

## **Should women be ministers?**

To answer this question for the church, we must first find our answer in Scripture. Church history would also be helpful, but this paper mainly deals with the question of Scripture as it is the starting point for Christian belief, particularly for evangelical Christianity.

Whatever the stance one takes on this question the starting point is to acknowledge that the Bible is open to interpretation. The fact that there are clearly two camps that read the same Bible and come up with two different answers to this question suggests that an observation needs to be made at the start: the interpretation of the Bible at this point is not abundantly clear. Unless, of course, one wants to take the stance that everyone who disagrees with his/her camp's interpretation is willfully and knowingly trying to subvert the text! In other words, we have to acknowledge that on both sides of this issue there are strong, Bible believing, Jesus loving, authentic believers. One side does not hold all the saints.

In cases like this careful study is needed (this is what we will focus on in this paper), but I would also suggest that an open conversation is helpful as well. I find it hard to believe that we can draw lines on issues like this without ever talking to the other side. This is a sound principle to have when it comes to hot button issues like this one, abortion and homosexuality. The conversation, and by that I do not mean debate, may not change our opinion, but it may help us from demonizing the other side, which is all too easy to do. By talking with the "other side" we can at least be reminded that we need to be compassionate in our words and stances because all of us are equally created in the image and likeness of Christ. It is never a bad thing to be reminded of this truth.

A further word of caution is needed before we delve into this topic. As nice as it is that we have Scripture in the English language and that it is easily accessible to us, we need to be aware of the fact that this presents a very real danger to us. Anyone can make Scripture say anything they want it to say. This has been one of the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church has insisted on tradition--church regulated interpretation-- as being first and foremost, for fear that giving the laity the opportunity to interpret the words of God, his message would be subverted and destroyed. Protestants reacting against this have wanted to free Scripture, and its interpretation to the masses, trusting that the Holy Spirit would be the guide. Certainly we would say that this has resulted in some good things, but it has also resulted in some terrible things as well. Without the church to declare what is a right interpretation and what is a wrong one the possibility for misunderstanding, misconception, and misinterpretation is very real.

This is why we are doing this in community. I am just as prone to this as anyone else so I need you. We need each other to make sure that what we are saying here is not off kilter in some way. Moreover, my community extends to scholars, teachers, pastors and friends who have all helped to guide me in the reading of the Bible. This is why we

need the Church and why Christianity cannot survive as an individualistic faith. We need each other to better understand the things of God.

For this reason, we can say that a safeguard for reading Scripture correctly is community. This is not foolproof, of course, but it is better than interpreting Scripture exclusively by oneself. A further safeguard to help us in interpretation is to become better acquainted with the context of Scripture. To do this, we need to be aware of two levels of context. First, reading a passage in context means taking into account the location of a text in a particular book. What does it say around the passage and how does this help? What is the overall argument that the author is working on? How does this passage fit into that argument? The answers to these questions will help us better interpret a particular passage or verse.

The second level of context centers on the world in which the text is written. It matters, for instance, that the Old Testament (from now on OT) was written in a Jewish cultural context and that there were differing social and religious customs associated with their surrounding neighbors. Our understanding the Jewish context will help us understand the overall meaning of the OT, and can help to illuminate particularly difficult passages.

What was the cultural context of Corinth? What was Ephesus like? These are not questions that can be answered through exclusively reading the Bible. To answer these questions we need to turn to secondary sources (in part this is why you have pastors & teachers in the Church, to help you with this). Churches should be the kind of places where knowledge is passed on so that each of us can have a better understanding of what is going on in the Bible and, therefore, what it might mean for us today.

So before we ever draw a conclusion about the acceptability of women in ministry we need to do some contextualization.

## **SOCIAL CONTEXT**

(This section is influenced by a wide reading but borrows heavily from CS Cowles, *A Woman's Place*)

It is paramount that we understand that the Bible (OT and NT) was written in a patriarchal society. Men held the power and were more important to society than women. Though this is evident in reading the Bible, I'll offer a couple of proofs of this. Take for instance the fact that male heirs were so important. The father's line was what was most significant in Jewish society. This is why we find so much in the OT that focuses on the father/son relationship and find very little that speaks of the mother/daughter relationship. The need for a male heir is a prominent feature of many of the OT stories, but what passage speaks of a desire or need for a daughter?

Even the covenant that God makes with the children of Abraham is focused on the male. The sign and seal of this covenant was the circumcision; something, of course, that only men could undergo.

The Bible is birthed in a patriarchal society. There is no denying that but we need to move beyond this recognition to understand a little more of what it meant to be a woman in the ancient world, particularly the world of Judaism. Let us imagine for a moment that you are a woman in the ancient world of Scripture.

First you need to know, that as a woman you are not your own. You have no legal rights. You are the property of your father and then once you marry you are the property of your husband. This understanding, it was believed, came directly from Scripture and the command of God, specifically the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, . . . wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to him” (Ex 20:17). Clearly the wife is listed alongside other property so the conclusion to be made is that you are your husband’s property.

Offenses against you (i.e, rape) were not actually against you but against your father or husband, because the offense happened against their property. In this sense, rape was not much different than theft of cattle. And because you were your father’s property he could sell you into slavery up to the age of 12 (of course without your permission). Likewise, he could marry you off to any man he saw as suitable.

It was taught by the Jewish sages that it was much preferred for you to stay home and to avoid going out into public places. If you did go out, though, you were to be covered and to have a veil over your face. Men were forbidden to give you a greeting on the street and it was considered disgraceful for a Rabbi to speak to you in public, even if you were his mother, wife or sister.

The covering of the woman was so highly prized that it was even taught in some Jewish circles that a woman who kept herself veiled even in her own home was to be highly regarded.

Once married you had no legal recourse for divorce. You could not have more than one husband, though your husband could have as many wives as he could afford. And he could divorce you at any time. There were two schools of thoughts on this during Jesus’ time. The school of Shammai taught that divorce could only happen in cases of infidelity. The school of Hillel taught that a man could obtain a divorce for any reason that suited him. If divorced, you were supposed to receive a payment (alimony of sorts) though there were a number of loopholes to this so this often did not happen. This meant that if you did not have family or a son to provide for you you were left with very few options for survival. The main option being prostitution.

The greatest honor you could attain would be to bear a son. The greatest shame would be to be barren.

You would have been illiterate and uneducated lest you have access to the law, so the sages taught. Women having access to the law (*Torah*) was frowned upon because, as Rabbi Eliezer stated, “If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery [inordinate sexual desire or activity].” The thought being

that the more she knows, the more she will want to discuss the law with men and the more she will lead them into sexual immorality. This is what women do after all.

You simply could not be trusted. You could not be trusted in the court of law to be a witness. You could not be trusted because, as Rabbi Hillel said, “Whenever women were gathered together, there was much witchcraft.” So you were not allowed to participate fully in the Jewish religious practices. You could not offer sacrifices; only men could do this.

You were not even given the same opportunities as men in synagogues. You entered through the back door. You could not sing or pray. You were only allowed to stay for half of the service. At which point, once you were dismissed, the men would be taught the Torah.

In the end, this prayer fairly well summarizes the place of women in the ancient Jewish society of Jesus’ day: “Blessed is He who did not make me a Gentile, blessed is He who did not make me a woman, blessed is He who did not make me ignorant of the law.” A popular variation of this prayer said this: “Blessed is He who did not make me a Gentile, ...a dog, ...a woman.”

These are broad brush strokes to be sure. There were no doubt exceptions to these, but this is the picture that we get from the Bible as well as the many secondary sources we have of the ancient world. Women simply were not considered equal to men.

Much of what we know about the Jewish life of the ancient world comes from the Mishnah and Talmud. These are collections of Jewish Rabbi’s teaching on Scripture, but they are not Scripture so we have to wonder if this picture really is the ideal of Scripture.

Is this description of women intended to be read prescriptively or descriptively? Is the subservience of woman to men mandated by Scripture and, therefore, by God or is it descriptive of the culture of the day, found in scripture because it was a part of the setting in which scripture was written?

## **OLD TESTAMENT:**

This get’s us to the texts at hand.

The place to start is not with the troublesome texts of Paul but with the beginning and the creation narrative. How we read the beginning is going to influence the rest of Scripture.

The Danvers Statement (a document drafted by the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and endorsed by a number of leading evangelicals) states that Adam’s “headship” in marriage was designed by God before the fall and was not a result of sin.

The proof given for this is Genesis 2:16-18. The curious thing about this “proof” is that this is not the first account in Genesis of the creation story.

The first comes in Genesis 1:26-29 (at least as it pertains to humans). Does this passage suggest a hierarchy inherent in the man/ woman relationship? If we let the text speak for itself then it seems to suggest equality between the two: no mention is given of one being created first, both are said to be the image and likeness of God, both are commanded to be fruitful and multiply, both are given the resources of the land and God says that what he created (humankind) is good. Both of them are good.

It seems a great injustice would be done to this text if one were to argue that this creation account showed God’s design for Adam to be over Eve, which is why the Danvers Statement does not cite it as proof. But one has to wonder should two creation accounts (located in the same book of the Bible and only verses apart) come to two different conclusions? Should the second account state something that the first does not? In other words, could there be a reading of the second creation account that fits in with the first and is not at odds with it?

The second account is found in Genesis 2.

For some who want to use this as their prooftext for male dominance the logic is simple:

Adam was created first.

Eve was created out of Adam.

Therefore, Adam is superior to Eve.

The logic is flawed, however. By this same logic, we would have to conclude that dirt is superior to all things because this account says that all things were formed from the dirt (v19). By the logic above this is what we would have to conclude:

Dirt was created before Adam.

Adam was created from dirt.

Therefore, dirt is superior to Adam.

And by extension this would imply that we would need to work backwards in our levels of superiority. According to the first account this would mean that everything else that was created was superior to Adam and Eve. Finding this logic flawed some theologians have taken the opposite approach. They have insightfully remarked that the first creation account actually seems to move in a direction of less complexity to more complexity. Of course, by this logic, then, we would have to conclude that Eve, not Adam, is the most superior.

The truth is neither of these arguments are all that helpful. They just go to show that what is going on in these accounts is much deeper than a surface reading allows.

Despite what some want to read into this text, there is no inferiority implied in this passage about Eve. The reason she is created is because Adam needed someone

equal to him. Many have noted that the incompleteness in this passage is not found in Eve, it is found in Adam. He is alone not because he has nothing else around him but because he has no equal. He did not need a beast of burden--they were already made. He did not need a pet--they were already made. He needed a helper, a partner, an equal.

For some, the English word "helper" carries the connotation of "less than" not "equal to." So when it comes to a critical word like this we need to do a little research. And when we do we find that the Hebrew word that is translated here is *'ezer*. It is the very same word that is used to speak of God helping us (see Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps 20:2, 33:20, 115:9-10). I quote one as representative of a number of passages: "Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay" (Ps 70:5). I doubt many Christians would like to suggest that God's help is somehow inferior. The fact is in Hebrew the word for helper does not carry the same connotation as it does in the English. It actually speaks to the very nature of God being imbued into creation. As Joseph Coleson has said: "If *'ezer* should be translated "helper" here, it means God intended to make someone who would rescue the *'adam* from solitude. This would be God's final step in making a creature in God's own image, which includes living intimately in community" ([http://www.whwomensclergy.org/booklets/power\\_like\\_him.php](http://www.whwomensclergy.org/booklets/power_like_him.php)).

We might want to ask ourselves: If God was wanting to make a point about the inherent correctness in Adam being above Eve, then should he not have chosen a different way to create her? Scripture tells us that God takes from the side of Adam and forms woman. Why the side? Does this not imply equality? Standing side-by-side hardly suggests an idea of hierarchy. It does, however, fit into an idea of mutual partnership. If God wanted to show a hierarchy why wouldn't he have taken from Adam's foot or even his back, either of these would have been more powerful symbols of hierarchy than the side. Again the text seems to be pointing to an equality of relationship.

It has been often said (and is part of the reason why women were treated as they were in the ancient world) that Eve is the cause of sin. Of course Adam was there and he ate too. But because Eve ate first and because she tempted Adam, more blame is placed on her. Some early Christian theologians even argued that if Eve was never created then Adam would have remained sinless (and alone!).

But look again at the text: notice how in verse 19 God creates Adam and then gives to Adam the important command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Where is Eve? She is not yet created! As far as Scripture is concerned Eve did not receive this command from God directly, she only received it from Adam. This of course does not suggest that Eve is off the hook, but what it does do is remind us that Adam is as guilty as Eve. He heard from the lips of God and he chose to eat anyway. Eve heard from the lips of Adam and chose to eat. Both were wrong, both sinned. Equally.

The fact is there is nothing in the second account that demands that we read the text, as many have suggested, as proof that male headship is a part of God's design from

the beginning. This would make our readings of the two accounts complementary and not contradictory, which in my estimation would do more justice to Scripture. How two creation accounts could come to opposite conclusions, seems strange to me. And why the second should be used to replace the first as of more value is questionable, as well. So why are some insistent that we read the second account this way? I would argue that the fall has colored the way many read the pre-fall creation accounts.

In Genesis 3 sin makes it's appearance. And sin changes everything.  
It changes the relationship of humankind to its creator.  
It changes the relationship of humankind to the rest of creation.  
It changes the relationship of humans to one another.  
Nothing is untouched by sin.

Accordingly, it is from this moment on that the equal partnership of Adam and Eve and their descendants is marred and replaced by male dominance and female submission.

Again the question is: is this descriptive or is it prescriptive? Is God making an observational statement about how things will be because of the devastating effects of sin in people's lives or is he making a command on how things ought to be?

Certainly much of the rest of the OT seems to suggest that this is how it has to be. Men dominate and women serve. But there are exceptions. There is the role of Sarah in Abraham's life and the covenant promise that extends to her, as well. There is the role of Miriam in Moses' life and the leading of God's people out of Egypt and her leading the worship of Yahweh after their escape. She is even declared a prophetess. There is the story of Ruth and Esther and the harlot, Rahab, in Jericho. There is Deborah, the first female ruler of Israel. And there is Huldah, the prophetess whom Josiah sought out to validate the authenticity of the temple scrolls. This is just a fraction of the women in the OT that seem to rise above the curse of Genesis 3. So unless we want to say that each of these women did wrong (went against the direct command of God) by becoming leaders among God's people then we have to conclude that Genesis 3 is descriptive and not prescriptive. It explains how things will mostly be not necessarily how they ought to be.

There is no doubt that in the OT there is a clear picture of male headship. But there is also a persistent and startling record of women overcoming the curse of the fall and rising to the position of importance and leadership within the people of God. This is startling because this happened in a patriarchal society. The people who recorded these stories were men--men who grew up in a cultural setting that believed that women were inferior to them, yet these stories remained and were passed on. They have been handed down through the ages, recorded as Scripture and, therefore, are testimonies that remind us that maybe things are not as clear cut as many suppose.

As we turn the page to the New Testament, maybe we should consider this: the fall destroys the mutual partnership of Adam and Eve (and their descendants) but is there

nothing to be done about this? Are we doomed to this life as is until death? Or could God intercede in some way to recreate his creation, bringing restoration back to it?

### **NEW TESTAMENT:**

(The format of this section is inspired by Ben Witherington III's article at <http://www.wesleyanholinesswomenclergy.org/women-in-ministry/>)

We are Christians and not Jews, which means that Jesus is the centerpiece of our faith. Of course, we recognize that Jesus was Jewish, so we value this heritage but whatever we believe about this question we must allow Jesus to speak his truth into our lives. The OT gives us a first glimpse into the heart of God and his will for our lives but this glimpse is made fuller in Christ. So to his teachings we turn.

### **Mark 3:31-35**

In this passage Jesus challenges the hereditary importance of family and he says that his family is reordered around faith. Those who choose to believe, those who choose to do God's will are given a place in the family. There is no importance given to heredity. The implication being that Jesus has not just come for the Jews. There is no significance given to gender either. Sons, apparently, are not most important in Jesus' family. This strange little encounter, which might be easily overlooked by us today, was radical in Jesus' day. He is questioning two main pillars in Judaism: the importance of heredity (their identity as a people) and the supremacy of men. This does not fully answer our question, but it does need to be kept in mind as we move along.

### **Mark 7:1-23 with particular emphasis on 14-23 and Mark 5:24-34**

The Pharisees often get a bad rap by us Christians and to some degree this is warranted. However, rather than viewing them as twisted legalists it might be helpful to consider that their desire was for there to be a priesthood of all believers. This is something that is near and dear to most Protestants and implies that God wants to work through all of us. "Whatever we do, we do it for the Lord." But what the Pharisees meant by this, is quite different. The Pharisees wanted to preserve the Jewish faith by keeping its people ritually pure. If everyone would just follow the Levitical laws, Judaism would not succumb to pagan Rome and the covenant would be maintained, so it was thought. So we find the Pharisees obsessed with ceremonial cleanliness, and when they see Jesus paying no heed to such things they are greatly disturbed. When questioned about this, Jesus calls their whole construct into question: "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" Ritual purity, says Jesus, does not ultimately make one clean because it is just an external act, what he (and the Father) is more concerned with is the attitude of the heart for this shows God what a person is really about.

So Jesus eats with sinners; he touches lepers, and he allows a hemorrhaging woman to touch him.

Women could have no hope of being priests, in Judaism, in large part due to the menstrual issue. It made women ceremonially unclean. Levitical law outlines the regulations for Jewish women to follow while on their period and makes provision for their reinstatement back into the community following a time of separation. (Lev. 15:19-33). The command states that for the seven days of her “regular flow of blood” (or however long the period lasts) she is considered unclean; therefore, she should touch no one, and others should not touch the things she touches. At the end of the flow of blood, another eight days were needed before a woman could be declared ceremonially clean. This would mean a minimum of 15 days each month a woman would typically be considered ritually unclean and unable to participate in the worship practices of the Jewish community. Given such laws it would make it nearly impossible and certainly very impractical for a woman to be a priest within the Jewish faith.

So when Jesus challenges the ceremonial cleanliness laws of the Pharisees, he is doing something rather remarkable. He is shifting the very foundation of faith from external, ritual based practices to an internal motivation. Without specifically saying that women now have the opportunity to be priests, he is, at the least, breaking down walls that had long been constructed to keep women from having this opportunity.

If we are hearing Jesus correctly then we have to conclude that it is not the food, it is not the disease, it is not blood that makes a person unclean in the sight of God. It is his/her heart, and for Jesus there is no difference in importance between a male will (heart) or a female one. His desire is to see each purified.

#### **Luke 10:38-42**

It could be argued, that simply because Jesus cares for the purity of the female will as much as the male will that this does not necessarily mean that he is advocating for a breaking away from the patriarchal headship principle. This would be hard to maintain, though, in light of the story of Mary and Martha.

In this familiar, widely loved passage, we find Martha upset because she is having to make all the food preparations (a woman’s duty in Jesus’ day) and wants Jesus to scold Mary for not doing her womanly duty. According to the customs of the day Martha had every right to be upset and if the headship principle was in effect we should find Jesus siding with her. Instead, Jesus says that Mary chose the better “portion.” There is a play on words in the Greek text that is hard to carry over into the English. Essentially, what Jesus is saying is that Mary has chosen the better meal. In other words, Jesus is commending Mary for choosing the spiritual food he is offering over the physical food that she is societally expected to offer.

For a first century Jew (man or woman), this event would have been utterly shocking. Mary should not be in the place of men, learning from Jesus. She should be, to put it bluntly, in the kitchen where the women belonged. But when the text says that she was “[sitting] at Jesus’s feet,” it is stating that she was in a place reserved for men only. In scripture, to sit at someone’s feet is to imply discipleship. Literally a person could be seated at the feet of a teacher to learn, or this could be a euphemism for one being

trained by a rabbi. Either way, a place that had only been open to men is now opened up to a woman, and she is commended for it by Jesus!

What is more, it is not just that she is free to learn from the Master. In Judaism, a religion whose very existence is constructed on the principle of discipleship, the passing on the faith through study, it was considered a great privilege to be a disciple of a rabbi because this meant that the rabbi believed that you were the kind of person that had the capability to **be** like him. The emphasis was not just on knowing what the rabbi knew, but on being like the rabbi. For the ancient Jews, then, there should be no disconnect between knowledge and being. One cannot know the truth without acting on the truth; we must hear and obey, they would say.

So Jesus, in saying that Mary was right in choosing to sit at his feet, was making a statement about the equality that exists at his feet (a place of learning) and the possibility of Mary being like him.

How one can read this passage and not conclude that for Jesus discipleship trumps traditional roles, is hard to figure. He has opened the way for women to learn and presumably to have the same responsibility to pass that knowledge on (ie., teach and preach). It would be rather strange for Jesus to give equal access to his teaching then for us to conclude that men are allowed to pass that teaching on, while women should not. Jesus grants freedom of access and we have no recorded statement of him denying women the opportunity or privilege of passing that knowledge on, so why would we not assume that women are meant to pass on his teachings just as the men are?

## **John 20**

Let us assume for a moment, though, that Mary's story is affirming that women are allowed to learn, but that the proclamation of this learning (preaching/teaching) should not extend to her since she is a woman (Jesus does not state this but many churches do so let's just assume it at this point).

At the very center of our faith stands the cross. It is the greatest symbol of God's love for humanity, for on it God takes on the sins of the world and puts them to death. Of course without the resurrection and the empty tomb the victory is not complete. The great consequence of the fall is that death has entered our world. It is the final stronghold of sin but with the resurrection of Jesus it's power is broken. As Paul says, we are resurrected with Christ. Though we remain in a physical body that is still bound to the law of death, spiritually we are resurrected at the moment of belief with Christ. We can be a new creation right now! We get a foretaste of the full redemption that comes after our physical resurrection.

This message, that Paul is to develop in such amazing detail in his epistles, begins with women. In each of the Gospels it is women that go to the tomb, it is women that receive the message of Jesus' resurrection, it is women that go and tell.

In John's account Mary alone sees Jesus. When she does she declares him "Rabbi," as one would expect of a disciple. He is her teacher; she is his disciple. As such, he commands her to go and he gives her a message to deliver to the others, which she faithfully does (vv17-18).

What is preaching and teaching really about? Are these activities nothing more than delivering the message God has given to us, telling others of the resurrected Christ? Sure the details vary and the styles vary, but if a pastor is not preaching Christ, crucified for our sins and resurrected for our new life, then that pastor is not really delivering the message of Scripture. Were these first speeches of the resurrection not sermons? Were they really any different than what happens each and every Sunday in churches across the world?

Here is the truly remarkable thing about this: as you might recall, women were not trusted as witnesses in the ancient world. They could not testify in court. So any right minded person who wanted to "sell" a resurrection account in the world of Jesus' day would not choose to have women be the first seers and, therefore, the main witnesses. Why would one choose to have the least trustworthy be the first seers? We can trust the historicity of these accounts because no right-minded, first century person would choose to write it this way. The only reason it would be recorded as such is if it were true. This is how it happened.

In Jesus' new creation women are proclaimers of the truth alongside of men; in fact, they are the first speakers of this truth!

A common response to this conclusion is to point out that Jesus only selected twelve men to be his apostles. Surely if he wanted women to lead he would have selected some. There are several things to say to this:

- 1). The list also does not include a Gentile, so are we to assume that Jesus did not want Gentiles to be in a leadership position? If so, the church has a real problem today! This would suggest that the first twelve are not meant to be the template for all time and could easily be interpreted as a reflection of a cultural necessity for the time (again the prescriptive vs. descriptive argument).
- 2). The commission that Jesus gives to the twelve is helpful at this point. He tells them to "seek out the lost sheep of Israel." Their call is primarily to Jews; therefore, to a society that is very particular about the place of women.

Clearly, if Jesus' message was going to reach Jewish men they were going to have to hear it from other men. Few righteous male Jews would listen to a woman teacher (much like most devout Muslim men would not take religious advise from women today). So, unless Jesus didn't care about the men of Israel he needed to appoint male leaders.

There was no problem, however, getting Jewish woman to receive the message of Christ (as attested to by all the women that follow Jesus in the Gospels and in the

record of Acts). A message of dignity, freedom and agape love was not a hard sell for woman of the day!

When we come to Paul we have a disciple of Christ who is specifically called to reach the Gentile population with the message of the resurrected Christ. Could it be that the movement from a Jewish centered faith to a Gentile centered church might allow for a fuller exploration and development of these ideas? Might the subtle teaching of Christ become more overt in Paul (I say subtle only in the sense that for us today it may not be quite as clear how remarkable and bold Jesus' teaching actually were for his day)? Or does Paul simply ignore all that we have noted about Jesus thus far and revert to the patriarchal standard of the day?

Before we get to Paul, though, one look at the Book of Acts might be helpful to us.

### **Acts 18:24-26**

Priscilla and Aquila were a married couple that lived in Rome until the expulsion of the Jews, by emperor Claudius, at which point they moved to Corinth (Act 18:2). There they met Paul and they worked alongside each other for a year and half as tentmakers. Priscilla and Aquila then moved to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19) where they hosted a house church (1 Corinthians 16:9). It is here that they met Apollos. There is no reason to doubt that Paul knew this couple quite well. He knew their hearts and knew how they interacted as a husband and wife team. We're going to meet them again in Romans so for now let's just focus on this interaction with Apollos.

Together, the text tells us, Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos the deeper things of God. Clearly this interaction is about discipleship, leading someone into a deeper walk with God. And Priscilla is specifically mentioned as part of this process. It seems only logical to conclude that she was teaching a man (Apollos) about the deeper truths of God.

These two are mentioned a number of times in the NT and when they are Priscilla is often mentioned before Aquila, her husband (in the Greek at least, some translations like the KJV do not follow this). By forgoing the customary way of addressing these two (husband first), many scholars believe that this is Paul's way of affirming the legitimacy of Priscilla as a minister in her own right. She is neither superior to her husband nor is she riding the coat-tails of her husband. She is a minister just as her husband is a minister.

This, of course, is problematic for those who argue that women should not be "over" men or even for those that would argue that Aquila should be over Priscilla. So it may not be all that surprising to find that this text has gone through some interesting changes over the years.

There are manuscripts of Scripture, particularly from the Middle Ages, that change this passage in a significant way. Instead of saying "they" taught him, these manuscripts say "he" (meaning Aquila) taught Apollos. The older manuscripts do not contain this

change and so most (if not all) modern translations use the “they” (as they should). But why the change?

It is hard to say for sure, maybe it was just a scribal error. But we do know that by the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church was fully constructed around a male dominated hierarchal government. So to have a text question this, one that could be used to argue for the equality in leadership of men and women would be a dangerous thing indeed. Maybe it was accidental maybe not.

Unfortunately this was not the only place in Scripture that was to receive such editing.

### **Romans 16:1-16**

This may seem like a boring piece of Scripture but in fact it is a remarkable piece of antiquity literature. To say that there is no other piece of writing in antiquity that addresses the woman issue like this, is no understatement.

All told there are 27 names mentioned in these verses. Nine of them are women. This is a statement in itself. But it is not just the fact that Paul accords women the same honor as the men (by naming them in this list), what he says about them is even more significant.

If I say to you that “John is a fellow worker in Christ” or that “Andrew has worked very hard in the Lord” or that “Thomas has been a servant of the church”, what do you think I mean? What would you assume the role of these men would be in the church? Would you feel comfortable concluding that these men are ministers in some way in the church?

The interesting thing is that these are the very things Paul says about women in this chapter.

In the opening address, Phoebe is said to be a servant of the church in Cenchrea. The Greek word translated as servant is *diakonos*. This is the same word that Paul uses to identify his own ministry (see 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4, 11:23; Eph 3:7; Col 1:23, 25). So when Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:6, “He has made us competent ministers [diakonos] of a new covenant...” no one bats an eye. Of course Paul is a minister. But use that same word in relation to a woman and suddenly diakonos needs to take on another meaning. And this says nothing of the fact that Paul uses the masculine form of diakonos in referring to Phoebe. He is making a point that should not be missed. She is a minister. Technically servant is not a bad translation, if you mean it in the sense that Jesus called himself a servant, or commanded the disciples to be servants of others. The point being that to be a minister in the church is to be a servant. It does not necessarily imply a lesser level of work in the church.

Paul goes on to say that Phoebe is a great “help”. Help in the Greek is *prostatis*. Its literal meaning would be “one who stands in front or before.” It carries the meaning as the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* notes as meaning to lead. Phoebe

is commended to the church as a leader of the church in Cenchrea and Paul wants to make sure she is received in Rome for the simple fact that she is a woman! If Phoebe were a man there would be no question to us that she was a leader, a minister in Cenchrea, yet because she is a woman we find biblical translators trying to minimize or downplay her role. Why? Is the text speaking for itself or is it being controlled by other factors? Maybe looking at the way Paul speaks of some of the other women in this text will shed light on this.

Priscilla is again mentioned along with her husband. They both are commended as “fellow-workers” with Paul. This same word is used in reference to Timothy, Luke, Demas, among others who share the Gospel along with Paul. Why would the designation given to this husband and wife team not apply to Priscilla? When the text in Acts says that they were teaching together and this text declares that they are both fellow-workers but we find commentators wanting to again minimize her role, we have to wonder if a bias is blinding some to the way that Paul actually views women and their role in the church. Set aside any prior belief in the legitimacy of the headship principle and this text seems to suggest that these two are ministers (fellow-workers in the Gospel) in the church that meets in their very home.

And then we come to verse 7. It is a verse that has been more controversial than any of the others in this chapter, because of the implication of Paul’s words. The text states that Andronicus and Junia (or is it Junias) are considered by Paul to be so outstanding that they are given the special designation as apostles. Among the apostles they are outstanding; Christ followers before Paul even was.

So what is so significant about this? Junia is a woman’s name. Junias is a man’s. Some translations have Junia and some have Junias. If it is Junias (a man) then the statement may not be all that remarkable. But if it is Junia (a woman) then this is a very significant statement indeed.

Here is the thing: the earliest Greek texts clearly have Junia. The earliest commentators on those texts believed Junia to be a woman. Take John Chrysostom for example. John was born c. 347AD and because of his gifted skill at speaking he quickly became an important person in the church, even becoming bishop at Constantinople. He writes this in his sermon entitled, *Homily 31 on the Epistles to the Romans*: [speaking on verse 7 and the greeting Paul gives to Andronicus and Junia] “And to indeed to be apostles at all is a great thing. ... Oh! how great is the devotion of this woman (Junia), that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle! (*Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol 11, p.555).

But some may argue that it is easy for me to say these things because I am coming from the pro-woman ministers perspective. Maybe I am not being as balanced as I should be. It is a fair point to make.

So don’t just take my word for it listen to what Douglas Moo (one of the signers of the Danvers statement) wrote in his commentary on Romans some 10 years after the

Danvers statement was printed: “Interpreters from the thirteenth to the middle of the twentieth century generally favored the masculine identification (Junias). But it appears that commentators before the thirteenth century were unanimous in favor of the feminine identification. And probably for good reason. For while a contracted form of Junianus would fit quite well in this list of greetings, we have no evidence elsewhere for this contracted form of the name. On the other hand, the Latin ‘Junia’ was a very common name. Probably, then, ‘Junia’ was the wife of Andronicus.” (NICNT 922-923).

And again we have to ask why? Why is there debate on this? Why would there need to be a shift away from the earliest reading? The editors note that is found in the text I just quoted from Chrysostom gives us insight to this, I believe. There are three notes made to this one verse that John is working with.

- 1). The editor wants us to know that “apostle” doesn’t always mean the 12, that others like Paul and Barnabas among others are named apostles. *Okay but does that make what Paul is saying about this woman any less important?*
- 2). Though Chrysostom reads Junia to be a woman, the editor notes that others read the name to be masculine. *No reason is given as to why and no reference is made that the earliest known manuscripts have Junia.*
- 3). The editor states that it is impossible to know for sure if Paul means that these two are to be counted among the apostles or whether they are highly regarded by the apostles. Chrysostom, the editor notes, reads them as among the apostles. Then the editor makes this conclusion: “The more probable view is Andronicus and Junias [not Junia as Chrys., certainly not if his interpretation is correct; that a woman should have been an apostle is out of the question] are designated as distinguished, honorably known among (by) the apostles. (Ibid, p.555).

Despite the text saying otherwise, despite Paul’s affirmation of nine other women in this list, despite the earliest commentary on this text, the editors and others alongside them set that all to the side and simply declare it to be out of the question. But is it out the question for men or for God?

It is remarkable to think that given all that we have covered (of which there are more examples that we could have pointed to!), that anyone thinks that this is such a clear cut, black and white issue. There clearly is much in Scripture that challenges the idea of male headship. The Genesis account seems to point to a relationship of equality. There are numerous examples of strong, Godly women that are passed on to us through the Old Testament, despite it being a patriarchal society, and despite some of the very negative views of women by Jewish sages.

Jesus absolutely calls into question the very foundation of the patriarchal and hereditary practices of Judaism. He gives women equal footing in the family of God, he sets aside the ceremonial laws that prohibited women from worshipping equally, he allows them to learn under him, he commissions them to go tell of his resurrection. Paul builds on this

by raising up women leaders, he commends them as his fellow servants, workers, leaders in Christ.

Maybe when Paul wrote that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female-- he meant it! Maybe the church is to be a place of radical equality.

## DIFFICULT TEXTS

Ah but we haven't yet got to the problematic texts have we? What about 1 Corinthians and Paul's command for women to be silent in church, to ask their husbands first so that they will not speak in church?

Or Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy 2 that women should not exercise authority over men and that they should be submissive?

Or Paul's call for wives to submit to their husbands and for husbands to be the head of their wives, in Ephesians 5?

These are real questions because the "plain meaning of the text" seems clear enough. This is the stance that the Danvers Statement takes-- if the obvious reading says one thing then shouldn't that thing be authoritative? "Technical ingenuity" or "hermeneutical (interpretative) oddities" should not be devised to get around the simple meaning. And I really doubt any authentic Christian would disagree with this. We don't want people just making stuff up to suite their own needs and desire; unfortunately, we have a number of examples of people twisting Scripture in such ways. But is this one of those times?

The problem with the "plain meaning" principle is that it depends on the English perfectly presenting the Greek (therefore the original intent of the authors). But this is simply not possible. Translations are inherently difficult and are not perfect--which explains why we are constantly getting newer ones that tout themselves to be even better than before... meaning they better portray the original meaning. Of course, we believe that the Holy Spirit has a part in all of this but clearly God has chosen to work *with* us in this process rather than *apart* from us. How else could we explain these difficulties? If Scripture comes to us only from the "hand of God" then why is it filled with so many questions? Could God not have given a document that had no contradictions, clearer teachings, answered all of our important questions? Instead we have a text that is very mysterious in many ways. We have to pour over it and study it and in the end a good student discovers that we do not master the text it masters us!

Furthermore, the "plain meaning" principle is flawed because it assumes that the social context of our day is absolutely equal to the time when Scripture was written and, therefore, does not need to be accounted for at all. So we read Paul mentioning a few names of women and we think nothing of it; Jesus allows Mary to sit at his feet and we think nothing of it. But as we have seen, to the original hearers these were quite significant. They were radical statements. Instead of hearing it through the ears of the

original hearers (as best we can of course) we automatically hear it through our own ears, our own context and because of this we miss details; we misread what the text is actually saying. Plain meaning cannot be the only way we read Scripture because it is not as full-proof as the Danvers' authors seem to think that it is.

So here is another safeguard when reading Scripture (remember we mentioned two in the beginning: community and context): When interpreting Scripture we must interpret the part by the whole. In other words, if your interpretation of one text is in direct contrast to a significant portion of Scripture then your interpretation is questionable and likely wrong. If you find yourself stuck with an interpretation that goes against the "whole tenor of Scripture" then some deeper study is needed, and the plain meaning of one text may need to be set aside.

The question we need to ask is Has the plain readings of these three passages been used to interpret the rest of the biblical message on the role of women, or has the whole tenor of Scripture been allowed to interpret these three passages?

I have made a case that Scripture actually argues for the equality of women so now my task is to show how this interpretation could possibly come from these texts, which seem to say the exact opposite, without being unjust to them. If this can be done then we can affirm the belief that women have an equal place alongside men as ministers in God's church.

### **Ephesians 5**

This passage does not specifically speak to the question of women being ministers but since it deals with the husband/ wife relationship it has been used as a secondary proof text to the argument of biblical headship. In this sense it helps to prop up the interpretations of Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. So let us see if this prop is being used correctly.

The English comes across well enough. Women are likened to the church and men are likened to Christ. By that observation alone some have argued for a biblical appeal to hierarchy-- Christ obviously is above the church, so the husband is above the wife. The problem is that this conclusion fails to take into account the rest of the words of this passage. We don't even have to get into the technicalities of the Greek to discover that things are not as they first appear but the Greek does enhance this for us.

First, let's be clear and at the least note that women are only being asked to do what Paul has asked everyone to do, see v21. The fact is Paul is wanting us to pay particular attention to this because v22 does not even have a verb in it in the Greek. It literally reads: "Wives, to your husbands as to the Lord." Wives what to your husbands? To make sense of this verse translators have taken the verb from the above verse and placed it in this verse. There is little doubt that this is what should happen for the translating of this verse, but the effect is significant. It would have been all too easy in Paul's day for his hearers to jump on the idea of women submitting to men (this would

have been the cultural norm) so Paul creates a speed bump of sorts. By forcing the reader to go looking for the verb, he is reaffirming the idea that women are to submit just as everyone else is expected to!

Though some want to read Paul as bringing commands to the church, the reality is that his language suggests something else. This is apparent in the Greek but even the English points to this as well. If Paul was commanding us to “submit to one another” then one wonders how this could even be possible. If submit is to carry the meaning of being obedient then how are we to each be obedient to one another? When faced with questions of vision, mission, worship style, curriculum choices for Sunday school or the like, how could a church make any decisions. “Brother, I submit to you to choose the songs we sing. No, brother, I submit to you.” A command for each of us to be obedient would make the church an impossible place to make decisions, to move forward, to get anything done.

This reality, though evident in the English, is made even more clear in the Greek. If Paul was wanting to define submission as “being obedient to” then he would have used the Greek word, *hupakouo*. This is the word he uses a few verses later when he says to children “obey [*hupakouo*] your parents in the Lord” (6:1) This was the word that the Greek philosophers used to describe the husband/wife relationship--she was to be obedient to him. Paul does not use this word, though. Instead he uses the word *hupotasso*. In the active form this word is used to describe the relationship between the victor and the defeated (see Luke 10:17). But Paul does not use this word in the active form, instead we find it being used in the Greek imperative middle voice.

The imperative means that it is necessary, this is not an option. But for Paul this is not forced upon us. This is where the middle voice comes into play. In Greek the middle voice is reflexive-- it is where the subject of the sentence enacts the verb on himself/herself. So Paul is not saying that our submission is forced from another, he is saying that it is willingly offered by us to one another! Submit to one another... choose to live self-sacrificial lives with those around you. As one author has noted: “[Submission] has nothing to do with a position of inferiority or powerlessness but has everything to do with spiritual powerfulness; that is, it demonstrates personal self-esteem and strength of character in deliberately choosing to humble oneself on behalf of the beloved, or to ‘one another’ in the Body of Christ” (Cowles, 121)

This interpretation fits in nicely with the overall message of Ephesians, particularly with the material that comes just before this passage: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering” (5:1).

All Christians are called to imitate Christ and to offer up our lives to one another. This is not forced but it is expected; it is necessary for us to be the people that God wants us to be. The wife, then, is being asked to lay her life down for her husband as a response to the work of Christ in her. The husband does not force this-- he is not commanded to subject her. She is called to submit herself out of reverence for Christ.

And the husband in turn is called to love his wife like Christ loves the church. I suspect that in Paul's day, given the general belief about women, that these words were the more startling in this passage. Remember the culture of the day treated women as second-class citizens or property so to have someone say that husbands should consider their wives as worthy of dying for is remarkable, and to say that this is done not out of some noble duty but out of love is even more remarkable.

Since our word "love" carries so many different meaning, ranging from like to sexual activity to intense emotional feelings, it is important for us to try to know what Paul is trying to say here. The Greek is helpful at this point as well because we find Paul using the word *agape* to describe this love that is supposed to be present in the husband. *Agape* was used sparingly in the common Greek of Paul's day, but once Paul latches onto this word and defines it in his writings as the selfless, sacrificial love that God loves us with it has become a significant word in the church. *Agape* is God-like love, it is the love of 1 Corinthians 13. The ideal love in the church is *agape* love because this is the love that God has shown us in Christ.

So Paul is calling on husbands to do the very same thing that the wives are called to do-- to lay down their lives for the other. His language is more evocative with the men and it takes him a lot more words to show what he means (maybe because what he is asking men to do is so radical given the culture of his day), but the outcome is no different than what he desires for the women.

In Paul's understanding of the kingdom of God, where there is neither male nor female, he sees husbands laying down their lives for their wives because of the love of Christ in them, and wives laying down their lives for their husbands because of the love of Christ in them. A godly marriage is one built on *agape* love and self-submission to the other.

But some will ask what about the idea of Christ being "head" of the church and husbands being "head" of their wives. Does this not support male headship in the church?

In the English, "head" is the location of the brain--the thinking part of the body so it is used in a metaphorical sense as the leader. For instance, the head of the department is the leader of the department. This is a common use in our culture but is it what Paul was saying? The curious thing is that those who want to argue that this promotes the headship ideal have just assumed that Paul is using this word in the same way we do 2000 years later and have ignored the context all together.

In the Greek, the word that Paul uses is *kaphale*. It is a difficult word to translate but most often it means "source" or "origin of life". Paul is reminding his readers of the creation. Adam was the source of Eve. Again this does not have to imply hierarchy. In fact, if this was Paul's desire there are at least 46 Greek words that he could have used to imply this. He didn't use these words, instead He chose *kaphale* instead.

Why? It seems clear enough even in the English. Christ's headship means dying to self so the other can have life. Christ died so the church could live. This is what his headship means. The passage carries no connotation of hierarchy-- that is simply our contemporary ears hearing a word that has a certain meaning for our day but not for Paul's. If we want to argue for a biblical model of headship then what we have to argue for is a model where the husband dies to himself for his wife but at the same time this is happening the wife is dying to herself for her husband.

This is a beautiful picture of mutual, self sacrificial love, of the mutual partnership that is to be found in the Godly marriage--not unlike what we found in the creation accounts. Therefore, this is not a passage that should be used to subject women or to argue for the sole authority of men, to do this would result in an injustice to the reading of Ephesians.

### **1 Corinthians 14:33-35**

Here we find the first of two examples in Paul's writing that restricts the activity of women in church. Again we find the English clear enough. Women are not allowed to speak in church, to be in "full submission", and they are to ask their husbands at home if they have any questions.

How could Paul be clearer, one might say. Indeed. It is interesting that those who take these words in a prescriptive sense (meaning that God ordains this) seem to forget the words of Paul three chapters earlier. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul says this, "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head--it is just as though her head were shaved" (v5).

Notice that Paul doesn't say that women should not pray or prophesy, he simply is arguing for a way that it should be done. He does not just limit this to women but also speaks to men. It is apparent that the Corinthian church had a number of difficulties in it and Paul is addressing these problems. One of the difficulties is how worship is done in church. In chapter 11 Paul is not concerned about women speaking in church (they are permitted to pray and prophesy) but he is concerned about how they do it. They should have their heads covered. Why was this important?

It is hard to say for certain what Paul's concern is but we do know from our understanding of the ancient world that two things might be contributing to Paul's writing about how men and women are to look as they worship. First, a common sign of a woman being a prostitute in the ancient world was to have an uncovered head. Moreover, in the fertility cults of Rome there were often ceremonial prostitutes-- women who were slept with as part of the worship practices. It could be that Paul is concerned for the new attender to the Corinthian church getting the wrong impression. In this sense, then, what Paul is saying is not prescriptive (a command for all time) but descriptive-- women should have covered heads and long hair so that they do not look like prostitutes. Paul is wanting the women to think about how they present themselves, he is not limiting their participation in worship.

A second issue may be at play here, though. One can imagine, that if all that we have said is true and that Christianity is at its core a religion of radical equality, this would have been very empowering for women, but it is not too hard to imagine that in its infancy that this empowerment would have also been ripe for problems. What if women who suddenly understood themselves equal to men in the site of God started giving up the social decorums of the day? We know, for instance, that in the ancient world dress was determined by the gender of a person. It was important for men to dress like men and women to dress like women, and there were rules to how this was to be done. It could be that the women of Corinth, hearing that there is neither male nor female in Christ, got the wrong impression. Paul was not arguing for a genderless faith, where we are androgynous, he instead is arguing for an equality of the genders. But to have women dressing and acting like men (in the culture of that day) would have given the wrong impression of what the Christian faith is all about. So Paul tells the woman of Corinth to worship freely, but do so as women: dress like women and be proper about by covering your heads.

It makes little sense for Paul to spend so much time teaching women how to pray and prophesy in church if in the end what he really believes that they are to be silent in church. Why would he not have said this in chapter 11?

It is clear, however, from the context of chapter 14 that what Paul is dealing with is disorder in worship services. He begins with the problem of tongue speaking (vv1-25) in that without interpretation it is edifying to no one but the speaker and confusing to the unbelievers: "will they not say you are out of your mind," he asks (vv22-25). Then he takes on other disorders in the service in Corinth: only a couple people should speak in church, they should not interrupt one speaker with a new revelation and then he says, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (v33).

It is then that he confronts the issue of women in church. It seems clear enough from the context that what he is dealing with are abuses in the church. Some things are out of whack and need correcting. It is not that tongues are all bad and should be avoided at all costs; they need to be done in a certain way, he says. It's not bad for people to get inspiration to speak a word from God but it should be done orderly-- everyone cannot speak at once, we should not be interrupting each other. So what is the disorder that women cause in the church?

The NIV does us a disservice in its translation because it drops the definite article in the Greek and makes it seem like Paul is speaking to all women when in fact what he says is directed to "the women." At the beginning of this letter we find that Paul has received word from Chloe's household (a woman!) that there were quarrels in the church (1:11). So could the problem simply be a group of women within the church that have become a distraction? Paul is addressing this fraction group just as he has elsewhere in this letter. This interpretation would make more sense given what he says in chapter 11 (not all women are to be quiet just this difficult group) and would fit in better with the other things that Paul has said of women.

But what is the disorder? Imagine, again, women who were for their whole lives had been held back by society. They would not have been educated or allowed to participate in worship as men were. And now they are. It, at the very least, could make for a complicated situation. What if women were trying to teach but had no education to speak of? What if women were trying to assert themselves in destructive ways to the community? It seems just as likely that what Paul's desire is here is to bring order to a volatile situation. These women are to be quiet because they are out of control. They are told to submit and ask their questions at home because apparently all their questioning had become a problem in worship.

Submit. Again we find the Greek not being the forced obedience that we so often link to this word. Instead we find Paul using the same word, *hupotassomai*, as he used in Ephesians 5. So Paul is not commanding these women to be obedient, he is calling them to a voluntary submission. He is asking them to restrain themselves.

Notice what the passage does not say, though; women are not told to be submissive to men. It is often assumed that this is what Paul says here but notice that he just calls for their submission. Submission to whom or to what? Paul is calling for their submission to the teaching-- his and the speaker in worship. Instead of using worship as a time to ask all their questions (which given the fact that this would have been all new to the women we could imagine that their would have been many!) the women of Corinth should sit in silence meditating on the things spoken and then ask their questions at home. This does not have to mean that Paul is endorsing a hierarchy but is simply giving practical advice. Men were more educated than women. This was not necessarily the will of God but it was reality and now Paul, as a pastor, has to try to deal with the problem of disorder in the church while at the same time affirming the equality of men and women in Christ. So the short-term answer is to require silence of women so that they can actually hear sustained teaching in church and grow in wisdom and to ask their questions at home to further this growth. Paul wants women to learn! This is the prescriptive statement in this passage (this ought to be) but to argue that the descriptive way that this is done is intended for all time, seems dubious at best.

## **1 Timothy 2**

Of the three difficult passages, this one is the most problematic. There is such a force and directness about Paul's words that there seems to be little doubt about what he is saying. But if what we have accomplished thus far suggests that God's desire is for an equality within his kingdom, then maybe it is high time that we stop putting so much weight to these verses. This would not be the first time that the Christian faith has stopped using a passage of Scripture to argue for something that should have died along time ago. It seems incredible to think that just 150 years ago Christian ministers were defending the practice of slavery with the Bible, but they did. I would like to think that we all would agree that it took far too long for that interpretation to die but die it did (at least mostly) and I cannot imagine how a Christian would argue that this is not a good thing.

The question is not whether this passage is Scriptural or not, of course it is. But does this passage of Scripture need to define every other bit of Scripture that we have studied so far? Do we do an injustice to Scripture to set this passage aside and confess that we do not understand it? Especially when what we do understand is that the contemporary translation of this passage goes against the grain of the “whole tenor” of Scripture. I say all this not because there are not some plausible explanations for what Paul writes here, there are some. But none of these are not without their difficulties. The fact is this is just a difficult passage.

Some observations might help us to get a sense of what Paul is saying here. First, when Paul is writing this letter, Timothy is in Ephesus (1:3). This is the church that Paul wrote so beautifully about the mutual self-submission of husbands and wives; it also the church that Priscilla and Aquila were ministering in (Acts 18). In fact, Paul sends his greetings to these two in 2 Timothy 4:19 (again listing Priscilla ahead of her husband). It seems remarkable to think that Paul, who has heaped praise on Priscilla and Aquila, would write words that would seem to call their ministry and relationship into question. But maybe Paul isn't writing about all women. Maybe like in Corinth, he is writing to some women.

Another note: we know that in Ephesus one of the biggest temples was dedicated to Artemis. This was a female-only cult, whose priests were female. It is not all that conceivable to think that the empowering Gospel message caused some issues when it came to women in Ephesus. Was the empowerment to look like that which happened in the temple of Artemis? Were women supposed to be in charge in the Christian faith? How was Christianity going to set itself apart from this cult and yet keep true to the message of equality in God's kingdom? These are serious problems that at the least should be in our mind as we read these words.

As we saw in Corinthians, we find Paul defining proper worship. He first writes to the men and says that they are to worship without arguing and getting angry with one another. Apparently, the worship practices of Ephesus included some rather remarkable outbursts. Are we to assume that every single male was arguing or fighting or could it just as easily be a faction within the congregation? Culturally, the idea of arguing and trying to win debates was not frowned upon, in fact this was idealized. Paul is warning the men to not just be men. Be men that listen first, meditate and worship. Don't be like all the other men of Ephesus that argue and fight with their words (sometimes their fists) over their beliefs. This is not suitable for Christian worship, says Paul.

After addressing a deficiency in the men he turns his attention to the women. He begins with dress. Women are to dress modestly and decently. Just as the idea of being a man in the culture of Ephesus came with certain expectations so, too, did that of being a woman. And Paul is calling the women of Ephesus to set that superficial nonsense to the side. Instead of focusing on jewelry, clothes and hair-dos, they should focus on “good deeds.” This sounds rather innocuous to us. But “good deed” was the cultural way of referring to the social obligation we have in helping the less fortunate.

Far from limiting the women, Paul is challenging them to step up and be a force of change in Ephesus by giving their time, energy and finances to things that matter.

This sounds all well enough but then we read in verse 11: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

The negative of course jumps off the page. But we should not let that prohibit us from actually seeing the positive. Paul is saying that women should learn (the literal translation would be more forceful and say women must learn)! This in itself is such a remarkable thing in the ancient world. The problem of course is deciding how this was to happen. There was no template for this so in the messiness of the Gospel meeting the real world Paul has to put limits to this learning, but this should not cause us to overlook the simple truth that women are to be learners too.

Paul says that this learning is to be done in silence. The Greek word used here, *hesuchia*, does not imply a forced silence; rather it reflects the need for a student to be quite to listen to a teacher. This is the beautiful quietness that one hears when a teacher/pastor has the complete attention of his/her listeners. This same word was used by the early church fathers to speak of the proper way a person (man or woman) is to worship.

Paul telling the women to be learners but to do it quietly is not demeaning them, he is teaching them the proper way to learn! Stop talking, stop asking questions all the time just listen. Soak in the words and the wisdom.

He then tells them to be in “full submission.” Again, we may want to conclude that he means to men but this is not what he says. They are to be submissive to the message. Learning is a process and it begins with the recognition that there is something to be learned. Paul is not commanding men to subject women. He is calling for women to humbly recognize that they are new to this game. Unlike men (of that time), they have not had the privilege of education so they need to start with a humility that recognizes that they have much to learn and, for the time at least, men are going to be the primary source of that knowledge.

Which helps to explain Paul’s next words. It seems highly improbable for Paul to endorse Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia, etc if he believes that no woman should ever teach a man. Yet the reality is that these women were exceptions to the rule. Most women were illiterate and uneducated. And given the fact that a cult of Artemis was renowned in Ephesus, Paul needed to be very clear about what was acceptable and what was not. Women, in the Christian faith, are not to dominate men (of course men are not to dominate women but Paul addresses this in his Ephesians 5 writings). This is what the Greek word *authenteo*, the word translated for having authority suggests. This is the only place in Scripture that it occurs, but based on uses in other antiquity documents it carries the meaning of domination (often in violent ways). Women are not to dominate men as they do in the cult of Artemis; it has no place in the Christian faith.

Furthermore, some form of the word “teaching” is found 24 times in 1 and 2 Timothy. Almost all of these refer to false teaching. It is clear that there are some serious deficiencies in the teaching in Ephesus and if we connect the dots it appears that women are a large part of the problem. Not because they are inherently flawed, but because they are so ill-prepared and unequipped and, therefore, susceptible to false teachings. This helps us to understand the next words of Paul, which at first seem to suggest that the best women have to offer is child-bearing.

Paul, however, has shown elsewhere that this is not his desire. He is drawing on Scripture to illustrate the above point. Adam was created first and was commanded by God not to eat of the tree. Eve was created second and was not given this direct teaching and was easily led astray by the tempter. Paul is not saying men are better than women or that only men are to be teachers, what he is saying is, “Look, you women have not had enough learning so it is easy for you to be led astray... don’t you remember what happened to Eve? You don’t want to be like that. And don’t think that everything you do as women is invaluable or somehow less important. Child-bearing is significant. But whatever you do do it with faith, love and holiness and do it respectfully.”

So here is an interpretation that attempts to account for the real-time difficulties of trying to apply the Gospel in the midst of cultural norms that contradict its message. It is, of course, much easier to take the words at face value but to do this means that we have to argue against a host of other Scriptures with the result, by the way, of making a gender subservient to another gender. This, at the very least, should give us pause.

## CONCLUSION

This paper no doubt has much that can be argued and debated. In no way is it meant to be the final say on this topic. At most my desire has been to put forth a Scriptural defense of why I believe that some women have been called by God to be ministers. If you have found any of these arguments persuasive then you owe it to yourself, to women, to the church, to Scripture to continue to pursue learning more about this topic. The resources below may be helpful to this pursuit.

Resources:

***Backgrounds of Early Christianity***, Everett Ferguson--helpful in learning more about the cultural context of the day.

***A Woman’s Place***, C.S. Cowles--written by a Nazarene Scholar

***Junia, The First Woman Apostle***, Eldon Jay Epp

***Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters***, Philip Barton Payne

**What Paul Really Said About Women: The Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love**, John T. Bristow

**Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy**, eds., Ronald Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and Gordon D. Fee

Web Resources

**[www.ntgateway.com](http://www.ntgateway.com)**-- has a lot of scholarly articles on NT books and topics

**<http://podacre.blogspot.com>**-- a podcast related to the above website. Produced by Mark Goodacre, Associate Professor of NT at Duke University.

Particularly helpful is <http://podacre.blogspot.com/search/label/Women>

**[www.wesleyanholinesswomensclergy.org/article-index/](http://www.wesleyanholinesswomensclergy.org/article-index/)** is a good resource for articles written by Wesleyan men, women, scholars and pastors on topics related to women in ministry

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