

WOMEN, SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND MINISTRY

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Introduction

This paper looks at the biblical basis of shared leadership and examines the role of women in the church. Some believe that scripture prohibits women from positions of leadership, often pointing to the male-dominated apostolate and local ministry described in the New Testament as well as the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2. Does the New Testament, in fact, limit women from a leadership role? This paper addresses these concerns using the account of creation and the fall; the role of women as recorded in the Old and New Testaments; Jesus' interactions with women; and the implications for the church in interpreting and understanding the Pauline texts which address women in church in an affirmative manner.

Adam and Eve Created as Co-regents of God's Creation

The account of creation is multi-faceted. It gives us an understanding of the person, characteristics and attributes of God and an understanding of how the world, including all humankind, came into being. This account also describes God's original plan for humankind in their interaction with one another as male and female.

The creation account clearly states that God created both man and woman in his image (Gen. 1:27), emphasizing this idea of created equality.¹ While creation order has sometimes been cited as evidence that God intended woman to be subordinate to man, the idea of creation order as precedence for authority is lacking in several areas. The idea that Adam is superior to Eve because he was created first is not supported by Scripture. Adam was created after the animals, yet had authority over them. As John Calvin noted, "Paul's argument that woman is subject because she was created second, does not seem very strong

¹ Roger Nicole. "Biblical Concept of Woman." *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition.

for John the Baptist went before Christ in time and yet he was far inferior to him.”² While some have viewed Adam as God’s ultimate creation and therefore master of all, if authority in Genesis was based on creation order, then Eve, created as an equal being in God’s image *after* Adam, would rule over Adam and clearly this is not God’s intention. The created order of Adam and Eve established oneness, not hierarchy. God’s original intention for man and woman was that they be co-regents over his creation.

According to Paul’s account of creation (1 Cor. 11:9), Eve was formed *because* of Adam’s need: It was not good for the man to be alone. Therefore in answer to that need, God said, “I will make a helper (*ezer*) suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18). However, most English translations of 1 Corinthians 11:9 replace the word “because” with “for” or “for the sake of,” despite the fact that the New Testament consistently translates the same word in the given grammatical construction as “because” (as is the case in 1 Cor. 11:10, “because of the angels”).³ This misleading translation makes the purpose of Eve’s existence seem male-oriented rather than God-oriented. The more accurate translation “Eve was formed because of Adam” reveals the underlying reason for the woman’s creation.⁴ Adam lacked something without Eve; he needed her (Gen. 2:18). Eve marks God’s crowning act in creation: While up to this point, God has declared his creative work to be good, he defines it as very good only after the creation of both man and woman (Gen. 1:27, 31).

This understanding is bolstered by the words used to describe Eve: she is Adam’s *ezer kenegdo* (2:18). Often translated as “helpmeet” or “helper,” its usage through out the Old Testament does not support this translation. The noun *ezer* is used most frequently in

² John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and the Epistles of Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T.A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 217.

³ Grace Ying May and Hyunhye Pokrifka Joe. “A Response to J.I. Packer’s Position on Women’s Ordination” in *Priscilla Papers*, Volume 11, Number 1, Winter 1997

⁴ *Ibid.*

the Old Testament to mean “help” – someone who will come to the aid of another or bring help. The person bringing aid, in most occurrences of the word, refers to the help which comes from one who is superior. In most cases, the “help” is God Himself (Ps. 33:20; 46; 121:1). This word occurs twenty-one times in the Old Testament; nineteen refer to God’s help.⁵ The second word, *kenegdo*, means suitable or like the man. The Hebrew word literally means “facing” – God meant woman to be face-to-face, or on the same level with the man. Adam’s response to Eve (Gen. 2:23) emphasizes the one-flesh intimacy as God’s ideal relationship for man and woman.

This one-flesh nature of Adam and Eve is highlighted in the institution of marriage as a monogamous union. While the first instance of polygamy occurs fairly soon as a result of sin in scripture (Gen. 4:19), the monogamous nature of marriage is affirmed again in the story of salvation from the flood when God preserves four couples in the ark who shall once again populate the earth (Gen. 8:15-16; 9:1). Jesus also taught that monogamy was God’s original intention (Mt.19:5; Mk.10:8; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31; cf. 16:18). If Jesus upheld God’s original intent for marriage in his teachings, did he also uphold God’s original intent for equality (the co-regency) between man and woman? This paper argues that Jesus did in fact treat women as co-heirs and co-regents in the kingdom of God.

The Fall: Blessing and Curse

Genesis records the perfect union Adam and Even enjoyed until the Fall. Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 2:13-14 have often been used to justify women as ecclesiastical second-class citizens. However, certain questions arise when comparing the Genesis account with this passage. The Timothy passage says that Adam was not deceived but the woman was (v. 14). Since Genesis 3:6 uses the plural pronoun, evidently Adam was with Eve during the

⁵ Joy Elasky Fleming, *Man and Woman in Biblical Unity*. Minneapolis, MN: Christians for Biblical Equality.

conversation with the serpent. And if Adam (who seems to have been given the prohibition prior to Eve's creation) was with Eve during the conversation with the serpent, why was he so silent? Eve's lack of clarity about God's command may indicate that she was poorly taught by Adam, or that she did not understand the command. Paul's illustration from the Genesis account is cited to make the point that untaught and unqualified individuals should neither teach nor hold positions of leadership, not to issue a generic prohibition against women as leaders.

Genesis 3 describes the consequences of sin, not a divine mandate to carry out. Because sin entered the world, both man and woman face harsh consequences. These consequences, however, are the result of sin – not God's original intention. Man shall rule over the woman (v. 16) as a result of their sin, not a divinely ordained command. Therefore, Jesus' death, resurrection and enthronement provide the ability to end this alienation, as it does other types of estrangement which result as a consequence of sin.

Women and the Old Testament

The Bible is remarkable for its emphasis on women in leadership, especially in a patriarchal culture. Women are prophets, judges, and deliverers of God's people; visited by God or his angels; and highlighted in the genealogy of the Messiah. And God's provision for women is seen in his law which protects women from being merely a source of sexual satisfaction, a producer of children or a worker. God views women very differently than the culture surrounding the Israelites.

While the Israelites lived in a patriarchal society where one would expect the role of man to be emphasized, God's word gives an unusual emphasis to the role of women. The role of mother as well as father is frequently recognized (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 21:18-19; Prov.1:8; 6:20; 10:1). Daughters and sons are listed in the historic narrative as well as in the

legal codes (Ex. 20:10). Women occupied the highest positions of their culture: Miriam was a prophet (Ex.15:20; Num.12:2); Deborah was both prophet and judge (Judges 4:4); Huldah was a prophet (2 Chron. 34:22); and Esther, like Moses, was the deliverer of her people. The one office they were excluded from was that of priest, but this may have been due to the decadence of the surrounding culture with its practice of worshipping fertility goddess. The Aramaic word “*shammash*” is used to describe the High Priest officiating in the temple on the Day of Atonement; the feminine “*shammasha*” means a prostitute.⁶ This exclusion from the priesthood, therefore, can be seen as a consequence of the fall and resultant depravity rather than divine design.

Women in the New Testament

Women are shown in every aspect of spiritual leadership in the New Testament: the merchant Lydia, founding mother of the church at Philippi (Acts 16:14, 40); the disciple Tabitha/Dorcas (Acts 9:36); the deacon and pastor Phoebe (Rom. 16:1); the apostle Junia (Rom. 16:7); the teacher Priscilla (Acts 18:26); and the four prophets/daughters of Phillip (Acts 21:9).

The life of Jesus begins and ends with women playing a primary role. The narratives of his birth and early childhood include many women in addition to his mother Mary. Jesus first identifies himself as the resurrection and the life to a woman (Jn. 11:25-26). Women are recorded as present at his crucifixion (Mt. 27:55f; Mk. 15:40; Lk. 23:49; Jn. 19:25) and are the first witnesses to his resurrection (Jn. 20:14-18).

One of the consequences of the Fall is that woman becomes valued primarily for her ability to bear children and run a household, and is desired or resented for her sexuality.

Jesus, in his repeated interactions with women, reflects a different value of women, one not

⁶ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1903), p. 1602.

based in biology. Jesus praises obedience to God, regardless and independent of gender (Lk. 11:27- 28). Jesus commissions the Samaritan woman as the first evangelist for her village (Jn. 4). Far from prohibiting a woman from joining the disciples or holding a leadership position, Jesus seems to encourage it.

Women are shown in a variety of roles beyond the traditional one of wife and mother. Jesus had women disciples; Tabitha is called “disciple” (*mathetria*) in Acts. 9:36. Jesus refers to his disciples in Matthew 12:46-50 as “brother and sister, and mother,” implying that his group of disciples included women as well as men. Luke records that Jesus traveled through “the cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, and also some women...who were contributing to their support out of their private means” (Lk. 8:1-3). Jesus is traveling with a group of men and women known to be his disciples, a most unusual thing for a Middle Eastern man to do.⁷

Luke also records the story of Mary and Martha; Mary was “seated at the feet of Jesus, listening to his word” as a disciple (Lk. 10:38). Paul describes himself as a disciple of Gamaliel in this same way (Acts 22:3). When Martha is troubled by Mary’s failure to help her in the kitchen (fulfilling the traditional and culturally accepted role for women), Jesus rebukes Martha, not Mary. In fact, Jesus praises Mary for her choice to sit at his feet by saying, “Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk. 10:42). In other words, Jesus affirms Mary as disciple.

Women are seen as teachers of theology: Priscilla taught Apollos, who was considered to be an “eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures ... instructed in the way of the Lord,” one who “spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus” (Acts 18:24-

⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View,” in *Theology Matters*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan/Feb 2000, p. 2.

28). Scripture records that Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, “explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Given the cultural mores of the day, it was remarkable for these women to be mentioned in this account, emphasizing their high level of knowledge and ability to teach. Additionally, Luke is careful to list Priscilla first, before her husband (Acts 18:18-26, Rom. 16:3), just as he does with Paul and Barnabas when it was apparent that Paul was leading the Gentile mission. Paul also uses name order to signify James as the leader of the church over Peter and John in Galatians 2:9. Some posit that Luke presents Mary as a teacher of theology in her Magnificat. Because she is the composer and singer of this, she thus teaches those who read Luke’s Gospel.⁸ Mary also prophecies about the future work of her Son.

Women are seen as deacons in the New Testament. Paul commends Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2, calling her a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church; the use of the title “deacon” indicates that Phoebe was ordained to a clearly defined ministry, namely, that of deacon. Commentators from the time of John Calvin to the present have recognized Phoebe as one who held a recognized and holy ministry in the church.⁹ Phoebe is “described as a or possibly the ‘deacon’ of the church in question, and this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrences in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12.”¹⁰ Phoebe is also called a *prostatis* over or to many.¹¹

Women are seen in the role of prophet in the New Testament. God’s household, the church, is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), giving special emphasis and honor to the apostles and prophets. Philip the Evangelist, a highly regarded

⁸ Ibid. p. 2.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, tr. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 320.

¹⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 374.

¹¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View,” in *Theology Matters*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan/Feb 2000, p. 3.

member of Christ's church, had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9), giving credence to the acceptance of women as prophets. Peter clearly states in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost that women as well as men will prophecy by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17-18). Paul accepts women as prophets; in 1 Corinthians 11, he provides instruction to both men and women. It is obvious from this text that women did speak in church; while praying could refer to private devotions, prophesying is a public act with clear guidelines on how it is to be done.

Women are seen as apostles in the New Testament. The name of Junian (or Junia) in Romans 16:7 has been questioned as to its gender, since it can be masculine or feminine. Historically the name has been believed to be feminine. Origen of Alexandria, Jerome, and Peter Abelard all held to the feminine name. Chrysostom said of Junia, "how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle."¹² In fact, the male name "Junias" does not appear until 1512. This text seems to have influenced Luther's translation of the Bible into German, and therefore influenced other versions. Thus, the weight of history and the teachings of the Church Fathers hold to the idea of a female apostle.

Paul places the role of apostle and prophet above that of teacher (1 Cor. 12:28, cf. Eph. 4:11); the ministry of the apostle is "first" in the church. By listing Junia as an apostle (Rom. 16:7), Paul thus considers her as "first" in the church, destroying the case that Paul believed women could have only subordinate ministries.¹³ God has indeed called both men *and* women to exercise their gifts for the building up of the body (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-26; Eph. 4:11-12). To restrict women's gifts is to disobey God. The New Testament teaching

¹² B. Brooten, "Junia...Outstanding Among the Apostles" in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, eds. L. and A. Swidler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 433f.

¹³ Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia, the First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

about gifts always occurs in context of the interdependence of Christ's body. The Spirit assigns gifts to women and men for the explicit purpose of enriching their common life. It is our gifts, not our gender, which determine our function in the body. Each person's gifts exist for the benefit of one another and thus for the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on women and men (Acts 2). Empowered by the Spirit, God's sons and daughters spoke in tongues and prophesied. When they preached, thousands were converted. It was not their masculinity or femininity that drew people to the Lord, but their Christ-likeness. As a result of the Spirit's work, God's reign is open to men and women of all ages, races and classes. The Spirit calls and empowers us all, and the same Spirit that dwells in women dwells in men, for there is only one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4). Scripture is filled with examples of women ministering as apostles, preachers, teachers, evangelists, deacons and ministers. There is no prohibition against ordaining women in the Bible.¹⁴

The Teaching of Paul

Paul's writings, specifically 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:34-38 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, are most commonly used to prohibit women from a position of leadership within the church. However, since so many other passages show women in leadership, it seems beneficial to re-evaluate these passages in light of other scriptures. We must look to the entirety of the Bible and not just one or two "proof texts" in seeking understanding; the church suffers "when we fail to read the Bible as connected to a historical and cultural context."¹⁵

What are we to do when faced with seemingly contradictory scripture? We can (1) dismiss the biblical witnesses as contradictory and thus irrelevant; (2) take the texts that say

¹⁴ Gilbert Bilezikian. "A Challenge for Proponents of Female Submission to Prove their Case from the Bible" in conjunction with Wheaton College and Christians for Biblical Equality, available online at <http://www.bilezikian.com/gbilezikian/publications/challenge.html>.

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, "Women Ministering" in *Evidence for Biblical Equality*, Autumn 2008, vol. 7.

“yes” to women as normative and ignore the others; (3) focus on 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 and overlook the many examples of women disciples, teachers, deacons, ministers, prophets, and apostle; (4) decide that there is only one possible view to hold, which must be supported against the other view; or (5) look again at the texts in question to see if their historical setting might allow for more unity of thought that previously believed.¹⁶ The best approach seems to suggest that we take another look at the texts in question for a possible harmonization of thought regarding women in ecclesiological roles.

When looking at Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, it becomes apparent that chapters 11-14 form a single literary unit. The chiasm of 1 Corinthians 11:2-14:33-40 helps to clarify Paul’s thoughts:¹⁷

- 1 Disorder in worship (11:2-34):
 - 1a Dress of women/men prophets (11:2-16)
 - 1b Disorder in the Eucharist (11:17-34)
- 2 The Spiritual Gifts (ch. 12)
- 3 Love (Ch. 13)
- 2₁ The Spiritual Gifts (ch. 14:1-25)
- 3₁ Disorder in Worship (14:26-36):
 - (3_{1a}) Prophets all talk at once (14:26-33a)
 - (3_{1b}) Women talk in church (14:33b-36)

Paul begins (ch. 11) and ends (ch. 14) with a discussion on disorder in worship. The discussion of spiritual gifts (chs. 12 and 14) forms a second parallel. The famous chapter on love (13) is the climax of the chiasm. Both men and women are prophesying in chapter 11, so we know that there are men and women prophets. Therefore, when Paul tells the women in 14:34-35 to be silent and listen to the prophets, we already know that some prophets are women (11:5). Given this, it seems that Paul was not issuing a decree that women were

¹⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View” in *Theology Matters*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan/Feb 2000.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

never to speak in church, but demanding that women (as well as men) should ensure that worship was conducted in a manner worthy of God.

In the chapter immediately preceding this chiasm, Paul addresses freedom in Christ and says, “‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (10:23-24). Paul is concerned that lack of head coverings for women will prevent the Corinthians from knowing Christ. This evangelical concern is also behind his circumcision of Timothy but not Titus (Acts 16:3; Gal. 2:3). Paul, in each of these examples, weighs the effect of cultural mores on evangelism.

Paul is addressing good order during worship; he is speaking against disorder in public worship in the form of people seeking to outdo one another by speaking in tongues and prophesying (14:34-35). Paul’s stress here seems to be against argumentative debate by some women and their disruptive insistence on being heard; in other words, Paul speaks out against their way of speaking rather than the act of speaking.

Additionally, there is a textual question in 1 Corinthians 14:33-40. One tradition, chiefly western, places verses 34 and 35 after verse 40. In this reading, Paul's appeal to the “command of the Lord” (v. 37) would come before the command that women be silent. Even the appeal itself has variant readings: some manuscripts have “commands of the Lord” while others omit the word “command” altogether.¹⁸ Even if none of the variants are original, the changes offer something akin to a first commentary on the text. In other words, early copyists also had problems understanding Paul's words.¹⁹ That being so, perhaps we would be wise to approach this text with some humility.

¹⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 695.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

J.I. Packer asserts that 1 Corinthians 14:34f debars women from “speaking in church” and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 prohibits women from “teaching and giving directions to men.”²⁰ However, any interpretation which builds “a universal church order”²¹ on a few verses which are highly debatable exegetically and theologically is suspect. Since many biblical scholars admit that 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 are difficult passages to translate from the original Greek, and therefore difficult to understand, perhaps we should especially interpret these verses in light of other, clearer texts.²²

At the heart of the dispute is not merely the original meaning of the texts, but how they are to be applied in the church today. We need to distinguish between original sense and present application in much the same as we have done with Paul’s instruction that women are to cover their heads (1 Cor. 11:2-16). This passage and 14:33-40 address much that is specific to the Corinthian situation. Since we have abandoned the requirement of head coverings for women, why do we cling to the prohibition against women speaking in churches? We can remain faithful to the issue that Paul is addressing – concern for good order in public worship – which is not primarily related to the issue of women speaking in church.

The idea of cultural application has some merit as well in Paul’s letter to Timothy. Erickson, in discussing these restrictive passages, states that they “should probably be seen as relating to particular local situations (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:33-36).”²³ When Paul writes to Timothy, the temple of Artemis in Ephesus was still functioning. This temple, one of the seven wonders of the world, dominated the city and brought much income and status to the

²⁰ J. I. Packer, “Let’s Stop Making Women Presbyters” *Christianity Today* 35 (February 11, 1991) p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Grace Ying May and Hyunhye Pokrifka Joe. “A Response to J.I. Packer’s Position on Women’s Ordination” in *Priscilla Papers*, Volume 11, Number 1, Winter 1997.

²³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) p. 566.

city (Acts 19). Women, along with castrated males, played a dominant role in this temple. Given the city's emphasis on the goddess Artemis (always depicted with rows of multiple breasts), a female priesthood, and castrated males, is it not possible that Christian males in leadership might experience resistance to their leadership? A culture that practiced the ultimate violence and most dehumanizing act on men (castration) might also practice other forms of sexism and violence, giving the church an especially difficult time. Paul began his epistle to Timothy with a warning against false teachers – who must have abounded in Ephesus! When Paul says he permits no women to teach, perhaps he is referring to those theologically ungrounded women who were still working to become free of their pagan beliefs, or those who were culturally conditioned to believe that women (not men) should be in charge of worship.

In what sense does Paul use *authenthein* in 1 Timothy 2:12? While this word is often translated in a neutral sense to mean “have authority,” it had pejorative connotations, including “murder” or “perpetrate a crime,” during Paul's day.²⁴ Paul had a variety of words to select if he were speaking about the ordinary exercise of ecclesiastical leadership and authority, most notably *proistemi*.²⁵ Paul uses this word six times in reference to church leadership (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; Rom. 12:8), where it carries the connotation of manage, conduct, rule, direct – the expected practices of leadership. Given the pejorative connotations of *authenthein*, it seems feasible that this word choice might have something to do with the unique situation in Ephesus.

Was there something about the city of Ephesus, home to the temple of Artemis, a cult which worshipped a female goddess and was controlled by women and castrated men,

²⁴ Leland Wilshire, “The TLG Computer and Further References to *Authenteo* in 1 Tim. 2:12” in *New Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 34, 1988). pp. 120-134.

²⁵ John Jefferson Davis, “1 Tim. 2:12, the Ordination of Women, and Paul's Use of Creation Narratives” in *Priscilla Papers*, vol. 23, no. 2, spring 2009, p. 5.

which made Paul speak out like he did? When Paul writes about the Fall in Romans, he focuses almost exclusively on Adam as the representative figure who brought guilt on the entire human race (Rom. 5:12-21). In his first letter to the Corinthians, he uses creation order to call for orderly worship and stresses the mutual interdependence of man and woman (1 Cor. 11:2-16). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is concerned about false teachers (2 Cor. 11) and uses the serpent's deception of Eve as a warning for the entire Corinthian congregation, male and female alike. Thus, we can see Paul's reference to Eve in 1 Timothy 2:12 as addressing his concern over the shadow cast by the temple of Artemis. Because of their practice of female priests, Paul could be using Eve as the representative figure who brought sin into the world as a warning to some of the younger widows who had already "turned away to follow Satan" (5:15), possibly in service to Artemis.

In looking at these passages, it is apparent that Paul does not have a universal hermeneutic of creation and the fall: "'Eve' can be seen as a figure of *women* in Ephesus or as a figure for *an entire church* in Corinth – because the local circumstances differ, though false teaching is a danger in both settings. Applications are drawn from Genesis in a church-specific and contextually sensitive way."²⁶ Thus Paul's emphasis is that only those who are doctrinally sound should teach, as recorded in his instructions to Timothy.

Paul in his doctrinal teachings occasionally expressed common rabbinical views. This is not surprising, since Paul was educated as a rabbi. However, many of these rabbinical teachings come close to (if not outright) rejecting the idea that man and woman were created equal in God's sight, as evidenced by their prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman."²⁷ Just as "Paul revised and contradicted his teaching on such subjects as the

²⁶ Ibid. (italics are the author's).

²⁷ *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Menachot 43b.

resurrection”²⁸ between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians,²⁹ a similar progression of thought is apparent on women and ministry as “Paul struggled to balance his attempt to grasp the word of God and his training as a rabbinic Jew.”³⁰

Each of us is guilty of “selective literalism” whenever we choose which passages apply literally and which we judge no longer apply today, such as the Old Testament prohibition against wearing “a garment made of two kinds of materials” (Lev. 19:19). While we might say Christ’s death and resurrection has freed us from the Mosaic Law, we seem to believe that Paul’s prohibition against women praying with uncovered heads (1 Cor. 11:5) is a culturally specific teaching and not applicable today.³¹ Another example is seen in the New Testament command to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26), which, judging from current practice, we consider culturally bound and no longer applicable. How have we identified some commandments as culturally specific and thus not applicable and yet uphold others which also have a culturally specific context?

Paul and Authority

Paul’s teachings on wifely submission are often stressed to the exclusion of his far more radical instructions to husbands and heads of households on submission. In Ephesians 5-6, Paul tells men as well as women to practice mutual submission in imitation of Jesus. Obedience by wives and slaves was required by Roman law. Paul’s words to wives did not institute a new aspect of marriage or social mores: “Roman men had the right, even the duty, to threaten, coerce, and dominate their slaves, children and wives.”³² Rather than reaffirming

²⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) p. 249.

²⁹ WD Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*. (London: SPCK, 1955), p. 311.

³⁰ Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). pp. 112-14, 134-39, 145-47.

³¹ Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

³² Carrie A. Miles. *New Man, New Woman, New Life* workbook, Empower International Ministries, 2008.

the law, Paul gives a radically different command to husbands: to love (*agape*) their wives, in the same way that Christ loved the church and gave himself up on behalf of it.

Peter's example of Sarah (1 Pet. 3:6) as an obedient wife who obeyed her husband Abraham is cited in the full knowledge that Abraham obeyed his wife just as often as she obeyed him, including once under God's specific command (Gen. 21:11-12).³³ This offers a picture of mutual submission, not merely wifely submission.

Paul instructs children to honor and obey both father and mother. Legally, authority over the child was vested in the father, who also controlled the money. By instructing a child to obey his mother as well as his father, Paul is challenging the accepted nature of society and giving mothers the same honor showed to fathers. Paul radically challenges traditionally accepted cultural understandings when he tells husbands to love their wives, to not provoke their children to anger, and to treat their slaves with respect and kindness (Eph. 6:9).

Paul writes in Ephesians 5:20-23 that the husband is the head of his wife, just as Christ is the head of the church. What does Paul mean by "head"? The word head (*kephale*) can refer to the thing physically at the top of an object, such as the head of a column, or more commonly, refers to a body part, such as a person's head. Rarely, it was used to refer to source. It was also a military term for the soldier that was first in battle – not the general, but the one in the position of greatest risk.³⁴ When Paul wrote, *kephale* did not mean "authority over," "leader," or "ruler." New Testament writers used *arche* when they meant leader or ruler. If a writer meant authority in general, he might use the word *exousia*. Other words Paul could have used include *kyrios* (lord) or *despotis* (also translated lord or as head

³³ Gilbert Bilezikian. "A Challenge for Proponents of Female Submission to Prove their Case from the Bible" in conjunction with Wheaton College and Christians for Biblical Equality, available online at <http://www.bilezikian.com/gbilezikian/publications/challenge.html>.

³⁴ Carrie Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

of the household). So why did Paul use *kephale*?

While man is referred to as head of woman only twice in the New Testament (Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 11:3), Christ is called the head of the church several times (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:9-10, 19). Therefore, this suggests that we should consider the ways in which Christ is head of the church and the implications of this model. Colossians 2:9-10 says that Christ is the head (*kephale*) over every rule (*arche*) and authority while Ephesians 1:22 says that God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." In this verse, Christ is one with the church, which is his body and his fullness. Those things under subjection to Christ are under his feet, not his head. Thus the head does not subjugate, dominate or rule the body but reigns together in unity with it. Greek scholar Richard Cervin wrote, "What then does Paul mean by his use of head in his letter? He does not mean 'authority over' as the traditionalists assert, nor does he mean 'source' as the egalitarians assert. I think he is merely employing a head-body metaphor,"³⁵ implying one flesh. According to Cervin, Paul uses "head" to suggest the one who goes first, such as the soldier in battle. According to him, the husband is the first among servants. In other words, it is a position of risk and serving, not one of honor.

Since God himself designated woman and man as mutual rulers (Gen. 1:28) and created them as equal, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:10 ("a sign of authority on her head") could be interpreted to mean that at creation woman was vested with authority which she is free to exercise. This "sign of authority" should not be mistaken for "submission." Paul's next verse describes the mutual nature of authority: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came

³⁵ Richard Cervin. "Does Kephale (Head) Mean 'Source' or 'Authority over' in Greek Literature? A rebuttal." *Trinity Journal* 10 NS 1, 1989.

from man, so man comes through woman: but all things come from God” (1 Cor. 11:11-12). Paul again stresses the mutually independent, mutually submissive nature of male-female relationship.

In Paul’s day, service was expected of women; wifely obedience was required by law. Thus for a couple to make their relationship one of unity, the husband had to be the head – the first to surrender privilege – because the woman had no legal authority to relinquish. For the husband, this was a sacrifice of everything he had been raised to expect. This parallels the example of Jesus, the head of the church, who gave himself up for the church (Eph. 5:25). Paul’s commands in Ephesians 5:21-22 cannot be seen apart from his teaching that everyone in the Christian body – husbands as well as wives, fathers as well as children, masters as well as slaves – should submit to each other, out of reverence for Christ. Subordination is asked of every Christian (Eph. 5:21).

The form of the verb “submit” suggests a voluntary submission under others, not by compulsion. It does not mean that the wife must place herself under the husband. Then slavery would be called a created order, but that is certainly not what is implied in 1 Peter 2:18 where servants are called to be submissive to masters. Submissive behavior is a way of showing special honor and respect to the other partner; it is a mutual submission. It is a reminder that ultimately the only one who actively “subjects” things is God himself (Eph. 1:22).³⁶

Paul’s baptismal formula found Galatians 3:26-28 points to one result of becoming a new creation in Christ: the new unity and equality of believers in Christ. Although national, religious, social status and gender differences remain, Paul seems to believe that this new equality has social implications: while Onesimus remains a slave, Paul expects Philemon to

³⁶ Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985).

treat him differently after his conversion. This is the “real life” example of Paul’s instructions regarding master-slave interactions in Ephesians.

Conclusion

While the Bible is inerrant, interpretations of scripture sometimes change with new historical and intellectual discoveries as well as shifting social customs. Scripture is inspired by God and inerrant; interpretation is not inerrant. We view Paul’s exhortations to slaves in light of a specific setting that accepted slavery as a cultural given and social norm, not as normative for every culture. Paul’s restrictions on women in Christian leadership must also be reviewed in light of contemporary cultural understanding and not taken as an absolute rejection of women in leadership, especially since scripture provides examples of women in these roles (Ex. 15:19-21; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22; Neh. 6:10-14; Acts 9:36; 16:14, 40; 18:26; 21:9; Rom. 16:1, 7).

The biblical truth of women’s spiritual and ontological equality means that women and men stand on equal ground before God; they share equally in creational authority, personal agency and responsibility, and spiritual rights and privileges (Gen. 1:28, Gal. 3:28, 1 Pet. 3:7). Thus, all leadership roles in the church are open to women, who, like men, meet the biblical criteria.

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