
THE PROBLEM WITH THE PROBLEM WITH WOMEN IN MINISTRY LEADERSHIP

**An Answer To Those Who Mistakenly Believe That Women Should Not Be
Spiritual Leaders**

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From the very outset of the creative order, when God shaped humankind in His image, He intentionally wrought male and female as complements to one another. He blessed both equally and bequeathed to them shared dominion over the earth.¹

Knowing it was “*not good*” for man to be isolated, cut off from his own and unable, therefore, to bring forth fruit after his own kind, the Lord fashioned woman from the earthly-essence man.² “*All flesh is not the same flesh,*”³ so God made woman of the selfsame substance as man. He shaped her differently only so that she would be an exact counterpart to him. Because woman fit perfectly with man in shape and body, man would eagerly leave his parents, and hold resolutely to her—becoming, once again, one flesh.⁴

Note: All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Version*.

¹ Genesis 1:26-28; Matthew 19:4

² Genesis 2:23

³ 1 Corinthians 15:39-40

⁴ Genesis 2:24

In the creative order, God arranged things to take care of themselves and produce life-sustaining fruit without much cultivation. Adam and Eve watched over a creation that naturally fell under their joint rule, effortlessly yielding its seed for them.⁵ Though Adam and Eve's sin disrupted creation on every front, God assured the continued connection between husband and wife by giving Adam's wife a renewed desire to stretch toward him, and by giving Eve's husband an additional assignment to more directly govern her.⁶ Each would now be far more occupied and engaged with the other than before sin knocked the world off course.

Initially it was God who "brought" Eve to Adam, and it was Adam who followed hard after Eve—pursuing and desiring to overtake her.⁷ But now God gives Eve her own incentive to flow toward her husband despite the painful fruit bearing. Likewise, Adam had initially enjoyed an attractive helpmeet who suited and aided him; now God delegates to him an additional role of responsibility to consider her and pay attention to her needs.

God assigned man a leadership function, vis-à-vis his wife, as a means of reinstating the original partnership they enjoyed, just as He advanced His original intention for them to multiply by augmenting woman's role to bear children, despite the pain. God's intent with this new order was to enable Adam and Eve to fulfill their mutually held, God-given purpose on earth. The whole point of two genders has always been one race connected together for ministry and fruitfulness.

The husbandly responsibility to reorder his priorities toward servant-leadership in marriage, and the wifely responsibility to reorient herself to that headship does not assert male dominance over females—nor does it disallow single or married women from leadership roles in church and society.

BIBLICAL PRECEDENT OF EQUALITY

Sin has not altered the fundamental equality of men and women. Both bear the image of God and both are being changed from glory to glory in the image of Christ. Since the woman's seed was prophesied as that which would eventually

⁵ Genesis 1:28-30

⁶ Genesis 3:16

⁷ Genesis 2:22, 24

produce Messiah and overcome the serpent, there is no reason to imagine that God's rearrangements after the entry of sin into the world diminished her person or giftedness in ministry.

The biblical precedent for women in ministry leadership is clear. From *Genesis* to *Revelation*, women have supervision/teaching roles among the people of God:

OLD TESTAMENT

1. Miriam was called "*the prophetess*,"⁸ and she was one of the three main leaders "*sent before*" Israel by God to lead the people out of Egypt.⁹
2. Deborah, the *wife* of Lappidoth, sat as judge of Israel, keeping the land "*undisturbed for forty years*";¹⁰ her assistant, Barak, deferred to her primary leadership role because he recognized her gifting/calling.
3. When Hilkiah the high priest found the lost *Book of the Law* in 621 *B.C.*, King Josiah chose to inquire of the Lord from the prophetess Huldah, *wife* of Shallum, who then advised both the high priest and the king about their future.¹¹
4. Esther used her royal powers to effect deliverance for her people, and Mordecai did according to what she commanded him to do.¹²

NEW TESTAMENT

1. On Pentecost, Peter reminded everyone that prophetic ministry and the outpouring of God's Spirit were promised to "*sons and daughters*," old and young alike—all the bondservants of the Lord, "*male and female*."¹³

⁸ Exodus 15:20

⁹ Micah 6:4

¹⁰ Judges 4:4-5; 8

¹¹ 2 Kings 22:14-20

¹² Esther 4:13-17

¹³ Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18

That very day in the upper room, both women and men were filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

2. Priscilla, who was usually mentioned before her husband, Aquila, collaborated with him in teaching and correcting the understanding of eloquent Apollos, a man “*mighty in the Scriptures*”;¹⁵ as “*fellow workers*” with Paul, they co-pastored a church in their home.¹⁶
3. When Saul ravaged the church by “*entering house after house,*” men and women were put in prison or “*scattered throughout the regions,*” where they continued preaching the word.¹⁷
4. Philip, who was known as an evangelist, had four single daughters who were called *prophetesses* in the same way that Agabus was called a *prophet*.¹⁸
5. Junia, along with Andronicus, was part of a prominent team of apostles.¹⁹
6. Phoebe was a *diakonon* of the church at Cenchreae²⁰ as well as a benefactor (prostotes, meaning protector, leader or ruler) of Paul.²¹
7. Various others, such as Nympha²² and “*the chosen lady,*”²³ led churches.

JESUS’ MINISTRY

The New Testament presents an egalitarian view of men and women in mutual ministry—from those who followed Jesus to those who gathered in the Upper

¹⁴ Acts 1:14; 2:4

¹⁵ Acts 18:24-26

¹⁶ Romans 16:3-5

¹⁷ Acts 8:1-4

¹⁸ Acts 21:8-9

¹⁹ Romans 16:7

²⁰ Romans 16:1

²¹ Romans 16:2

²² Colossians 4:15

²³ 2 John 1

Room. Men and women are counterparts to one another, and it serves no godly purpose for either gender to function autonomously, acting independently, without need of the other.²⁴ Even though “*the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman.*”²⁵ God’s design for His Body is always that we have need of one another.²⁶

God promises prophetic ministry and the outpouring of His Spirit on “*sons and daughters,*” old and young alike—all the bondservants of the Lord, “*male and female.*”²⁷ The qualification for ministry is neither age, nor gender, nor marital status, but surrender and faith. Just as the Gentiles are made “*fellow heirs*” with the Jews through the gospel,²⁸ so, too, are “*wives*” with their husbands.²⁹ Each wife is given as much “*authority over*” her husband’s body as each husband has over his wife’s.³⁰

At the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, such rights granted to women, as well as the inclusion of women in significant spiritual roles would have been alarmingly radical. Jesus’ selection of twelve men as founding apostles is no more a statement regarding gender qualification for ministry office (i.e., *males* only) than it is—as some church traditions have interpreted—a declaration about marital status and ministry leadership (i.e., *singles* only). We should remember, too, that the apostles were all Jews; however, no one would suggest that church leaders must be of Jewish ancestry.

Men and women—single and married—can be equally used by God to introduce “*kingdom-come*” ministry on earth.

CROSSING CULTURAL DIVIDES

Jesus crossed the cultural and religious divides of His day. He healed *lepers*, spoke to *Samaritan* women, drew *children* to Himself, welcomed *prostitutes* and *tax*

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:11

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:12

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

²⁷ Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18

²⁸ Ephesians 3:6

²⁹ 1 Peter 3:7

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 7:4

collectors, and exposed the barrenness of religious tradition. He included all people based on faith: “*The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*”;³¹ “there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised.”³² Jesus Himself reconciled us in one body to God through the cross, and made us all members of God’s household.³³

By making those who were not previously a people into a holy nation, God removes the economic, religious, cultural and ethnic distinctions between groups of people when those people identify themselves with Christ. He breaks down barriers because He wants *His* people to be a joined-together people, each of whom supplies meaningful ministry to the whole body.³⁴ He wants each individual to have his or her gifts surface in due season within a fellowship that is supportive of each member.

The early Church, comprised mostly of Jews, was somewhat taken aback that God gave to the Gentiles “*the same gift*” that He had given to them, and realized that they would be “*standing in God’s way*” if they held to their traditional exclusion of the uncircumcised.³⁵ Historically, the place of women in the leadership of the church has been somewhat reminiscent of that divisive exclusivity.

Making distinctions among us for treating one group differently from another is both sinful and dishonoring of “*fellow heirs of the kingdom.*”³⁶ Just as there is no place in the church for biased treatment of people based on economic standing, racial heritage, national identity, political persuasion, religious upbringing or physical age, neither is there any room for discrimination on the basis of gender. “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”³⁷

³¹ Romans 1:16

³² Colossians 3:10-11

³³ Ephesians 2:11-19

³⁴ Ephesians 4:16

³⁵ Acts 11:15-18

³⁶ James 2:1-9

³⁷ Galatians 3:28

Since women are redeemed, anointed, gifted, called and loved by God in exactly the same way as men, they should be fully released to exercise their gifts for every facet of ministry in His church.

POSTURE OF SUBMISSION

As is the case for men in leadership, women in leadership should submit themselves to mentoring and training so they become leaders who “*rule well, worthy of double honor,*” as instructed in Scripture.³⁸ Submission is one of the most significant principles for truly spiritual living. That is why believers are told to submit to God,³⁹ to leaders,⁴⁰ to human authorities,⁴¹ to one another,⁴² and, ultimately, to humble themselves before the “*mighty hand of God,*” being assured of His care for them.⁴³

Grace comes to those who live humbly toward others, to those who refuse the temptation to grasp after position, but submit themselves to God’s purposes as Jesus did.⁴⁴ An attitude and lifestyle of submission is appropriate for all spiritual leaders, indeed, for all believers.

Sons *and* daughters of God do best and experience the fullest measure of blessing when they arrange themselves with respect to *all* the authorities in their life. In various life situations, Christians are enjoined to “*come under*” or “*fit in with*” a range of authorities. A married woman has a different set of leaders to whom she submits (i.e., husband, employer, pastor) than does her teenager (i.e., parents, schoolteachers, youth pastor). An unmarried 40-year old man might have exactly the same authorities in his life as a 40-year old single woman (employer, cell group leader, pastor).

³⁸ 1 Timothy 5:17

³⁹ James 4:7

⁴⁰ Hebrews 13:17

⁴¹ 1 Peter 2:13

⁴² Ephesians 5:21

⁴³ 1 Peter 5:6-7

⁴⁴ Philippians 2:1-11; Hebrews 10:5-10

FITTING IN

Just as Paul did, Peter admonished every child of God to find appropriate points of mutual submission within his or her life-setting: “*Submit yourselves, for the Lord’s sake...*”;⁴⁵ “*servants... to your masters*”;⁴⁶ “*wives... to your own husbands*”;⁴⁷ “*husbands... with your wives*”;⁴⁸ “*younger men... to your elders*”; and “*all of you... toward one another.*”⁴⁹

Submission is the manner of relating to *any* God-ordained authority, and appropriate submission in one arena of life does not disqualify believers for leadership in other areas. The fact that a man submits to his company’s CEO does not prohibit him from leading a department within that company. Though he is called to obey and submit to spiritual leaders in his church,⁵⁰ it would be silly to imply that such submission in the church means he should be held back from leading his family in the home.

Bible passages dealing with husbands and wives should not be generalized into a discussion about men and women. Much of the confusion about the appropriateness of women leading men is due to this type of error. God has arranged redemptive patterns *in marriage*, whereby a couple can be “*subject to one another.*”⁵¹ However, those arrangements do not diminish the leadership capacity of married or single women *in ministry*.

A husband who serves his wife by understanding and honoring her is not excluded from ministry outside the home; on the contrary, his spiritual activity will be “*hindered*” if he does not esteem her as a fellow heir.⁵² Neither, then, should a wife be excluded from spiritual leadership outside the home because she submits to her

⁴⁵ 1 Peter 2:13

⁴⁶ 1 Peter 2:18

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 3:1

⁴⁸ 1 Peter 3:7

⁴⁹ 1 Peter 5:5

⁵⁰ Hebrews 13:17

⁵¹ Ephesians 5:21

⁵² 1 Peter 3:7

own husband as a demonstration of her trust in the Lord.⁵³ It is completely inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture to consider that a person's godly desire to submit and to put others first could possibly be used as a reason to exclude that person from public ministry.

Being subject to one's husband "*as to the Lord*"⁵⁴ does not mean that a married woman is supposed to come under the authority of other women's husbands (or men in general), and single women have no mandate whatsoever to be submitted to men—other than the mutual submission every believer is supposed to exercise in regard to others.

The encouragement for *married* women in pastoral ministry to maintain fitting submission with respect to their husbands is not qualitatively different from an admonition for bi-vocational pastors to remain submitted to their secular employers. In both cases, the ministers would be disqualified for spiritual leadership by ignoring God's intended order. We should celebrate ministers who may have a boss in the marketplace and those who may have a husband in the home, just as we heartily welcome the ministry of those who have either or neither.

WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS

We do not want to fall into the grievous polarization of opinion that exists in the Church at large over the question of women in ministry leadership. Neither do we wish to engage in strident debate with any who hold differing perspectives. But we must address several Bible passages that have most often been referenced as reasons why women should be relegated to subservient roles and subjugated positions within Jesus' Church. This is not a crusade to fight others, or to insist that everyone must accept this viewpoint—as though it is an essential of the faith—but neither do we want to back away from our convictions.⁵⁵

The Bible is God's inerrant word to us, and any belief not founded on the truth revealed to us in Scripture is in error. The view of any church must be drawn from

⁵³ 1 Peter 3:1

⁵⁴ Ephesians 5:22

⁵⁵ Romans 14:22

God's written and revealed word. But much of the Church has accepted one interpretation of these passages, unwittingly presuming that there is no other way to read them in their contextual and cultural setting. These passages can be understood in ways that fit more closely with what the rest of the Bible communicates about the heart of God for His children.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:34-35

At first glance, it can seem hard to argue with the straightforward statement, "*Let the women keep silent in the churches.*"⁵⁶ Taken out of context or without keeping the totality of Scripture in focus, this seems quite conclusive. But in this same letter to the Corinthians, Paul has previously spoken about the appropriate way for a woman to speak in church.⁵⁷ Therefore, he cannot be prohibiting women from all manner of public speech in church.

To better understand what Paul meant, it is important to realize that this chapter is about ordering public assemblies of believers in the most advantageous way for all present. Paul reminds believers that everything done and said in church should "*be done for [the] edification*" of all those gathered, and not just for the benefit and instruction of a few individuals.⁵⁸ Paul tells the Corinthians that, in a public venue, "*five words*" that instruct, strengthen, encourage or console the whole body are better than "*ten thousand*" that are unclear, incomprehensible or irrelevant.⁵⁹

Likewise, he states that during a gathering of believers, a prophecy is more fitting than a message in tongues, unless there is an interpretation of the tongue.⁶⁰ If there is no interpreter present, "*let him [the one who would speak in tongues] keep silent in the church.*"⁶¹ A public service is not the place or the time for private devotional conversations with God in tongues. If individuals speak in tongues (without interpretation), newcomers will conclude that Christians are mad

⁵⁶ v. 34

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:5

⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:3-5; 19;26

⁵⁹ v. 19

⁶⁰ vs. 5; 13

⁶¹ v. 28

barbarians,⁶² and fellow believers will receive no benefit because they cannot understand what is being said.

NO CONFUSION

*“God is not a God of confusion.”*⁶³ People receive more benefit in an assembly if everything is *“done properly and in an orderly manner.”*⁶⁴ That’s why Paul instructs, *“prophesy one by one,”* instead of allowing everyone to prophesy at the same time.⁶⁵ He suggests that they cluster two or three revelations at a time, and evaluate them before moving on to the next set.⁶⁶ Should the Spirit give a revelation to someone while another person is speaking, *“let him [the one who is currently speaking] keep silent.”*⁶⁷

The spirits of Christian prophets remain *“subject” to them.*⁶⁸ Prophets can, and should, control themselves. They should not blurt out prophecy in catatonic, trance-like utterances, similar to the supposed prophecies of the Sibyl or Oracle of Delphi, whose utterances were induced by hallucinogenic vapors. The Sibyl was the female medium who prophesied and predicted the future. The temple complex at Delphi was located roughly 50 miles north of Corinth across the Corinthian Gulf, and its cult following was prevalent throughout the Mediterranean world.

After first admonishing disruptive speakers in tongues and prophets who refused to be quiet when it was another’s turn, Paul writes this easily-taken-out-of-context, seemingly straightforward declaration: *“Let the women [who are adding to the confusion by not controlling their urge to talk] keep silent in the churches.”*⁶⁹ He continues in that vein, stating that such disorderly women should *“subject themselves.”*⁷⁰ Paul’s use of this word, when lifted out of context, is the basis upon which some church traditions equate submission on the part of women with their

⁶² vs. 11, 23

⁶³ v.33

⁶⁴ v. 40

⁶⁵ v. 31

⁶⁶ v. 29

⁶⁷ v.30

⁶⁸ v. 32

⁶⁹ v. 34

⁷⁰ v. 34

silence in church. Such groups believe that a truly submitted woman will not engage in public ministry.

But the call for talkative women to *subject themselves* is simply an echo of the admonition Paul has already given to prophets and those who might bring forth a message in tongues. He says that they should control themselves, think about others, and behave appropriately; they ought not seek their own or “*act unbecomingly*.”⁷¹ When the prophet or teacher who has been expounding some revelation from God is instructed to yield the pulpit and stop talking, Paul certainly is not issuing a policy statement excluding such ministers from future public ministry!

Neither does this text imply that those who speak aloud in tongues without an interpretation were being banned from ministry leadership in church! It was just their excitement and exuberance over a newly experienced spiritual facility in their lives that caused them to be insensitive to the public setting and to others around them.

NO LIFETIME BAN

Similarly, women were for the first time in their lives experiencing spiritual instruction. Having been denied the sort of religious training afforded to men, they would have had many questions—and a great deal of excitement about what was being taught. Women talking out of turn and loudly enough to distract the proceedings of a service, even if it was to ask their husbands something because they wanted to learn, would have been behaving “*improperly*.” Seeking personal instruction, they made the same blunder as individuals who spoke in tongues for private edification.

We should not interpret Paul’s statements about women who were disrupting the service with their talking as a general restriction on women in ministry. We must consider that he also said, “*You may all prophesy,*”⁷² and “*when you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching...*”⁷³ Both men and women were present at those

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 13:5

⁷² v. 31

⁷³ v. 26

meetings, so we must assume that both men *and* women exercised their gifts, including teaching publicly. In fact, earlier in his letter, he gives Corinthian men *and* women detailed instructions for the appropriate way to pray and prophesy in the church services.⁷⁴

1 CORINTHIANS 11:1-16

This passage gives specific instructions regarding the appropriate way for women to minister publicly in a mixed-gender church setting. It seems that this passage would settle the question about women in ministry leadership. Nevertheless, people who oppose the concept of women in public ministry often reference it. Perhaps the difficulty of translating some of the words and a lack of understanding pertinent historic facts, complicate a simple reading in 21st century English.

To begin with, the language of the day used the same term for man/husband, and the same word for woman/wife. Some readers have misconstrued Paul's words, "*Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman,*"⁷⁵ to mean that men in general are heads over women; it follows, in their view, that a woman cannot be in leadership over (any) man. However, virtually every student of the Bible agrees that, in an identical passage found in Ephesians, Paul is referring to a husband in relation to his wife:⁷⁶

*For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church,
He Himself being the Savior of the body.*

So we can safely dismiss any interpretation of this text implying that all men have an inherent leadership role over all women.

SPIRITUAL HEADSHIP

Additionally, the word *head* (*kephale*) does not necessarily have the metaphorical connotation of *boss* or *ruler over* in Greek, as it does in English. Rather, it suggests either *prominence* (as in *preeminent* or *first seen*), or *source/origin* (as in *beginning*)

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:4-15

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:3

⁷⁶ Ephesians 5:23

or *headwaters* of a river). This is essential for understanding the parallel statement that follows, “*God is the head of Christ.*” We know that Jesus and the Father are one,⁷⁷ and it makes little sense to speak of Jesus as being *ruled over* by the Father. It is more in keeping with the meaning of this verse to see that, throughout His ministry, Jesus intentionally deflected attention and glory away from Himself and gave honor to the Father as the source of His teaching and ministry.⁷⁸

The point is that Jesus never acted independently of the Father: “...*whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.*”⁷⁹ It is the same idea Jesus expressed when He says to men and women alike, “*I am the vine, you are the branches...apart from Me, you can do nothing.*”⁸⁰

In other words, Jesus followed the Father’s lead—just as Paul encouraged the Corinthians to follow him, as he imitated Christ, doing all “*to the glory of God*” and giving “*no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.*”⁸¹ Believers are to follow Jesus’ example and honor the appropriate connections in their life, doing nothing that will offend vital communion with others in the Body—or cause them to stumble.

STUMBLING BLOCK

What might have offended the Greeks or Jews in Corinth? Known as the city of many prostitutes, Corinth was a bustling Roman colony strategically situated at the narrow isthmus separating the Peloponnesian Peninsula from the rest of Greece. Its name became synonymous with wasted living, debauchery, and illicit sex. In modern language, Corinth was a city where everyone “*did his or her own thing*” without regard for convention or propriety. Ships putting into port on one side of the isthmus would offload their crews for the three days it took to drag the boats along a stone causeway, and put back to sea on the other side.

Numerous sailors with shore leave created quite a demand for street prostitutes and temple prostitutes (serving the goddess Aphrodite)—whose very short

⁷⁷ John 10:30; 17:22

⁷⁸ John 7:16-17

⁷⁹ John 5:19

⁸⁰ John 15:5

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 10:31-32

haircuts easily distinguished them in a crowd. A woman with shorn hair and without a covering or wrap on her head was announcing her spiritual connection with a false god, the fact that she was unattached and available for hire, or both.

Such public displays in church caused unnecessary temptation. In public worship services a woman without a covering (either long hair or a wrap) would have been, in effect, declaring her independence in the midst of a city where sexual activity was so pronounced that Paul suggested it would help the Corinthian believers to be less distracted if each man was to have “*his own wife,*” and “*each woman...her own husband.*”⁸²

Just as Paul cautions the Corinthians not to eat meat they knew had been offered to idols because it could violate another’s conscience,⁸³ so he reminds them not to let their newfound freedoms in dress and ministry cause anyone to stumble.

This brief explanation does not deal with all the complexities of the passage, but one final comment may be helpful. Paul allows for the fact that not all cultures would have the same perspective on head-coverings and short hair for women when he says, “*Judge for yourselves...*”⁸⁴ The symbols of a woman’s covering are not as important as the fact that she acknowledges a “*covering*” in her life. As discussed elsewhere in this paper, everyone who seeks to minister in the church ought to be covered by and submitted to others, but that does not mean women are disallowed from public ministry and leadership.

EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9

Though the issue of women in *ministry leadership* should not be confused with women in *marriage*, sincere believers do sometimes blur the two together—especially in the case of this passage. Contrary to popular belief, this text is not primarily about husbands and wives—or some uniquely restrictive submission incumbent upon married women.

⁸² 1 Corinthians 7:2

⁸³ 1 Corinthians 10:23-30

⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:13

When we extract a Bible verse and read it without the benefit of its surrounding context, we often arrive at an interpretation that is quite different from what was intended. One of the most common and glaring instances of this is the simple declaration, “*Wives be subject to your own husbands as to the Lord.*”⁸⁵ When reinserted into its original context, this verse is merely meant as an example of how wives can do what every believer, male and female and young and old, is encouraged to do: “*Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.*”⁸⁶

In the verses that follow, Paul provides *husbands, children, fathers, slaves and masters* with similar advisements for spiritual living. Paul writes these encouragements to different groups because class distinctions within secular culture disappeared in church among those who had been newly adopted by God.⁸⁷ *Slaves* sang hymns or joined hands in prayer with their *masters*; teenagers who had accepted Christ months earlier watched their *fathers* get baptized; *husbands* and *wives*, who were once dead in their trespasses and sins,⁸⁸ found themselves as joint-heirs in Christ.

DEFERRING TO ONE ANOTHER

How easy it would have been for a *slave* to use her newfound freedom in Christ and spiritual equality with her *mistress*, now also a believer and attending the same cell group, as an opportunity to disdain or disregard her owner. Since God desires Spirit-filled believers to speak “*to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,*”⁸⁹ Paul encourages them to be “*devoted to one another in brotherly love*” and to honor one another above themselves.⁹⁰ Rather than using their spiritual freedom to throw off appropriate respect in the home, they were to redouble their determination to defer to one another. Each life-situation suggests ways in which we can honor the Lord by honoring (i.e., *submitting to* and *giving*

⁸⁵ Ephesians 5:22

⁸⁶ Ephesians 5:21

⁸⁷ Ephesians 1:5

⁸⁸ Ephesians 2:1

⁸⁹ Ephesians 5:19

⁹⁰ Romans 12:10

greater regard to) others. No more is being required of one group than of another because “*there is no partiality*” in Christ.⁹¹

We can put this passage in present-day language and follow the logic of Paul’s argument: he tells employees to obey and be subject to their employers “*with fear and trembling...as to Christ.*”⁹² But that certainly does not imply that all believers who are employed (and, therefore, submitted to their employers at work) should obey all the believers who are employers. Nor does it suggest that employees are disqualified from leadership in the church. In exactly the same way, we cannot say that a married woman should be subservient to all husbands—or to men in general.

Being subject to one’s husband “as to the Lord,” does not mean that a married woman is supposed to come under other women’s husbands (or men in general) who attend church, unless we want to say that *being subject to one’s employer “as to Christ,”* means that an employee in a company run by someone in the church should be subservient to all executives, supervisors and bosses in the congregation. Historically, the Church has put no restrictions on the leadership roles that can be filled by church members employed in the marketplace and submitted to a boss. It is a mystery why some church traditions disqualify other church members from similar fulfillment *just because* they are engaged in the home and submitted to a husband.

HEAVENLY GIFTINGS

It should be noted, as well, that Paul continues his letter with one of the most significant passages in all the NEW TESTAMENT concerning the nature of our spiritual battle on earth. He encourages all believers—men and women, slaves and masters, children and parents—to “*be strong in the Lord...take up the full armor of God...and stand firm*” against “*spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*”⁹³ This echoes the beginning of *Ephesians* when he makes the incredible assertion to all believers—without mention of gender, marital status or position in

⁹¹ Ephesians 6:9

⁹² Ephesians 6:5

⁹³ Ephesians 6:10-18

society—that we have been blessed with “*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.*”⁹⁴

This grand context positions *every* son and daughter of God spiritually and temporally, in the heavenlies as examples of His grace,⁹⁵ and on earth as agents of that grace. If women are not excluded or limited in those positions, why would the church impose restrictions on positions that can be filled by women? The only ministry distinctions Paul mentions in his letter are based on gifting, not gender, and their primary function are to equip “*the saints for the work of service.*”⁹⁶

There is no mention of gender in those ministry gift-mixes (apostle, prophet, evangelist, etc.), and certainly no suggestion that the saints are equipped differently based on their life-situations—married, free, etc. Instead, Paul affirms the value of everyone working together as equals in love, “*according to the proper working of each individual part.*”⁹⁷ No basis can be found in this text for any limitations on the nature or degree of ministry available for women.

1 TIMOTHY 2:8-15

Timothy’s first pastorate was located in Ephesus, the second or third largest city in the Roman Empire at that time. At the crossroads of the great caravan route stretching east toward India, and the shipping lanes that brought goods from all over the Mediterranean, Ephesus was one of the wildest and most idolatrous cities in the Empire. Paul had disciplined a small band of believers there. As a result of his teaching (over a couple of years), the whole region had come to hear the gospel and the culture was radically affected—so much so, that the pagan society protested the church,⁹⁸ as opposed to how it has become in our day when the church protests society.

With little formal preparation, Timothy was appointed pastor of the sizeable church in Ephesus. Sometime later, Paul writes him with advice and counsel for

⁹⁴ Ephesians 1:3

⁹⁵ Ephesians 2:6-7

⁹⁶ Ephesians 4:11-12

⁹⁷ Ephesians 4:16

⁹⁸ Acts 19

leading the congregation Paul knew so well. Timothy was under personal attack, probably based on his age and inexperience,⁹⁹ and he had been told by Paul to correct several false doctrines that had gained a foothold in the church because of certain teachers and leaders.¹⁰⁰ Undoubtedly, those leaders were resisting the young pastor.

False and misleading doctrines and spiritual values permeated the church, so Paul's foremost advice to Timothy is to replace wrong-spirited leaders with truly godly ones. Reminding Timothy of the primacy of love as the goal for all teaching,¹⁰¹ Paul paints portraits of five different types of pseudo-spiritual leaders, and contrasts the qualities of those problematic people with characteristics that ought to be true of leaders in the church. His advice in the first two chapters follows a basic pattern: "*Instead of quality X, look for quality Y in those who want to be leaders.*"

PSEUDO-LEADERS

Specifically, Paul counsels Timothy not to fill his leadership ranks with seemingly notable people like: (1) *mystics* because they speculate about matters God has not revealed in His word, rather than believe what He has said;¹⁰² (2) *legalists* who have lost sight of grace;¹⁰³ (3) *former leaders* who have since suffered shipwreck in faith, and no longer live as they once did;¹⁰⁴ (4) *ear-catching, men* who imagine that blustering opinions and debate accomplish more than prayer;¹⁰⁵ and, (5) *eye-catching women* who adorn themselves externally with good fashion, instead of spiritually with good works.¹⁰⁶

When Paul says, "*I want men...to pray...without wrath or dissension,*" in 1 Timothy 2:8, he draws a distinction between readily apparent, outward qualities and those truer manifestations of godliness behind the scenes. It is possible for men to appear spiritual simply by virtue of being opinionated or passionate about things.

⁹⁹ 1 Timothy 4:12; 5:1

¹⁰⁰ 1 Timothy 1:3-4;

¹⁰¹ 1 Timothy 1:5

¹⁰² 1 Timothy 1:3-4

¹⁰³ 1 Timothy 1:7-16

¹⁰⁴ 1 Timothy 1:19-20

¹⁰⁵ 1 Timothy 2:8

¹⁰⁶ 1 Timothy 2:9-10

But Paul wants to know, “*Can they pray?*” Only sincere prayer makes the gospel kind of difference.

A man who might be able to intimidate leaders or impose his will on fellow believers with red-faced anger, will not, with those same tools be able to accomplish the will of God,¹⁰⁷ or push back spiritually malignant forces. Only prayer makes the gospel kind of difference. Paul wants praying male leaders serving in church, as good examples with sincere faith.

“*Likewise,*”¹⁰⁸ he wants female leaders who do not confuse external, physical attractiveness with internal, spiritual beauty. A man’s spiritual measure is not an opinion statement embellished with a shaken fist or a raised voice; nor is a woman’s “*claim to godliness*” a fashion statement punctuated with expensive outfits and elaborate, jewel-accented hairstyles. Just as a man backs up his claim to spiritual maturity by engaging in authentic kingdom activity (prayer) “*without wrath or dissension,*” a woman demonstrates her maturity “*by means of good works,*” conducting true spiritual business in a posture that is neither disquieting itself, nor upsetting to others.

Paul recommends men who know when and how to submit; instead of debating and rising up in public indignation, they should simply pray. Men should model a peaceable demeanor that recognizes spiritual authorities in the church. So should women who aspire to leadership. When they “*receive instruction*” or correction, Paul notes, they should embrace it “*quietly...with entire submissiveness,*”¹⁰⁹ resisting the temptation to rise up in self-importance to intimidate the very leaders who have corrected them.

Can a woman hold her tongue and keep her seat when things do not go the way she wants? Does she fit in with and respect the leaders above her and the people around her—unless, of course, they are advocating something unbiblical? Or does she try to dominate them with an attitude that says, “*I know better than you?*”

¹⁰⁷ James 1:20

¹⁰⁸ 1 Timothy 2:9

¹⁰⁹ 1 Timothy 2:11

UNSUITABLE AUTHORITY

Paul reminds Timothy, “...I do not allow a woman [who has just been instructed] to teach or exercise authority over a man...”¹¹⁰ The whole point of someone being taught or corrected is for that individual to learn—not to turn the situation upside down and have the student presume to instruct the teacher. The expression translated “exercise authority over” (*authentain*) describes acting on one’s own self-appointed authority, in order to seize control of a situation or organization. We’ve all experienced someone *taking over* a conversation by talking as if they are the only one with something to say. That’s the idea of this unique phrase used by Paul.

Our generic use of the word *authority* in English creates confusion about the permissibility of a woman having authority in a church. By employing this word, used nowhere else in the Scriptures, Paul characterizes an unacceptable behavior that would disqualify a recently taught or corrected woman from consideration for further leadership in church.

Paul does not use the word for rulers (*huperoche*) “who are in authority.”¹¹¹ Neither does he use (*exousia*): the *rank* held by a military officer positioned above and below others;¹¹² the *capacity* with which Jesus taught, forgave sins and did all that He did—and passed along to His disciples;¹¹³ or, the *competency* given to spiritual leaders “for building up” the saints.¹¹⁴ He does not refer to the *weight* (*baros*) he could exert as an apostle,¹¹⁵ or the *command* (*epitage*) with which Titus was told to “speak and exhort and reprove.”¹¹⁶ Paul does not speak of *positional lordship* (*kuriotes*) or even *control over* (*exousiazo*) one’s own body or will.¹¹⁷

Once we realize that Paul is not speaking about rightfully delegated spiritual leadership and authority—but about “*presuming to take charge*”—the text reads quite differently. He is telling Timothy to beware of women who, after being corrected, rise up over the one who corrected them. Such women, who “*usurp*

¹¹⁰ 1 Timothy 2:12

¹¹¹ 1 Timothy 2:2

¹¹² Matthew 8:9

¹¹³ Matthew 7:29; 9:6; 21:27; 28:18-19

¹¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10

¹¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:6

¹¹⁶ Titus 2:15

¹¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:4

authority,” are unsuitable for spiritual leadership. They manifest the opposite of what ought to be true of godly leaders—selfless surrender, sacrifice and submission.¹¹⁸ But we should not propose that this warning applies only to women, unless we also want to suggest that Paul’s desire for prayer and lifted hands applies only to men.

PEACEABLE DEMEANOR

Paul has earlier said to pray for “*all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.*”¹¹⁹ Such an atmosphere in society is most conducive to the spread of the *Good News*,¹²⁰ and the same is true in church. Potential spiritual leaders, both men and women,¹²¹ should not be “*quarrelsome,*”¹²² “*self-willed...quick-tempered...pugnacious... but self-controlled.*”¹²³ Paul sought leaders with a peaceable demeanor, as opposed to a contrary, insubordinate manner.

This attitude of submission is the baseline for simple, godly living and has nothing specifically to do with gender. Those who aspire to leadership are reminded “*to be subject (hupotasso) to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient (peitharcho; conform to advice, be persuaded by a ruler), to be ready for every good deed...to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle (epieikes; seemly, yielding), showing every consideration for all men.*”¹²⁴ Even believers who do not aspire to leadership ought to behave in a mutually submitted posture of graciousness, obedience, and servant-heartedness.

The phrase so often used to deny women positions of spiritual authority is simply addressing one type of illegitimate and ill-gotten authority; authority that has been wrestled from the hands of rightful leaders.

Spiritual wisdom—for men and women—is shown by good behavior: “*deeds in the gentleness of wisdom*”; “*The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle*

¹¹⁸ Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:2-11

¹¹⁹ 1 Timothy 2:1-2

¹²⁰ 1 Timothy 2:3-4

¹²¹ 1 Timothy 2:8, 10-11

¹²² 2 Timothy 2:24

¹²³ Titus 1:7-9

¹²⁴ Titus 3:1-2

*and reasonable, full of mercy and good fruit..."*¹²⁵ Here's how Paul expounds it to Titus, another of his young protégés who needs advice on the kind of leaders to look for in church: Overseers must not be "*self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good,... self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word..*"¹²⁶

¹²⁵ James 3:13-17

¹²⁶ Titus 1:7-9