H. Headship in 1 Corinthians 11

So, finally, we get to 1 Corinthians 11 – but having spent so much effort understanding Ephesians, hopefully with a rich, full understanding of Jesus and our relationship to him in mind.

(1 Cor. 11:3 ESV) ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

As tempting as it is to see this passage in terms of power, dominion, and control, it won't work. After all, we've shown in the discussion regarding "head" in Ephesians earlier that "head" is more about support, encouragement, nourishment, and sustaining the body.

God sustains Christ. Christ sustains husbands. Husbands sustain their wives.

1. Christ and God

Before Jesus came to earth, he was equal with God –

(Phi 2:5-7 ESV) ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, **did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped**, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

While Jesus was certainly in submission to God while on earth, but having now returned to heaven, he has "all authority" (Matt.28:19).

(1Co 15:27-28 ESV) ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection,"

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it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Paul describes Jesus as being subjected to God at the end of the age – future tense! Until then, Jesus is co-regent with God, sharing the throne of heaven.

2. Christ and Man

Just so, when God created the heavens and the earth, he did so through the Christ.⁸³ Thus, Adam and Eve were made in the “image” and “likeness” of God by the hand of Christ – who shared his glory with mankind.

And when God made Eve, he made her from the flesh of Adam – which was at the time uncorrupted and somehow in the image of God. Adam granted to Eve his own share of God’s image.

Thus, Eve not only derives her flesh from Adam, but also her place as God’s own image. And she owes to her husband an obligation to be a suitable helper.

(Eph. 5:22 ESV) 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

As Paul explains in Ephesians 5, the wife’s obligation to her husband does not mean the husband has no reciprocal obligation. Rather, while Paul finds the role of wives in their prototype, Eve, he finds the role of husbands in their prototype, Jesus, as the husband of the church (and from the Old Testament, the Lord as husband of Israel⁸⁴).

(Eph. 5:23 ESV) 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Paul immediately balances v. 22 by declaring the husband like Christ. We live in a world built on power structures and hierarchy, and so we read our experience and our fears into the text, but Paul is quite precise regarding what he means.

(Eph. 5:24 ESV) 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Wives must submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. How, then, does the church submit to Christ? Well, in Ephesians, by being his body, by being in

⁸³ Joh. 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6.

⁸⁴ E.g., Isa. 54:4-8; Jer. 31:3-32; Hos. 2, as well as the countless references to Israel’s and Judah’s idolatry as “adultery.”

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unity with him, by sitting on the throne of heaven with him, by imitating him, by following him, by seeking to be just like him in his service, submission, sacrifice, and suffering. By following him to our own crosses. By being crucified with him.

Did we forget that?? It's not about power. It's about becoming like Jesus with the help of the Spirit, the Helper. We submit to Jesus by becoming like Jesus in his submission.

3. Husbands

Christ is like God. Husbands are like Christ. And the role of husbands is –

(Eph. 5:25-27 ESV) 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Really? Yes, the role of husbands is to give themselves up for their wives. It's to present their brides to God as holy, with splendor received from God. "Present" is the language of sacrifice, and so we give our wives over to God. *It's not about control but surrender.*

The sacrifice of Christ would have meant nothing had it not been voluntary. Our obedience to Christ must also be voluntary – desired not resented – because it's not truly obedience unless it's what we want. Just so, a wife's submission cannot be compelled or it's not truly submission. Submission must be desired because, just as we submit to Christ because he has submitted to us, the husband follows the example of Christ in submission.

(Eph. 5:28-6:1 ESV) 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Notice how much more Paul has to say to husbands! They should treat wives "as their own bodies." As "himself"! He should nourish his wife just as he nourishes himself. And he should cherish her just as he cherishes himself. As commanded by Moses, he should "hold fast to his wife" and be in unity with her.

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Paul seems to blush a bit in v. 32 when he compares the relationship of Christ and his church to the “one flesh” relationship of a husband and wife, but both are unity relationships.

Thus, the husband must love the wife as himself, and she must respect her husband. She is to be his suitable helper – a support and an encouragement, and he must not prefer himself to her.

In Genesis 1 and 2, men and women are both made in the image of God, both are made in the likeness of God, and they are made out of the same flesh – utterly literally. The text is all about equality, with Eve completing what was lacking in Adam as a complement, co-heir, and like being – not as someone to be under his power. Rather, both male and female were given dominion over the Creation together.

4. Back to “head”

So is there a hierarchy? Well, not a worldly hierarchy built on worldly principles. It’s not about power or control. That’s just not the nature of the relationships that Paul is discussing. And when we read hierarchy into these relationships, we are ignoring many of the deepest teachings in scripture.

The scriptures point us toward unity, toward the giving up of ourselves for others, toward becoming like God so we can become one with God – meaning that we, like God, do good for the just and the unjust. Nothing could be further from dominance, control, and compelling obedience by virtue of a power structure to which all must submit.

So am I entirely sure how to translate “head”? Well, no, but it’s the nature of figurative language that it doesn’t always translate so well – even when the message itself is fairly clear.

When David tells us that God makes us lie down in “green pastures,” I don’t have to be able to replace “green pastures” with something more literal to understand his point. His point is clear enough from the image itself. Indeed, the reason we so often speak in metaphor is that the image often communicates the idea better than any effort at literalness.

If I’m your head, then you’re my body. And that makes us united and in relationship – so closely tied that we cannot go our separate ways. Indeed, if we don’t work together, we won’t work well at all. That much is very plain. In fact, one godly goal is for us to grow ever closer, to Christ, to our spouses.

The human head is the source of the body’s nourishment. Wives grow closer to their husbands, more united, as he nourishes and cherishes her – just as Jesus nourishes and cherishes the church so that he and the church may grow more and more united.

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So “head” means “head.” Really. It’s a metaphor but a metaphor defined by the relationships of God, Christ, husbands, and wives that is a relationship of mutual submission leading toward unity, not hierarchy.

Thus, my literal head is a unity with my body. Without my head, my body dies. Without my body, my head dies.

But Eve received God’s image from Adam (by being made from his flesh), Adam received God’s image from Christ, the immediate Creator, and Christ received God’s image from God. The relationship is not about power but about being in God’s image. The head is the part that we look at, by which we identify who someone is. It’s our image. Indeed, the Greek for “image” is *eikon*, which is also the word for a portrait.

I. A Fresh Translation

So let’s take a stab at a fresh translation in light of what we’ve considered.

(1 Cor. 11:3-16 ESV) 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every [husband] is Christ [because he receives God’s image from the Christ and is united with the Christ], the head of a wife is her husband [because he receives God’s image from Adam and is united with her husband], and the head of Christ is God [because he receives God’s image from God himself and is united with God].

4 Every man[/husband] who prays or prophesies with his [literal] head covered dishonors [Christ, who is] his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her [literal] head uncovered dishonors her [husband, who is her] head, since it is the same as if her [literal] head were shaven. 6 For if a wife will not cover her [literal] head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her [literal] head, let her cover her [literal] head.

7 For a man[/husband] ought not to cover his [literal] head, since he is the image and glory of God, but [a wife] is the glory of [her husband].

8 For [husbands] are not made from woman, but [wives] from man. 9 Neither was man created for [their wives], but [wives] for [their husbands].

10 That is why a wife ought to have authority [over] her head, because of the angels.

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11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

1. The challenges of cross-cultural translation

That is likely not perfect, but I think it comes close to Paul's intention. There are difficulties. Greek is a language in which the same word is used for "wife" and "woman" and the same word is used for "husband" and "man." As taught in *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*,⁸⁵ our language reveals our worldview. Many languages omit entire words that other languages contain because, in that culture, that word is simply not needed.

Thus, clearly enough, the Greeks tended in conversation to assume that all men are married and all women are wives. It was obviously untrue, but single adults were evidently ignored as not fitting within their worldview.

It's the same phenomenon we see in many churches that speak of being composed of "families," as though no member might be single or otherwise unattached within the church. The worldview of that congregation assumes that everyone is part of a family within the church, and so singles and the divorced are rarely considered when decisions are made or policy is set. Because the language of the church is all about "families," those who don't fit the mold cannot be discussed. There is no language available.

Just so, while there were surely divorced and single members of the church in Corinth, the social convention was to speak as though everyone is a husband or wife. Single adult women didn't fit into society well, except as prostitutes to be used or widows to be supported. Just so, an unmarried man was out of place. After all, a man had a duty to bring children into Roman society, to do his part in bringing about the next generation. And so the language came to match how people thought.

And so we see that Paul doesn't really have words with which to express himself. (Greek had about 1% of the vocabulary of modern English. Scrabble™ would not have been popular.) Therefore, it's not surprising that his use of *anēr* and *gunē* can be difficult for us to follow. The Greeks wouldn't have cared to be as precise as we feel the need to

⁸⁵ E. Randolph Richards & Brandon J. O'Brien. InterVarsity Press. 2012.

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be. In fact, the passage makes much better sense if you just assume, as the Greeks evidently did, that all adults were married.

2. Verse-by-verse

With the foregoing in mind, let's work through some remaining issues in the text.

(1 Cor. 11:3-16 ESV) 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every [husband] is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

Imagine that Paul is actually speaking in terms of power, authority, and hierarchy, and that he really means “women” and “men,” as many translations have it. Just what power does every man have over every woman? Does every man have authority over your daughters? Power to do what? Power to compel what obedience?

It is unimaginable that Paul intends to subordinate all women to all men. Therefore, he is referring to the relationship of wives to their husbands, and we should not guess or assume but find that relationship in Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5, not the history of the world's unfair treatment of women by men.

4 Every man[/husband] who prays or prophesies with his [literal] head covered dishonors [Christ, who is] his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her [literal] head uncovered dishonors her [husband, who is her] head, since it is the same as if her [literal] head were shaven. 6 For if a wife will not cover her [literal] head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her [literal] head, let her cover her [literal] head.

Thanks to the work of Bruce Winter, previously quoted, this much of the passage is actually now fairly clear. Roman women were expected to wear veils that covered their hair. It was a mark of marriage.

There are theories as to why this had become a problem. Some speculate that the wives unveiled themselves because the priestesses of some pagan cults were led by women and they were not veiled. This seems very unlikely to me, even for the Corinthian congregation.

Rather, Winter suggests that the women were emulating a class of Roman women, the “new wives,” who rebelled against Roman standards of female behavior and modesty – so much so that the Senate felt compelled to pass laws in an attempt to regulate these women.

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By deliberately removing her veil while playing a significant role of praying and prophesying in the activities of Christian worship, the Christian wife was knowingly flouting the Roman legal convention that epitomized marriage. ... If, according to Roman law, she was what she wore, or in this case what she removed from her head, then this gesture made a statement in support of the mores of some of her secular sisters, the new wives, who sought to ridicule the much-prized virtue of modesty which epitomized the married woman.⁸⁶

In short, the veil was required by local culture.

7 For a man[/husband] ought not to cover his [literal] head, since he is the image and glory of God, but [a wife] is the glory of [her husband].

Roman men sometimes pulled their shawl, a part of their toga, over their heads when engaged in religious ritual. Jewish men also covered their heads, as a matter of tradition, to show submission to God. Paul disagrees.

A woman's hair is the glory of her husband – surely meaning that only her husband was allowed to see her hair. Only he could enjoy her glory. And as his suitable helper, the wife cannot act to bring shame to her husband.

But the appearance of the husband reveals the image of God and so should not be hidden. Of course, women are also made in the image of God, but societal notions of modesty and of shame override and require wives to avoid shaming their husbands.

That is, we are so close to God, as Christians indwelt by the Spirit, that we should symbolize our relationship with God by not covering our heads – as though a barrier should be erected between us and him, as though God could not be that near – when he in fact dwells within us. God's goal is to unite us, not to draw lines between us. And so a head covering that symbolizes distance from God says the wrong thing.

But a head covering that symbolizes faithfulness of a wife to her husband is a good thing. It all depends on what the head covering is meant to say.

8 For [husbands] are not made from woman, but [wives] from man.
9 Neither was man created for [their wives], but [wives] for [their husbands].

⁸⁶ Bruce W. Winter. *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities*. *ibid.* p. 96.

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Wives were created for their husbands because Eve was made a suitable helper for Adam – not an inferior or subordinate, but nonetheless bound to him so that she must not shame him.

10 That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority [over] her head, because of the angels.

Verse 10 states, in the ESV, that a woman is to have a “symbol of authority on her head.” But “a symbol of” is absent in the Greek and has been added by the translators. The KJV is more literal in translating that the woman must have “power on” her head. As noted by Mark C. Black, assistant professor of the New Testament at Lipscomb University,

Another possible reading would translate “the woman has to exercise control (*exousia*) over her head,” and therefore does not directly refer to the head-covering at all. Because of the creation principles (8-9) and because of the angels (10), she must behave correctly with regard to her head (which of course means wearing the covering).⁸⁷

Thus, the reference to “authority” in verse 10 is to the woman’s exercise of authority, not the man’s.

Often, “authority” has been interpreted as the veil itself, the idea being that the veil is symbolic of the husband’s authority over the wife or the authority of a woman to be in public while veiled. However, the suggestion that “authority” is the woman’s own authority over her own head makes the best sense because it is consistent with the fundamental notion that Christians have freedom coupled with responsibility not to use their freedom to harm others. This thought is the essence of much of Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians.

11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

The “nevertheless” and “in the Lord” suggest a contrast with what goes before. Paul is evidently afraid that readers may take his words to mean that men are independent of women and owe them no obligations. But man is born of woman and, under the Law, must honor their fathers and mothers. Hence, no man is above women as a class. He must

⁸⁷ “1 Cor. 11:2-16-A Re-investigation,” pp. 208-210, published in Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Vol. 1. p. 210, footnote 79.

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submit to his mother – which the rabbis (and Jesus⁸⁸) considered to apply to adults as well as children.

Moreover, “all things are from God,” that is, all must be done in submission to God, which means consistent with the Christian principles we’ve been considering.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

Paul wraps up with plain references to the local culture – what is “proper,” “nature,” “disgrace,” and the practices of “the churches of God.” This is hardly how Paul would argue an eternal command from God. Rather, he is speaking of cultural expectations for the dress of women.

J. Spiritual leadership

One interpretation of this and a few other passages is that “head” refers to the “spiritual leadership” of men in the church.

Fifty or more years ago, the Churches of Christ taught the spiritual leadership of men in all settings, including the work place. But there are now too many women at church who work in business, where they supervise men. We gave that argument up.

And so, we took a supposed universal, eternal principle regarding the relationship of men and women and retreated into the church and the family, insisting that men must be spiritual leaders at church and at home. Business is different. Too much money is at stake, and the women are too obviously competent and gifted at what they do.

I’ll not deal with the other relevant passages, but 1 Corinthians 11 is a thin reed on which to support such a heavy position. I mean, that’s a lot of meaning to read into “head” with precious little support from the Old Testament or the Gospels or the overall message of the scriptures. The Law of Moses says nothing of the sort, nor is it easy to find such a rule in Genesis 1 and 2.

Rather, the usual verse argued is from Genesis 3,

(Gen. 3:16 NET) To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your labor pains; with pain you will give birth to children. **You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you.**”

⁸⁸ E.g., Mark 7:11-13.

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But this is plainly only about husbands, not men in general and women in general – and is a result of sin, a change from Eden, after the Fall of Man, and *is not presented as a good thing*. Rather, it's parallel with increased pain in childbirth and weeds in the fields. It's a bad thing. It's the product of separation from God, the very separation that Jesus came to undo.

Moreover, the word is “dominate” or “rule over,” as in nearly all English translations. This is not “spiritual leadership.” It's domination and rule, as though Eve had been lowered to the level of an animal. (In Genesis 1:26-28, mankind is given “dominion” over the rest of Creation.)

And if men are to rule women, just what is the extent and nature of this kind of headship? Does it apply to the workplace? Home? Church? Friendships? And just what service may men command from women? To what extent must your daughters submit to whatever man they should happen across?

And how do we suppose that the Curse applies in the family and the church – where we are supposedly closest to being able to realize the gospel in our lives – and not applicable in the workplace? The workplace is more like Eden than the church? It makes no sense.

Each hierarchicalist commentator seems to reach a different conclusion as to where to draw the line. Some frankly admit that they don't know where the line is but insist that there be a line limiting a woman's role *somewhere*. Finding the line thus becomes an exercise in human bias rather than biblical exegesis. We simply have no guidance without a unifying principle. I mean, do we seriously believe that these passages are arbitrary rules without any underlying foundation?

Now, I have no complaint with men being leaders – at home, at church, or in the workplace. Leadership is, after all, a gift from God.

(Rom. 12:6-8 ESV) 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; **the one who leads, with zeal**; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Those gifted to lead are commanded to lead because to do otherwise would be to reject a gift from God himself. Even if it's a woman he has chosen to gift. Just as Anna the prophetess had to use her gifts to declare the coming of the Messiah in the temple courts – the most public of all places of worship – *women gifted by the Spirit to lead must lead*.

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(1 Cor. 12:18-21 ESV) 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 21 **The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”**

Moreover, the rest of us are prohibited from saying, “I have need of you,” because it is God who chose whom he would gift.

I am aware, of course, of what Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 14 and in 1 Timothy 2. But he said these things as well, and they are also true. Therefore, we can’t just overrule major biblical themes by proof texts. Rather, we must consider these other texts in light of the major themes of scripture. And we’ll get there.

CHAPTER XI
1 CORINTHIANS 14 – SILENCE IN THE CHURCHES

1 Corinthians 7 and 11 are not the only passages in 1 Corinthians dealing with men and women – they are not even the most controversial.

(1 Cor. 14:33b-36 ESV) 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. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

A. What is the original text?

1. “As in all the congregations of the saints”

Osburn, in his *Women in the Church 1*, indicates that “As in all the congregations of the saints” is properly a part of the preceding sentence and that Paul’s discussion of women begins with “women should remain silent.” There was no punctuation in the original Greek, and First Century Greek was written entirely in capital letters. Imagine having to read text like “ASINALLTHECONGREGATIONSOFTHE SAINTS” without paragraphing or punctuation! Writing materials were expensive, so why waste money on spaces and periods? Fortunately, it’s easier to read in Greek than in English, but still the lack of punctuation leaves us with an occasional ambiguity.

Grammatically, “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches” is redundant. Hence, the KJV, NASB, and NIV all translate this phrase as the end of “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace ...”

Moreover, as Michael Hanegan points out,⁸⁹

The first thing we can look at is how Paul uses a similar statement elsewhere in 1 Corinthians.

“...He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”
(1 Corinthians 4:17)

⁸⁹ “1 Corinthians 14 and the Silence of Women: Textual Considerations,” *MichaelHanegan.com* (December 8, 2014) <http://www.michaelhanegan.com/blog/1-corinthians-14-and-the-silence-of-women-textual-considerat.html>.

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"Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches."
(1 Corinthians 7:17)

"If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice - neither do the churches of God." (1 Corinthians 11:16)

Paul's pattern (and note that all of these examples are in the *same* letter) is that such a "universal" statement always *concludes* a thought or element of an argument. Paul does not use such clauses as a foundational starting point for his argument.

It's not critical to the interpretation of the passage, but I find Osburn and Hanegan persuasive.

2. Did Paul write this passage?

Gordon Fee, in his highly influential, conservative commentary in the New International Commentary series, argues that this passage is a later scribal interpolation and not written by Paul at all. He notes that some ancient manuscripts have these verses after v. 40 rather than v. 33.⁹⁰

Although these two verses are found in all known manuscripts, either here or at the end of the chapter, the two text-critical criteria of transcriptional and intrinsic probability combine to cast considerable doubt on their authenticity.

First, on the matter of transcriptional probability, Bengel's first principle⁹¹ must rule: That form of the text is more likely the original which best explains the emergence of all the others. In this case there are three options: Either (1) Paul wrote these words at this place and they were deliberately transposed to a position after v. 40; or (2) the reverse of this, they were written originally after v. 40 and someone moved them forward to a position after v. 33; or (3) they were not part of the original text, but were a very early

⁹⁰ Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1987. p. 707.

⁹¹ Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti (Exegetical Annotations on the New Testament)* (1742), created the earliest critical apparatus of the New Testament comparing various ancient manuscripts where inconsistent. He proposed principles of textual criticism to help determine which reading is most likely the original.

marginal gloss that was subsequently placed in the text at two different places. Of these options, the third is easily the one that best fits Bengel's first principle. One can give good historical reasons both for the gloss itself and for its dual position in the text; but one is especially hard pressed to account for either options 1 or 2 had the other been original. ...

Second, once one recognizes the improbability of authenticity on transcriptional grounds, then several questions of intrinsic probability are more easily answered: (1) One can make much better sense of the structure of Paul's argument without these intruding sentences. ...

Furthermore, very little in the two verses fits into the present argument, which to this point has only to do with manifestations of the Spirit in the community. ...

(2) Of even greater difficulty is the fact that these verses stand in obvious contradiction to 11:2 – 16, where it is assumed without reproof that women pray and prophesy in the assembly, not to mention that such is also assumed in the repeated "all" of vv. 23 – 24 and 31 and the "each one" of v. 26. ...

(3) Finally, as will be noted in the commentary on the individual verses that follow, some usages in these two verses seem quite foreign to Paul. ...

Real problems for Pauline authorship lie with the phrase "even as the Law says." First, when Paul elsewhere appeals to "the Law," he always cites the text (e.g., 9:8; 14:21), usually to support a point he himself is making. Nowhere else does he appeal to the Law in this absolute way as binding on Christian behavior. More difficult yet is the fact that the Law does not say any such thing. Gen. 3:16 is often appealed to, but that text does not say what is here argued. If that were the case, then one must admit that Paul is appealing not to the written Torah itself but to an oral understanding of Torah such as is found in rabbinic Judaism. A similar usage is reflected in Josephus, who says, "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive." This usage suggests that the provenance of the glossator was Jewish Christianity. Under any view this is difficult to reconcile with Paul.

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Much more detail will be found in his commentary. Pauline scholar Richard Hays agrees, but commentators have largely not followed Fee. The translator notes to the NET Bible argue that the verses were in fact a marginal insertion, but by Paul himself!

(1) Since these verses occur in *all witnesses to 1 Corinthians*, to argue that they are not original means that they must have crept into the text at the earliest stage of transmission. How early? Earlier than when the *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53 – 8:11) made its way into the text (late 2nd, early 3rd century?), earlier than the longer ending of Mark (16:9 – 20) was produced (early 2nd century?), and earlier than even “in Ephesus” was added to Eph. 1:1 (upon reception of the letter by the first church to which it came, the church at Ephesus) – because in these other, similar places, the earliest witnesses do not *add* the words. This text thus stands as remarkable, unique.

Indeed, since all the witnesses have the words, the evidence points to them as having been inserted into the *original* document. Who would have done such a thing? And, further, why would scribes have regarded it as original since it was obviously added in the margin? This leads to our second point.

(2) Following a suggestion made by E. E. Ellis (“The Silenced Wives of Corinth (I Cor. 14:34 – 5),” *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis*, 213 – 20 [the suggestion comes at the end of the article, almost as an afterthought]), it is likely that Paul himself added the words in the margin. ...

(4) The very location of the verses in the Western tradition argues strongly that Paul both authored vv. 34 – 35 and that they were originally part of the margin of the text. Otherwise, one has a difficulty explaining why no scribe seemed to have hinted that these verses might be inauthentic (the scribal sigla of codex B, as noticed by Payne, can be interpreted otherwise than as an indication of inauthenticity [cf. J. E. Miller, “Some Observations on the Text-Critical Function of the Umlauts in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14.34-35,” *JSNT* 26 [2003]: 217-36.]). There are apparently no MSS that have an asterisk or obelisk in the margin. Yet in other places in the NT where scribes doubted the authenticity of the clauses before them, they often noted their protest with an asterisk or obelisk. We are thus compelled to regard

the words as original, and as belonging where they are in the text above.⁹²

And so, given the absence of a scholarly consensus, and the presence of weighty arguments on both sides, we feel obliged to take the verses as authentic, although we have to admit that Fee makes good points that seem less speculative than the NET Bible translators, who seem to press the evidence into conjecture.

3. Is Paul quoting someone else?

Several places earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul quotes what some in the Corinthian church were saying and Paul then respond with his own thoughts. And so some have suggested that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 may be Paul's quotation of others and v. 36 is Paul's response. However, this theory has not won many supporters. Ferguson notes that –

when Paul ... uses the conjunction “or” (*ē*) as in verse 38, he often is extending his argument or advancing a further consideration When he rejects a quoted statement or slogan, he uses the strong adversative “but” (*alla*), as in 6:12 and 1:23.⁹³

4. Conclusion

In short, I conclude such translations as the KJV, NIV, and NASB correctly attach “as in all the congregations of the saints” to the preceding text and that the remaining text of 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 consists of the words of Paul himself.

B. Exposition – Introduction.

“Women should remain silent.” What does this mean? As tempting as it is to say, “Means what it says; says what it means,” no thinking Christian can believe this passage really means that women must be silent during the assembly. Why not?

First, we conventionally allow women to break their silence in the assembly for any number of reasons, including:

⁹² W. Hall Harris, ed., *The NET Bible Notes*. 1st ed., Accordance electronic ed. Biblical Studies Press. 2005, n.p.

⁹³ Ferguson *Women in the Church*. p. 14.

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1. Singing. We allow women to sing even when men do not accompany them. Many songs have not only female leads, but also female section solos.⁹⁴

2. Speaking in unison. There are many occasions where the congregation speaks in unison. Some churches say the Lord's Prayer or another prayer in unison. Others recite scripture in unison. Some do responsive readings. In each case, the women are not silent.

3. Praying. Many of our favorite hymns are prayers. For some reason, some have fallen into the habit of omitting the "amen" at the end of such songs, but the song is a prayer nonetheless. Women sing these prayers out loud, in the presence of men, and our only justification is that the women do so to a tune.

4. Greeting. How many times have you attended a church where the service was interrupted while the members were asked to greet one another and the visitors? Were the women required to stay silent?

5. Confessing Jesus. When a woman comes to the front to be baptized, do we make her fill out a card to say that she believes in Jesus? Or does she say it out loud? I've never seen anyone make a candidate for baptism wait until after services or write down the answer to this question. And yet the passage says "silent." It doesn't say members only. It says "women." And there is really no necessity for a confession during services. After all, we could wait until after the closing prayer. But that's not our way.

So what's my point? First, those who insist on a strictly literal interpretation of this passage must admit that their interpretation is neither strict nor literal. I have just offered a truly literal interpretation, and yet common sense tells us that this is not what Paul meant. So while we are searching for the truth of the matter, let's remember that no one occupies the "high ground" of literalness or even strictness. And while the interpretation that I will offer of this passage may not be very traditional, it is stricter and more literal than the traditionalists.

Second, the Bible's text itself, and not our culture or tradition, raises certain questions that must be taken into account in whatever conclusion we reach:

1. 1 Corinthians 11 is a discussion of appropriate head coverings for women while they prophesy or pray in an assembly with men present. If it is a sin for a woman to pray or prophesy in the presence of men, why didn't Paul simply condemn the practice? If it is

⁹⁴ Ferguson *Women in the Church* argues for an implied exception for unison speaking, as women speaking or singing in unison with men is not authoritative speech. However, Paul says nothing about women exercising authority in 1 Cor. 14. 1 Tim. 2:11-15, which does speak of authority, wasn't written until decades later. Moreover, Ferguson only approves of unison singing in the assembly. Everett Ferguson. *The Early Church and Today Volume 1 • Ministry, Initiation, and Worship*. ACU Press. 2012. To my knowledge, no one else in the Churches of Christ finds error in singing hymns with separate parts or section solos for sopranos and altos; but Ferguson's logic is at least consistent: If women are required to be silent, how do we justify allowing the women to sing a song separate from the men?

a sin for a woman to pray or prophesy in the presence of men, then Paul’s instructions are on the order of instructing women on what to wear while committing adultery! If it’s wrong, it’s wrong, and Paul has no business discoursing on appropriate dress during sin.⁹⁵

2. There is nothing in the text that suggests that the assemblies under discussion in chapter 11 are different from those in chapter 14. As pointed out above, there is good reason to believe that the same assemblies are under consideration. If we were to conclude that only one chapter is discussing the general assembly, comparable to our Sunday morning assembly, and the other is discussing some special assembly, it would be much more logical to conclude that chapter 11 is discussing the general assembly because it is more closely tied to the discussion of the Lord’s Supper. Moreover, the reference to angels being present in the assembly in chapter 11:10 indicates that much more than a casual gathering is at issue.⁹⁶

3. That the assembly is in mind in chapter 11 is also plain from our own history. Until the last few decades, women in the Churches of Christ felt compelled to wear hats (and even fashionable veils) to the assembly. If chapter 11 doesn’t apply to the Sunday morning assembly, why did we require women to wear hats to such assemblies?

And so we have what appears to be a perfect contradiction. Chapter 11 indicates that women may pray and prophesy in the presence of men in the assembly, but chapter 14 compels them to be silent in the assembly. How can both be true?

C. Overriding Principles

Let’s first remember that our relationship with God as Christians is defined by the overriding principles of love and grace. God doesn’t just make up arbitrary rules and impose them on us. It is, therefore, entirely proper to ask if our usual way of reading this passage actually makes sense.

⁹⁵ Ferguson criticizes Osburn for concluding that Paul approves of women prophesying in chapter 11. “The text does not say Paul ‘approves’ of the practice” (Ferguson Christian Chronicle). True, but Paul would hardly spend so much effort addressing proper apparel for a practice that he disapproved. It is an absurd argument.

⁹⁶ The commentators generally conclude that Paul is referring to a Jewish tradition that angels are present wherever God is worshiped. E.g.,

Why then does he say that a woman ‘must have authority on her head because of the angels’ (verse 10)? This is one of the most puzzling verses in a puzzling passage, but there is help of sorts in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There it is assumed that when God’s people meet for worship, the angels are there too (as many liturgies, and theologians, still affirm).

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For example, if it is disgraceful and wrong for a woman to speak in the worship assembly, wouldn't it be equally disgraceful and wrong for her to speak in a Sunday school class? Most Churches of Christ prohibit female speech in the assembly but permit – and even encourage – female questions and discussion in a classroom setting. I mean, Paul was particularly clear that women are not to ask questions – but we traditionally only allow question asking in Sunday school. We don't even allow men to ask questions in the assembly! If there is some eternal principle prohibiting women from asking questions in the assembly, why not in Sunday school classes?

Public or private setting? The distinction has often been suggested that woman are not to speak or ask questions in a “public” setting, and the Sunday school classes are said to be “private.” But this is plainly wrong. We advertise our Sunday school classes to the public just like we advertise our assemblies. Our classes are in no real sense private. In many churches, the adult class is often conducted in the same room as the assembly! Why is it sin to speak at 10:00 a.m. and not at 9:00 a.m.?

Assembly or another meeting? Another distinction made is that, in context, Paul is addressing the assembly, not a class, as is evident from all of 1 Corinthians 11-14. And I agree that this is true, but the answer to my question must come from more than context. It can't be *just* a rule! The question is *why* are Sunday school classes different from the assembly – if indeed they are? Why is speaking in the assembly disgraceful and speaking in a Sunday school class okay – even good?

If we can't come up with an intelligent answer to that question, we are forced to confess that we really just don't understand this command. Paul didn't just order women to remain silent. He gave reasons, and he surely meant for those reasons to be well understood by his readers.

D. Paul's reasons.

First, Paul explains that women “must be in submission, as the Law says.” We will spend some time discussing the meaning of “the Law.” Plainly, Paul believes that asking questions in the assembly is unsubmitive. Now, I ask again, what makes a woman unsubmitive when she speaks – particularly when she asks a question – in the assembly but perfectly submissive when she asks a questions somewhere else? What “magic” does an assembly have that compels female silence?

Next, Paul states that it is “disgraceful” for a woman to “speak in the church.” Why? Must women be more submissive at church than at the workplace? More submissive in the assembly than in the foyer? Is the requirement to be submissive purely about the assembly? And how can “the Law” – surely a reference to some part of the Old Testament – create a rule for the Christian assembly that doesn't apply to other gatherings of Christians? I mean, there were no comparable assemblies in Old Testament times. The synagogue was not invented until after the completion of the Old Testament, and so the Law says nothing about how women should act in synagogue. And nothing in the Law imposes a requirement of silence on women at the temple or tabernacle.

Finally, Paul refers to the sensibilities of those from whom the “word” – meaning the gospel – originated, certainly a reference to the feelings of Jewish Christians. And what possible impact could the feelings of First Century Jewish converts have on the eternal pattern of how men and women are to relate to one another?

And what on earth does this passage have to do with love and grace? Is this just an arbitrary rule, with no real purpose, or does it somehow further the overarching command to love my neighbor?

And what about “ask their own husbands at home”? How does Paul intend for this to work? What about the woman who is unmarried? or whose husband is not a Christian? or whose husband wasn’t at church that day?

E. Husband or legal representative?

Everett Ferguson asserts that in ancient Greece the unmarried women always had a “man” as a legal representative – a husband, father, brother, or uncle. *Anēr* could refer to “man” rather than “husband.” Hence, single, divorced, and widowed women would be expected to ask questions of their legal representative. That is, women in ancient Greece were legally incompetent to contract and so had to deal through a near male relative – husband for a married woman.⁹⁷

And yet Ferguson takes Paul to be laying down law forever. If this is so, then the same rule applies today. As a matter of history, Ferguson is likely right, but surely this demonstrates plainly that Paul was acquiescing to a culture that no longer exists.

Even as recently at the 19th Century, most American states treated married women as incapable of making contracts or selling property except through their husbands. This was changed by a series of state legal reforms in the 19th Century.⁹⁸

So are we to return to those days? Were those reforms anti-biblical? (Many preachers so taught at the time!) Must modern women ask their questions about the sermon only of their “man” today?

F. “Own.”

Ferguson further fails to address the Greek that says the woman is to speak with her “own” (*idios*) “man,” which sounds much more as though Paul were telling women to speak to their own husbands, rather than the husbands of other women, in accordance with Greek morality. Why would he care that a single woman speaks with another

⁹⁷ Ferguson Women in Church. p. 18.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., http://womenshistory.about.com/od/marriedwomensproperty/a/property_1848ny.htm.

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woman's "own" legal representative? But it's easy to imagine Paul not wanting a wife to speak to another wife's husband in that culture.

The command is thus a prohibition on conversation between a woman and another woman's husband. It would have been unseemly in First Century society for married women to speak freely to men married to another woman. Such consorting would have opened the church up to accusations of unchastity.

Conclusion. Let's be honest enough to admit that we have never enforced this passage as it's written. I've never attended or heard of a church that requires women to only ask questions at home of their own husbands – much less would a modern church require a woman to ask her male legal representative questions at home!

Indeed, we quite often encourage women to ask questions in the hallways, in the foyer, and certainly in the classroom. After all, we really encourage Bible study, and it would make no sense to deny a woman to ability to sincerely inquire into the Word with the help of her fellow Christians.

G. The Status of First Century Women

With these questions in mind, we should consider the very real possibility that Paul's command was caused by temporary cultural circumstances that no longer exist.

There is considerable support from history that First Century Jewish and Grecian women were uneducated and lived extremely sheltered lives. This was especially so among the Jews, who formed the core of most congregations in the church's early history. The questioning of a teacher by such women would have been ignorant and a burden on the time of the men. Thus, the women had to be brought to a better understanding by some means other than remedial instruction before the entire congregation.

In support of this view is the phrase, "If she should learn⁹⁹ anything" This language seems to be a reference to the extreme lack of education and degradation of women of the day. Few women could read or write and few could have profitably participated in the Socratic debates that characterized teaching in ancient Greece and Judea. Thus, Paul begins with an "if." He does not assume that the woman will choose to learn anything. This is not due to Paul's sexism, but a recognition of the degraded state of women in those days. In fact, Paul's encouraging of the education of women put him well out in front of society (which took nearly 2,000 years to catch up with Paul!)

Similarly, the asking of questions of a teacher could often become a confrontation. In a society where submissive women did not provoke confrontations with men (especially before an audience), no Christian woman would have been considered moral

⁹⁹ KJV. The NIV incorrectly translates "inquire about" rather than "learn." BDAG translates the Greek as "to gain knowledge or skill by instruction, learn."

or honoring God if she engaged in a debate with the teacher before the congregation (all or a part). “Silence” therefore refers only to the asking of questions – or more precisely, to engaging in Socratic-style debating with the teacher.

Jewish women. The ignorance of women in the First Century was not unique to the Jews, but the Jews of that time took special care to keep their women ignorant. There was a saying that wives should only be taught enough of the Torah¹⁰⁰ to know the penalty for adultery! And there was no exaggeration in the saying.

This conclusion is buttressed by history:

In Jewish law a woman was not a person; she was a thing. She was entirely at the disposal [of] her father or of her husband. A woman was forbidden to learn the law; to instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. Women had no part in the Synagogue service; they were shut apart in a section of the Synagogue, or in a gallery, where they could not be seen, and were allowed no share in the service. A man came to the Synagogue to learn; but, at the most, a woman came to hear. In the Synagogue the lesson from Scripture was read by members of the congregation; but not by women, for that would have been to lessen “the honour of the congregation.” It was absolutely forbidden for a woman to teach in a school; she might not even teach the youngest children. A woman was exempt from the stated demand of the Law. It was not obligatory on her to attend the sacred feasts and festivals. Women, slaves and children were classed together. ... Rabbi Jose ben Johanan is quoted as saying, “ ... Everyone that talketh much with a woman causes evil to himself, and desists from the works of the Law, and his end is that he inherits Gehenna.”¹⁰¹

Barclay also notes that among the Jews, a strict follower of the Jewish *Talmud*¹⁰² would not even speak to his own sister in public.

That Paul had the Jews especially in mind is evidenced by his exclamation at the end of the paragraph, “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” The word of God originated with the Jews. It had reached other nations, but in the church’s early history, nearly all other churches were either Jewish or

¹⁰⁰ The Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, that is, the books of Law.

¹⁰¹ William Barclay. *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon – The Daily Study Bible*. Westminster Press. 2nd ed. 1960. p. 77.

¹⁰² A compilation of the oral laws of the Jews.

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had a large Jewish component. Thus, the “disgrace” referred to by Paul was particularly in the eyes of the Jewish members of the congregation, the people from whom the word of God originated.

There is ample evidence in the text that Paul had concluded that preservation of unity and fellowship with the Jewish members and congregations demanded that women take a submissive role in the assembly.

Grecian women. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city, being a major port and a Roman colony. Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans and then rebuilt as a colony. But the city was squarely in the middle of Greece, and all north-south land traffic had to go through Corinth. Moreover, Corinth was an important east-west port city, making it one of the Empire’s premier commercial centers. By the First Century, due to its wealth and vigorous trade, Corinth had also become notoriously immoral with rampant prostitution, including cultic prostitution, that is, “priestesses” who engaged in “fertility rites” for a fee – making prostitution a religious observance.

Osburn quotes the Grecian historian Plutarch, a near contemporary of Paul: “Not only the arm but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped. ... She should speak either to, or through, her husband.”¹⁰³

Barclay comments,

The respectable Greek woman lived a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone: she never went to any public assembly, still less did she ever speak or take any active part in such an assembly. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking and a teaching part in the work of the Christian Church, the Church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being the resort of loose and immoral women.¹⁰⁴

The risk of being considered immoral was very real. Moreover, to appease the sensibilities of the various levels of society, especially the Jews, strict rules would have to be followed.

¹⁰³ Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts* 31. Ferguson *Women in the Church*. p. 43, quotes Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom*. p. 32, “For a woman ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband, and she should not feel aggrieved if, like the pipe-player, she makes a more impressive sound through a tongue not her own.” He describes this as “the conservative Greek view.”

¹⁰⁴ Barclay, *ibid.*

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Ferguson disputes this view of First Century women. He concedes the low estate of Jewish women of this age, but points out, “There were plenty of priestesses in Greco-Roman religions, and one historian of ancient Rome, Carcopino, describes a women’s emancipation movement in Rome in the first century.”¹⁰⁵

Ferguson misses some key points. First, the fact that there was an emancipation movement for women plainly tells us that women felt the need to be emancipated. Moreover, there is no evidence that the movement succeeded. Recall the Women’s Suffrage Movement of the early 20th Century. Women actually prevailed, gaining the right to vote, and yet continued to suffer severe discrimination for decades thereafter. If a successful emancipation movement doesn’t necessarily grant women equal legal rights, plainly a *failed* emancipation movement hardly proves that women were emancipated.

The fact that women could serve as priestesses in pagan religions doesn’t indicate emancipation in their roles as housewives – or even as priestesses. In fact, many of the priestesses were little more than prostitutes, certainly not an elevated status. As Barclay writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, “To that temple [of Aphrodite], there were attached one thousand priestesses who were sacred prostitutes, and at evening time they descend from the Acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth”

Thus, the silence commanded is the avoidance of such speech as might open the women to charges of moral laxity as measured by the culture of the community. Thus, singing, speaking in unison, and such would not be prohibited. Neither would prayer and prophecy. However, the direct addressing of a man, where a woman engages in conversation or debate with someone else’s husband, would be a violation of propriety. This conclusion is supported by Paul’s statement that such speech is “shameful.”¹⁰⁶

In fact, Ferguson argues that this is a reference to the prevailing honor-shame culture,¹⁰⁷ which makes it *cultural*. The requirement for wives to be suitable complements is not, being found in Genesis 2:22, but the way submission is shown will vary from culture to culture. As Ferguson says a few pages later,

Male and female distinctions were instituted by God Some of the ways that those distinctions are observed are conditioned by societal norms, some are not.

¹⁰⁵ Ferguson Christian Chronicle.

¹⁰⁶ Verse 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ferguson Women in the Church. p. 20.

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H. Summary.

In context, and taking into account the emphasis on a woman speaking to her *own* husband, the command is a prohibition on speaking to another woman's husband. It is, therefore, a command founded on the appearance of immorality in a society where women were not permitted to speak in public to men other than their own husbands. Paul's command is therefore a reference to local cultural standards.

The sense of Paul's teaching can be seen in an example from the mission field:¹⁰⁸

My mother used to compare the situation in Corinth to the one she and my father faced in northern China. Back in the 1920s when they were first to bring God's message to that forgotten area, they found women with bound feet who seldom left their homes and who, unlike the men, had never in their whole lives attended a public meeting or a class. They had never been told as little girls, "Now you just sit still and listen to the teacher." Their only concept of an assembly was a family feast where everyone talked at once.

When these women came to my parents' church and gathered on the women's side of the sanctuary, they thought this was a chance to catch up on the news with their neighbors and to ask questions about the story of Jesus they were hearing. Needless to say, along with babies crying and toddlers running about, the women's section got rather noisy! Add to that the temptation for the women to shout questions to their husbands across the aisle, and you can imagine the chaos. As my mother patiently tried to tell the women that they should listen first and chitchat or ask questions later, she would mutter under her breath, "Just like Corinth; it just couldn't be more like Corinth."

A very similar story from the mission field is told by Ken Bailey, and related by N. T. Wright – ¹⁰⁹

In the Middle East, he says, it was taken for granted that men and women would sit apart in church, as still happens today in some circles. Equally important, the service would be held (in Lebanon, say, or Syria, or Egypt), in formal or classical Arabic, which the men

¹⁰⁸ Kari Torjesen Malcolm. *Women at the Crossroads*. InterVarsity. 1982, pp. 73-74, as quoted by John Temple Bristow. *What Paul Really Said About Women*. HarperCollins. 1991. p. 64.

¹⁰⁹ N. T. Wright. "Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis," a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church' St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004. http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm.

would all know but which many of the women would not, since the women would only speak a local dialect or patois. Again, we may disapprove of such an arrangement, but one of the things you learn in real pastoral work as opposed to ivory-tower academic theorizing is that you simply can't take a community all the way from where it currently is to where you would ideally like it to be in a single flying leap. Anyway, the result would be that during the sermon in particular, the women, not understanding what was going on, would begin to get bored and talk among themselves.

As Bailey describes the scene in such a church, the level of talking from the women's side would steadily rise in volume, until the minister would have to say loudly, 'Will the women please be quiet!', whereupon the talking would die down, but only for a few minutes. Then, at some point, the minister would again have to ask the women to be quiet; and he would often add that if they wanted to know what was being said, they should ask their husbands to explain it to them when they got home. I know there are other explanations sometimes offered for this passage, some of them quite plausible; this is the one that has struck me for many years as having the strongest claim to provide a context for understanding what Paul is saying. After all, his central concern in 1 Corinthians 14 is for order and decency in the church's worship. This would fit extremely well.

I. Some Definitions.

With this cultural background in mind, let's search out the meaning of a few words and phrases.

“Speak.” The Greek word translated “speak” throughout the chapter, *lalein*, takes its exact meaning from the context, and can refer to anything from silent meditation (v. 28) to disruptive speech of about any kind. There is nothing in the word itself to indicate what kind of speech is in mind. However, the verb is in present tense, indicating continuous action. Thus, Paul is saying something like “they are not allowed to *continually speak*.”¹¹⁰

“Silent.” The Greek word translated “silent” in 1 Corinthians 14:34, *sigao*, does not necessarily mean “not speak at all.” Rather, the word may mean nothing more than

¹¹⁰ Osburn, *Women in the Church* 2. p. 199, citing F. F. Bruce. *1 & 2 Corinthians*. Eerdmans. 1971. p. 135. The present indicative refers to continuing action.

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“be quiet” or even “keep a secret.” The italicized portions of the following verses are all the other occurrences of the word in the Greek New Testament:

(Luke 9:36 NIV) When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples **kept this to themselves**, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

(Luke 20:26 NIV) They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became **silent**.

(Acts 12:17 NIV) Peter motioned with his hand for them to **be quiet** and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

(Acts 15:12-13 NIV) The whole assembly became **silent** as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

(Rom. 16:25 NIV) Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the **mystery** hidden for long ages past

(1 Cor. 14:28 NIV) If there is no interpreter, the speaker should **keep quiet** in the church and speak to himself and God.

(1 Cor. 14:30 NIV) And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should **stop**.

(1 Cor. 14:34 NIV) [W]omen should **remain silent** in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

Notice that in its normal use in the New Testament, *sigao* refers to a temporary silence, typically the courteous silence of not interrupting while another speaks. In 1 Corinthians 14, *sigao* is used in verses 28 and 30 to refer, not to total silence, but to abstaining from rude or inconsiderate speech.

In verse 28 Paul told the tongue speakers to “keep quiet [*sigao*] in the church,” a phrase not significantly different from verse 34’s “remain silent in the churches.”

(1Co 14:28 BGT) σιγάτω ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ
sigatō en ekklēsia
be silent in church

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(1Co 14:34 BGT) ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν
en tais ekklēsiais sigatōsan
in the churches be silent

And yet we readily see that Paul did not mean for tongue speakers to be completely silent, only that they should not speak in tongues when no interpreter is present. Other speaking by those with the gift of tongues is not banned by the “keep quiet” command.

Similarly, in verse 30 Paul tells the prophets to stop speaking, literally to “be silent [*sigao*].” But this command to silence clearly only means to stop talking long enough to let another speak. Thus, in each case, in context, *sigao* means “refrain from inconsiderate speech” of a certain type.

Thus, when Paul tells women to “remain silent” because they “must be in submission,” we should understand that the command to silence is limited to speech that is not submissive. After all, the Law only requires submission of wives, as complements for their husbands, not silence. Wives should be silent to the extent that speaking would, in the circumstance and at the time, violate the command to be in submission.

But prophets and tongue speakers are given the same limited command – not that they should not use their gifts to God’s glory, but that common courtesy and mutual submission of Christians to one another requires the taking of turns, using gifts in a manner that edifies, and behaving decently and orderly.

Clearly, where considerations of courtesy and orderliness do not prevent speaking, tongue speakers and prophets are free to speak, even as stated in verse 28, “in the church.” Likewise, in a culture and place where a woman may speak in the presence of men without causing a scandal or being perceived as immoral, the command to be silent has no application. This interpretation will become clearer as we proceed more deeply into the scripture.

J. “The Law.”

Paul’s reference to the Law as supporting his command is either (a) the Law of Moses, (b) the curse pronounced on women in Genesis 3, or (c) a reference to the “one flesh” relationship that God created, described in Genesis 2. No one has plausibly suggested any other possibility.

But Paul cannot be arguing from the Law of Moses, since the Law of Moses never commands women to be silent in the presence of men or even to be submissive to men. And Paul cannot be arguing from the curse in Genesis 3, as many would suggest. This is a curse, not a command, and is the result of sin, not a pattern for righteous living. Thus, the only possible explanation is also the most appealing explanation. Paul is referring to the

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command that husbands and wives be one flesh and the role of women as suitable complements – for their husbands.

K. “Women.”

The Greek word translated “women” is *gunē*, which can be translated “wives” or as “women” – the distinction can only be found in the context. Translating *gunē* as “wife” solves a number of problems and has much to commend it. First, only a wife can ask her husband at home. A widow, divorcee, or other unmarried woman could hardly do so. Second, the Law (Genesis 1 and 2) imposes submission on *wives*, and then only to their husbands. Nowhere does the Law require all women to be in submission to all men. Eve was Adam’s helpmeet, not a helpmeet to all men.

L. A Fresh Translation

With these definitions in mind, let’s try our hand at a clearer translation:

As in all the congregations of the saints, **wives** should not **speak in a way considered rude or immoral** in the churches. They are not allowed to [so] speak, but must be in submission, as **Genesis 2** says [about wives being suitable complements for their husbands]. If they want to **learn** about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a **wife** to speak [rudely or immorally] in the church. Did the word of God originate with you [rather than the Jews]? Or are you the only people it has reached [the gospel has reached many people who consider female questioning of men very immoral]?

M. Cultural limitation

Doesn’t this passage remind you of the abuses of the Lord’s Supper discussed in 1 Corinthians 11? Paul commanded the Corinthians to eat at home (1 Cor. 11:34). We readily understand that this is a response to the local situation in Corinth and not a universal rule, and yet it is phrased very similarly to the command to silence in 1 Corinthians 14:35 where wives are told to ask their questions of their husbands at home.

Also, Paul’s reliance on arguments using such phrases as “as in all the congregations of the saints” and “it is disgraceful” are very similar to his statements made in 1 Corinthians 11 dealing with veils. We readily acknowledge that such arguments show that only temporary cultural concerns were at issue when veils are under discussion. We should hold to the same standards here. Note the close comparison:

(1Co 11:6, 13-16 ESV) For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is **disgraceful [aischron]** for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it **proper** for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a **disgrace** for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, **we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.**

(1Co 14:34-36 ESV) ³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is **shameful [aischron]** for a woman to speak in church. ³⁶ **Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?**

The same traditionalist commentators who insist that “As in all the congregations of the saints” in chapter 14 makes the command to be silent an eternal rule will argue that “we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God” applied only in the First Century so that veils are no longer required.¹¹¹

N. Restoration Movement understanding

I am not the first within the Churches of Christ to reach this conclusion. David Lipscomb, a co-founder of the *Gospel Advocate* and the Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University) and long-time editor of the *Gospel Advocate* stated,¹¹²

¹¹¹ D. A. Carson suggests an alternative interpretation in his excellent *Showing the Spirit*. Baker Books. 1987, pp. 129-131. Carson first argues that the First Century gift of prophecy differs from the Old Testament gift, because (i) the First Century gift had to be tested (pp. 91-100), noting 1 Cor. 14:29 (interpreting “weigh” as evaluate) and 1 Thess. 5:19-21); (ii) Paul treated New Testament prophets as inferior to the apostles (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:37-38); (iii) the latest epistles, rather than encouraging reliance on the prophets who survived the apostles, urged reliance on apostolic teaching (“Guard the deposit!” “Keep the faith once delivered to the saints!” “Return to what was from the beginning!” 2 Tim.; Jude; 1 John, respectively); (iv) in some cases, Paul specifically refused to follow the counsel of an acknowledged prophet (Acts 21:4) who inaccurately prophesied Paul’s fate (Acts 21:10-11 – the Jews didn’t bind Paul, the Romans did; the Jews didn’t turn Paul over to the Romans but attempted to lynch him). Accordingly, Carson suggests that in vv. 33-35, Paul directs that while women may prophesy, they may not engage in the questioning of prophets in order to test them.

Without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with Carson’s theory, it is not inconsistent with the above theory. After all, Paul’s reason for so limiting women may well have been cultural, as a woman’s testing of a male prophet by interrogation certainly would have been seen as highly disrespectful, even immoral, in Corinthian society.

¹¹² M. C. Kurfess, ed. *Questions Answered by David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell*. McQuiddy. 1921. p. 736, quoted by Rowland. p. 140. Rather inconsistently, another book quotes Lipscomb as saying in the same text, “I cannot write it in simpler words, plainer, or put in a connection that would make it easier to be

[Continued next page]

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Yet, women have the right to teach those who know less than themselves; Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). So, I am sure that a woman may teach the Bible to young and old, male and female, at the meeting house, at home, at a neighbor's house, on Sunday or Monday or any other day of the week, if they know less than she does, if she will do it in a quiet, modest, womanly way.

Lipscomb's long tenure as editor of the *Gospel Advocate* made him the leading thinker within the Churches of Christ at the time they split from the instrumental churches and for many years thereafter.

Burton Coffman, the author of a series of commentaries on the entire New Testament and long-time minister of the Manhattan Church of Christ, concludes,

[T]o blow this up to a universal law that no woman might open her mouth in a church service is simply contrary to all reason.¹¹³

George W. DeHoff, a well-respected preacher, leader, evangelist, educator, publisher, and scholar, states,

No verse in the Bible teaches that women must teach God's **word at home**, or **in private**, those limitations having been added by false teachers. Any teaching that does not usurp authority over a man does not violate this passage.¹¹⁴

The traditional view is also disputed by J. W. McGarvey, who is certainly the most respected of the late 19th Century Restoration leaders and second only to Alexander Campbell in the quality of his scholarship among the 19th Century Restoration Movement leaders.¹¹⁵

The powers of woman have become so developed, and her privileges have been so extended in gospel lands, that it is no longer shameful for her to speak in public; but the failing of one reason is not the cessation of both. The Christian conscience has

understood. 'Let your women keep silence in the churches ...' I do not know how to add a word that can make it clearer, more direct, or more forcible. One who can explain that away can explain away anything I can write." p. 729, quoted by *Osburn, Women in the Church 2*. p. 189. Perhaps Lipscomb made a distinction between the formal assembly and other speaking opportunities.

¹¹³ Coffman. p. 240.

¹¹⁴ *Sermons on First Corinthians*. The Christian Press. 1947. p. 99, quoted with approval by Coffman. p. 243.

¹¹⁵ *Commentary on First Corinthians*. The Standard Publishing Co. 1916. p. 143, quoted approvingly by Coffman, *ibid*, and DeHoff, *ibid*. McGarvey's commentary on 1 Corinthians has also been republished as part of the *Gospel Advocate* commentary series.

therefore interpreted Paul's rule rightly when it applies it generally and admits of exceptions. ...

The gift of prophecy no longer exists; but, by the law of analogy, **those women who have a marked ability, either for exhortation or instruction, are permitted to speak in the churches.** ... The law is permanent, but the application of it may vary. If man universally gives woman permission to speak, she is free from the law in this respect.

More recently, Carroll D. Osburn, Professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University, and among the Churches' foremost living Bible scholars, concluded,¹¹⁶

Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text anything regarding hierarchicalism or female subjection. ... Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in worship. ...

Referring, as it does, to a very specific problem of disruptive questions by these women, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 teaches that these particular wives, like the uncontrolled tongue-speakers and prophets at Corinth, must defer to the assembly by voluntarily yielding to orderliness. The general principle that is to be applied to contemporary church life is that decorum is mandatory for all in the public assembly, without regard for gender.

Thus, we see in writings from 1916, 1947, 1977, and 1994 that well-respected and prominent commentators within the Churches of Christ have rejected the notion that women may only speak in private gatherings. The commentaries vary in the details of the conclusions that they draw, but they each disagree with conventional thinking within the Churches today. Coffman goes so far as to say, with respect to the requirement that women not ask questions but be silent,

What about the woman whose husband is an ignoramus, an unbeliever, or an open enemy of God and all religion; should **she** comply with this rule? Until it is affirmed that she should, it is a sin to make this rule universal.

But of course we *do* make this rule universal. Isn't it amazing that anyone who supposes that a woman may speak in an assembly will be condemned and "marked" as a

¹¹⁶ Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*, pp. 110-111.

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heretic while many of our best scholars do not agree with the traditional view now being insisted on by so many? Moreover, isn't it also amazing that we are so intimidated by the right wing of the Churches that only the rarest of congregations would actually engage in the practices approved by Lipscomb, McGarvey, DeHoff, Coffman, and Osburn (among very many others)? In fact, precious few of our members are even aware that many of our best scholars have taken these positions. Instead, the current thinking of many is that anyone allowing women to speak in assembly is *per se* a liberal and not one of us.

O. Conclusions

The considerations underlying Paul's commands aren't true in the United States today. It is not at all uncommon for me to teach Bible classes having women with more formal Bible education than I have or who have published more Bible-based literature than I have. We have blessedly advanced far beyond the First Century in educating women, and so we *already* let women ask questions – so long as it is in Sunday school class and not in the worship service, when no one asks questions anyway.

When Paul tells women to be “in submission” in verse 34, he is not telling them to be in submission to their husbands or to men in general. Rather, they are to be in submission to the requirement of decency and orderliness. In the Greek, “as the Law says” does not modify “not allowed to speak” but “submit yourselves.” There is, of course, no command in Genesis or the Law of Moses compelling women to be silent. Rather, the Law (Genesis 2) requires submission, but this is little different from the submission that Paul later commands in 1 Corinthians 16:16: “submit yourselves to one another.”¹¹⁷ And this submission ultimately flows from the fact that we are all, men and women, created in God's image, as discussed earlier.

I started by pointing out that this passage must be read in light of the overriding principles of love and grace. Have we done that? I think so. Why were women to refrain from certain speech? Because to do so would have subjected them to accusations of immorality, bringing shame to their husbands and to Christ. Paul's command was far from arbitrary – it is simply one of many examples of Christians yielding their freedom for a greater cause.

This reasoning, rooted deeply in Paul's own words, tells us that the command to be silent in 1 Corinthians 14 is no longer binding today in American culture. We have yet to study 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and many advocates of the silence rule would concede that 1 Corinthians 14 is not a sound basis for commanding female silence, but they instead rely on the commands in 1 Timothy 2.

Isn't it very implausible that God invented an eternal rule for women in the assembly that applies nowhere else? If women are inferior or subordinate in the assembly due to the curse of Eve, then they are inferior or subordinate in private worship, during

¹¹⁷ See Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*, pp. 108-109.

1 Corinthians 14 – Silence in the Churches

church committee meetings, at Sunday school class, in the work place, and in the home. God did not curse Eve only between 10:30 and 11:30 on Sunday mornings! We are left with the conclusion that the command to be silent was a temporary expedient and is not binding in current American society.

The assembly should be a reflection of our seven-day a week relationship with God. We aren't held to higher standards Sunday morning than the rest of the week! We can't put on show for God – he won't be fooled! Whatever submission is required Sunday morning is required all the time.

CHAPTER XII 1 TIMOTHY 2 – USURPING AUTHORITY

Now we get to the most challenging of the passages. We have shown that the interpretation of Genesis 3 as a curse, and not as a command, results in a sensible, consistent interpretation of many other verses. It all fits together as a logical, unitary whole. Our understanding of even familiar passages is deepened as we see how our marriages fit into God eternal plan for mankind.

But 1 Timothy 2 seems to run contrary to this pattern. Or have we missed the point entirely?

A. Background

1 Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy while Timothy was in Ephesus. Ephesus was a Greek city and a very wealthy one. The Temple of Artemis was not only a religious cult center but a financial center that served much the same role as modern banks.

Bobby Valentine explains how the culture should shape our understanding of 1 Timothy¹¹⁸ –

As a missionary, Paul, entered the capital of Roman Asia, Ephesus, he could not have missed one of the largest structures in the Hellenistic world. The magnificent temple to the Goddess Artemis – one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It had columns towering to six stories and was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, measuring about 377 by 235 ft. Artemis was the center of life in Ephesus and this is demonstrated by the fact that the city stopped work and devoted itself to the the cult for a whole month each year.

Ancient historian, Gregory Sterling, notes that women in the Greco-Roman world were generally devalued and restricted to home. In the area of religion, however, women tended to achieve their greatest degree of “freedom.” He says that religion was the one state-sanctioned sphere where women were allowed to take leading public roles throughout the period.” This freedom was especially true in the Cult of Artemis in Ephesus that was dominated by women.

¹¹⁸ Bobby Valentine, “First Timothy 2.8-15 & the Silencing of Women in Worship,” Stoned-Campbell Disciple (Feb. 20, 2013). <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2013/02/20/first-timothy-2-8-15-the-silencing-of-women-in-worship/>

The church that Timothy was put in charge of lived and breathed the atmosphere of that great pagan temple and its goddess. Just as the church in Corinth was affected by its surroundings, and churches in the South imbibed its environment, so the Ephesian church could not escape the toxins of the flamboyant and uninhibited worship of Artemis. The worship of Artemis was dominated by virgins dedicated to the goddess and castrated males. Kenneth Baily wonders, “what possibility would any male religious leadership have had for a sense of dignity and self-respect? What kind of female attitudes would have prevailed in such a city? ... Castration being the ultimate violence against the male, would not anti-male sexism in various forms have been inevitable?”

B. The text

(1 Tim. 2:1-15 ESV) First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and **quiet** [*hesuchios*] life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. ⁷ For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

⁸ I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, ¹⁰ but with what is proper for women who profess godliness – with good works.

¹¹ Let a woman learn **quietly** [*hesuchia*] with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain **quiet** [*hesuchios*]. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

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Before embarking on the study of the last paragraph, let's first observe something of the first three quoted paragraphs.

First, all Christians are urged to live peaceful and quiet lives, men and women. The word translated "quiet" in verse 2 is *hesuchios*, the same word translated "quietness" in 1 Timothy 2:11 and "silent" in verse 12.¹¹⁹ *Hesuchios* does not mean silent – it means peaceable or tranquil.

Second, Paul instructs men to "pray, lifting holy hands" (v. 8). This sentence is written as a command in the plainest of terms. Its broad scope is emphasized by the use of "in every place." We know from history that the custom of the Jews in those days was to pray looking toward the heavens, with hands raised and palms opened toward the sky. And yet I know of instances where people have complained about the lifting of hands during the assembly, it being perceived as "denominational" or Pentecostal or people drawing attention to themselves. We learn something about ourselves when we observe our members protesting obedience to a direct command!

And yet I agree that Paul does not *require* the lifting of holy hands today. The eternal, universal command is to pray. The lifting of hands is the manner of complying with the command dictated by the customs of the day.

Third, Paul instructs women to dress modestly and not with costly apparel, gold, or braided hair. And yet we readily accept women in church in fine, expensive clothes, with gold or pearl jewelry, and with braided hair. In fact, expensive clothes are standard for most congregations. Who repealed this law?

Once again, we understand that the eternal command is modesty and simplicity. What constitutes modesty and simplicity varies from culture to culture (although I think that many of our churches are very far from obeying this command even by today's standards).

This brings us to Paul's commands regarding women. Paul states that women may not teach or have authority over a man, but rather must be in submission and in quietness. But unlike the two preceding paragraphs, we have chosen to bind this command as an eternal command. We overrule the lifting of holy hands and prohibition of braided hair as based on culture, but we decide that the requirement for women to neither teach nor exercise authority is eternal. Why? Certainly not based on the context! The immediate context suggests that the universal rule, that women are to be submissive, is to be applied in the First Century cultural context by not teaching or exercising authority over men.

We need to be very cautious in dealing with a passage that is colored in our minds by our own culture (past and present) as well as being colored by First Century culture.

¹¹⁹ In 2:11, Paul uses the noun, *hesuchia*, rather than the adjective, as in 2:2.

Rather, we must try to read 1 Timothy as Timothy himself would have. Scholars present us with three possible interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:11-15:

1. Paul prohibits women from teaching a man in public.
2. Paul prohibits women in Ephesus from teaching or exercising authority because certain false teachers were taking advantage of the ignorance of the Grecian women of the day to spread false doctrines.
3. Paul prohibits any teaching by a wife of her husband that is domineering or that otherwise contradicts her role as his complement.

C. Teaching Men in Public

The traditional interpretation of this passage is that women may not teach in public. Of course, nothing in the passage mentions teaching *in public* – rather it appears that *all* teaching by women is prohibited. But such an interpretation is contradicted by Priscilla’s teaching of Apollos (Acts 18:26). Then, why would we imagine that Timothy had a copy of Acts in his drawer that he could turn to in order to find this exception?

Rather than finding exceptions in books by other authors written to another person, we should rather interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-15 to be consistent with Acts 18:26. In fact, it’s very worrisome that we would resolve an apparent contradiction by creating an exception not even hinted at in 1 Timothy 2. It’s presumptuous beyond words! *A better response to the apparent contradiction is to figure that we’ve incorrectly interpreted 1 Timothy 2, and if we were to understand it correctly, there’d be no need for us to create exceptions to God’s word!* A little humility goes a long way in hermeneutics.

Thus, there are several difficulties with this interpretation. First, we don’t allow women to teach men in Sunday school, even though when we consider 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, we declare that women can ask questions in Sunday school, since it is a private setting. *How it can be that Sunday school is public in the context of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (so that women may not teach) and private in the context of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 (so that women may speak) is beyond me!*

Second, there is no reason in our current culture that a woman teaching in Sunday school would be unsubmitive while teaching at home would be submissive. After all, outside of the church setting, we are all routinely willing to be taught or lectured by a woman in a public setting. It only seems wrong to us at church, and then only because of our interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

Third, nothing in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 limits the scope of its prohibition to the assembly or even to church affairs. Rather, we add this limitation by cobbling “in the churches” from 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 into this passage. But Paul did not write Timothy expecting him to pull out his pocket copy of 1 Corinthians and then read the two passages

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together to find Paul's meaning. No, Paul meant 1 Timothy to be understood from 1 Timothy.¹²⁰

Finally, there is no basis in the Creation accounts to prohibit a woman from teaching a man. The only arguable basis is that a woman can't exercise authority over a man due to a wife's role as suitable complement – but only a wife is a suitable complement and then only to her husband. Women are not, as a class, suitable complements to each and every man.

Thus, we are well justified in searching for a fresh interpretation.

D. False Teachers and Unlearned Women

The Ephesian background. Paul wrote 1 Timothy to Timothy while Timothy was in Ephesus,¹²¹ and so the letter deals with the situation in Ephesus. Unlike 1 Corinthians 14, Paul does not say that he does not allow women to teach or have authority “as in all the congregations.” Thus, his command may well be localized to Ephesus. Moreover, the fact that Paul takes personal credit for the command – “I do not permit ...” – indicates that Paul was making a rule to meet the needs of the particular time and place, much as he prohibited the Corinthians from eating together to prevent the abuse of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11.¹²²

The earliest New Testament books often deal with the problem of Judaizing teachers, arising from the efforts of certain Jews to mix Christianity with the Law of Moses. Later books (including 1 Timothy), however, begin to deal with Gnosticism,¹²³

¹²⁰ Some, such as Ferguson *Women in the Church*, pp. 30-31, argue that the assembly is in mind based on –

(1 Tim. 3:14-15 ESV) I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

However, the “church” and the “household of God” refer to the congregation, not the assembly, and the preceding verses in chapter 3 deal with elders and deacons, who are officers of the congregation, not the assembly.

¹²¹ 1 Tim. 1:3.

¹²² 1 Cor. 11:34 declares, “If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.” Most Churches of Christ interpret this command as being limited to the Corinthian situation, because the common meal was being abused to the point of sin. 1 Cor. 11:20-21. A significant number of Churches insist that this verse prohibits eating the church building – at all times and places. But this view fails to acknowledge that there were no church buildings until the 4th Century. In fact, until Constantine legalized Christianity, most assemblies were conducted in private homes, where there were kitchens and much eating. Moreover, Jude 7 specifically condones the “love feast,” or common meal of Christians, often combined with the Lord's Supper.

¹²³ Many scholars dispute that Gnosticism was a First Century phenomenon, and certainly history tells us that Gnosticism was not formalized until the Second Century. On the other hand, the mystery religions

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arising from the efforts of certain Greeks to blend Christianity with the Gentile mystery religions.

The mystery religions were Gentile cults that had many elements in common with Christianity. They often promised salvation, unity with a god, and sonship. In many cults, the god being worshipped was believed to have died and been resurrected. These cults preceded Christianity and doubtlessly helped pave the way for the pagan world to accept Jesus. However, the cults also contained many elements utterly foreign to Christianity. It is not surprising that the Greeks tried to combine their old religions into Christianity, much as the Jews tried to combine Judaism into Christianity.

Evidence of Gnosticism in the Pastorals. And indeed there is ample evidence in 1 Timothy of Paul's concern regarding Gnostic teachings. Moreover, it appears that much of the problem centered on the women in the congregation.

(1 Tim. 4:1-7a ESV) Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ **who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods** that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ **For everything created by God is good**, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

⁶ If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. ⁷ **Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.**

One characteristic of Gnosticism is asceticism. Some Greeks taught that material things are evil and must be given up to be truly spiritual. Thus, the enjoyment of the pleasures of this world must be forsaken. This false teaching was eventually accepted into Christianity, resulting in the monastic movement, Lent, and similar efforts to escape the world that typify medieval Catholicism. But Paul says that there is nothing wrong with enjoying God's creation and that there is no merit in giving up some pleasure just for the sake of suffering.

and pagan philosophies that gave rise to Gnosticism had been around for centuries, and we see in the Pastoral Letters and many other books of the New Testament the troubles these false ideas were causing very early in the history of the church. Call it Proto-Gnosticism if you will.

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The ESV avoids the literal meaning of “silly myths” in 1 Tim. 4:7. The Greek is “the godless and old-wifely myths” or, as the NIV translates, “old wives’ tales.” We should understand that Paul meant “old wives’ tales” to be taken literally. We use it as a figure of speech, but Paul was referring to tales told by old wives! As was also true in Corinth, in Ephesus the women were uneducated and did not work outside the home. Once a woman had raised her children, she often became idle and was subject to becoming a gossip, as Paul states later. But these same women were the foundation of many of the Ephesian religions. Unscrupulous men found the opportunity in this to raise themselves to positions of influence and to make money at the expense of naive women. And we should not underestimate the naiveté of certain classes of First Century women.

Imagine growing up with no formal education, no opportunity to associate with better-educated people, no television, no magazines, no periodicals, and no radio. “Ignorant” understates the situation. Such women, through no fault of their own, would doubtlessly be easily duped by whatever cult was fashionable.

(1 Tim. 5:11-15 ESV) ¹¹ But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹² and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³ Besides that, **they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies**, saying what they should not. ¹⁴ So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary **no occasion for slander**. ¹⁵ For **some have already strayed after Satan**.

The Ephesian women formed a class that was subject to the sins of gossip and slander. But the danger was perhaps much worse than the translators indicate. The word translated “busybodies” can also be translated “practitioners of magic arts,” which is how the same word is translated in Acts 19:19. The Ephesian religions were often characterized by the practice of “magic” cults.

We see in the final quoted sentence that Paul was very concerned for the reputation of the women in the Ephesian church. The command to have children and to marry is to protect their reputation in a world where an unmarried woman frequently became a temple prostitute for lack of any other means of employment.

We see the same problem with many of women members of the church at Ephesus reflected in 2 Timothy as well.

(2 Tim. 3:6-7 ESV) ⁶ For among them are those who creep into households **and capture weak women**, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

It's important to realize that Paul is not being critical of women as such but rather is criticizing what was going on in Ephesus at the time due to the local culture's bias against women.

Summary. Commentators are essentially unanimous in recognizing that 1 Timothy was written in part to combat the evils of Gnosticism. Male false teachers created the problem, but the problem spread and infected the church in large part due to the ignorance and naiveté of the women. Thus, in a society where women were unspeakably uneducated and ignorant, and where false teachers were spreading anti-Christian traditions by taking advantage of women, Paul had very good reason to place limitations on the authority that women should have.

E. Wives May Not Seek Dominion through Teaching

Women or wives? An alternative translation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is to take *gunē* to mean wife and *anēr* to mean husband. As discussed earlier, the words are completely ambiguous in the Greek, and the distinction can only be found from the context. So let's see if we get a better result by translating *gunē* as wife and *anēr* as husband:¹²⁴

A **wife** should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a **wife** to teach or to have authority over a **husband**; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the **wife** who was deceived and became a sinner. But **wives** will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Translated in this manner, the verse becomes a prohibition of a wife's usurping authority over her husband, not women having authority over men. And notice the appropriateness of the translation. Only wives should be saved through childbearing. Paul would hardly expect unmarried women to seek this route to salvation!

While this translation does not resolve all difficulties with the verse, it has much appeal. After all, Adam and Eve were husband and wife. Wives are to be complements for their husbands. And nowhere does the Old Testament require women in general to be subject to men in general.

¹²⁴ As noted earlier with regard to the meaning of *gunē*, translatable as either woman or wife, in 1 Cor. 11, because the Greek language uses the same word for woman and wife, Paul uses the word in both senses in the same context, assuming, as the language assumes, that adult women are married, as was typically – but certainly not always – the case. This leaves the translation of *gunē* in many contexts very difficult, since in our culture such an assumption is not permitted.

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“**Silent.**” The King James Version mistranslates *hesuchios* in verses 11 and 12 as “silence.” The ESV makes the same mistake in verse 12. In fact, as noted previously, the word means “quietness” or “tranquility.” *Strong’s Dictionary* defines the word –

keeping one’s seat (sedentary), i.e. (by impl.) still (undisturbed, undisturbing): – peaceable, quiet.

Vine’s states that while *eremos* means tranquility arising from without, *hesuchios* –

indicates tranquility arising from within, causing no disturbance to others.

This is a different word from *sigao*, translated “silent” in 1 Corinthians 14:35. In fact, it is the same word translated “quiet” in 1 Timothy 2:2 describing how all Christians should live all the time! Hence, our translation now becomes –

A wife should learn in **peaceableness** and full submission. I do not permit a wife to teach or to have authority over a husband; she must be in **peaceableness**. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the wife who was deceived and became a sinner. But wives will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

The meaning of “exercise authority.” We must next consider the meaning of “exercise authority,” which is a translation of *authenteo*. Commentators disagree as to the meaning of *authenteo*. This is the only time the word is used as a verb in the New Testament. *Authenteo* means to dominate or “usurp authority.”¹²⁵ It would hardly be consistent with submission to dominate.

While “exercise authority” is a possible translation (as in the ESV), Paul always uses other words for “exercise authority,” and so his selection of this unusual term must be intended to carry some special meaning. If he just wanted to say “exercise authority,” why vary from his normal vocabulary? Moreover, *authenteo* is phrased in contrast to “be in quietness” (mistranslated “be silent” by the ESV). “Domineer” best suits the evident contrast. Thus, the King James Version is better than the ESV in translating “usurp authority.”

Standard Greek dictionaries confirm this conclusion. BDAG translates –

¹²⁵ Vine’s, *ibid.* p. 89.

to assume a stance of independent authority, *give orders to, dictate to*

Strong's Dictionary defines *authenteo* –

to act of oneself, i.e. (fig.) dominate: – usurp authority over.

Vine's defines the word –

to exercise authority on one's own account, to domineer over, is used in 1 Tim. 2:12, A.V., "to usurp authority," R.V. "to have dominion." In the earlier usage of the word it signified one who with his own hand killed either others or himself. Later it came to denote one who acts on his own authority; hence, to exercise authority, dominion.

Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*¹²⁶ translates,

one who acts on his own authority, autocratic, ... an absolute master ... to exercise dominion over one ... 1 Tim. ii.12.

Spiros Zodhiates¹²⁷ translates –

to use or exercise authority or power over as an autocrat, to domineer (1 Tim. 2:12).

BDAG translates –

to assume a stance of independent authority, give orders to, dictate to

The Revised Standard Version translates "have dominion." Many other translations are similar: New English Bible: "domineer over"; American Standard Version: "have dominion over"; Living Bible: "lording over."

Quite clearly, "exercise authority" in the ESV should instead be rendered "domineer."¹²⁸ Thus, Paul does not prohibit women from having authority – in the church

¹²⁶ Hendrickson Publishers. 1996.

¹²⁷ *The Complete Word Study Dictionary – New Testament*. AMG International, Inc. 1992.

¹²⁸ Osburn, *Women in the Church* 2. p. 82, comments, "Both from the first century BC, a papyrus in Berlin clearly has the meaning 'to domineer,' as does Philodemus, who mentions 'dominating masters.'"

[Continued next page]

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or elsewhere. He simply reminds them that self-willed rule is unchristian. Indeed, the New Testament is clear that no one may domineer, including men in general and elders in particular.¹²⁹

Teaching. This leaves the question, then, of what Paul intends by prohibiting a woman from teaching. If a woman may exercise authority, so long as she doesn't domineer, then may she teach in a non-domineering manner? Certainly, Priscilla was allowed to teach Apollos.

In his *Women in the Church 1*, Osburn states,

For reasons that must be explained in detail elsewhere, I am of the opinion that the “teaching” in v. 12 is not “teaching” per se, but specifically “domineering teaching.” The *authentein* is taken by complementarians [hierarchicalists] to mean “exercise authority,” but stronger arguments exist for taking it to mean “domineer,” paired with “submissive” in v. 11 and in contrast to “peaceable/quietness.” Both “teach” and “domineer” have “man” as a direct object (here in the Greek genitive case because “domineer” takes that case). When, in Greek, two verbs are joined in this way, the nearer qualifies the farther. Hence, the lack of quietude/peacefulness that is stressed both before and after this admonition is countered by “not to teach in a domineering way.”¹³⁰

And so our translation becomes –

A **wife** should learn in **peaceableness** and full submission. I do not permit a **wife** to teach her **husband in a domineering way**; she must be in **peaceableness**. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

Osburn points out further examples of the meaning domineer in the writings of early Christians, pp. 217-219, John Chrysostom (4th Century) and Hippolytus (3rd Century).

¹²⁹ 1 Pet. 5:1-3: “To the elders ... Be shepherds of God’s flock ... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” 1 Pet. 5:5-6: “Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”

¹³⁰ p. 112, relying in part on Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*. rev. G. Messing. Harvard University Press. 1956, pp. 364-365. Ferguson points out that the new edition of BDAG shows that this construction is often parallel, so that the second phrase does not necessarily modify the first (Ferguson *Christian Chronicle*). At best, Ferguson has shown that Osburn’s construction is not necessarily right, leaving us to find the correct result based on historical and literary context. On the other hand, in *Women in the Church 2*, Osburn provides several New Testament examples in this construction where the second clause (“domineer” in this case) defines and limits the first clause (“teach”). p. 221, including Acts 4:18, Gal. 1:16-17; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; and Acts 16:21. Greek scholars call this construction *hendiadys*. Of course, the distinction between a *hendiadys* and parallel construction must be made in the context of the entire Bible. Which translation is most consistent with Gen. 1-2?

And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the **wife** who was deceived and became a sinner. But **wives** will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Thus, Paul prohibits wives from teaching or otherwise exercising authority so as to dominate their husbands. Certainly, this would violate the command to be submissive. (We could point out that it would be just as wrong for men to refuse submission but to insist on dominance.)

F. Adam and Eve

I believe that there would be much less controversy over this passage but for the references Paul makes to Adam being made before Eve and Eve being the first to sin. While these are true statements, they hardly argue for all women to be subordinate to all men. After all, although Adam was made first, he was made incomplete (and hence imperfect) without Eve. And while Eve sinned first, Adam sinned as well. Moreover, in Romans 5 Paul gives Adam the blame for the Fall of Man (Rom. 5:12). The world was condemned through the one man, Adam, according to Paul. And God gave the command to not eat of the tree of knowledge to Adam before Eve was even made (Gen. 2:16-17). Adam can hardly claim the moral high ground over Eve. Why does Paul seem to blame Eve here and Adam in Romans? Why has Paul seemingly interpreted Genesis 2 and 3 inconsistently?

I believe the text is best understood when we outline the passage as follows:

- a** women should learn in quietness
- b** do not teach or exercise authority (in a domineering way), but be in full submission
- b'** Adam was formed first
- a'** Eve was deceived

This structure is called a “chiasm” and is very common in the scriptures,¹³¹ and the ancient world in general. The logic is parallel, with **a'** explaining **a** and **b'** explaining **b**.

¹³¹ See Brian Casey, “Galatians mini-structures,” *NT Christianity* (March 1, 2013), <https://blcasey.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/galatians-mini-structures/>, for several other examples from Paul’s writings.

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- (a) Women should learn in quietness because (a') women should not be easily deceived, as Eve was.

The reference to Eve being deceived makes the point that women should learn so as to avoid following Eve's bad example in being deceived.¹³² When women do not study, they allow themselves to become victims of false teaching, and they can't count on their husbands' learning to protect themselves, any more than Eve was protected by Adam from the serpent's lies. This is exactly what was going on in Ephesus at the time, and it continues to be sound advice. Paul's first command is that the women "should learn." Only by learning can the women avoid following in Eve's footsteps.

Paul uses the account of Eve's deception to apply essentially the same point to all Christians in 2 Corinthians 11:1-3. "But I'm afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." As in 1 Timothy, Paul sees Eve's sin as a warning to Christians, men or women, against being led astray by false teachers.

- (b) Wives should not teach in a domineering way because (b') Eve was made as Adam's suitable complement.

The argument from the Creation order does not indicate subordination. After all, in Genesis 1, man – male and female – was made last, but that hardly argues for subordination of the man to the animals! Creation was from incomplete to complete, not superior to inferior. Moreover, we've already seen that the subordination of women begins with God's curse of the Creation.

Thus, the point must be found in the purpose behind the order of creating men and women. Man was not good alone. He needed a suitable complement. God made women to complement their husbands. Therefore, if a wife domineers, she fails to be the complement that God intended. The order of creation argument supports the command to submission that we are already well familiar with.

Thus, Paul says that women should learn because Eve was deceived (and women should not follow her bad example) and that wives should not usurp authority over their husbands, because they were created to be suitable complements, not dominators.

We learn from this passage:

¹³² The NET Bible translators note –

Although the Greek conjunction δέ (de) can have a simple connective force ("and"), it is best to take it as contrastive here: Verse 1 Tim. 2:11 gives a positive statement (that is to say, that a woman should learn). This was a radical and liberating departure from the Jewish view that women were not to learn the law.

1. Women are required to learn in quietness. The command to quietness is the natural extension of Paul’s command that all Christians should live quiet and peaceful lives, found in 1 Timothy 2:2.

2. Wives are to be in submission to and complements for their husbands, and this is always true.

3. Wives may not teach in a domineering way.

4. Women should learn God’s word to protect themselves from deception (which is always true but was a particularly critical need in Ephesus when Paul wrote 1 Timothy).

5. Nothing in this passage teaches that women are gullible or more gullible than men.¹³³

G. A More Formal Argument

Many argue that Paul’s argument is –

A. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve”

C. Therefore, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man”

I agree.

1. The missing step

Where we disagree is how Paul gets from A to C. Under any interpretation, Paul’s argument is an enthymeme, that is, an argument stated with a missing step. So what is the missing step?

You see, it’s not obvious why Adam being made before Eve requires all women in church (and only in church) to submit to all men in church.

Now, it’s common among all people in all times and places to skip steps in arguments – even mathematicians do this. Paul surely thought Timothy knew the logic that got him from A to C, but nearly 2,000 years later, it’s not so obvious.

So what is B? What step completes the logical flow?

¹³³ Indeed, if being compared to Eve’s sin makes a gender gullible in God’s eyes, then both genders are gullible because both men and women are compared to Eve’s deception in 2 Cor. 11:3.

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Well, one possibility is that B = “Whomever God makes first has authority over whomever God makes second.” (Call this B1) That’s the classic argument. There are several problems with it.

First, the real premise would have to be: “Whichever gender God creates first rules over whichever gender God makes second” (Call this B2). After all, Paul somehow generalizes from Adam and Eve to all men in church and all women in church. You see, many female members of my church were made before my 18-year old son, but under the traditional view, they are subordinate to him. Hence, the real argument is B2, not B1.

Another problem is there is nothing in either B1 or B2 (or A or C) that tells us why the rule only applies in the church and does not apply to Deborah and does not apply in the workplace.

So you can argue that B1 or B2 is true, but it doesn’t complete the argument as made in contemporary Christianity.

Or you could argue that Christian women should not have authority over men in the workplace either, and that at least follows from B2, but no one seems willing to accept that conclusion.

Rather, even the most conservative among us want to insist that C is really “Therefore, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man [but only in the family or internal church matters].” Call that C2.

To get from A to C2 you need a B that logically implies C2 from A. And I’m aware of no such argument. Even if 1 Timothy 3:15 tells us that C is really C2 (which I dispute but doesn’t change the conclusion), you still have to logically get to C2 from A by some missing step. What is it?

Now, there are those who get frustrated at this point in the discussion and say “Paul said it and I believe it and that’s all there is to it!” But Paul didn’t say C2. He said C. And C2 is not a reasonable inference from A if you can’t explain how A implies C2.

You see, Paul gave us the reason for C. He was quite explicit. And he expected to be understood. And if we interpret C to really be C2, and if C2 can’t be inferred from A, then we were wrong to interpret C as really meaning C2.

That’s the formal argument. Of course, that argument doesn’t answer the question. I merely shows that the traditional argument has significant logical flaws. The flaws can be partly (and only partly) cured by teaching that Christian women cannot have authority over men in the workplace, but it’s only a partial solution because it doesn’t deal with Deborah.

1. Deborah

There are three usual rebuttals to the Deborah argument –

- Many commentators solve the problem by ignoring her.
- F. LaGard Smith, in *Men of Strength for Women of God*, argues that God empowered her because the men were so weak, but there's no evidence of this in the text at all. It's just not there. And God often used weak men to lead his people. Consider Gideon, for example.
- Finally, some argue that God gave her special gifts via the Spirit, which empowered her to lead. But these same people would refuse to admit that a woman given the gift of leadership or teaching (Rom 12:7-8) today could lead or teach men – whereas Deborah led men.

Thus, to make A imply C, you have to overcome the Deborah argument and explain how the order of creation only applies in internal church affairs as a logical conclusion from A or else both overcome the Deborah argument and accept that Christian women cannot have authority over men in the workplace.

2. A better explanation

Now, the above is all true as a matter of logical necessity whether or not I have a better explanation, but I have a better explanation.

First, as we've earlier discussed, "woman" is a reference to a wife. The Greek word (*gunē*) is entirely ambiguous and must be interpreted from the immediate context. The same is true for the word translated "man."

There are at least two reasons to take it as meaning "wife" in this context.

- I. 2:15 refers to being saved through childbearing. Paul is obviously not thinking of single women!
- II. It's just not true that all women are subordinated to all men in Genesis 2. Eve was made the suitable helper for her husband, not for all men. There is nothing in Genesis 2 that remotely suggests that all women are to be subject to all men.

Therefore, I take Paul to really be saying,

- A. "For Adam was formed first, then Eve"
- B. ?
- C. Therefore, "I do not permit a [wife] to teach or to exercise authority over a [husband]"

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Now, translated this way, what is B? Obviously, B = “Eve was made second to be a suitable helper to her husband, a relationship that should be true of all marriages at all times.”

(Gen 2:24 ESV) 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Moses himself generalizes the lesson of Genesis 2 to all marriages – but not to women and men who are not married to each other.

Hence, Paul is truly reasoning from the Law (the Torah), just as he said. He is not making a new rule. He is applying a general principle announced by Moses in Genesis 2.

3. Conclusion

Therefore, the traditional interpretation insists on a conclusion that cannot be inferred from the reasons stated by Paul, whereas the interpretation I suggest results naturally and easily from Genesis without having to invent doctrines not found in Genesis.

Moreover, these conclusions follow even without reference to the culture of Ephesians and the relative ignorance of the women in that congregation.

H. Saved through childbirth.

What did Paul mean when he said that women will be saved through childbirth? I know three theories that make sense:

1. The Kroegers¹³⁴ suggest that many Ephesian cults considered childbearing to be a sin and condemned women who gave birth. Perhaps Paul is dealing with this strange teaching here.

2. In the Greek, “childbearing” is preceded by “the.” Perhaps Paul has a particular birth in mind, that is, the birth of Jesus prophesied in Genesis 3:15. The curse that imposes such limitations on even Christian women (because of the importance of adhering to society’s notions of propriety, which notions are influenced by male domination) will ultimately fail because of the birth of Jesus.¹³⁵

3. Paul may be saying simply that virtuous Christian women will be saved. Possibly Paul is saying that women may be saved despite the curse of Eve in whatever

¹³⁴ Richard Clark Kroeger & Catherine Clark Kroeger. *I Suffer Not a Woman*. Baker Book House. 1992.

¹³⁵ Greek does not follow English in the use of definite articles. A Greek “the” often does not refer a single or particular object and thus often doesn’t mean “the” as we use the word in English.

role society assigns to them by living the Christian life in that role. If the role of women is to bear children and not teach or have authority in a given culture, then the women will be saved by their faith, love, and holiness in that role. Submission may require Christians to live as strangers in a strange land and not fully enjoy the freedom that Christ bought.

As is so often the case, N. T. Wright summarizes the point nicely,¹³⁶

And what about the bit about childbirth? Paul doesn't see it as a punishment. Rather, he offers an assurance that, though childbirth is indeed difficult, painful and dangerous, often the most testing moment in a woman's life, this is not a curse which must be taken as a sign of God's displeasure. God's salvation is promised to all, women and men, who follow Jesus in faith, love, holiness and prudence. And that salvation is promised to those who contribute to God's creation through childbearing, just as it is to everyone else. Becoming a mother is hard enough, God knows, without pretending it's somehow an evil thing.

I've never heard a preacher preach or seen an author write that women who can't bear children will be damned. If this were so, then it would be better for a single woman to bear children out of wedlock than to die childless! What an absurd conclusion. Therefore, we very properly and consistently limit this teaching to its cultural time and place, just as the preceding verses must be so limited.

¹³⁶ N. T. Wright, "Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis," a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church' St John's College, Durham, September 4 2004. http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm.

CHAPTER XIII GALATIANS 3:28 – THERE IS NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE.

A. The big picture

The New Testament's most explicit statement of the new relationship of men and women is found in Galatians 3:28:

(Gal. 3:28 ESV) 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Not surprisingly, there are widely varying views on how to interpret this passage. Paternalists and hierarchicalists typically limit this truth to the requirements for being saved – men and women have the same right to initial salvation. Egalitarians, however, see this truth as applying more generally – it applies after men and women are saved as well as when they are saved.

B. “No male or female”

Most translations conceal a vital element of Galatians 3:28. While the Greek text says, in close parallel, “neither Jew nor Greek” and “neither slave nor free,” the third pair is not “neither male nor female.” Rather, the Greek is “no male and female” – as correctly translated by the ESV.

The language “male and female” is the same as “male and female” in the Greek of Genesis 1:28 in the Septuagint. And to any Jew, especially a well-educated Jewish rabbi such as Paul, the quotation from Genesis would be immediately apparent.

Obviously, Paul is not declaring that Christians will have no gender or will not engage in sex. And Paul is plainly not urging homo- or bisexuality. So in what sense is there no “male and female”? I've been able to find three answers.

1. The synagogue prayer

Wright suggests that Paul is specifically contradicting the synagogue prayer in which a Jewish man thanks God that he is not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.¹³⁷

We might observe, closer to home, that in Galatians 3:28 he implies a drastic revision to a well-known synagogue prayer: his claim that ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, no male and female’ **answers quite directly to the prayers of thanks that the**

¹³⁷ N. T. Wright. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. vol. 4, Christian Origins and the Question of God Fortress Press. 2013. p. 1150.

person praying has not been made a heathen, a slave or a woman. (Similar invocations are found within the non-Jewish world as well. It is not only Jewish traditions that Paul is rejecting.)

But this doesn't explain the no "male and female" element. Under this theory, the three pairs all serve the identical purpose – to contradict the prayer.

2. The image of God according to the rabbis

The Babylonian Talmud (the "oral law") says in 5 Tract Avot, regarding Job 1:1:

Adam the first man also came forth circumcised, as it is written:
"And God created man in his image."

The Jews considered circumcision a mark of the image of God. Because the woman was not circumcised, she was not in God's image – not to the same degree as the male. It seems likely that Paul is refuting this error and declaring that, in Christ, the female is just as much in God's image as the male.

Circumcision is a gender specific rite. Only men were circumcised. But in Christ, we're all sons of God and therefore have all the rights of sons – including inheritance of the New Heavens and New Earth, but not just that. Inheritance is part of our salvation but not all.

Because we're all sons, we are all in *Abba*-relationship with God. We're all adopted by God. We're all saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus the Messiah!

3. Circumcision

In his book *Justification*, Wright explains that circumcision was a sign of the covenant that only applied to men.¹³⁸

Perhaps this is part of the point in the 'no "male and female" ' of 3:28: **circumcision itself not only divides Jew from Greek, it also puts a wall between male and female, with only the male proudly bearing the covenant sign.** It isn't like that in the gospel. Male and female alike believe in the faithful Messiah. Male and female alike are baptized, die and rise with and in the Messiah. Male and female belong side by side as equal members of the single family God promised to Abraham.

¹³⁸ Tom Wright. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. 2009. p. 110.

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I think this is surely part of Paul's thinking. Baptism is gender neutral. Receipt of the Spirit is gender neutral. But only men bear the mark of circumcision – and this shows that circumcision is obsolete, inappropriate for the Christian age. After all, as Paul concludes in Galatians 3:26 –

(Gal. 3:25-26 ESV) ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

– we are all *sons* of God. Not children of God, but sons. We are sons because we are in the Son of God, Christ Jesus. Thus, we receive the full rights of inheritance.

(Gal. 4:5-6 NET) ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may be adopted **as sons with full rights**. ⁶ And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who calls "*Abba!* Father!"

Daughters did not enjoy the same inheritance rights in those days. Only the male heirs were assured of an inheritance.

And so, thanks to the Son, we – both male and female – have “full rights of sons.”¹³⁹ Is this just the right to be saved? Hardly. After all, we weren't even clothed with Christ until we'd been saved, and being clothed with Christ is what gets us full rights! Being clothed with Christ is not about admission to salvation – it's a result of salvation, and therefore our new status as sons of God affects how we live and relate to one another as Christians.

4. Conclusion

I think all three interpretations are correct. Given that Galatians was written to deal with whether Gentiles must be circumcised, the circumcision explanation was likely primary in Paul's mind, but there's no denying the remarkable parallel between Galatians 3:28 and the Jewish daily prayer. Any Jew or Gentile God-fearer would have immediately seen it, too. Paul plainly wishes to quash any notion that men should think of themselves as better or even more fortunate than women. Just so, the idea that men, and not women, are made in God's image runs contrary to Paul's theology, and so it would be very much like him to repudiate any such notion.

¹³⁹ The NET Bible translator notes explain the reason for adding “as sons with full rights” –

The Greek term *υιοθεσία* (*huiothesia*) was originally a legal technical term for adoption as a son with full rights of inheritance. BDAG 1024 s.v. notes, “a legal t.t. of ‘adoption’ of children, in our lit., i.e. in Paul, only in a transferred sense of a transcendent filial relationship between God and humans (with the legal aspect, not gender specificity, as major semantic component).”

In short, Paul wrote the verse to elevate the status of women in the eyes of the men in Galatia.

C. Initial justification

Jack Cottrell¹⁴⁰ points out that under the Law of Moses daughters did not inherit, unless there was no son. Thus, for a female Christian to inherit the “promise,” that is, the promise of salvation by faith rather than works that God gave to Abraham, some mechanism must be found to get around this rule.

Paul deals with this by declaring that at baptism Christians “put on Christ” (3:27 KJV) and so God only sees Jesus when he looks at us, thereby allowing us to claim the inheritance of the promise.

Cottrell also points out that Gentiles and slaves don’t qualify to inherit from Abraham either – only male, free Jews. Thus, the commonality of the three pairs is the contrast in ability to inherit.

I’m inclined to agree with Cottrell up to this point. But then he concludes that therefore inheritance only applies to a Christian’s initial salvation – not to other aspects of our relationship with God. Thus, while men and women have equal access to salvation – clearly the subject at hand – they don’t necessarily have equal access to other elements of the Christian life. And here I must disagree.

Inheritance. First, we need to realize that Paul speaks in terms of “promise” and “inheritance,” not salvation.

(Gal. 3:16-18 ESV) ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Paul is addresses God’s covenant made with Abraham. This promise was to provide Israel with an “inheritance,” being the Promised Land. However, the prophets, Jesus, and his apostles expanded the Torah’s language of the Promised Land to include the entire earth our promised inheritance. Compare –

¹⁴⁰ Cottrell.

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(Mat 5:5 ESV) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

– with –

(Psa 37:11 ESV) But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

And in Revelation 21, the new heavens and new earth are described as heaven descending to join with the earth so that God will live with man. Hence, "inheritance" and "promise" become "salvation."

(Gal. 3:28-29 ESV) ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Thus, Paul declares that the equality of the three pairs result in all Christians belong to Christ and so becoming "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." That is, we inherit the earth because of God's promise to Abraham, to treat faith as righteousness and to invite the Gentiles into Abraham's family.

But for all to inherit equally, in the church, there may be no distinction between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female, because in the ancient world, being the wrong race, a slave, or a woman could keep you from inheriting.

And because we are all sons, and because God does not discriminate, circumcision is not a marker of salvation – since it applies only to Jewish men.

But among the many points Paul makes in Galatians is that *whatever gets you into Christ is the same as what keeps you in Christ*. Thus, not only do I not have to be circumcised to become saved, I don't need to be circumcised to stay saved.

Take, for example, Galatians 3:3 –

(Gal. 3:3 ESV) ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

In other words, if the Spirit is how you were saved, then the Spirit is how you walk as a Christian and how you remain saved. How you enter the Kingdom defines what it means to be in the Kingdom.

This is why Paul declares in Galatians that the gospel – salvation by faith – affects how we deal with our fellow Christians. For example, at the end of chapter 2, Paul rebukes Peter for refusing to associate with the Gentiles. Why? Because discrimination contradicts how we are saved. Paul reminds Peter,

(Gal. 2:16 ESV) ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

In short, Paul declares that the process by which we are saved tells us how we are to treat one another. God accepts Jews and Gentiles both based on faith. Because the Gentiles are saved by faith, we may not refuse to eat with them because they are uncircumcised. God has accepted them. We must therefore do the same. God is not a respecter of persons. We may not be a respecter of persons either.

Therefore, the terms of admission define how we are to treat our fellow Christians. We must treat Gentiles as full citizens, having full rights as adopted sons, because this is how they were justified. We cannot argue that their sonship only justifies them and yet we may now discriminate against them because they aren't Jews!

In other words, Cottrell is exactly right that Paul is discussing justification, but the terms of justification define how we are to treat each other in the Kingdom.

Of course, the same argument addresses how men and women are to relate to one another in Christ. Indeed, if God only sees Jesus when he looks at a woman, then who are we to see anything less?

And if we aren't required to grant women the same full rights as sons, why did Paul insist that Peter treat Gentiles the same as Jews – so much so that Paul declared Peter condemned for his discrimination.

D. Peter's condemnation

Paul says of Peter, before he repented –

(Gal. 2:11-12 ESV) But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

Peter refused to eat with the Gentile Christians, treating them as second-class citizens of the Kingdom, out of fear of criticism. Paul says that treating the saved as damned in this way meant that Peter “stood condemned” (ESV). The NASB, NIV, and NRSV agree. But the KJV and NET Bible soften the language to say he was “clearly wrong” or the like. But the NET Bible translator notes concede that the Greek is “he stood condemned.”

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Scary stuff, isn't it? Peter the apostle stood condemned because, out of pressure from fellow Christians, he treated a class of believers as second-class citizens, to please their scruples. Really ... scary ... stuff.

E. Mary

(Gal. 4:4-5 ESV) ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Why does Paul point out that Jesus was born of woman? Isn't everybody? I believe that it is to emphasize two things. First, that Jesus has an earthly ancestry that traces back to Abraham, and thus he is a legitimate heir to the inheritance of righteousness by faith. Second, *Paul declares that God honors women – he chose a woman to bring his Son into the world! How, then, can the false teachers insist on a male-centered command?*

By treating Mary abstractly as “woman,” Paul is implying more than that Mary was Jesus’ mother. His point must be to contradict the notion that men are greater than women in God’s scheme since circumcision brings them into a relationship that women cannot share. His point is that God has honored women by bringing the Savior to the world through a woman – clearly offsetting any claim to superiority that the Judaizing teachers could make.

F. Conclusion

Paul declares that this thinking contradicts the gospel because God accepted the Gentiles without circumcision, and therefore we must not only treat them as saved, we have to eat with them. We have live the acceptance of God. How we treat them must reflect the grace we’ve all received.

And so I see no way to separate the terms of justification from how we treat each other. And Paul couldn't be clearer in Galatians 3:28 that women have the same rights as men – in terms of inheritance and so in terms of how we treat each other in the church.

**CHAPTER XIV
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

I studied and even taught this material for many years before arriving at my present position. I'm confident that many readers will struggle to get comfortable with these ideas that are so far removed from what many of us have been taught. If I we're teaching in person, I'd look forward to a question and answer period to allow those with questions to clarify their thinking. In lieu of such a session, the following are the hardest questions that I could think of to ask myself:

Q. The argument for men to have dominion over women seems so simple and your position seems very complicated, with references to the Greek and commentators and all. Isn't the simplicity of the dominion position strong evidence that it is the right position?

A. Not at all. The simplest interpretations of scripture are sometimes right but sometimes very wrong. After all, it is very easy to point out that the New Testament frequently, plainly, and unambiguously commands us to greet one another with the Holy Kiss.

(Rom. 16:16) Greet one another with a holy kiss.

(1 Cor. 16:20) Greet one another with a holy kiss.

(2 Cor. 13:12) Greet one another with a holy kiss.

(1 Thess. 5:26) Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

(1 Pet. 5:14) Greet one another with a kiss of love.

These are all direct commands. The commands are plain. We don't preach, teach, or practice them, even though the argument in support of adopting this practice is very simple indeed. What's not to understand?

The only reason we don't struggle with the Holy Kiss (or for that matter, prohibitions on braided hair and gold jewelry or the requirement to wear a veil) is that such commands run contrary to our culture today and would not serve their original purpose today. We do struggle with the role of women because, until very recently, our culture has refused to allow women to have the same opportunities and recognition as men. Our older members grew up in that culture and many (including the women) came to approve and accept unequal rights for women. Therefore, they find the traditionalist arguments comfortable – and therefore “simple.” (We might analogize to the Stockholm Syndrome and principles of cognitive dissonance.)

Moreover, the argument that I've spent more than 100 pages on can be stated just as simply as any other argument dealing with the role of women:

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The Bible says that in God's eyes there is no male and female. It means what it says.

Passages that apparently limit women's role are written for a temporary cultural situation that no longer exists in the West (much like the command of the Holy Kiss).

Genesis 3 is a curse not a command.

Genesis 1 and 2 define how men and women should relate in Christ, who came to undo the Fall of Man – they are both made in God's image and husbands and wives should be one flesh, much as Jesus and God are one.

It's not really complicated.

Q. I just can't accept that men and women are equal.

A. Me neither. God made us different. While God did not set up a hierarchy of men over women, Genesis 2 plainly teaches that Adam was inadequate (not good) without Eve. God did not make another man – he made a woman, who was wondrously different.

The inherent, God-created differences between men and women mean that certain gifts and talents will often be unequally distributed among them. It is hardly a shock to anyone that more women teach the cradle roll class than men. There is no deep theological reason that men shouldn't do this. They just, on the whole, don't care to and, on the whole, wouldn't be as good at it. But many women have this talent. This does not mean that men cannot teach cradle roll. Just so, it is conceivable that more men than women are gifted to teach adult Sunday school classes (although we really have no way of knowing this at this time). If this proves to be a fact, nonetheless, as J. W. McGarvey suggested nearly 100 years ago, capable women should be allowed to teach.

Finally, the differences between men and women relate foremost to marriage, not church organization. God gave Eve to Adam as a wife – not as a pre-school Sunday school class teacher and communion preparer. As we will discuss in the next chapter, when the Bible speaks of any Christian's role in the church, it speaks in terms of talents. And while talents may be unequally distributed, all the talents that God has given must be used to his glory, no matter to whom God has given them. It is, after all, God's choice.

Q. Regardless of what you write or teach, nothing's going to change. Why rock the boat?

A. I am not that cynical. Besides, the boat needs rocking.

Flavil Yeakley, of Harding University, recently published statistics for the growth of the Churches of Christ in the United States during the 1980's.¹⁴¹ We grew 5.2% – not per year – but per *decade*. This works out to an annual rate of growth of only 0.51%. At the same time, the general population grew over 11%. We didn't even keep up with the growth of the general population! More precisely, we aren't even converting enough new members to replace those of our children who leave the church! We lost over *half* our children from the Churches of Christ during that time. Something has to change.

I'd never suggest adopting a new doctrine just to grow. But I would never condone accepting a tradition not found in the Bible if that tradition kept anyone from finding Jesus. Those outside the Churches look at us and see a very peculiar people. They wonder: *how can these people know about how to live and be moral when they don't even grant their women the same rights that the godless do?*

One advantage that the Churches of Christ have over many other religious groups is our appeal to rational thought in a scientific age. If we really believe that our religion is Bible-based and not man-made, then we should be more than willing to change when we are convinced that we've misunderstood the Bible – without regard to the criticism that will follow any major course correction.

Q. But wouldn't it be safer to require women to be silent and to not teach? After all, consider the eternal consequences of being wrong!

A. It is just as sinful to impose a command not made by God as to ignore a command made by God. Binding what God doesn't bind is just as sinful as loosing what God doesn't loose (*Cf.* Mat. 16:19; 18:18). Notice that we only feel compelled to find safety in obedience to those doubtful rules that happen to suit our traditions. If this is not so, then our women members would be wearing veils, long hair, and no jewelry, and our men would be raising their hands in prayer and greeting one another with a kiss. We'd all be washing each other's feet!

There will always be another “command” for someone to find and make us feel guilty about. We can never keep enough rules to be safe. This is, in fact, precisely the approach to God that sent the Pharisees to hell, and I don't care to join them. Thank God for his grace! The one thing I know for sure is that I'm saved, and my confidence is not based on my intellect or my education but on Jesus Christ and him crucified. If anyone teaches you otherwise, run for your eternal salvation. We need to flee the temptation

¹⁴¹ Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr. *Separating Fact from Fiction: A Realistic Assessment of the Churches of Christ in the United States*. The Harding University Center for Church Growth Studies. 1995, as summarized by Yeakley in vol. 10, no. 2 *Church Growth*. Center for Church Growth. April-June, 1995.

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toward a new Pharisaism and we should rather return to the Old Paths – being the Bible’s paths.¹⁴²

Q. Wouldn't I be a liberal if I accepted your arguments?

A. There are those who would call you a liberal, but they would be liars and slanderers for having done so. Jesus speaks plainly to our tendency to pin false labels on those with whom we disagree:

(Mat. 5:22) “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Jesus is not saying that “fool” and “Raca” are especially wicked words. Rather, he is condemning the sin of contemptuous name-calling. Whether we use “fool,” “Raca,” “nigger,” or “liberal,” the sin is the same.¹⁴³ No matter how strongly one feels that I am wrong, such feelings do not justify making false or exaggerated claims in opposition to what I say.

In one of the best books written on the history of the Restoration Movement, *Christians Only*,¹⁴⁴ James DeForest Murch describes actual liberalism, which developed in the late 19th Century:

The schools of theological thought which grew out of this religious revolution were many and varied but they might all be grouped under the banner or **liberalism** or **modernism**. No two liberals thought exactly alike, but the general principles were the same. The Bible was to them merely a historical record of the developing religious consciousness of the Jewish people. Liberals did not accept

¹⁴² See HSRG for a more thorough discussion of this critical issue.

¹⁴³ Mat. 15:19-20; Col. 3:8-10; James 4:11-12:

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?

¹⁴⁴ Standard Publishing, 1962. This is an excellent reference, although written from the perspective of the conservative, instrumental Christian Churches/Churches of Christ within the Restoration Movement. Murch’s telling of the history of true liberalism should be required reading for elderships and college trustees everywhere.

Jesus as one to be worshipped but as an example, a prophet, a teacher, and a moral pioneer.¹⁴⁵

The Churches of Christ were largely spared from liberalism by their separation from the northern Churches over the instrument and missionary societies. The then much smaller Churches of Christ had few colleges or other institutions within their ranks, most schools and publishing houses having been controlled by the instrumental churches. However, within the Restoration Movement's instrumental churches, liberalism came to be a serious problem.

Now, of course, true liberalism is rife with sin, and we must be vigilant to rid our camp of its wickedness. Liberalism rejects the inspiration of scripture and denies the divinity of Jesus. Obviously, nothing in this book even remotely encourages these sins.

So, why be concerned about being labeled a liberal? Because some within our brotherhood have developed a mindset whereby they conclude that anyone who disagrees with them must question the inspiration of scripture! And since those who doubt the scriptures are liberals, then those who doubt what these brothers teach must be liberals, too. What a wicked thought! If I were so arrogant as to suppose that the only reason someone might dare disagree with me is that he doubts the inspiration of scripture, then I must consider my opinions inspired! But it is quite obvious that I can form a different opinion from yours about any number of issues – the role of women in the church, divorce and remarriage, how many children an elder must have – and do so while still having a very strong belief indeed in inspiration and Jesus our Lord.

Those of us who seek to bully the rest of us into submitting to their teachings through name calling, lies, and slander will be judged very harshly. I am not a liberal, and those who happen to agree with all or some of what I believe are not liberals for having so agreed.

Q. Can't a woman be required to be subordinate without being made inferior?

A. The paternalist and hierarchicalist positions are often justified by the argument that the leadership or presumed "headship" of man makes woman subordinate – but not inferior. Indeed, hierarchicalists and many paternalists would insist that women have the same "value" as men, arguing that this is the true meaning of such passages as Galatians 3:28: "There is ... no male and female."¹⁴⁶ And it is certainly true that in certain circumstances one may take a subordinate role to another and be in no wise inferior to

¹⁴⁵ pp. 224-225.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Black, *ibid.* p. 212-213; Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern*. Goebel Music Publications. 1991. p. 530; Ferguson Christian Chronicle ("A common mistake is to confuse equal worth with equal rank").

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that person. It is repeatedly stated that women should “voluntarily” subordinate themselves to men, *and yet no effort is made to explain how one can voluntarily subordinate oneself if one has no choice!*

In the not-too-distant past, we required black men and women to take subordinate positions to whites. Today, we see that this was wrong – not because no black person should ever be subordinate to a white person – but because the practice evaluated the black men and women as a race and not as individuals. Indeed, the requirement of subordination plainly indicated inferiority, and for this reason it was immoral.

Accordingly, whether we mean to or not, we patronize women when we argue that requiring them to be subordinate to men regardless of their respective talents, experiences, or accomplishments and regardless of what is best for the work of the church has no implication of inferiority.

The paternalist responds to such arguments by reasoning in a circle. God plainly values women the same as men. God plainly requires women to be subordinate to men. Therefore, subordination does not imply inferiority. But such reasoning “solves” the problem by denying the problem. The reality is that limiting what women can do purely because of their gender indicates inferiority.

PART IV WOMEN AND CHURCH OFFICES

CHAPTER XV THE GIFT-OCRACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

A. The Parable of the Talents

We will next study the qualifications for elders and deacons. But before we approach this topic, we need to return to the Gospels. Jesus had much to say that relates to these issues. Most significant is his Parable of the Talents:

(Mat. 25:14-30 NIV) “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on

deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

“Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

There are powerful lessons in this parable. Note these points.

A “talent” was literally a standard weight of silver or gold, while we understand that figuratively it refers to anything that allows us to serve God – an ability, a resource, even an opportunity.

Jesus praised the servants who provided a 100% return on the master’s money. Where do you get this kind of return risk free? Nowhere. In fact, the master condemned the one-talent servant saying, in effect, that he should have at least earned interest on the money. Even investing with the bankers was very risky in the First Century, when there was no FDIC insurance, no Federal Reserve Board, and no other protection for investors. If investing with the bankers was risky, imagine the risks the other two servants must have taken to yield such a high return for the master!

Thus, Jesus pronounces damnation on those who would take no risks. Those who pass by opportunities and who fail to give the Master a return on what he did for us will receive hellfire for having been too afraid of the Master. Safety is not found in doing nothing. Quite the opposite. Safety is found in Jesus. In grace. In the cross. When we look to rules and our works for safety, we understandably feel unworthy (we are!) and will be afraid to make mistakes (we will!) But Jesus condemns those who think this way. Do something for Jesus. Doing nothing is sure damnation.

Therefore, imagine the frustration of a Christian woman with the gift to teach, who must endure classes taught less well than she could teach and see students not reach their potentials as Christians for lack of instruction. Imagine the frustration of a Christian woman with the gift of administration, who could run a benevolence or mission program far better than the best man available. Imagine the frustration of a Christian women with the gift to speak in public, who cannot provide her Master with any return on his investment. Imagine the frustration of the Holy Spirit who generously gives these gifts to men and women and finds the leadership of his church too afraid of being wrong to allow the gifts to be used. Imagine the anger of God when he sees his children unfed, his people lost, and his churches understaffed because over half of its members are severely limited in the service that they can perform.

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Of course, women can teach ladies classes and pray among women, but such limited service no more fully utilizes their talents than limiting men to speaking to entirely male audiences or leading prayer among purely male groups would fully utilize their talents. How many adult education programs have enough teachers among the men? How many benevolence or evangelism programs have failed for lack of leadership? How many women have dropped out frustrated by their second-class citizen status?

The foremost objection voiced by those opposing full membership for women is that it is not safe to rely on an interpretation of these “ambiguous” passages. They argue that the safe thing to do is to not let women exercise their talents. But Jesus Christ himself tells us what happens to those who think like this. The sin of the one-talent man is that he imagined that his master would be angry if he lost the money. He was wrong. His Master had more than enough money to lose. The Master wanted a return on his investment.

B. The Doctrine of Gifts

In the New Testament, the leadership of the church is to be based on the gifts given by God to his children. This is a logical extension of Jesus’ Parable of the Talents. We often ignore the implications of the passages dealing with the use of gifts for church governance.

(Rom. 12:4-8 ESV) ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ **Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:** if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; **the one who teaches, in his teaching;** ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; **the one who leads, with zeal;** the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

What if a woman is given the gift of teaching? or of leadership? What does this passage tell her to do? God tells women that he gave them the gifts they have to be used in his service, and that refusal to do so is a sin.

(1 Cor. 12:7, 11, 18-21 NIV) Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is **given for the common good.** ... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. ... But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, **just as he wanted them to be.** If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. **The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”**

The NET Bible translates v. 7—

(1Co 12:7 NET) To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the benefit of all**.

Leon Morris explains,¹⁴⁷

The gifts are not given for rivalry and jealousy but *for the common good*. That is the point of it all. Spiritual gifts are always given to be used, and to be used in such a way as to edify the whole body of believers, not some individual possessor of a gift. A schismatic individualism contradicts the purpose of the gifts.

Paul tells us that all gifts come from God, and that God gives each of us the gifts he wants us to have to serve the *entire* church – the common good. Women have the gifts they have so they can be “just as he wanted them to be.” And it is sin to prevent the use of God-given gifts. We can’t tell the women, “We don’t need your gifts!” God says that if we didn’t need their gifts, he wouldn’t have given the gifts to them! And we can’t limit women to serving only other women. The gifts are for the *common* good – the good of the total body.

When we consider who should have any position within the church, these lessons must be kept in mind. They are true whether or not they fit neatly within our traditions. If a woman has the gift to fill any of these roles, how can we deny her the use of her gift to serve the God who gave her the gift and, by so doing, called her to that service?

¹⁴⁷ Leon Morris. *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale NT Commentary 7. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. InterVarsity Press. 1985. p. 165.

CHAPTER XVI DEACONS – DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

I refer the reader to the excellent book *Deacons: Male and Female?* by J. Stephen Sandifer. Sandifer explains in great detail the history of deacons in the synagogues, the early church, and throughout history. The research on which this section is based (but not the arguments made) is a very brief condensation of his work.

A. What does a deacon do?

There are only two sources of information regarding the work of deacons: the word “deacon” and Acts 6. “Deacon” or *diakonos* is an untranslated word when used of a church official. It’s normally translated “servant” or “minister.” It does not mean minister in the sense of “preacher.” The same word was used by the ancients to refer to any servant, such as a waiter or busboy.

The synagogues had no officer called a *diakonos*, but in Gentile religions, deacons were frequently appointed. The term normally referred to the persons handling the organization’s funds or the persons responsible for distributions of food to the needy. The Gentile deacons were not in authority over the congregation, but simply trusted men or women who conducted a congregation’s benevolent program.

The citizens of the first century composed a broad economic spectrum, making philanthropy very significant. Finance became a central focus of many [pagan] associations. **The funds were brought to one man, the *episkopos*,¹⁴⁸ and he then gave them to servants known as *oikonomoi* (managers, stewards) or *diakonoi* (servants, deacons) to distribute.** The benevolent need was even greater in Christianity because perpetual virginity and perpetual widowhood were encouraged, thus increasing the proportion of single women requiring financial assistance.

The *diakonoi* were those who commonly served tables, especially in distributing the meat of sacrifice among the festival company in pagan religious associations.

The same word refers to either a male or female deacon.¹⁴⁹ The Greek word for a deaconess was not coined until the Third Century or so.

Commentators are split as to whether the seven men appointed in Acts 6 were deacons, elders, or just men appointed to a task. Certainly, it would seem that Acts was

¹⁴⁸ Overseer or bishop.

¹⁴⁹ Sandifer, pp. 11-13.

written late enough that Luke would have called them the first deacons if they were. On the other hand, their duties closely correspond to the pagan religious use of the word.

(Acts 6:1-6 NIV) In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

These men were appointed to handle the feeding of certain widows. Their duties are contrasted to the apostles’ prayer and ministry of the word. This service is so close to the meaning of *diakonos* in the pagan congregations that preceded Christianity that this passage surely describes the role of deacons. If it does not, then nothing in the Bible tells us what deacons are to do!

This conclusion is reinforced by the writings of uninspired Christians from the early years of the church. It is evident from scripture and early church history that many congregations served the Lord’s Supper at a common meal, known as the love feast, or simply the *agapē*.¹⁵⁰ These common meals also served as a means of dispensing food to the poor. Thus, the deacons who were charged with the distribution of food soon were also charged with handling the elements of the Lord’s Supper.

B. Early church history

In *Trallians 2*, Ignatius (c.¹⁵¹ AD 107), the bishop of Antioch, states,

[D]eacons, who are ministers of the mysteries of Christ Jesus; for they are not [just] ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Jude 12.

¹⁵¹ The “c.” is short for *circa*, or approximately.

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The reference to “mysteries” is probably to the Lord’s Supper. “Meat and drink” would be a reference to the love feast.

According to the *Shepherd of Hermas* 3:9:26 (c. AD 120), the job of a deacon included care for widows and orphans, and bad deacons are those guilty of misappropriating benevolent funds.¹⁵³

Justin Martyr (c. AD 155) states that deacons took the Lord’s Supper to the sick who could not attend the assembly (*First Apology* 67; *Symonds* 410). Deacons were also charged with handling the elements of the Lord’s Supper (*First Apology* 67).¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, the only other role found for deacons in the Second Century is as teachers. This association goes back to the Syrian *Didache* 15 (c. AD 100), where elders and deacons are identified with the prophets and teachers in Antioch, evidently in an effort to conform to Antioch’s historical practices (Acts 13:1-3) with the increasingly standard pattern of elders and deacons.¹⁵⁵ However, the *Shepherd* (3:9:26) lists deacons as church officers of lower rank than the office of teacher. And yet the same book associates deacons with the instruction of converts.

We must be careful not to place too much emphasis on these uninspired writings. And yet we see that the deacons began with a charge to handle the distribution of food for the care of a church’s widows. This role expanded to include the congregation’s love feast (where such distributions often occurred), and then expanded again to include the Lord’s Supper (which was often combined with the love feast). In the Third Century, the role of deacons expanded further into a formal clergy.

This bit of history is entirely inconsistent with the modern notion that deacons are to each head a different church ministry or program. Indeed, all deacons were charged with the same ministry in the New Testament and the Second Century. It is certainly inconsistent with the notion that the deacons meet as a body to make financial or “non-spiritual” decisions.

Deacons were charged with benevolent functions for the benefit of the poor of the congregation. The only example of the role of deacons is the distribution of food to widows, and this is exactly the use of the word we find in pre-New Testament times and post-New Testament times. In fact, the apostles ironically refer to their job as “waiting on tables.” This hardly indicates a position of great authority, but perhaps one involving responsibility for a great deal of money. There is no support in the Bible, pre-New Testament history, or post-New Testament history for giving deacons any greater or

¹⁵² Sandifer at p. 69.

¹⁵³ Sandifer at p. 69.

¹⁵⁴ Sandifer at p. 70.

¹⁵⁵ Sandifer at p. 68.

broader role. In Acts 6, we see that a committee of seven men headed the food distribution program. They didn't head seven programs. They were charged with a common task as a group.

If this is the pattern for deacons, we also have their qualifications – “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Moreover, we have their selection process – “Brothers, choose seven men from among you.” The membership did the selecting.

C. Were deacons universal during New Testament times?

Deacons do not appear to have been universal even in New Testament times. Why did Paul give Timothy instructions on the appointment of deacons but not Titus? Paul told Titus whom to ordain as elders. Why didn't Paul tell him about deacons too? Was Titus supposed to ask Timothy (who was many days away in Ephesus on the mainland while Titus was an evangelist to the island of Crete)? If Titus had access to the book of 1 Timothy, why tell him whom to pick for elders?

I don't know the answers, but it may have depended on the sizes or ages of the congregations. Ephesus was presumably a fairly large church, being an older congregation in a very large city. But this is sheer speculation. Antioch apparently had “prophets and teachers” rather than elders and deacons.¹⁵⁶ Jerusalem had apostles and elders (Acts 15:4).

We can only *prove* that the church at Philippi had deacons (Phil. 1:1) and that Timothy was supposed to ordain deacons in Ephesus. We can deduce that Jerusalem may have had deacons (Acts 6). If Phoebe was a deacon, then the church at Cenchrea had deacons (Rom. 16:1). There is no other mention of the office.

D. What can only deacons do?

If we were to conclude that women cannot be deacons – other than wear the title – what is it that women could not do? In a congregation with no deacons, what is it that the men cannot do because they are unqualified to be deacons? In a congregation with no men qualified to be deacons, can any man handle the treasury and the giving of alms to the poor? It hardly makes sense to argue that only certain Christians can be deacons but to

¹⁵⁶Prophets and teachers evidently led the church at Antioch. Acts 13:1-3. Some within the Churches of Christ have argued that prophets = elders and teachers = deacons, seeking to demonstrate that elders and deacons form the universal, eternal form of church governance. If so, then the references to prophets and teachers should be so understood. But since we know that women prophesied, what are we to conclude about women elders? If the elder and deacon pattern is not eternal and universal, are we now bound by the qualifications requirements? Thus, others argue that the form of government changed until it reached its final form in elders and deacons. Others do not consider Acts 13 as saying the prophets and teachers governed the church, leaving room for unmentioned elders and deacons. Sometimes I am amazed how sometimes we know the least about what we are the most sure about.

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then allow anyone to do what deacons do. Or could it be that those who have the gifts to do these things should do them?

The notion that deacons are men who head church programs is a late 20th Century addition to the Bible. Quite frankly, since we felt compelled to have deacons because some of the First Century churches had deacons, we had to come up with a job description for qualified men. It was not practical to require that all church work be done by a deacon, and so the notion developed that deacons are to be program heads.

And yet we've never *really* insisted that deacons head all programs. After all, the youth minister, who often isn't considered qualified to be a deacon due to being unmarried or childless, runs most youth programs. Campus ministers, who are often unmarried or childless, run campus works. The Ladies Bible Class, or the elders' wives, or another group of women sometimes handle the distribution of meals to the bereaved. The older women in the church handle the giving of showers for the engaged and expecting. Sometimes we become concerned when we have a program not headed by a deacon, and so we put a deacon "in charge" of a program that runs much better without him. And when the women head a program, we look the other way and don't list their program as an official, church-sanctioned ministry.

When we debate whether women can be deacons, we are really only debating whether a woman can be responsible for the distribution of food to widows, an area that our women members have been handling quite well for many years and with no titles. The real issue that troubles us is whether a woman can have authority in a church, and certainly she can. The only scriptural question is whether a woman can have authority *over a man*, and the only passage dealing with this is 1 Timothy 2:11-15, discussed previously.

E. Can a woman satisfy the qualifications to be a deacon?

It is something of an academic exercise to consider the arguments suggesting that women may be deacons, since there is no church function that can only be performed by a deacon. After all, we've never denied our women members the right to wait on tables, to organize meals for our members, or to distribute food to the needy. Nonetheless, it appears highly probable that there were women deacons in the First Century, and we find no prohibition of their appointment as deacons in this century.

1 Timothy 3:8-15 provides the qualifications of a deacon:

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

It is, of course, hard to imagine a woman being the husband of one wife, and yet many leaders within the Restoration Movement and the Churches of Christ have taught that women may be deacons.¹⁵⁷ Sandifer quotes Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, Robert Richardson, W. K. Pendleton, Robert Milligan, Tolbert Fanning, Isaac Errett, Moses Lard, J. M. Barnes, Philip Y. Pendleton, J. C. McQuiddy, C. R. Nichol, G. C. Brewer, J. Ridley Stroop, J. D. Thomas, and James Bales (among many others) all in support of women deacons. No one could put together a list of men more representative of the “mainline” Churches of Christ.

The scriptural argument normally centers on 1 Timothy 3:11.

¶ In the same way, **their** wives are to be **women** worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

As indicated by italics in the KJV, “their” is not found in the Greek. Moreover, “women,” as translated in the ESV, is not in the Greek. Thus, a more literal translation would be –

¶ In the same way, wives are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

The word translated “wives” in the ESV is *gunē*. It can mean “women” or “wives” depending on the context, and it is perfectly ambiguous.¹⁵⁸ The same word is translated

¹⁵⁷ Summarized by Sandifer at pp. 146 - 180.

¹⁵⁸ To this point, I've consistently suggested that *gunē* be translated as “wives,” and so my suggestion that it be translated “women” in this context may appear inconsistent. It is not. I uniformly urge the translation “wives” when submission to men is the context, because this is how I understand Genesis and the rest of the Bible. Here, the question is not submission, and other contextual factors, discussed later, argue for “women.”

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“wife” in verse 12, but could be translated “woman” just as well (“husband of one wife” is better translated “one-woman man”). Thus, our translation becomes –

11 In the same way, **the women** are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

The *arguments in favor* of verse 11 referring to female deacons are as follows:

First, notice these parallels:

<i>men – verse 8</i>	<i>gunē – verse 11</i>
worthy of respect	worthy of respect
sincere	not malicious talkers
not indulging in much wine	temperate
not pursuing dishonest gain	trustworthy in everything

These striking parallels between verses 8 and 11 demonstrate that the verses are both talking about deacons, first the men and then the women. The requirements are virtually identical.

Second, if verse 11 refers to wives, you have the peculiar requirement that Paul imposes a standard for deacons’ wives and none for elders’ wives. Anyone who has spent much time in church knows how much more important the wives of elders are, due to the far greater responsibilities the elders have.

Third, Phoebe was a deacon (not “deaconess”).

(Rom. 16:1-2 ESV) I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [deacon] of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

Romans 16:1 refers to her using the same masculine Greek word that is found in 1 Timothy 3. More precisely, she is referred to as a “deacon of the church in Cenchrea.” It is not natural to translate the phrase as “servant of the church in Cenchrea.” “Of the church in Cenchrea” certainly seems to belong with a title.

She is also called a *prostatis*, which means patron. It is a title given to men and to women and reflects great honor. Cities built monuments to celebrate both men and women who were a *prostatis* to the city. To translate “great help” as in the ESV is unjustified. To take the traditionalist view, she would be called a servant and a helper, which would be redundant.

Fourth, early church history makes clear that deaconesses were common.¹⁵⁹ The earliest reference to female deacons comes from a report, written in Latin, from Pliny, Roman governor of Bithynia, to the Emperor Trajan, in AD 112. Pliny describes having tortured two female *ministrae* to learn about the Christian religion. *Ministrae* is the Latin word that translates “deacon” in Romans 16:1 with respect to Phoebe in Latin translations of the Bible.¹⁶⁰

The Shepherd of Hermas 1:2:4 (c. AD 120) refers to a female “deacon” named Grapte, whose work was to admonish widows and orphans.¹⁶¹

Clement of Alexandria (AD 180-220) states that “we know what the honorable Paul in one of his letters to Timothy prescribed regarding female deacons.” *Stromata* 3:6:53.

Didascalia Apostolorum (AD 220-240) refers to women deacons who assisted in the baptism of women, ministered to those in need, visited the sick, and distributed communion to women and children.¹⁶² No First or Second Century Christian source refers to “deaconesses,” but many refer to deacons who are female.

During the same period of history there were also a number of references to a church office for enrolled widows, evidently following the command of 1 Timothy 5:9-10.

Clement of Alexandria refers to a list of “chosen persons,” being presbyters, bishops, deacons, and widows. *Instructor* 3:12:97. Tertullian (AD 208-217) criticizes a church for appointing a 20-year old virgin to the “order of widows.” *On the Veiling of Virgins* 9:2-3.¹⁶³ The *Didascalia Apostolorum* clearly states that the order of widows and female deacons are two different offices.¹⁶⁴

Fifth, there is no good reason that women could not be deacons. Even if women cannot have authority over men, they can perform many of the duties we normally charge deacons with: handling the money, dispensing it to the poor, maintaining the building, etc. In the modern interpretation, they can head programs (which primary department is *not* headed by a woman?), lock the doors, be responsible for the building and grounds,

¹⁵⁹ Sandifer at pp. 85-98.

¹⁶⁰ Sandifer at p. 85.

¹⁶¹ Sandifer at p. 86.

¹⁶² Sandifer at p. 87.

¹⁶³ Sandifer at p. 86.

¹⁶⁴ Sandifer at p. 87.

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make bank deposits, count the money, etc. If we deny women the role of deacon, what responsibilities are we making exclusively male, other than ruling over others?

Sixth, even if verse 11 deals with the wives of deacons, in the same book where Paul said that women cannot teach or usurp authority, we would not expect that women would be allowed to be elders or deacons – not necessarily for any eternal reason, but due to the same temporary cultural limitations that kept women from becoming teachers. Therefore, while at best 1 Timothy 3’s listing of deacon qualifications may specifically approve women deacons, at worst the list merely indicates that women could not be deacons at that time and place.

But there are *arguments against* this interpretation [followed by rebuttal in brackets].

First, there are further qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3 that are not in parallel. [But notice that the deacon list in 1 Timothy begins with two parallel lists, one for male deacons and the other for female deacons. After the two parallel lists, Paul adds additional requirements, including that the deacon be the husband of one wife.¹⁶⁵ However, we understand that Paul often speaks of men, husbands, sons, or brothers when he means men or women, husbands or wives, sons or daughters, or brothers or sisters. He often uses male references while meaning an indefinite gender. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul says that it is good for a “man not to touch a woman.” Certainly, he also meant for us to understand that it is good for a woman not to touch a man. It would make good sense to interpret Paul’s reference to deacons’ wives accordingly, and impose the same guidelines as to male deacons as female. It would be very inelegant to expect Paul to say “the spouse of one spouse.” And we shouldn’t expect him to say everything twice, once for men and once for women, in an informal letter to a fellow missionary. Moreover, there is no requirement that the qualifications be absolutely parallel. After all, the requirements for elders in Titus 2 are not exactly parallel with the requirements for elders in 1 Timothy 2.]

Second, if verse 11 does not refer to wives, then there is no requirement for wives to meet as to elders or deacons. We all know how important the wives are. [But isn’t it really odd to imagine Paul imposing requirements on wives of deacons and not elders?]

Third, it is argued that Phoebe is not a deacon but a servant. *Prostatis* should be translated as “helper.” [This is, of course, circular reasoning. Whether *diakonos* is used as “servant” or as “deacon” must be gleaned from the context. It is not enough just to say that Phoebe was not a deacon because women can’t be deacons.]

Fourth, the early church missed the boat. At the time deaconesses were being appointed, single bishops were beginning to rule the elderships. [It is true that we cannot rely on post-biblical sources to clinch this or any other scriptural argument. However, we

¹⁶⁵ Literally, a “one-woman man.”

can test an interpretation of the scriptures against early church practices. Early church practices often vary from the biblical pattern, as the church became increasingly corrupted. Nonetheless, it is hard to defend a supposed New Testament practice that has nothing in common with Second Century practice. Thus, we clearly see that deacons as program heads or as a legislative board was never the early church's practice. We further find that early deacons did much the same thing as the seven men appointed in Acts 6, with their role expanding over time to include the Lord's Supper and the love feast, and in some areas, teaching. We also clearly see that women deacons were an ancient practice – remarkably so given the extreme prejudice against women that was common in First and Second Century society. There is no rational explanation of the Second Century church's appointment of women as deacons other than as a continuation of First Century practice.]

Fifth, women shouldn't be greedy for a title. The fact that they want the title of deacon proves their lack of merit. [Yes, the argument really is made.]

Sixth, God's listing of qualifications is eternal. It just looks and feels like an eternal law. [But doesn't 1 Timothy 5:9-10 have the same look and feel?

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband [literally, a one-man woman], and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

[Here we have an easily understood list of qualifications for a list of widows, and we do not maintain such lists and, to my knowledge, never have in the history of the Restoration Movement. Why is it that we've never put this list of qualifications for women into place? Doesn't this passage have the same look and feel of the elder and deacon passages? Why do we feel comfortable ignoring this inspired list of qualifications and feel uncomfortable at the thought of a woman being called a deacon?]

F. Recent scholarship on the meaning of *diakonos*

In *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*,¹⁶⁶ John N. Collins comprehensively surveys secular and Christian Greek literature to find the correct meaning of the terms *diakonia* and *diakonos*. Collins has followed that 368-page book with a shorter sequel focusing on a handful of key passages, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New*.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Oxford Univ. Press. 1990, reprinted 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Morehouse Publ. 2003.

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Collins' scholarship has been so persuasive that the latest edition of BDAG, the most respected dictionary of New Testament Greek, revised its entry for *diakonos* to read as follows:

1. one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, agent, intermediary, courier ...
2. one who gets someth. done, at the behest of a superior, assistant to someone...

Hence, Collins sees the word as meaning something like “agent” or “representative” or even “messenger” rather than “servant.” While an agent may well act as a servant, there is nothing in the word itself that connotes humble, submissive service.

With respect to the verb form, *diakonia*, BDAG gives these definitions:

1. service rendered in an intermediary capacity, mediation, assignment ...
2. performance of a service ...
3. functioning in the interest of a larger public, service, office
4. rendering of specific assistance, aid, support ... esp. of alms and charitable giving
5. an administrative function, service as attendant, aide, or assistant

The shift in meaning is often quite subtle, but still it can be very important. Hence, Collins would re-translate Mark 10:45 as follows:

(Mar 10:45 ESV) “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

[Collins] For the Son of Man came to carry out an assignment not to benefit himself but others by giving his life in ransom ...

Rather than the more general “servant,” Collins prefers “carry out an assignment.” And this certainly fits the context.

Or consider –

(1 Cor. 3:5 ESV) ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? ~~Servants~~ [Messengers] through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

Rather than “servants,” Collins would translate “messengers,” that is, representatives of the Lord who brought his message – which is more fitting to the context and makes the words of Apollos and Paul matter much more.

The same shift in meaning is important in –

(2 Cor. 3:5-6 ESV) 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us sufficient to be ~~ministers~~ [messengers] of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul is not just a minister or servant of the covenant, he is God’s messenger – someone empowered to speak on behalf of God regarding a new covenant.

Just so –

(2 Cor. 11:23 ESV) ²³ Are they ~~servants~~ [messengers] of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Paul is not so much a servant of Christ as an agent or representative of Christ. Therefore, the fact that he has suffered in this way shows him to be like the person he represents.

Servants do not have to be like their master, whereas an agent or messenger must act and speak as their master does.

1. Deacon as church office

So what does mean with regard to the office of deacon? Well, we should not think of them so much as servants but as representatives, agents, or even attendants. That is, they serve at the behest of the elders to assist them in their duties.

The subtle question that the redefinition forces us to ask is: whom do the deacons ~~serve~~-represent? If the word means “servant,” then we would naturally take the deacons as serving the church, and that has been our traditional interpretation (and the traditional interpretation of many others).

But if the word means “agent” or “representative” in this context, the church can’t be the answer. Rather, Acts 6 offers an example of the deacons taking on a role previously held by the apostles, doing work so that the apostles are freed for prayer and the ministry of the word.

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Hence, the Acts 6 deacons are deacons for the apostles. They carry out assignments for the apostles, which in that case was serving the Hellenistic widows.

Here's the flow of Luke's thought, as retranslated –

(Acts 1:24-25 ESV) ²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this **ministry** [role as **messengers**] and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

Collins takes *diakonia* to be used by Luke of the apostolic task of carrying Jesus' message to the world, with that meaning being established in chapter 1 and then carried throughout Acts until –

(Acts 20:24 ESV) But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and **the ministry** [acting as messenger for Jesus] that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

(Acts 21:19 ESV) After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his **ministry** [acting as messenger for Jesus].

If that's so, then Acts 6 is not about failing to feed widows but a failure to bring them the message of Jesus in their own language at home. If that's so, then it only makes sense that Luke immediately tells us about Phillip's and Stephen's proclamation of the gospel. They were originally appointed to proclaim the word within the church, to its Hellenistic widows, and then they were called to do the same for the lost.

2. Wrapping up

Now, if this is right, and many scholars have been persuaded by Collins, then the role of deacons is even less well defined than I had imagined. They are simply members of the church tasked to assist the elders in their work or they may be teachers of the word, assisting the elders in their task of teaching the word.

If deacons are teachers, then that would nicely explain why Paul mentions shepherds and teachers and not deacons among church offices in Ephesians 4.

The earliest uninspired sources we have associated deacons with serving the Lord's Supper on behalf of the elders, as well as providing for the poor and widows.

And so, the likely answer is that deacons are simply members charged with helping elders fulfill their duties. The elders' duties certainly include teaching, and so it

may well be appropriate for deacons to be teachers. But the elders are also concerned with the needy and with carrying on the Sunday assembly.

Therefore, we cannot easily draw lines as to what deacons can and cannot do – which means there is no way that we can distinguish “deacon” from “teacher” or “ministry leader” or “small group leader.” All are acting, directly or indirectly, at the behest of the elders to perform the elders’ work.

Therefore, in today’s church, there’s really little need to have “deacon” as a standalone title. There certainly should no deacons at large, that is, deacons without a job. Rather, any task that would show up on a church organizational chart could be called the work of a deacon. Hence, we really have minister-deacons, teacher-deacons, ministry leader-deacons, small group leader-deacons, lost sheep ministry-deacons, and all sorts of other deacons, whether or not wearing the title.

We’ve simply used other words that mean essentially the same thing. Any good eldership should assign members to teach, to lead ministries, to do various ministries, to conduct the Lord’s Supper, to otherwise lead in the assembly, or to otherwise carry out the work that Jesus has assigned to the local church. And if they carry with them any of the responsibility or authority of the elders, they may properly be called “deacons.”

And if that’s right, then the qualification list in 1 Tim. 3 becomes *very* problematic if we take the list as requiring a deacon to be male, married, and a good father. If that’s so, we would be required to remove over half of the men and all women who serve the elders well in all sorts of responsible tasks.

On the other hand, if we read the lists less strictly and more as examples of how a deacon would be shown to be “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3), the problem goes away, and we aren’t required to put married men in positions that God has not equipped them to do.

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CHAPTER XVII ELDERS – WIVES OF ONE HUSBAND?

When I first taught this material, I passed out a survey on questions involving the role of women. After the class had finished with the survey, I asked, “Which question was the hardest?” A godly woman said, “Whether a woman can be an elder.” A number of other women, good, submissive, dedicated, hard-working lovers of the Lord, nodded their heads. I was surprised, but they were right, and they were well ahead of me in their understanding of scripture.

The issue arises because the lists of elder qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus require an elder to be the “husband of one wife.” Admittedly, it would be hard for a woman to meet this standard. The question, however, is whether the reference to an elder being male is intended to be an eternal requirement or whether it is limited to the culture and time in which Paul wrote. Plainly, in First Century Grecian and Jewish society, a woman would not have been accepted in such a position – and very few women would have been suitable for the role in any event. And so, did Paul refer to elders as male because all First Century elders were male, or because male elders were God’s eternal plan?

Before we delve into the lists of elder qualifications found in 1 Timothy and Titus, some other key verses should be considered:

A. Elders and Deborah

Deborah ruled the nation of Israel as spiritual and civil leader. She was a prophetess and a judge. Thus, Deborah’s position was far more authoritative than our elders today. Therefore, the notion that there is an eternal law that prevents women from having spiritual leadership is plainly false. God called Deborah, and God cannot sin.

Also, it’s clear from numerous Old Testament passages that, going back to the Egyptian captivity, men called elders governed the ancient Israelite cities. Plainly, then Deborah was over the elders of Israel. While we don’t know that much about the exact role or authority of the Old Testament elders, they evidently served a role in the ancient cities comparable to the role of elders in the modern church. If not, why did the New Testament writers choose to use this term for certain church leaders?

There are numerous other examples of female leaders in the Old Testament, which we’ve discussed previously. Because Miriam was a “leader” of Israel, she had a higher position than the elders of the day. If the king was answerable to Huldah the prophetess, then the elders of the day were that much more so. If God placed Queen Esther in a position of royal power to protect the Jewish people, then it can’t be wrong for a woman to have authority to care for the people of God.

Plainly, there is no eternal law of male headship that prevents a woman from having authority over a man. God would not have set these examples for us otherwise.

B. New Testament prophets and elders

A similar argument is apparent in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, Paul lists the church offices in order of rank, listing apostles first, prophets second, and elders (pastors) beneath both (neither list includes deacons). But we have seen Junias, a woman, counted among the apostles in Romans 16:7. We see many women counted as prophets in the New Testament. In fact, Paul's discussion of prophets in 1 Corinthians 12 follows closely after his discussion of women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11. Surely he still had women in mind. We have seen the evidence for women deacons. *And so what eternal principle decrees that women may be above and below the elders in rank but not be an elder?*

We must also take note of what prophets do. They are not soothsayers, predicting the future as a curiosity. They foretell the future as a warning. Prophets foretell and forth-tell. The forth-telling involves warning, instructing, exhorting, and rebuking. When the New Testament calls a woman a prophet it does so with 1,500 years of history of prophecy and Paul specifically places prophets as second only to apostles.

Note also Joel's prophecy of the coming of the Christian age quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-18 –

(Joel 2:28 NIV) And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your **sons and daughters** will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both **men and women**, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

God spoke through Joel to declare that both sons and daughters would be prophets. Twice he emphasizes that the gift will fall on both men and women. Since the coming of the Spirit on women in the Old Testament was less common than for men, a sign of the coming of the Messiah would be the *equality* of the sexes in terms of gifts of the Spirit. And, of course, it is the New Testament itself that places prophets above elders.

Up to this moment, God has acted by his spirit among his people, but it's always been by inspiring one person here, one or two there—kings and prophets and **priests** and righteous men and women. Now, in a sudden burst of fresh divine energy released through the death and **resurrection** of Jesus, God's spirit has been poured out upon a lot of people all at once. There is no discrimination between slaves and free, male and female, young

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and old. They are all marked out, side by side, as the nucleus of God's true people.¹⁶⁸

The point of Peter's quotation of Joel was that, unlike in Old Testament times, the Spirit and its gifts — especially prophecy — would be received by all, slave and free, male and female — broadly and indiscriminately. The Spirit would be *outpoured*, not drizzled and dropped.

And if the office of prophet was higher than the office of elder, and women not only were prophets but the fact that we women were generously and abundantly made prophets was a sign that the Kingdom had come! How on earth could God gift women to be prophets and refuse to gift women to be elders? After all, as we'll soon cover in detail, the Spirit gifts men and women to be elders as the Spirit chooses.

C. May a woman be an elder?

The questions thus presented are:

1. Is the apparent prohibition of a woman being an elder evidenced in 1 Timothy and Titus, as well as early church history, a temporary cultural matter only or an eternal ordinance of God?
2. Are the qualifications described in 1 Timothy and Titus intended as laws or as wise counsel, with the true test being to whom God has given the gift of leadership?

An affirmative answer to *either* question would permit many women gifted to lead to serve as elders.

1. Is the apparent prohibition of a woman being an elder evidenced in 1 Timothy and Titus, as well as early church history, a temporary cultural matter only or an eternal ordinance of God?

We have covered the ground surrounding culture versus an eternal command at length. The case has already been made, and there is no reason to go through the motions of restating it. Certainly, for the same reasons that women were not allowed to teach men in Ephesus, no women were going to be appointed elder by Timothy or Titus. The possibility is eliminated by the commands in 1 Timothy 2. But we have shown that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is culturally limited (just like most of the rest of the chapter). It is certainly reasonable to conclude that the qualifications listed in the Pastoral Letters¹⁶⁹ are also limited based on cultural conditions insofar as they relate to the gender of the elders.

¹⁶⁸ Tom Wright. *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12*. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. 2008. p. 33–34.

¹⁶⁹ 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, which are personal letters written at about the same time and under similar circumstances by Paul.

This cannot be proved or disproved by reference to the qualifications themselves. Rather, with the justification for the discrimination against women no longer applicable today, we must look to God's eternal principles as they apply to men and women and husbands and wives. When in doubt, go with the larger, eternal principles. In the absence of the qualification lists in 1 Timothy and Titus, what principle would deny a congregation the right to appoint as elder a woman with the talent to serve as elder?

2. Are the qualifications described in 1 Timothy and Titus intended as laws or wise counsel, with the true test being to whom God has given the gift of leadership?

Objectively viewed, it is hard to argue that the qualification lists in 1 Timothy and Titus are "laws." As we have discussed in the context of Galatians, Paul has very principled reasons for not making himself into the next Moses. Moreover, there is internal evidence that these are not laws.

First, why are the lists in Titus and 1 Timothy different? Is God's eternal law of who can be an elder different in Crete (the destination of Titus) than in Ephesus (the destination of 1 Timothy)? It would appear so. While the lists are similar, Titus and Timothy were working out of two different rulebooks, if rulebooks they are.

(Titus 1:6-9 NIV) An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He 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.

(1 Tim. 3:1-7 NIV) Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now 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

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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.

The following chart compares the two qualification lists:

<i>Titus</i>	<i>1 Timothy</i>
blameless	above reproach
husband of one wife	husband of one wife
	temperate
self-controlled	self-controlled
upright	respectable
hospitable	hospitable
hold firmly to sound doctrine	able to teach
not given to much wine	not given to drunkenness
	not violent
	gentle
not quick-tempered	not quarrelsome
not pursuing dishonest gain	not a lover of money
	manage own family well
children not wild and disobedient	children obey with proper respect
	not a recent convert
	good reputation with outsiders
children believe	
not overbearing	
loves what is good	
holy	
disciplined	

As the table demonstrates, the two lists are very similar, but different. For example, we in the Churches of Christ have customarily held that an elder must have at least one (some say two) Christian children. That limitation is from Titus. But Paul told Timothy that it is enough if an elder has children who obey with proper respect, a very different thing indeed. A child may be obedient and yet be too young to be a Christian. And Paul told Timothy to ordain no recent converts, and yet Titus was given no such instruction. Do these inconsistencies threaten the inspiration of the passages? Not at all, but they tell us much about their nature.

Second, the test for who could be a deacon in Acts 6 is simply “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Why is this rule different from the rules laid out by Paul regarding deacons and elders? Indeed, Paul told the elders in Ephesus that the Holy Spirit had “made them overseers.”¹⁷⁰ The most natural interpretation of this statement is that the elders were made overseers by the Spirit by being filled with the Spirit – that is, by receiving the gifts of the Spirit associated with being an elder, such as the gifts of administration and leadership. Could it be that the rules are not different at all? Maybe what Paul is saying in the Pastorals is, “Timothy and Titus, these are the characteristics that you look for to determine who has wisdom and is filled with the Spirit.”

As numerous commentators have pointed out, the characteristics of an elder or deacon are characteristics that *all* Christians *should* have. The exceptions to this rule are the apparent requirements that elders and deacons be married and fertile (and have fertile wives).

But Paul and most (if not all) the apostles were single.¹⁷¹ Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:

1 Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. ... 7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ... 32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – 34 and his interests are divided. ... 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

If Paul believes that marriage is required for a man to be a deacon (so he can lock doors, keep the building maintained, handle the treasury) or an elder, then he certainly changed his tune from 1 Corinthians 7. But I have too much respect for inspiration to believe that Paul changed his mind or exaggerated his recommendation of celibacy. He was quite sincere when he wrote 1 Corinthians 7, and he never changed his mind. There is no imaginable reason why a man must be married and have children in order to be a deacon. Paul would agree. He says that a man is a *better* servant of God if he is single! And he truly wishes that *all* men were single so they could better serve God!

¹⁷⁰

(Acts 20:28 NIV) Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

¹⁷¹ Peter had a mother-in-law and so either was married or had been married. Mat. 8:14.

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Does Paul wish that there were no elders or deacons? And if an apostle is a better apostle for being single, how can we conclude that the man locking the building (or waiting on tables) must be held to some supposedly *higher* standard?

The only conclusion we can reach and still take Paul at his word is that the lists in 1 Timothy and Titus are not laws but wise counsel on how to tell who is full of wisdom and the Spirit – at the time and place the letter was written. Any other interpretation causes Paul to contradict himself – and requires a man to be married and fertile in order to wait on tables!

Third, there are other verses that specify the qualifications of elders, and they speak in terms of gifts, not sex, marital status, or fertility.

(1 Cor. 12:28-30 NIV) And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, **those with gifts of administration**, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

The Greek word translated “administration” literally means “(a) steering, pilotage; (b) metaphorically, governments or governings, said of those who act as guides in a local church.”¹⁷² This is certainly an apt description of the eldership. And yet Paul’s discussion is in terms of spiritual gifts. Paul points out –

(1 Cor. 12:18-21 NIV) But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

The gift of administration is from God, and it is a sin to tell anyone with the gift that the church does not (or cannot) use that gift.

(Eph. 4:7, 11-13 NIV) But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ... It was he who **gave** some to be apostles,

¹⁷² Vine’s.

some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be **pastors** and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

We next see that being a pastor (elder) is a gift from God. The only qualification mentioned is whether a Christian has been so gifted.

(Rom. 12:6-8 NIV) 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.

“Govern” is defined in *Strong's Dictionary* as “to stand before, i.e. (in rank) to preside, or (by impl.) to practise: – maintain, be over, rule.” It is the same verb used by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:4 and 12 with respect to elders and deacons “ruling” their households well. And yet, in Romans, the only requirement for leadership is having the gift to lead. Moreover, the language is a command. If one has the gift to lead, one *must* lead and lead diligently. The command applies to women as well as to men.

Realize that 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Romans were all written well before 1 Timothy or Titus. How were the Christians who received these letters to understand them? Surely, each Christian had to understand that he or she should humbly determine his or her gifts and then use those gifts in God's service. Paul did not tell the Corinthians, Ephesians, or Romans that his teaching only applied to men! It would have been the rarest of women in the First Century world who had the ability to lead. This is just not so today. If a woman has the gift, we are commanded to let her use the gift.

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CHAPTER XVIII CONCLUSION

Galatians 3:28 (“no male and female”) states the general rule. The same principle is found in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and Romans 12, along with the Parable of the Talents. When Paul is speaking of the church and the Spirit’s gifts in general terms, he makes no distinction based on sex.

Paul, however, wrote Titus and 1 Timothy at a time and place when women could not exercise their gifts freely. It was unthinkable in First Century society that a woman would assume authority over a man, and women were rarely educated or even literate. It would have been the rarest of women who had the gift to be an elder. For the same reason that Paul denies women the role of teacher in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul could not allow women to be elders. But Paul no more makes this a rule for all eternity than he approves slavery for all eternity by his commands to slaves to obey their masters.

To determine the more general rule, we must look to God’s plan for men and women as revealed in other scriptures. We quickly find that there is no eternal rule denying women authority over men. Deborah, Miriam, Huldah, Esther, Anna, and countless First Century prophetesses make any such an argument frivolous. Moreover, nowhere in the Law of Moses do we find any prohibition on women having authority over men.

Genesis 3 states that husbands will rule over their wives – but this is sin allowed into the world by God’s curse on Creation. It is hardly a command or even good advice (no more commendable than pain in childbearing or weeds in a garden).

Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that wives are to be suitable complements to their husbands, but we see from numerous other Old Testament verses, that “help meet” is not a term of submission or subjection. Women fill up that which is incomplete or lacking in their husbands, and all married men know it.

The fact that women are “complements” no more disqualifies them from the eldership than the fact that men without women are “not good” and incomplete without women disqualifies them from the eldership. Indeed, the most logical conclusion from the Creation accounts is that an eldership without both men and women will be incomplete. “It is not good for man to be alone.”

PART V
REFLECTING ON THE TEXTS

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CHAPTER XIX HOW DO WE DECIDE?

What is the rule in this case? Do we presume a rule or do we presume freedom? What does the Bible say?

(Gal. 3:25 NIV) Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Why do we insist on replacing the law that Christ died to free us from with a new, equally strict law? Can you tell any difference between our debates over whether a man must resign as elder if his wife dies or if his only child (or one of his two children) dies or is divorced and the debates the Pharisees had as to whether it is right to heal on the Sabbath? I can't. They thought they were honoring God by strictly construing his commands to be "safe." They built fences around the law to be doubly safe. They are destined for the fires of *gehenna*. Let's not follow their example.

In fact, I well remember attending many a Sunday school class where we were advised that the Pharisees were condemned because they built fences around the laws of God, imposing rules that God did not. And yet I also have attended many a class where I was taught that we need to be safe, and that to be safe, we need to impose rules that aren't necessarily in the Bible. These rules would be imposed by the church to protect us from what violating these rules "might lead to." These rules would also protect us from any accusation by other congregations or the most traditional members of our own congregations. I've even been in classes that described this process of being doubly safe as "building fences." I can be very dense at times, but I eventually concluded that there is a very serious problem with this kind of thinking.

(2 Cor. 3:3-6, 17 NIV) You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such **confidence** as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers **of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** ... Now the Lord is the Spirit, **and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.**

(Rom. 7:6 NIV) But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that **we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.**

If we turn the freedom that is in Christ into a new Law of Moses, replacing one law with another, we will receive our reward – death. Law brings death. The Spirit gives

life. The New Testament is not a new Deuteronomy. We don't have better, more modern rules – we have salvation and an indwelling, and we have freedom.

(Col. 2:8 NIV) See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on **human tradition and the basic principles of this world** rather than on Christ.

Recall that the “basic principles of this world” are the results of God’s curse on Creation – man’s sinfulness, the reign of death, and the domination of women by men. Galatians 4:6-9. Hebrews says much the same thing, drawing a contrast between the new order and the old:

(Heb. 9:1, 10 NIV) Now the first covenant **had regulations for worship** and also an earthly sanctuary. ... They are only a matter of food and drink and various external washings – **external regulations applying until the time of the new order.**

The writer’s point is not that the new order will have new regulations. Rather, he is saying that external regulations for worship are characteristic of the Old Covenant, but in the new order, God will regulate us, not through rules, but internally, through his Spirit.

(Heb. 8:10-13 NIV) “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

The Hebrews writer quotes from Jeremiah’s prophecy of the Messiah to make his point. In the Christian age, God’s relationship to his people will be fundamentally different. We will not be saved through better scholarship, but because God himself will write his laws on our hearts through his Spirit. See also Romans 8:1-15.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ HSRG explains these ideas in much greater detail.

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(Rom. 4:14-16 NIV) For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. **And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith,** so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Paul says that the only way that we can be sin-free is to be law-free. Our salvation is by faith because making our salvation by works – even a little bit – will make us sinners and we will be damned. To allow us to be saved, God had to put into place a system where “there is no law.”

Thus, those who find arbitrary, external rules in the New Testament must be misunderstanding the scriptures. In the new order, the “rules” come from our relationship with the Spirit. We are to become Spirit-filled people who are ruled from the heart, not from a “written code” or “external regulations,” which can only bring spiritual death. Thus, the “gifts” or “talents” view of church order makes perfect sense and is exactly what the writers say is the new nature of things. The idea that we are bound by a host of elaborate rules regarding how many children deacons and elders must have and whether a man must be married to lock the building or whether a woman can head the primary department is, pure and simple, Old Testament thinking. If we instead look at each person's God-given talents, we are thinking spiritually and relying on God's internal regulations.

Despite knowing that we are Christians freed from law and regulations, we think we are under very strict regulations on which our very salvation depends but which we frankly cannot interpret with any consistency! I don't doubt for a moment the inspiration of these passages. I seriously doubt that we've understood why the passages were written.

Because we don't really know what role is exclusively the role of deacons, we try to structure our works and programs in whatever way will work, and then we put the best face on it so that our more traditional members don't protest too vigorously about the expanded role of women. Thus, we are glad for the Ladies Bible Class to take on providing food for the sick, but we'd never name the woman in charge of this very vital program a “deacon.” We are glad for our youth minister to run the program for the teenagers, even if he has no children. But because he is (1) male and (2) has a title (“minister,” which is from the Latin word that translates “deacon”) we invite him to our elders and deacons meetings and give him a voice and authority equal if not superior to any deacon.

We cannot effectively run a church and simultaneously limit every job that carries any authority at all to married men with children. Therefore, we rationalize our way around the rules while simultaneously insisting that we are obeying the rules and that all who disagree with us are going to hell. The solution is not stricter or even more consistent legalism. It is an end to legalism and an acceptance of the work of God's Holy Spirit.

The Bible plainly teaches that it is the Creator of the Universe who works in us to give us the gifts and talents needed to serve him. We need to honor God's work in us. We need to put aside our assumption that the New Testament is a law book. We need to admit that we've always ignored passages such as 1 Timothy 5:11 that is as much a list of qualifications as those dealing with elders and deacons and confess that we only try to enforce those passages that happen to be consistent with our own biases and presuppositions. And we need to read the Bible with spiritual eyes.

(1 Cor. 2:14-16 NIV) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

I don't have all the answers, and certainly don't pretend to be able to plumb all the depths of these passages. But neither am I willing to ignore their plain teachings. Over and over again, the Bible tells us that we are freed from laws, rules, regulations, and written codes, and over and over again my brothers insist on imposing laws, rules, regulations, and written codes. Is it safer to take a doubtful passage and assume that there is a rule? Or is it wiser and more Christ-like to interpret passages to be consistent with the plain teachings of the Bible regarding the Spirit's gifts?

CHAPTER XX SLAVES, WOMEN & HOMOSEXUALS

William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*¹⁷⁴ is a monumental work in support of the egalitarian position. Webb brings an incredible level of detail and extraordinarily wide scope of scriptural evidence to his arguments. Webb points out that there are numerous factors that ought to be considered in determining whether a doctrine is cultural or transcultural. By "transcultural" Webb means a scriptural approval or condemnation that applies at all times and places rather than being culturally limited.

Webb considers that the foremost test of cultural versus transcultural is the direction of the redemptive movement. Thus, Webb tests the treatment of slaves, women, and homosexuals in the surrounding, pagan cultures, under the Law of Moses, and under the New Testament. He finds that women and slaves are treated much better under the Law than under the surrounding cultures, and even better under the New Testament. Thus, the movement is strongly toward an increasingly improved, "redemptive" state.

Thus, just as the general direction of the scriptural treatment of slavery is toward emancipation of slaves – although not fully realized until after New Testament times – the trend of scripture also points toward the need to fully emancipate women – even though women may not have been fully freed during the First Century.

On the other hand, Webb finds that homosexuality is largely approved in the cultures surrounding both the Old Testament Jews and the New Testament Christians, and that the Law of Moses and the New Testament both strongly condemn homosexual practices. Thus, there is no tendency to redeem homosexuality – indeed, quite plainly, the scripture seek to change culture from acceptance to condemnation.

Webb reinforces these conclusions by comparing these three controversial issues with numerous other practices and issues.

In addition, Webb considers 17 other indicators of the transcultural nature (or cultural nature) of the Bible's teachings on women, slaves, and homosexuals:¹⁷⁵

1. Preliminary movement
2. Seed ideas
3. Breakouts
4. Purpose/intent statements

¹⁷⁴ Intersity Press. 2001.

¹⁷⁵ Summarized at pp. 69-70.

5. Basis in Fall and/or Curse
6. Original Creation, I: Patterns
7. Original Creation, II: Primogeniture
8. New creation
9. Competing options
10. Opposition to original culture
11. Closely related issues
12. Penal code
13. Specific versus general
14. Basis in theological analogy
15. Contextual comparisons
16. Appeal to Old Testament
17. Pragmatics between two cultures
18. Scientific evidence

This book is extraordinary and very helpful scholarship. I do have a few quibbles:

Webb's approach to hermeneutics is more inductive than deductive, in that he starts with countless details and seeks to find conclusions in them. I would prefer to start with the larger principles. Thus, to me it is far more important what the gospel, "love your neighbor," or Genesis 2 teaches than an 18-step analysis. Of course, the two approaches should reach the same conclusion. I just hate leaving the impression that finding scriptural truth has to be so complex. If we'll be guided by matters of first importance, we'll know the truth long before we do the detailed work. On the other hand, it is wonderful that we have scholars who do the detailed work, as we can take considerable comfort in seeing our conclusions confirmed from an entirely different direction.

Webb's work has to be taken as reinforcing arguments such as those made in the main text, rather than making a complete case, as Webb does not even confront such key texts as 1 Corinthians 11 and 14:33-35 or, for that matter, Galatians 3:28 in any detail. Rather, he seeks to dispense with hierarchical arguments by reference to his 18-step analysis. Of course, at some point you have to wrestle the texts themselves to the ground.

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Webb seeks to show the cultural nature of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 by reference to the outdated practice of primogeniture. “Primogeniture” is the legal preference for the first born, going back to very ancient times. Thus, a king is normally succeeded by his oldest son, land is usually inherited by the oldest son, etc. The Bible reflects these practices in the Law of Moses, in references to Christ as the firstborn, and so on. Webb’s argument is that when Paul declares that women should have no authority because Adam was made before Eve, Paul is referring to primogeniture, a then-familiar part of ancient life that was clearly cultural. Webb may be right, but I am persuaded that the argument in the main text, that Paul is referring to Eve’s role as Adam’s suitable complement, is truer to the text and to Paul’s thought.

In Webb’s reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-15, he treats Paul’s references to the Creation accounts as mere analogies, and thus cultural. Thus, he would take the passage to mean something like “women should not teach because, like Eve, they are gullible.” He then argues that women were indeed gullible when the passage was written, but no longer, and thus the passage is cultural. This is an attractive argument, and may be right, but the passage just doesn’t read like an analogy to me. Rather, Paul follows his commands with “for” (Greek *gar*) meaning “because” and not “like” or “as.” Therefore, as argued in the main text, I prefer to argue that the reference to Eve’s gullibility justifies the command that women should learn, rather than the command that women not usurp authority or teach. Of course, even if Paul’s reference to Eve is intended to be a justification for women having no authority, we still have to add an explanation to the text. Either women can have no authority because all women are gullible like Eve – or because the women at Ephesus (the destination of 1 Timothy) are gullible like Eve. The text could be read consistently with either interpretation, and only the second fits the facts. To be fair, Webb later offers an alternative argument, that I consider much stronger than his first:¹⁷⁶

Assuming that God intended Eden’s creative order to have transcultural implications, that does not necessarily mean that women should be restricted from having a pastoral teaching ministry today. Genesis does not say that women cannot teach men. If one accepts a transcultural dimension to the garden’s patriarchy, the most that can be said is that man should have some kind of greater honor or prominence than woman. Paul applied the principle within his day and culture. But Paul’s use of the Genesis text in restricting women from teaching is an application of the principle, not the principle itself.

¹⁷⁶ p. 237.

CHAPTER XXI
MORE QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q. Doesn't the fact that there were women deacons and not women elders in the early church tell us that God did not mean for women to be elders?

A. No, for two reasons. First, deacons were servants of the congregation (or assistants to the elders) and women could easily fill the role of deacon without violating cultural norms. But elders were foremost teachers and leaders. Many First Century Christians would never have accepted women as elders. Indeed, few women would have been qualified to be elders, due to lack of education or exposure to the world. The same cultural conditions that dictated that women not teach and that women not ask questions in the assemblies made eldership an impossibility.

Second, there is no reasonable basis to be found in the scriptures to subject women to men. If women can't be elders, then that would be the only place where women are subjected to men purely due to their sex. If this is fundamentally, eternally wrong, why did God make Deborah a judge over Israel?

Q. But the Bible plainly says that elders are to be the husbands of one wife. How do we safely distinguish a temporary local command from an eternal command?

A. The requirement that an elder be a husband is a special case, not any more binding today than the five commands that Christians greet one another with the Holy Kiss or the command of Christ that we wash one another's feet.

General and specific commands. First, one of the oldest and most-often mentioned rules of biblical interpretation is that the more specific overrides the more general. Thus, a specific command overrides a general principle. However, this rule is itself not found in scripture and is, I believe, entirely wrong.

As a practicing attorney I know where the "rule" comes from – law. It is a rule of statutory interpretation. We wrongly apply it to scripture by assuming that scripture is a book of law. It is not (some of it is, but not the New Testament). Rather, the real rule is that our God cannot lie and is unchanging.

Therefore, broad, general principles, such as love, grace, and the nature of God, override specific cases. There are no exceptions from these principles. Apparent exceptions are due to the need to give up freedom due to local and often temporary conditions. Hence, a supposed "law" mandating discrimination against women plainly is not a law but may be an application of the real law – love your neighbor – in a situation where love calls for Christian women to yield to local society's standards.

Commands contrary to local culture. Another useful guideline for distinguishing temporary from permanent commands is this: a command that was contrary to the culture

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in which the command was given is probably an eternal command – not a culturally limited command. After all, to be a culturally limited command, the command had to be a result of, or modified by, the then current culture. For example, Paul condemns homosexuality in Romans 2, at a time and place where many within Roman society accepted homosexuality. His rejection of homosexuality is therefore not culturally limited.

The purpose behind a command. When a command is consistent with local culture, the eternal nature of the command can normally only be determined by looking at the purpose or reason behind the command. If we simply declare, “God said it; that decides it,” then we need to all start kissing and selling our pearls and gold!

Christians are required to live up to at least two standards. We must live up to God’s standards, and we also must live up to society’s standards. While God’s standards are normally higher than society’s, there will often be “moral rules” imposed by society that we must obey or else appear to be immoral. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 11, women are commanded to have long hair – literally, hair that hangs down as a covering. This would ban numerous hairstyles worn by women today, including the teased hair preferred by many older women. But Paul had to require the congregation to meet the standards of hair and dress then adopted by moral Corinthians in society at large to protect the reputation of his women members outside the church. The eternal principle is for Christians to dress and wear hair modestly and not to appear immoral. The local application will change from time to time and place to place.

Thus, when we approach the question of women – as speaking in the assembly, teaching, having authority, or even serving as elders – we must recognize that any limitation on women found in the New Testament was consistent with the then local culture. Therefore, we must look at what eternal principles may require the command in any situation. Since a number of passages refer back to the Genesis accounts, we must especially look at these accounts to see what they say for all time – not as colored by First Century culture – but letting Genesis speak for Genesis.

By approaching the Genesis accounts with an open mind, we quickly realize that the eternal principles are that both men and women are made in God’s image, that man is “not good” without woman, and that woman was made as a “suitable complement” for man. We see that husbands and wives are to be “one flesh” and that this requires that husbands give up something – since it is men who are to leave mother and father to become one flesh.

We don’t see women in an inferior role until sin enters the world as the result of the sins of Eve and Adam. This role of women is a part of the corruption of Creation that Jesus came to earth to rescue us from. It is not God’s will, any more than any sin is God’s will.

We then look at the Law of Moses and find no command that women may have no authority over men. We look at such accounts in the Old Testament as the accounts of

Miriam, Deborah, Esther, and Huldah, all of which make it clear that God calls women to be leaders – even over nations! We see how Jesus treated women, with respect that was far beyond the respect that any other First Century Jew would have shown. We look at the New Testament female prophets, the women who traveled with Paul, and Priscilla, and we see no evidence of an eternal plan that women be subject to men. Indeed, the evidence is clearly to the contrary. In fact, it is far easier to make out a case for a woman’s equality than for the abolition of slavery, because there are so many verses that suggest that “there is ... no male and female.” We easily see the wickedness of slavery today – it is counter to today’s culture – and we would see the error in limiting the use of the gifts that God has given women if we didn’t still have some very old and very wrong attitudes about women in our hearts.

This approach to interpreting the scriptures comes from Jesus himself –

(Mark 2:23-28 NIV) One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.** So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Now the Ten Commandments delivered by God himself to the Children of Israel on Mt. Sinai plainly state that it is a sin to work on the Sabbath.¹⁷⁷ Even the animals were not permitted to work! And yet Jesus healed on the Sabbath.

Jesus’ principle of interpreting the scriptures is plain. First, he looked at the underlying purpose of the command. Why did God command Sabbath observance? Is it just a rule, or is there a divine reason behind the rule? We know Jesus’ answer: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”¹⁷⁸

The reason Jesus approved caring for people on the Sabbath is that the Sabbath was made to benefit man – not as a burden – and certainly not a burden purely for the sake of imposing a burden.

¹⁷⁷ Exo. 20:8-11.

¹⁷⁸ Mark 2:27.

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A similar account will also help demonstrate Jesus' approach to rules:

(Luk. 13:10-17 NIV) On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

There is no passage in the Law of Moses that says that there is no sin in watering a donkey or ox on a Saturday. In a similar passage, Jesus asks the Pharisees whether they would rescue an ox caught in a pit on a Saturday (Luk. 14:5). The Pharisees were ashamed to answer, because without any specific scriptural authorization, they certainly would have. Sometimes we have to have dollar signs attached to the truth to see it! Jesus concludes that if it is proper to do work to help farm animals on a Saturday, then it is proper to do work to help people.

Jesus then limits the scope of the Sabbath command to those applications that actually fulfill the command's underlying purpose. Since the Sabbath was made to benefit man, we can heal on the Sabbath. Jesus persuades his listeners by pointing out that they instinctively understood that the Sabbath was not meant to allow an animal to suffer or for a farmer to lose his herd. Their instincts were right, because they intuitively knew that some things are just more important than Sabbath observance. The Pharisees' sin was in not seeing that people are important, too. The same principle applies as to women. We don't blindly follow any command – even one of the Ten Commandments – to the point of frustrating God's purpose in giving the command.

Moreover, we must also remember that even the command of Sabbath observance has disappeared. It ceased to apply when its purpose ceased. The principle is, therefore, that no command can be understood until we determine the purpose behind the command. Eternal purposes result in eternal commands. Cultural or temporary purposes result in

temporary commands. And we can't always tell the difference by looking just at the language of the command!

Q. If there truly is no male and female in Christ, why did Jesus only appoint male apostles?

Jesus could not prudently appoint women as apostles.¹⁷⁹ The same cultural limitations that dictated against female elders even more so dictated against female apostles. The apostles were destined to lead the first church formed in Jerusalem. This church struggled with accepting Gentiles, and it continued Jewish ritual practices for many decades – even under apostolic leadership (Acts 21:17-26). The Jews of First Century Jerusalem would never have accepted women apostles and many would have rejected the faith and been lost rather than submit to a woman overseer. The fact that the apostles were to lead the first congregation also explains why Jesus could have female disciples (e.g., Luke 8:1-3) but not apostles. Only the apostles were destined to lead the Jerusalem church.

More importantly, in the East, stories were often told, and truths communicated, symbolically. Jesus appointed 12 men as apostles to represent the 12 tribes of Israel, implicitly placing himself in the role of Jacob, their father, that is, *Israel*. And Jesus fulfilled God's purposes of for Israel in many ways. For example, in the last several chapters of Isaiah, the Suffering Servant is first clearly identified as Israel. Later on, the Suffering Servant becomes a single person who dies a death to bring forgiveness to others. Jesus takes on the role of Israel as light of the world and as Suffering Servant on the cross. He died the death Israel should have died.

Just so, when Jesus sent out the 70 missionaries, he was repeating the work of Moses in ordaining 70 judges or elders over Israel. Jesus stepped into the shoes of Moses, claiming his place as a greater prophet and leader.

Q. If there really is "no male and female," then doesn't your position approve homosexual "marriages"?

A. Paul is calling for a return to ways things were before the Fall of Man, that is, to Genesis 2. God made man and woman, but he made them differently, to complement one another and to complete what was lacking in one another. Thus, "no male and

¹⁷⁹ Osburn, *Women in the Church* 2. p. 126, comments, "True, Jesus did not include women among the twelve, but the logistics of women being in that role were simply impractical and would have scandalized and obscured Jesus' true mission." Ferguson argues that although "Jesus transcended society's conventions in this treatment of women, it is notable that the Twelve and the Seventy were only men" (Ferguson Christian Chronicle). But Ferguson fails to consider alternative explanations for Jesus' preference for male missionaries, such as the nature of Jewish society.

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female” contradicts the domination of women by men that began in Genesis 3,¹⁸⁰ but not the original design of God that the two become one flesh, be fruitful, and multiply. God never meant for two men to become one flesh, and Paul certainly does not teach otherwise in Galatians.

¹⁸⁰ (Gal. 1:4) “[Jesus] gave himself to rescue us from the present evil age” The “evil age” began in Genesis 3, with the Fall of Man.

CHAPTER XXII CONCLUSION

A. Egalitarian or Hierarchalist?

We earlier considered Osburn's suggestion that there are four schools of thought as to the role of women: paternalism, hierarchicalism, egalitarianism, and radical feminism. We rejected radical feminism because this view does not accept the authority of scripture. We rejected paternalism because it is based on shallow methods of interpreting the scriptures and insists on adding rules that admittedly are not found in the Bible.

Hierarchicalism has a strong appeal to those within the Churches of Christ. This view supports the authority of scripture and makes a serious effort at careful Bible study in textual and historical context while retaining the comfortable idea that there is a principle of male spiritual leadership. And yet the egalitarian view also has much appeal. While distinctly non-traditional, it also supports the authority of scripture. It appeals to our innate sense of justice and fair play and certainly has much support in the doctrine of gifts and talents. Accordingly, it is appropriate to consider how far apart the schools of thought really are.

B. The Marriage Relationship

Our difficulty in understanding the verses dealing with marriage can be largely resolved by a deeper understanding of the nature of Christ. While Ephesians 5 compels wives to be submissive to their husbands, husbands are commanded to emulate Christ's example of giving himself up for the church. Both schools of thought concede that husbands must give themselves up – even to the point of death – for their wives.

(Phil. 2:5-8 NIV) Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but **made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant**, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled himself and became obedient to death** – even death on a cross!

(Heb. 5:8-9) Although he was a son, **he learned obedience from what he suffered** and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

We cannot interpret the role of husbands with a blind eye toward what it means to be like Christ. As tempting as it is to us males to claim the throne of Jesus and insist on having all authority, our lot as husbands is not nearly so grand. There is a price to be paid to claim this throne, and the price is becoming nothing, a servant, humble, obedient, and

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suffering. It is giving oneself up. And after we've learned this lesson, and *only* after learning this lesson, can we claim to be heads of our wives "as Christ is head of the church." Only after learning these lessons can we claim to love our wives "just as" Christ loves the church. Mere maleness does not a lord make. If men would truly obey this portion of the passages – on which all schools of thought agree – the distinction between the egalitarian and hierarchicalist views would become nearly one of semantics.

Thus, the key to reconciling the egalitarian and hierarchicalist views of marriage is for the hierarchicalist to acknowledge that the headship of the husband is *conditioned* on the husband's having the sacrificial, servant heart of Christ. Few women would struggle to submit to such a man. *That the husband's headship is conditioned is amply demonstrated by the fact that Christ's headship was conditioned on his obedience:*

(Heb. 5:8-10 NIV) Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus did not become high priest until he'd first learned obedience.

(Phil. 2:8-11 NIV) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! **Therefore** God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God only exalted Christ and called on every knee to bow to him *as a consequence* of Christ's death on the cross.

(Heb. 2:9 NIV) But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor **because** he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Plainly, even Jesus' Lordship is conditioned on his humility, his service, and his giving up of himself. We men can hardly claim a greater right to headship than Jesus has, and so our headship must be considered conditional on having the heart of Christ.

Any other interpretation of the passages referring to husbands as heads of their wives would subject women to the headship of the abusive, the selfish, and the domineering. We'd be hopelessly naive to believe that there are no such husbands within our churches, and we'd be hopelessly irresponsible to teach these men that they are entitled to have their way.

Thus, properly understood, the hierarchicalist view of husbands is nearly indistinguishable from the egalitarian view in the context of marriage. It is hard to imagine a real-life situation where the headship of a truly Christ-like husband would reach a different practical result from the sharing or partnership that egalitarians find as the pattern for Christian marriages. Certainly, either approach to marriage would be a vast improvement over what many of our wives are subjected to.

C. Church Affairs¹⁸¹

This brings us to the passages that deal more particularly with church affairs. In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 paternalists find ample basis to conclude that women must be silent in the assembly. But many hierarchicalists agree with egalitarians that this passage must be limited to its historical and cultural circumstance. Thus, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 becomes the central text of hierarchicalist thought, and so many hierarchicalists would permit women to speak in the assembly, so long as such speaking is not authoritative over men.¹⁸²

A hierarchicalist might allow women roles that have been traditionally denied them – so long as these roles do not threaten the essence of male leadership and authority.

¹⁸¹ In earlier editions of this book, I argued for elder to have much more limited authority than I now suggest. I now have access to newer and much more sophisticated Greek resources and have done far more study on the issue. I can no longer argue that an elder is not an “office” or lacks positional authority. The scriptures clearly give positional authority to elders (also referred to as “overseers” or “shepherds”). In fact, the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “shepherd” are all terms of positional authority in the Bible and in the ancient world. However, the scriptures do limit the authority of elders substantially, as we’ll discuss.

¹⁸² Rubel Shelly is a noteworthy hierarchicalist. Shelly writes,

“The Bible is not against women ministering, using their God-given talents, standing up and speaking, administering church programs, singing (congregationally, small groups, or solo), reading Scripture, sharing information about church projects, testifying, teaching sub-groups of the church’s membership (whether female, male, or mixed), writing articles or poems, or otherwise participating fully in the life of local churches. ...”

The difference between females preaching and leading prayers for the assembly and these service roles is the difference between directing the group on one’s own initiative and ministering to it in a predetermined way. In the former, one chooses the course for the group and genuinely leads/guides it; in the latter, one follows a text and interprets it to the group.

“A Responsible Challenge to Our Traditions,” published in *In Search of Wonder*. Howard Publishing Co. 1995, Lynn Anderson, ed. p. 91, quoting Shelly, “A Woman’s Place Is ...,” *Wineskins* (May 1993). p. 5.

Of course, nothing better illustrates the implication of gullibility or inferiority inherent in limiting a woman’s role than this highly progressive (by Church of Christ standards) teaching. If a woman can speak by reading a book but cannot interpret the book, then why not? Is any answer available other than distrust of women? Certainly this position would be a vast improvement over our traditional position, but it still belittles women.

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Thus, women might pass out bulletins, pass out communion, and according to many, even read scripture or sing solos in the assembly, because these practices do not involve any exercise of authority. But egalitarians would consider the limitation on the exercise of authority as a vestige of a culture that is dying out.

Thus, reconciliation of the two views appears to be impossible. And yet, I believe that the two views *could* be seen as being much closer.

First, Jesus greatly limits how elders and others in authority may exercise their authority –

(Mark 10:41-45 NIV) When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, **and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The true meaning of leadership is not authority – it is service.

(1 Pet. 5:2-3 NIV) 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.

Thus, in a passage that surely reflects Jesus’ very similar instructions, Peter denies elders the right to “lord it over” their congregations. Their ministry is one of service and of example. On the other hand, Peter doesn’t prohibit the shepherds from acting as overseers. “Overseer,” per BDAG, refers to a guardian, and in the church, “to one who served as overseer or supervisor, with special interest in guarding the apostolic tradition.” It’s a position with actual authority – but authority of a very certain kind.

Hebrews 13:17 has often been cited as authority for elders to act as rulers.

(KJV) Obey them that have the **rule** over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

(ESV) Obey your **leaders** and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

In the King James Version, which has shaped much of our doctrine, *hegeomai* is translated “them that have the rule over you,” suggesting a hierarchical eldership. The NIV translators prefer “leaders,” but speak of “authority.” Both translations command the members to “obey.”

Thayer’s gives as the definition “to lead, i.e. a. to go before; b. to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over.” BDAG translates *hegeomai*, the word translated “leaders” or, in the KJV, “rule,” as “to be in a supervisory capacity, lead, guide.” BDAG gives examples of uses in biblical and secular literature where the word is used of military leaders and princes. It refers to someone with real, positional authority, although typically authority held by delegation from a higher power.

“Obey” in the KJV is poorly mistranslated. As Vine’s says, *peitho*, the word translated “obey,” means –

to persuade, to win over, in the Passive and Middle Voices, to be persuaded, to listen to, to obey, is so used with this meaning, the Middle Voice, e.g., in ... Heb. 13:17 The obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.¹⁸³

The same word is used in numerous verses to mean “persuade” or “be persuaded” or synonymous words.¹⁸⁴ The passive voice refers to action by a third party. The middle voice is action upon oneself. Thus, in the passive voice, *peitho* would be translated “be persuaded,” but in the middle voice, we should translate “be persuadable” or, more precisely, “allow yourselves to be persuaded.”

Finally, “submit” translates *hupеiko*, found nowhere else in the New Testament. BDAG translates, “to yield to someone’s authority, yield, give way, submit.”

Accordingly, we translate Hebrews 13:17:

Be open to persuasion by those with authority over you and so yield to them. They keep watch over you as having to¹⁸⁵ give an

¹⁸³ p. 124 regarding “obey.”

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, Acts 5:36, 37, 40; Rom. 2:8; Gal. 5:7; Jas. 3:3.

¹⁸⁵ “Men” is not in the Greek. Rather, the noun is implied and has no sexual connotation. Accordingly, our re-translation omits “men” to follow the Greek more closely.

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account. **Be open to persuasion**¹⁸⁶ by them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Therefore, we see that this verse has much the same thought as 1 Peter 5:2. Peter warns the leaders not to “lord it over” the flock but to be examples. The Hebrews writer speaks from the perspective of the flock, telling them to be open to the example and teaching of the leaders but also to respect their authority.

The leaders of the church are not overlords, dictators, despots, or even bosses. They are leaders and guides, who teach, judge the correct path, persuade, and set examples. They have positional authority, but this is authority given by the Spirit.

(Acts 20:28 ESV) Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers**, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Elders are chosen by the Spirit. How does the Spirit do this? By gifting members for this special task –

(Eph. 4:11-12 ESV) ¹¹ **And he gave** the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, **the shepherds** and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

(1Co 12:28 NET) And **God has placed in the church** first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, gifts of healing, helps, **gifts of leadership**, different kinds of tongues.

And those who are selected by the Spirit for this work will have the characteristics of a shepherd, elder, and overseer. No one will measure up to the Good Shepherd, but each elder will contribute spiritual gifts to the body needed in leadership.

In addition to positional authority, those gifted as elders will also have relational authority – the authority that comes from being invested in the lives of the members of the church, from years of committed service to the church, and so their positional authority should not be resented by the membership, even when the elders choose a path that some members disagree with.

Thus, does 1 Timothy 2:11-15 ban women from the role of elder? Well, the fact that elders have authority would seem to do so (unless my interpretation of the passage is accepted, of course), but if we understand that God’s Spirit is alive, active, and busy

¹⁸⁶ “Obey” or “be open to persuasion” does not appear here in the Greek either. The ESV translators have simplified the verse by breaking one sentence in the Greek into two English sentences and repeating the verb.

equipping and selecting members of the church for leadership as elders, how could we deny the role of elder to a woman chosen and equipped by the Spirit?

How would we distinguish such a woman from, say, Deborah, a prophetess, judge, and leader of Israel – by the power of God’s Spirit placed within her? After all, if the reason Deborah was qualified to lead is her gift of the Spirit, wouldn’t the same hold true today?¹⁸⁷

D. Women Ministers

We generally turn to Paul’s instructions to Timothy for guidance as to the role of the located preacher –

(2 Tim. 4:1-5 ESV) I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ... ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

It’s argued that the instructions to “reprove” and “rebuke” imply a position of authority, unacceptable for women, even if women aren’t required to be silent. Moreover, the preacher is typically seen as being in a teaching role.

But we must also consider –

(2 Tim. 1:14 ESV) ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you [Timothy].

Just as elders are chosen by the Spirit, the same is true of preachers. We’ve already seen texts speaking of the role of teachers and evangelists (e.g., Eph. 4:11), and the modern preacher is a blend of both.

¹⁸⁷ Ferguson *Women in the Church*. p. 15-16, argues that the presence of a spiritual gift does not necessarily authorize the use in worship. After all, tongue speakers had a gift that was generally not allowed to be used in the assembly. Ferguson overlooks the fact that tongue speakers were permitted in circumstances that would edify the church – that is, if an interpreter was present. Moreover, the question of women having authority is not really about the assembly but the broader life of the church. How could someone argue that spiritual gifts given by the decision of the Spirit cannot be used in the broader life of the church? And who would deny that they should be kept out of the assembly in cases where they would not edify or otherwise serve the purposes of the assembly (to comfort, strengthen, edify per 1 Cor. 14:3)? And if a woman is gifted to comfort, strengthen, and edify the church, there is nothing in the logic banning tongues that would deny her authority to speak in the assembly.

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If the preacher is called to his ministry by being gifted by the Spirit, then – just as is true of elders – the gifting by the Spirit is itself authorization to use the gift. Someone gifted for an office is authorized to hold the office. And if the Spirit’s work among us today seems to contradict the Bible, well, we’ve misunderstood the Bible.

E. The Practicalities of Our Conclusions

We now have to contemplate the unpleasant task of deciding what to do with all these new ideas. Do we run out and appoint women teachers, deacons, elders, and preachers? Do we cower in fear of being seen as “liberal” and ignore what the Bible says? What if our congregation would split? What if the churches in our community would disfellowship us? What if our elders don’t even allow material such as this to be considered by the membership? There are many lessons taught by the Bible that bear on these points.

1. Divisiveness is a sin

Being very often a divisive people, as amply evidenced by our history of countless divisions, we have conveniently ignored a dirty little secret: divisiveness is a sin. It is among the worst of all sins.

(Rom. 16:17 NIV) I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

(1 Cor. 3:16-17 NIV) Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

(Titus 3:10 NIV) Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.

This is not ambiguous. Not only is divisiveness a sin, but also we are told that such a person must be disfellowshipped.

The lesson in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 comes in the context of the division described in chapter 1, where some members claimed to be of Christ, or of Cephas, or of Apollos, or of Paul. Paul first makes the point that the congregation is God’s temple and that divisions within the congregation destroy the temple. He then pronounces a curse on those who cause such divisions, saying that God will destroy such people.

Merely disagreeing isn’t divisive. Divisiveness is dividing over our disagreements. It is judging as damned or not worthy of our fellowship those who have been saved but who disagree with us on some point of non-salvation doctrine.

Thus, we cannot allow those who are divisive to set the agenda for the rest of us. We must teach the truth – the whole truth – even if those steeped in the sin of divisiveness don't like it.

1. Condoning sin

One of the more ridiculous ideas held by some within the Churches is the notion that by worshipping with a known sinner I somehow “condone” his sin. But, of course, we are all sinners. That's why we need Jesus! The idea that somehow my sins aren't very bad and so don't taint those who worship with me, while the sins of someone who disagrees with me are really bad and so taint the congregation, is an extraordinarily arrogant and wicked notion. When I worship with a sinner, I should be thankful that he is also willing to worship with a sinner, or else I would be all alone in church!

2. Romans 14 - 15

We will begin with Paul's conclusion, so that there will be no doubt as to Paul's point.

(Rom. 15:1-3 NIV) We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

Paul criticizes selfishness among Christians. Thank God that Jesus wasn't as selfish as we are! When Christians complain to the elders that some practice makes them uncomfortable or is not what they want, the complaint is essentially self-centered, and therefore, un-Christian. We should always think (and learn to care about) what is best for the community of Christians, not ourselves. More importantly, we must learn to be comfortable with what helps bring the lost to Christ or strengthen our weaker members (often our youngest members). Christ did not die to create a church that serves the strong. Rather, the strong are to serve the weak and the lost. Indeed, as we will see, Paul uses “weak” to refer to those in doctrinal error, and yet he commands us to bear with their failings.

(Rom. 15:5-7 NIV) May the God who gives endurance and encouragement **give you a spirit of unity** among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.**

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Unity is a gift from God. Thus, it is not based on our own efforts so much as on what God has given us. We will never all agree on every point of doctrine or practice. We've proved that over the last 2,000 years beyond argument. We must therefore learn to honor the unity that God has already given us, by acknowledging as saved and honorable all whom God has saved. Unity is not based on a seven-part lesson on the marks of the church. It is based on our accepting one another as Christ accepted us. Christ accepted us while we were sinners and long before we took a position on the role of women, creation/evolution, or what have you. If Christ accepted you, I must accept you. The burden is not on you. It's on me.

Notice especially that we are to accept (present tense – continuously) others just as Christ accepted (past tense – at a single point in time) us. Just how did Christ accept us? Through our hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized. So how are we to accept those with whom we disagree? By their faith and repentance – that is, their hearts.

Some have tried to turn this argument on its head by claiming to be the weaker brother! They argue that since they are weaker, the rest of us must yield to their peculiarities. This takes a lot of nerve, but it happens. But to claim to be weaker is to claim to be wrong, as we can see in chapter 14.

3. Courage in taking a stand

Neither Paul nor Jesus ever allowed fear of criticism (or even death) to prevent them from speaking out. Peter and John told the Jews that it is better to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). We should seek to have a good reputation, but not at the expense of failing to serve God as well as we know how.

(Mat. 12:1-14 NIV) At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread – which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! **Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**”

Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. **But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.**

Jesus could have easily avoided these confrontations. He could have waited until Sunday to heal. He could have instructed his disciples to avoid preparing food on Saturday. But he didn't. Rather, he provoked the Pharisees into a confrontation, which allowed him to show others that the religion of the Pharisees was a false religion and that their rules were contrary to God's will. Moreover, Jesus wanted to teach the standard by which his disciples would be judged.

Jesus' reputation among the Pharisees was as a blasphemer and lawbreaker. He chose to suffer their condemnation (and ultimately death) in order to teach his disciples the truth and to lure the Pharisees into showing their true wickedness.

(Mat. 15:1-20 NIV) Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “**Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!**”

Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; **their teachings are but rules taught by men.**”

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Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, **false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean';** but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"

Once again, we see Jesus going out of his way to provoke a confrontation with the Pharisees. Certainly he could have told his disciples to wash their hands to avoid a confrontation. Surely, their reputations suffered among the religious leaders of the day for their violation of the traditions. Moreover, the traditions certainly seem to us to be a good one. We all believe in washing our hands before we eat! And yet Jesus chose to challenge the rule. Moreover, he "offended" the Pharisees and didn't care.

Some of us argue that we must not "offend" our weaker brothers and that we must preserve our reputations as good Church of Christ Christians among the Churches. And yet Jesus was willing to be known as a sinner and a blasphemer rather than keep certain traditions that he could have easily followed. Why? Because to have done so would be to have condoned the false religion that produced these traditions.

Jesus wanted to make a radical change in what the people considered to be religious, and a radical change in thought required confrontation with the leaders of the opposition. He had to make clear not only what he stood for, but what he *didn't* stand for. Anything less would have risked perpetuating the false teachings of the Pharisees that were contradictory to the grace that was to come.

Jesus concludes with the point that the sin is not in rejecting even morally neutral traditions. The sin is in slandering and speaking ill of those who do.

F. Conclusions

Given the controversial nature of the doctrine of the role of women, how do we apply biblical principles to make our conclusions a reality in the Church of Christ today?

1. As pointed out earlier in this book, the biggest problem in the Churches today is a profound misunderstanding of the nature of grace and the workings of the Holy Spirit. So long as legalism is mistaken for the gospel of Christ, division will always follow change. Therefore, we must work diligently to spread the Good News within the Churches. **We must explicitly point out the errors of legalism** and plainly speak the truth of God's good grace.

2. While many will consider such teaching "liberal," in fact such teaching is simply a repetition of the work of Paul. Paul worked most of his career to rebuke Judaizing teachers, who sought a return to the Law of Moses. **We should follow Paul in rebuking those who seek a return to Old Testament theology.** But we should speak the truth in love. And I don't mean a condescending, arrogant "love" that takes pleasure in purifying the Churches. Rather, we must hurt for those who have never felt the joy of God's forgiveness.

3. We must recognize that **divisiveness is a sin** that requires excommunication. Too often we take our most divisive members and make them preachers and elders when they ought to be expelled from the church altogether. We will never all agree. But we should not tolerate those who divide (or who threaten division to get their own way).

4. If we become **committed to one another**, and not to having our way, then we will be in a position to deal with difficult issues without fear of division or splits. Division is not caused by discussing controversial issues, but by selfishness and an Old Testament understanding of grace. Love is not an abstraction, but a commitment that is built on shared experiences and on working side by side toward common goals.

5. We **cannot grant the legalists a monopoly** in the pulpit or the press. If the most grace-filled preacher refuses to teach grace for fear of the legalists, then we have a legalist preacher, as a practical matter.

6. And yet we must understand that **it takes time** for people to accept new ideas. Even for an open-minded person, a radical change in thought can take many years to feel comfortable. When I get a new eyeglass prescription, the new, better lenses actually seem worse than the old, out-of-focus lenses until I've worn them a few days. We must be patient. Practice may have to follow a new understanding of doctrine by very many years.

The participation of women in church affairs must increase in gradual steps. We were once uncomfortable with women attending a church business meeting. We later became comfortable with women being present but silent. We are now comfortable with women being present and speaking, so long as they do not vote. Then we became

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comfortable with women voting so long as they do not chair the meeting. The process must continue.

7. **Each church will follow its own pace**, and some churches will lag decades behind. The urban churches will often change faster than the rural churches, because the urban churches tend to be younger and more highly educated. Education helps people to be open minded by exposing people to many new ideas, broadening horizons, and humbling those who think they know everything. Younger Christians have had less time to get used to a way of doing things or of thinking. Not that this excuses older Christians from being tradition bound. Older Christians ought to be an example of humility and sacrificial love to the younger Christians. We ought to hold our older Christians to this standard in our preaching.

8. **Division is not inevitable**, but the danger is very great. Unless the Churches of Christ reject legalism and turn to the cross, division and splits will occur. The only other “solution” is to not change. And as pointed out earlier, we are not even keeping our own children in the Churches. The status quo is flatly unacceptable.

9. **Change is necessary and inevitable**. We cannot deny well over half our members the right to participate as full-fledged Christians forever. This is not because of their “rights” or “civil liberties.” Rather, God needs workers. The hungry must be fed, the children educated, and the world saved. If we deny so many of our members the right to participate in church decision making or leadership, we are unilaterally disarming in the face of Satan’s army. Imagine facing an enemy army and then turning around and decommissioning a majority of our own best officers for fear of violating the army’s book of regulations. We need to worry about defeating Satan and let God worry about his choice of leaders, teachers, speakers, and administrators.

One example should suffice. Many traditional missionaries from within the Churches of Christ have struggled to convert Russians who are desperate for the gospel, because they refuse to use female translators when they teach, fearing a violation of the command that women not be permitted to teach. And yet there aren’t enough male translators at times. Therefore, many souls in Russia are being lost due to this very restrictive view of the role of women. Our doctrine of women matters!

10. We must carefully, **prayerfully weigh these truths against the division and discord that moving too fast will inevitably cause**. We should not be naive. Changing our practices regarding women would be a very emotional matter for many members. We must go at a pace that fits the ability of our members to accept change. By being over-anxious, we can easily do more harm than good. And yet, in the long run, **the work of the church is hurt severely by the limitations we place on ourselves and by the legalism that such limitations encourage**.

The test of how to proceed is whether the chosen course will be best for the Lord’s work. We know that there will be problems associated with giving women greater influence in the church. And we have never done this before, and so we don’t know how

richly the Lord's work will be blessed by a change in this direction. It seems, therefore, hard to calculate whether the risk is worth the benefit.

For guidance I turn to Bill Tilden's advice on how to play tennis: "Never change a winning strategy; always change a losing strategy." Are we winning or losing? The only honest answer is "losing." The Churches of Christ have not grown appreciably in 30 years. We have split over Pentecostalism, grace, the Holy Spirit, the unity movement,¹⁸⁸ whether to be a "mainstream" Church of Christ, and many other issues, but we haven't grown. Nor have we founded very many new orphans homes (none, to my knowledge, in the U.S.), colleges, hospitals, shelters for the homeless, shelters for battered spouses, or low-income housing. We have certainly done much good in the last 30 years in absolute terms, but the world and the evil in it are growing far faster than we are.

How do organizations change? Become more effective? More dynamic? Clearly, the answer is leadership. And just as clearly the Churches of Christ are lacking in leadership (we have some fabulous leaders, but not nearly enough). Do we have enough qualified male leaders? Teachers? Missionaries? Mission organizers? Evangelists? Fund raisers? Bible scholars? Elders?

If you don't like my proposal, make a better one. How do we get off dead center? What haven't we tried that we should have tried? How can we be content to let "well enough" alone?

11. **The only way to never offend is to never do anything.** To hold up the feelings of these brothers as our standard of conduct is to make the most legalistic brothers the rule makers for the Churches of Christ. Jesus would not approve. **We should call on the legalists to repent**, rather than kowtowing to their whims.

12. **Education, therefore, is critical.** This is accomplished through books, classes, word of mouth (especially), and preacher seminars and lectureships. Unfortunately, as is true for all controversial topics, some of our preachers and elders play mind control games and refuse to allow their members to hear from those who disagree with the party line. This is closer to a cult than Christianity, but it is far too commonplace.

13. **Our women must be ready** to prove themselves worthy. As churches slowly move women into positions of greater influence and leadership, they will be severely tested. Each mistake will be greatly exaggerated.

¹⁸⁸ The on-going effort of many within the instrumental and non-instrumental branches of our Restoration Movement to re-unite the Movement's two branches.

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15. Ultimately, we can only do so much, and **the rest is up to God**. Even Jesus did not change the hearts of most of the Pharisees, but he changed enough hearts to rewrite the history of the world. We can only plant. God must give the increase.