

# The Bible and Gender Equality

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## What is Biblical Equality?

*Evangelical egalitarianism, or biblical equality*, refers to the biblically-based belief that gender, in and of itself, neither privileges nor curtails a believer's gifting or calling to any ministry in the church or home. In particular, the exercise of spiritual authority, as biblically defined, is deemed as much a female believer's privilege and responsibility as it is a male believer's.

Biblical equality does not mean women and men are identical or undifferentiated. Biblical egalitarians recognize average differences (both learned and intrinsic) between women and men, and affirm that God designed men and women to complement and benefit one another.

Although it shares with feminism the belief that unjust treatment of women should be remediated, biblical equality is not grounded in feminist ideology, which is derived from cultural factors and philosophies. Rather, biblical equality is grounded simply and solely in the properly consistent interpretation of God's written word. On this basis, biblical egalitarians (a) affirm that the gifts and callings of the Spirit are distributed without regard to gender, and that all believers in Christ stand on equal ground before God, and (b) repudiate the notion that the Bible grants to men spiritual authority and other religious privileges that it denies to women.

## The Biblical Basis for Gender Equality: An Overview

In the New Testament we find clear and repeated instructions for believers to relate to one another with humility, respect, mutual submission, and an attitude of servanthood. We are to treat one another as we ourselves would like to be treated; we ought not concern ourselves with getting and holding onto positions of status and authority (Matt. 7:12; 20:25-28; 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27; Rom. 12:3,10; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3-5; 1 Peter 3:8). God shows no favoritism for one group of people over another; therefore, believers ought not engage in preferential treatment (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; James 2:1-9).

Believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and gifted in prophetic ministry without respect to age, gender or social status (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18). Whenever a believer has received a ministry gift from the Holy Spirit, that person should use that gift (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Every believer has the responsibility to exercise his or her ministry gifts, and no believer has biblical warrant to deny or restrict other believers' Christlike use of their gifts in ministry.

There are numerous accounts in the Bible of women who were called and blessed by God in ministries that entailed teaching and leading both women and men (see chapter eight in *Good News for Women* and chapter six in *Discovering Biblical Equality*). If God had, in fact, decreed these ministries to be inherently "masculine" and thus unsuitable for women, there would not be any such women in the Bible. God would not call, anoint, and bless a woman in a ministry that God has denied to women in principle. Thus one cannot interpret 1 Timothy 2:12 "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" at face value without qualification or contextualization, because to do so would be to contradict the many biblical texts where women *are* teaching and/or leading men with the evident blessing of both God and man. Moreover, it is highly significant that both women and men were prophets. Deborah and Huldah were especially notable female prophets in ancient Israel. The ministry of prophecy—especially in the Old Testament—involved the very functions that gender traditionalists claim are permanently off-limits for women: discerning and authoritatively proclaiming the will of God for other believers, and speaking the word of God to others as a representative of God whom God has given the authority to so speak.

Scripture teaches that man and woman are created equally in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1-2). God is not to be represented as either male or female (Deut. 4:16). All believers—women as well as men—are to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:10-11; Gal. 4:19). Thus God is neither male nor female, and neither gender images God any more or less or differently than the other. Gender as an ontological category is attributable to human nature (and other species of created life), but not to God's nature. Likewise, gender is attributable only to Christ's human nature, not his divine nature. Spiritual authority is not grounded in maleness, nor are men better representatives of God than women. Biblically, gender has no bearing on a person's fitness to represent or speak for God.

In the new covenant in Christ there is no longer any distinction in spiritual privilege or status between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:26-28). Husband and wife are equal heirs of God's gift of life (1 Peter 3:7). Every believer is an adopted child of God, an heir of God and co-heir with Christ (Romans 8:15-17). Male and female—without distinction—were both given authority over all the earth (Gen. 1:26-28), and all believers are destined to rule together with Christ in the world to come (Dan. 7:18, 27; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 2:5). Thus there is no socially or biologically based inequity in spiritual status or authority. Women and men share equally in creational authority, personal agency and responsibility, and spiritual rights and privileges. Every believer is a recipient of the Spirit's power and is called to exercise authority in God's kingdom, both in this life and in the life to come. All believers are equal inheritors of the rights of spiritual "sonship" (Eph. 1:5). Since we are all equally heirs of God, every believer has an equal right—and responsibility—to represent the Father, and to hear from, obey, and stand directly accountable to God apart from any merely human mediator.

All believers are priests unto God (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10), and all are representatives of God to the church and the world (2 Cor. 5:20). There is only one mediator between God and humans, our high priest Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). With Christ as high priest, every believer can come directly before God in prayer and worship (Heb. 4:14-16; 13:15-16). Every believer has been given the priestly ministry of representing Christ to the world and the church, and of ministering to, hearing from, and standing accountable directly to God. Thus no believer has been given the ministry of mediating another believer's relationship with God; this ministry belongs to Christ alone.

There is no biblical warrant for the doctrine that men have a spiritual authority denied to women, which gives men the right and the responsibility to make the final determination of what God's Word means and what God's will is for the women who are under their authority. To add to the priesthood of all believers and the high priesthood of Christ another priesthood—a priesthood of Christian manhood—is to presume upon the unique mediatorial ministry of Christ by having men supplement or imitate the priestly ministry that is rightly Christ's alone. It also detracts from the priestly ministry of *all* believers by curtailing the opportunity of female believers to represent Christ to others, to minister in the church, and to hear from and obey God's Word and will according to their own Spirit-led understanding.

Although additional biblical texts and biblically-based principles could be cited, those discussed above demonstrate sufficiently the biblical basis of gender equality, and leave no place for the doctrine that Christian men have been given a unique spiritual prerogative to represent God, determine God's will, interpret God's Word, and stand accountable to God for the women under their authority. Such a fundamental inequity in spiritual status and service not only violates the biblical principles discussed above, but also goes far beyond what is actually stated in the biblical proof texts used to support this doctrine.

### **Galatians 3:26-28**

26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Of the many texts that support biblical equality, Galatians 3:26-28 deserves particular attention. Traditionalists claim this text states only that men and women are equally saved; thus it has no bearing at all on functional differences between men and women. But the context here has to do with the changes wrought by the replacement of the old covenant with the new covenant. It would have been superfluous and redundant for Paul to have said merely that women and men, slave and free, Gentile and Jew are now equally saved under the new covenant, when the fact was that salvation was available to members of all these groups under the old covenant, as well.

The point of this text is that something has changed with the coming of the new covenant. What is this change? Under the old covenant, free Jewish men were granted a number of religious privileges that women, slaves, and Gentiles were denied; for example, only men received the sign of the covenant, i.e., circumcision, and the priesthood was reserved for male descendants of Aaron. It is precisely this old-covenant inequality in religious status that has been rendered obsolete in the new covenant. Now, all are one body in Christ. Male circumcision has been replaced with baptism, and the priesthood of all believers has no gender (or ethnic) restrictions.

The idea of a religious pecking order along lines of race, class, or gender is alien to the new creation in Christ. No particular ethnic, sexual, or social class of believers has the intrinsic right to exercise spiritual authority over or assume spiritual responsibility for believers outside the privileged class. All are equal members and full participants of the religious community. Anyone can enter the Holy of Holies and minister before the Lord as a priest. Free Jewish male believers no longer have cause to recite the ancient Jewish prayer in which they gave thanks to God that they were not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. The Christian community is rid of the religious restrictions that were placed on non-free, non-Jewish, non-male believers under Old Testament law. This is the difference grace has wrought. (See chapter ten in *Discovering Biblical Equality* and chapter one in *Good News for Women*.)

The traditionalist interpretation of Galatians 3:28 not only trivializes Paul's words here, but also relies heavily on the supposition that woman's subordination is only a "difference" in "role" or "function" and is thus compatible with woman's equality in "being." The spiritual equality set forth in Galatians 3:28 is then classified as equality in "being" only, and so is deemed irrelevant to gender-based distinctions in "function" or "role." But careful scrutiny of this equal being/unequal role construct shows it to be logically incoherent; thus it fails to reconcile woman's subordination with the biblical truth of woman's equality. Rather, woman's spiritual and ontological equality with man rules out the sort of subordination prescribed by gender traditionalists.

Because woman's subordination is deemed intrinsic to God's original creation design, and is necessary, permanent, and grounded in woman's unalterable ontology, it cannot be merely a "role" that has no bearing on "being." On the contrary, if female subordination is, in fact, divinely mandated and justified for all women for all time, then it logically entails women's fundamental inferiority in *being* and not merely in function. Yet we know from Scripture that man and woman are created equal in being. Thus woman's subordination is contradicted by woman's equality. It is not logically possible for woman to be essentially equal to man, yet universally subordinate to man on the basis of an essential attribute (i.e., femaleness). And it won't do to insist that even if it's not logical it must be true because the Bible says so. Not even God can make a logical contradiction true; and if it can't be true, then it can't be biblical. (See my chapter eighteen in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, and chapters two and three in *Good News for Women*)

### **The Traditionalist Proof Texts**

Gender traditionalists point to several biblical texts in support of their belief that God's Word requires women to be subordinate to male authority as a matter of spiritual principle. I have found that the proof texts for gender hierarchy fall into basically three categories:

1) Those texts that speak of women's submission as one aspect of the mutual submission that should exist between equals in Christ: Eph. 5:21-24 and, by extension, Col. 3:18, which is part of an abbreviated version of the household codes that are set forth in Ephesians 5 & 6.

2) Those texts that speak of a *social* or *cultural* subordination that follows from what women were able and expected to do in the cultures of that time: 1 Peter 3:1-6, Titus 2:5, 1 Cor. 14:34-35, and perhaps 1 Tim. 2:11-15. The 1 Timothy 2 text belongs in this category only if *authentēin* in 1 Tim. 2:12 means official, sanctioned authority, and Paul's prohibition is, therefore, primarily a response to the fact that women in ancient Greco-Roman culture were not socially accepted as public teachers, and were less educated in the Scriptures and so more likely to teach error. However, if *authentēin* is more accurately translated otherwise, then this text belongs in the next category below.

3) Those texts that do not deal with women's submission to men at all: 1 Tim. 3:1-12, which sets forth behavioral criteria for married men who are elders or deacons; 1 Cor. 11:3-16, which deals with issues of sexuality and social propriety, not authority and submission; Genesis 1-2, which presents a picture of Edenic harmony between woman and man, with no evidence of a hierarchy of authority between them; and perhaps also 1 Tim. 2:11-15, where Paul is probably not talking about women's subordination—either cultural or spiritual—but is rather exhorting the Ephesian women not to fall into Eve's sin of leading "a man" into theological error through false teaching. See discussion of this text below. (The Genesis text is not discussed in this essay. Please see chapter five in *Good News for Women* and chapter four in *Discovering Biblical Equality*.)

Thus not all of the traditionalist proof texts actually have to do with women's submission. Moreover, when women *were* exhorted to be submissive in the New Testament, it was not a creationally-ordained spiritual subordination (as per traditionalist teaching today). Rather, it was a culturally based guideline for responsible Christian conduct, given the authority structures of the time. Gender traditionalists today go far beyond the actual scope of the biblical texts in their efforts to render women's submission universal and unilateral, and spiritual as well as cultural.

The distinction between cultural subordination and spiritual subordination is critical to a proper understanding of the biblical texts. The case for evangelical patriarchy rests on the assumption that if Scripture affirms woman's cultural subordination (in the context of patriarchal social structures), then it also affirms woman's spiritual subordination (as a universal, creational principle). But the one is not entailed by the other. For example, in North America women currently enjoy cultural equality for the most part—except in many evangelical churches, where women are placed in a position of spiritual subordination. In New Testament times, by contrast, women were culturally subordinate; but within the church, female believers enjoyed spiritual equality with male believers.

The *cultural* subordination of women was part and parcel of the patriarchal societies of biblical times. Women were thus expected, even legally required, to occupy a largely subordinate status with respect to social functions such as public leadership and teaching, property inheritance and ownership, and household governance. The New Testament epistles exhorted believers to comply with the cultural customs of the day, to the extent that compliance would not require disobedience to God's commands.

In evangelical patriarchy today, woman's *spiritual* subordination is based on the belief that authority has been given to man and denied to woman by God at creation. The man's authority is thus seen as both ordained by God and representative of God. A man is authorized by God to speak for God in his marriage, and the wife who disobeys her husband rebels against God's order (with the caveat that a wife is not obligated to follow her husband into blatant sin). Moreover, the husband's authority to mediate God's Word and will to his wife necessarily applies to all spheres of life. If a wife is to be obedient to God in all things, she must obey her husband in all things. For this is how God created and designed man and woman to relate to each other. Likewise, in areas outside the marriage relationship—church life, general social interaction—this God-ordained, creational principle is perpetually and universally

applicable, such that deviation from this pattern constitutes rebellion against the created nature of humans as God made them to be.

Note that this spiritual subordination is of an entirely different order from cultural subordination, which is based in and enforced by civil law or patriarchal social customs. Such spiritual subordination is also quite alien to a careful, conservative, and theologically integrated reading of the whole of Scripture.

The New Testament texts that exhort women to comply with the cultural custom of female submissiveness do not speak of the spiritual authority of male over female as a timeless creational mandate. The account of the creation of male and female (Gen 1-2) says nothing about the woman being designed and created to submit to the man's authority; male rule enters the picture only as one of the sad consequences of human sin (Gen 3:16). Rather, the New Testament submission texts speak of the biblical principle—emphasized especially in Christ's teaching and the letters of Paul and Peter—that all believers should be submissive to one another rather than seeking to rule others, and should, as well, submit to the civil laws and cultural standards of the day to the extent that they do not entail disobedience to God's law. Thus women in the New Testament church, who were in many ways culturally and legally subordinate to men, were instructed to comply with their social role in a manner that brings glory to God.

Yet in the body of Christ—regardless of the social structures of the day—there is to be a mutual sharing and edification as determined by the gifting and calling of the Spirit. In Christ *all* believers have been given authority—not the authority to require the obedience of other believers, but the authority to do the works of Christ as the body of Christ on the earth. (Would that the church enter into *this* task with the energy and zeal that has been expended on the project of keeping women subordinate to men!)

The traditionalist proof texts do not affirm a universal, creational principle of female subordination to male authority, but rather set forth culturally-specific applications of general moral principles such as civil obedience, social propriety, respecting and submitting to other believers, and requiring those who teach or lead to be morally and theologically equipped for the task. Because any biblical text is properly interpreted only in light of the teaching of the entire Bible, and because the doctrine of a universal hierarchy of male spiritual authority contradicts the biblical teaching of the equality of all persons before God, an egalitarian interpretation of these texts is the more reasonable and responsible alternative.

James states that we are saved not by faith alone but also by works (James 2:24). Yet evangelicals do not take these words at their face-value meaning, in isolation from the teaching of the whole of Scripture. Even so, the traditionalist proof texts should be interpreted in a way that does not violate the overarching biblical truth of the spiritual equality of all persons before God and within the body of Christ. The remainder of this essay will address the New Testament proof texts in turn.

## **1 Timothy 2:11-15**

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

The basic question with this text is: Did Paul set forth this prohibition specifically in response to a problem situation at the church in Ephesus, or was he stating a universal principle requiring women to submit to the spiritual authority of men? In other words, what is the theological principle governing this text? Is it that all women everywhere are always to be subordinate to the spiritual authority of men, or is it that the ministry of teaching is to be reserved for those believers who are adequately instructed in the Word of God and who, therefore, will not teach and impose upon others a doctrine that is false?

There are a number of problems with the traditional interpretation of this text. For example, if Eve's deception is somehow the reason why all women for all time are forbidden to teach men, then why should women be forbidden only to teach men but not women and children (who, presumably, would be even more likely than men to be deceived by the deceived)? And if Paul's intended meaning is simply that women are not to be pastors or elders, why doesn't he say just that? Indeed, why does Paul nowhere state clearly such a straightforward prohibition? Why, instead, all the roundabout, analogical language here? Moreover, taken at face value as a timeless injunction, the statement that a woman is not to teach or have authority over a man rules out many more ministries for women than just those of pastor and elder, including many of the ministries to which women were called in the Bible.

Like any biblical text, this passage needs to be interpreted in light of the purpose and occasion for its writing. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to tell him how to deal with the heresy that was being taught by some in the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). Since Paul's instructions were specifically tailored to meet the needs of this situation, the letter ought not be regarded as a general church manual directly applicable to every church in any circumstance throughout all time.

When Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or *authentēin* a man," it seems unlikely that he means no woman may ever exercise her authority as a believer in the Lord to instruct a man in spiritual matters. For one thing, women did just that throughout Scripture. For another, *exousia* is the usual Greek term designating ordinary authority to perform a legitimate function. The term *authentēin* occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and Paul's inspired decision to use that word here strongly suggests a particular meaning not conveyed by *exousia*. Plausible meanings of *authentēin* based on usage around the time of Paul include usurping authority, dominating, prevailing upon, or instigating harm of some sort. How, then, ought we to understand Paul's intended meaning in these few verses?

We know from 1 Timothy 5:11-15 and 2 Timothy 3:6-7 that false teachers in the Ephesian church were deceiving many of the women into believing a twisted understanding of God's word, and that some of the women may have been teaching this false doctrine to the men (or, at least, there was imminent danger of this occurring). When Paul looks at this situation, he sees a potential replay of the story of Adam and Eve and their fall into sin (1 Tim. 2:13-14). Eve submitted to satanic instruction concerning God's word and then prevailed upon Adam to go along with the false view of God's word that she had learned from the serpent. So Paul does not want a woman to do what the first woman had done: namely, to lead a man to accept and act upon false teaching regarding God's word.

Therefore, the theological principle governing this text is not woman's subordinate place in the spiritual order of things, but the universally applicable moral precept that one must not deceive or be deceived but rather submit to instruction in the truth. To whatever extent Paul may have been denying women opportunity to serve as teachers and leaders in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, it is most reasonably regarded as a temporary measure designed to deal with the challenges of a particular situation. (For more on this text, see my website article, "Leading Him Up the Garden Path," and chapter twelve in *Discovering Biblical Equality*.)

### **Ephesians 5:21-33**

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 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. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does

the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Because of this text's cultural setting and its placement in the biblical passage as part of the household codes, we know that Paul is mindful of the civil and social authority that the householder/husband had over the members of his household. Yet it is also evident that, compared to the usual instructions for households in ancient cultures, Paul's exhortation to husbands to love their wives self-sacrificially was quite radical, while his instruction regarding wives' submission was rather watered down.

Greco-Roman women were expected to obey their husbands. But while Paul tells slaves and children to "obey," his word to wives is simply to "submit." Paul and other New Testament writers consistently advise believers to conform to those cultural customs that do not go against God's will. So, he tells wives to submit, because submission is a general virtue appropriate for all Christians (vs. 21). As for the civil and social authority that husbands had on account of the patriarchal culture of the time, it is significant that Paul's instructions include no direct authorization for men to rule their wives. There is implicit acknowledgment of the husband's cultural authority, but no authorization of such—only the clarion call to love and give and serve as Christ has done.

Paul's intent in this passage is to demonstrate by analogy with Christ and the church how the husband and wife in this patriarchal setting could have a marriage that, in its practice of Christlike love and submission, would go beyond what was merely culturally and legally required, and thus become a relationship of mutuality, a knitting together as one flesh, one body, with the more socially powerful member, the "head," serving as provider of resources for the life and well-being of the wife. This is the transcultural, theologically grounded message—a homily forever relevant for any culture—that Paul inserts into a discussion of social structures, so that believers might be enabled to love and live in imitation of Christ *whatever* the structures of the day might be.

Notice, however, that none of this, either then or now, entails the husband's divine right to exercise spiritual authority over his wife. In verses 25-30, Paul explains quite clearly the spiritual significance of his analogy between the head-body relationship of Christ and church, and the head-body relationship of husband and wife. He says nothing about spiritual authority. In fact, Paul's only concern with authority in this text has to do with conforming in a Christlike manner to the authority structures in the culture of his day. To say Paul is here authorizing the man's spiritual authority over the wife as an eternal mandate grounded in Christ's spiritual authority over the church is to put words in Paul's mouth and to go against what he and the other New Testament writers say about *all* believers in God's kingdom standing on equal ground before God, equally created and recreated in his image, and equally members of God's holy priesthood.

But what about Paul's referring to the husband as the "head" of the wife? Doesn't this theologically ground "male headship" in the relationship of Christ to the church? If it does, then in whatever sense Paul means to say Christ ministers to the church as head of the Body, so also Paul enjoins husbands to minister to their wives. So how *does* Paul say men should imitate Christ in their ministry to their wives?

As even gender traditionalists readily perceive, Paul did not mean to say that the husband is like Christ in redeeming his wife from her sins, for this would contradict biblical teaching elsewhere. Yet neither did Paul mean that the husband has a priestly authority to represent God to the wife as Christ represents God to the church, for this contradicts biblical teaching that Christ is the *one* mediator between God and humans (1 Tim. 2:5, see also Mt, 11:27; Jn. 14:6). There can be no sub-mediators in the new covenant in Christ.

What Paul *was* saying by means of this analogy is evident from his description of the husband's Christlike ministry of life-giving, self-giving love for his wife (Eph. 5:25-30). As Christ loves, nurtures, provides for and sacrifices his own life and special (divine) prerogatives for the church, so should the husband for his wife. Similarly, as the church submits to the ministry of Christ (and as believers submit to one another, v. 21), so should the wife to her husband.

Despite the fact that Paul states fairly clearly just *how* the husband is to be "head" of the wife as Christ is "head" of the church, many in recent years have insisted that the metaphorical meaning of "head" is *always* "ruler" or "authority," whatever other incidental connotations it may have. Therefore, it is claimed, Paul's teaching in this passage is not only about the husband loving and caring for the wife as Christ does the church, but is also about the husband having spiritual authority over the wife as Christ has over the church. Yet, as always, the key to understanding the inspired meaning of a biblical text must be in the biblical author's intended meaning. In saying that the husband is "head" of the wife, did Paul mean that the husband possesses the divine right to exercise authoritative spiritual governance of the wife?

Paul uses "head" as a metaphor in seven New Testament texts, six of which are found in Ephesians and Colossians. In these companion letters, Paul speaks of Christ as the head of the church, which is his body, in Eph. 4:15-16 and 5:23, and in Col. 1:18 and 2:19. Of these four texts, three speak of the "head" as a provider of life—saving, sustaining, nurturing and supplying resources for the "body." In Colossians 1:18 Paul simply states that Christ is head of the body, the church, before going on to elaborate different meanings of the metaphor in chapter two. Paul also speaks of Christ as head over "every power and authority" in Col. 2:10 and as head over "everything" in Eph. 1:22. Here the metaphorical meaning of "head" is, indeed, rule and dominion. But notice that Christ's authority as "head" is never presented as being *over the church*; rather Christ is head over all the powers and authorities *for the sake of the church* (see Eph. 1:22). In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul employs yet another metaphorical meaning for "head," where it is used apart from the head-body relationship (see section below; for more on Paul's use of the "head" metaphor, see chapter eight in *Discovering Biblical Equality*.)

We can conclude from this overview of Pauline usage of the "head" metaphor that Paul intends the metaphorical head-body relationship of Christ and the church to be understood as a relationship whereby the head supplies resources necessary for the life and growth of the body. Although Christ certainly has spiritual authority over his church, Paul never uses "head" to speak of Christ's authority over the church. Rather, for Paul, Christ's authority as "head" is over all things *for the church*.

Given that Paul does not mean "spiritual authority over" when he refers to Christ as "head" of his body, the church, it would seem rather tendentious to insist that in Ephesians 5:23-30 Paul is speaking of Christ's spiritual authority over the church—and, therefore, the husband's spiritual authority over the wife. No, the natural reading of this text is that Paul means exactly what he says when he likens the husband's ministry as "head" of the wife to that of our Savior's sacrificial, life-giving service to his body, the church. There is no call to impose on this text other metaphorical meanings of "head" from non-Pauline, extrabiblical sources.

But what about Paul's command to the wife? Doesn't her submission to the husband entail his authority over her? In Ephesians 5:22, the submission of wives to husbands is presented as an aspect of the mutual submission to which all believers are called in the preceding verse. In the Greek text, the verb *submit* is not repeated in verse 22, but is borrowed from verse 21. The submission of wives to their husbands is one expression of the attitude of submission that all believers are to have toward one another. Just as the church is dependent on Christ for its spiritual resources, so the wife must submit to the ministry of her husband's love if she is to benefit from his life-giving provision for her. But the wife's submission is clearly not unidirectional; the husband also practices submission as he obeys the command to "give himself up for her," laying down his own needs, rights, and desires for her sake.

## 1 Corinthians 11:3-16

3 But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

7 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 did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

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

The metaphorical meaning for "head" in this passage seems to be that of "source" or "origin"—an interpretation first advanced by Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth century. This meaning still appears in modern English (we sometimes speak of the head of a river), though it was more common in ancient Greek.

The "head" relationships in 1 Corinthians 11:3 are listed in chronological order of origin. First, man originated from Christ, by whom all things were created (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). Then, woman came from man, according to Genesis 2:21-22. And in the incarnation Christ came from God the Father (John 1:1,14; 8:14,42). Thus for each of the three pairs, the first member serves as the source, or ground of being, for the second member.

We see in verses 8 and 12, where Paul speaks of the man as having come from the woman, that the concept of the man as the woman's source is integral to this passage, serving as an important line of Paul's argument. On the other hand, there is nothing in this passage about authority, except for the reference in verse 10 to the woman's own authority over her own head. Contrary to common misperception and mistranslation, this verse does not refer to the husband's authority over his wife.

Paul's intention in this text is to persuade Christian women in Corinth to wear a head covering during public worship. It was shameful, in some cultural sense, for a woman to appear in public unveiled, and this shame reflected on her husband. Thus Paul is probably arguing that although women believers have the right, in principle, to leave their heads uncovered (vs. 10), they should respect the convention of the day and wear a head covering during public worship; thereby a woman shows honor to her husband (her "head"). The principle behind Paul's exhortation is that women ought not distract other worshipers by their inappropriate attire, nor should they discard the head covering that served as a cultural marker of respectable womanhood. Thus the point of the text has to do with gender distinctions and social propriety, not authority and submission.

The statement that woman is man's glory because she was created from man and for man (vs.7-9) is often taken to refer to woman's supposedly subordinate status with respect to man. Yet it makes more sense to interpret this statement in light of Paul's overall argument in the passage: Because woman originally came from man (which makes man her "head"), she is, in a sense, a reflection of him. She is man's glory and so should dress and act in a way that honors and reflects well on her husband. As Gordon Fee puts it in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, woman "is man's glory because she came from man and was created for him. She is not thereby subordinate to him, but necessary for him. She exists to his honor as the one who having come from man is the one companion suitable to him, so that he might

be complete and that together they might form humanity." (See also chapter eight in *Discovering Biblical Equality*.)

### **1 Corinthians 14:34-35**

34 Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 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.

Although traditionalists agree that this is a transcultural command, they disagree as to the type of silence that is being imposed on women here. The uncertainty follows from the fact that a face-value reading of this text silences women absolutely and without exception, thereby contradicting Paul's words just three chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians 11:5, as well as the emphasis in the whole of chapter 14 on the participation of *all* the believers in the worship service. So the apparently literal meaning of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 must be qualified and modified somehow.

When this text is interpreted according to its textual and cultural context, rather than according to traditional interpretations of other texts, it appears that the silence to which women are admonished in verse 34 and the speaking that is considered disgraceful for a woman in verse 35 probably refer to interrupting the message with irrelevant questions. Not only were women less likely than men to be educated in the Scriptures, but it was also deemed inappropriate for a person to ask questions that betrayed much ignorance. Another relevant cultural factor is that it was often considered shameful for women to speak publicly or to speak to men who were not members of their family.

In any case, the solution Paul prescribes is for the women to have their questions answered after the church service by their husbands—who presumably would be more knowledgeable in the Scriptures than their wives. The transcultural principle behind Paul's words is not the permanent silencing and subordinating of women in the church, but the curtailing of practices that disrupt the flow and order of the public assembly of believers (a salient theme in 1 Cor 14: 26-40).

The reference to "the law" here does not prove that this is a universal command; for one thing, Old Testament law nowhere commands women to be silent or subordinate. Perhaps Paul is referring to Jewish law as representative of culturally appropriate behavior, which he frequently urges Christians not to disregard. At any rate, the point of the text has to do with maintaining order and propriety, not subordinating women as a matter of principle.

It should also be noted that solid textual evidence exists to make the case that these two verses were not in the original Pauline manuscript, but were later scribal interpolations (see, especially, Gordon Fee on this). If this is the case, then, of course, these verses are not part of the inspired text and their meaning is of no consequence to the question of women's properly biblical place in the church.

### **1 Peter 3:1-7**

1 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own 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, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. 4 Rather, 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. 5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, 6 like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

7 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.

The basic principle that Peter is applying in his discussion of the submission of everyone to the ruling authorities, slaves to masters, and wives to husbands (2:13-3:7) is that Christians are to behave in a socially irreproachable manner for the sake of being a good witness in a culture hostile to Christianity (see 2:12). This includes submitting to the authority structures in place at that time.

In ancient Greco-Roman society, it was a woman's cultural duty and legal obligation to be obedient to her husband. She was subject to him, and was not expected to make decisions on her own. This created a problem for the woman who rejected her husband's pagan gods in favor of Jesus Christ. In doing this she was being insubordinate. So Peter urges such women to be submissive to their husbands in other areas of life, so that they might be a good Christian witness both to their husbands and to society at large.

Although the primary emphasis of traditionalist teaching today is the wife's submission to her husband's *spiritual* authority, nothing in the New Testament demands such an interpretation, and we can be certain this is not what Peter has in mind here. Believing wives of unsaved husbands (to whom Peter addresses his advice) are not in submission to their husbands' authority in spiritual matters. Yet the apostle commends the Christian women who have refused to submit to their husbands' false religious beliefs, while urging these women to comply with the social roles of the day.

Gender traditionalists believe that the basic principle behind Peter's command to wives to submit to their husbands is not simply that believers should submit to those in authority, but that husbands *ought* to be in authority over their wives. In other words, Peter meant to say that the social institution of patriarchy (male rule) is *God's* law, not just Roman law. But if this be so, then the same principle must also govern the immediately preceding text, where slaves are commanded to submit to their masters (2:18-25). This text, as well, must be seen as not only requiring the obedience of the slave to the master's authority, but also as giving divine authorization for the social institution of slavery. But, of course, there is no moral or theological justification for believing Scripture so authorizes slavery. Neither do we have biblical basis to conclude that Peter means to authorize patriarchy as the law of God as well as the law of the land.

Peter ends this passage by exhorting believing husbands to treat their wives with consideration and respect, because women's socially weaker position makes them dependent on their husbands for their welfare, and (even more importantly) because women and men are spiritual heirs together, equal inheritors of God's gracious gift of life. Here Peter goes beyond the limitations of his culture and proclaims the full religious equality of women with men. Although social inequality remains, equal standing before God and in the body of Christ is now the birthright of all who are in Christ Jesus.

### **Titus 2:3-5**

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 urge 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.

Contrary to those traditionalists who see in this text transcultural instruction that a woman's place is always in the home, the governing principle behind Paul's words here is that women should learn to be "self-controlled and pure," as opposed to being busybodies who spend their time slandering others and getting drunk on wine (see similar passage 1 Tim. 5:13-14). The present-day application of this principle is not that women ought not pursue vocational work outside the home, but that women who are, for

example, addicted to television talk shows and soap operas should begin to use their time and talents responsibly—whether their work is primarily in the home or outside it.

As in the 1 Peter text, women are exhorted to submit to the social expectations of the day, so as not to “malign” the gospel before the watching world. However, we do not need to re-create the cultures of ancient societies in order to lead lives consistent with biblical teaching. We need, instead, to understand the general principles behind specific biblical instructions, and then apply those principles appropriately to our own lives.

### **1 Timothy 3:1-12**

1 Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

8 In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

11 In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

12 A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well.

Paul says here that an elder or deacon must be "the husband of one wife" (NASB), with children who obey him (see also Titus 1:5-9). Traditionalists often claim this text limits church leadership to men, in principle. But by the logic of this interpretation, elders and deacons are required not only to be men, but also to be married men with obedient children.

This list of qualifications for church leadership at Ephesus assumes, but does not demand, that a church leader will be a married man with children. (In ancient cultures, these were the attributes of social respectability.) Paul's concern is that such a person must not be a bigamist or an adulterer, but a responsible "family man" who disciplines his children properly.

The requirement that an elder or deacon be the husband of one wife could not have applied to Paul himself (who was not married), and probably not to Timothy either. If this list of behavioral guidelines for church leaders cannot be used to exclude unmarried men from church leadership (lest Paul and Timothy be disqualified), then neither can it be used as a biblical basis for excluding women.

Paul's commendation of a deacon named Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) makes it even clearer that when he stipulates in 1 Tim. 3:12 that a deacon must be "the husband of one wife," he does not intend this guideline to exclude women from serving as deacons. Nor (by logical extension) should we conclude that when Paul says an elder should be "the husband of one wife" he intends to exclude women from serving as elders.

Even if we were to say that Paul is here requiring all elders to be married men with obedient children, we could not say that these requirements apply to positions of spiritual authority in principle. Paul, after all, did not meet these standards—he was not a family man with wife and children—yet he certainly had more spiritual authority than the elders of local churches. In other words, if these guidelines serve as universal prerequisites for authoritative ministries (as many traditionalists take to be the case), then Paul is disqualifying himself from his own ministry. Therefore, the controlling principle of this text

cannot be the universal and transcultural restriction of ministerial leadership to persons of a specified gender and social status. Rather, it is simply that those who *are* church leaders must meet certain moral and behavioral criteria.

This material is taken primarily from *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*, by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and secondarily from *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. Some of the material on 1 Timothy 2 is based on my website essay, "Leading Him Up the Garden Path: Further Thoughts on 1 Timothy 2:15" (published in *Priscilla Papers*, Spring 2002). Website: [www.RebeccaMerrillGroothuis.com](http://www.RebeccaMerrillGroothuis.com)

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