

## What the New Testament (especially Paul) Really Says about Women

Introduction: Two divergent interpretations among those who accept authority of Bible:

- (1) the traditional view and
- (2) the egalitarian view.

**The traditional view** stresses *submission* and *dependence*.

The male is to take the lead in both the church and the home.  
A hierarchical view: God—Christ—Man—Woman (1 Cor 11).

**The egalitarian view** argues that there is *no scriptural reason for women not to share leadership* in the church or *to participate in a marriage relationship* based on the principle of *mutual submission and interdependent love*.

It is important to recognize that both sides appeal to Scripture!

### THE TRADITIONAL POSITION:

1 Cor 11: 2-16: “Head of the women is the man “.

1 Cor 14: 33b-35: Women are to keep silence in church.

1 Tim 2: 11-15: Women are not to teach (= hold a teaching office).

Eph 5:22-23: Paul argues for a hierarchical relationship in the family.

**Wives**: “submit yourselves unto your husbands”

**Husbands**: “love your wives”

Compare with 1 Pet 3: 1-7: “**Wives**, be *submissive* to your husbands.... **Husbands**, be *considerate* of your wives and honor them as the weaker sex....”

**THE EGALITARIAN VIEW** also takes scripture seriously. But it places the accent on a different selection of texts, or, in some cases, on different aspects of some of the same texts of scripture.

Gen 1: 26-28: God made man as male and female (not simply male) in His image: each has direct relationship with God, and each shares the joint responsibility of bearing children and having dominion over the created order.

Gen 2: 18-24: underlines this basic point. Both male and female are from God and both as “one flesh “ are heirs of the grace of God.

It is only as a result of the fall (Gen 3:16) that woman becomes subordinate to man. There is no hint of this prior to the fall. “Subordination“ is *predicted* by God, *not prescribed*. And even here it is primarily related to the husband-wife relationship, not to human relationships in general.

However, in Christ there is “a new creation”—the results of the fall are reversed. Paul makes this clear in Gal. 3: 28, where he is working out the theological significance of the meaning of Christian baptism: “There is **neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female**, for you are **all one in Christ Jesus**.”

This new creation was demonstrated in Jesus' life, as he broke with the existing hierarchical structure of male/female and treated women as equals. There are a host of illustrations of this: Jesus has women disciples, He talks with women in public, He touches women, He develops close personal friendships with women outside of his own immediate family (like Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and others), He assumes that women are equal partners of men in marriage when we discuss the question of divorce, etc.

In addition, there is **not a negative word found on the lips of Jesus concerning the role of women, not one saying of Jesus which can be used to support the view that there should be a hierarchical relationship between men and women**, either in the kingdom of God or in general society.

Furthermore, when you look at the early church there are many examples of women being engaged in significant ministries in the church. They are found:

- **praying and prophesying** (1 Cor. 11; Acts 21: 9)
- **sharing in the diaconate** (Rom 16:1-2; 1 Tim 3: 11; 5: 3-16; Tit. 2: 3)
- **engaging in evangelism and teaching** (cf. Paul's companions in Acts; Euodia and Syntyche [Phil 4:2-3: "have labored side by side with me in the gospel"])

Furthermore, **the Holy Spirit is given to both men and women without distinction. Gifts** are given by the risen Lord **to the church as a whole, both men and women.** (you can find an example of each gift listed in any of the lists of gifts fulfilled in the life of a woman mentioned in the NT, with the possible exception of "apostle"—but cf. Rom 16:7, Andronicus and Junia).

There is a **common call to men and women to grow in spiritual maturity and to develop their spiritual gifts**; no distinction made between men and women in regard to the type of gifts that are given to each gender, nor is it ever suggested (as it is said from time to time) that the husband has the primary spiritual responsibility for the wife. **Even the passages used by the hierarchicalists contain elements, which contradict the hierarchicalist position.**

E. g. 1 Cor 11: 11-12: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman come from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God." Paul stresses the principle of **interdependence of man and woman.** vs. 5 makes it clear that **women were permitted to pray and prophesy in public worship** ("prophesying" =[at least] preaching). Therefore, the **prohibitions of 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2 should not be taken as absolutes.**

In Eph 5, Paul's thought does not begin with verse 22, but rather with verse 21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." **MUTUAL SUBMISSION IS THE PRESUPPOSITION OF ALL THAT FOLLOWS.** (It is important to note the verb is not really in verse 22 but inferred on the basis of verse 21, where the main verb appears. **Verses 22-24 develops the way the wife is to manifest this mutual submission to one another in Christ. Verses 25-33 work out the same principle in relation to the husband**, who follows the example of Christ, "who came not to be served but to serve". When applied to Christ "head" *Kephale*) does not signify His authority but rather his sacrificial love. (Lord = sovereign authority. The husband is not the Lord of his wife!)

But, someone asks, **how do you explain Paul's apparent restrictions of the ministry of the women**, viz. in speaking (1 Cor 14) or teaching (1 Tim 2)?

Answer: (1) You understand these restrictions **in the light of clearer passages that speak of what women actually did in the early church.** (2) You understand them **in the context of the specific problems that are addressed by Paul.**

1 Cor 14: 33-40 is concerned with *orderly worship*; uneducated, married women seem to have been interrupting the worship by asking questions (cf. orthodox synagogues of the present day). The context suggests that women are contesting interpretations of prophetic utterances. As F. F. Bruce has pointed out, most churches today do not have the prophetic utterances Paul envisages [and this is especially true of the churches where they are concerned to keep women silent!], so it does not really apply.

1 Tim 2: 8- 15 represents **Paul's response to the fact that immature women**—without the educational or formal catechetical background of the men—**were teaching heresy in the church.** (There was no education for women in the ancient world, as a general rule, nor was there formal instruction for them in the synagogue.) **THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE RULE "NO TEACHING" SHOULD BE TREATED AS CANON LAW AND BE REGARDED AS APPLYING TO ALL CIRCUMSTANCES AND TIMES.**

Today, for example, the situation is very different. Women have the opportunity to study theology.

To this way of thinking, the TRADITIONALIST RESPONDS:

(1) Paul does not hint that his teaching in 1 Tim 2 or 1 Cor 11 or 14 was not for all time. Rather, to the contrary: cf. he *grounds his teaching by reference to the created order.*

(2) If you say that these passages in Paul are culturally conditioned and therefore do not apply to the life of the church today, how are we to be guided? *How are we to know what part of the NT is for the first century only and what part for today?*

(3) Furthermore, the *present-day egalitarian evangelicals are simply taking their cue from contemporary, secular society.* No one within evangelicalism ever took feminism seriously until it became an issue in secular society. Here we have simply one more example of Christians becoming 'conformed to the world' around them.

**Result: an impasse in the discussion.** *Is there a way out?*

It would be simplistic to suggest an immediate solution, which would commend itself to both sides of the debate. However, I would like to argue that **the basic issues at stake are hermeneutical, rather than a disagreement concerning the nature of Scripture or essential Christian doctrine.** And I would like to suggest some hermeneutical guidelines to help in the ongoing discussion.

### Seven hermeneutical principles.

1. There is the well known **contextual principle**: *a text must be treated within its immediate literary context*, within its full unit of meaning. That is to say, one must always beware of the danger of proof-texting, taking portions of scripture outside of their literary and theological context and using them to support ideas that are quite foreign to their original meaning.

E. g., *the ref. to wives being subject to their husbands in Eph . 5: 22-24* can only be understood in terms of the **mutual subjection** commanded in verse 21, the **sacrificial love** prescribed for the husband in vs. 25- 30, and the **unity of the marriage partners** affirmed by vs. 31-33. That is, one must place the phrase, "be subject to your husbands," within the context of the passage as a whole.

E. g. #2: **The guidelines for women to remain quiet in public worship** (1 Cor 14: 34-35) *should be taken with the concern expressed in verse 40 for “all things to be done decently and in order”*. Paul’s concern is for ORDERLY WORSHIP, not the unique role of women in the ministry of the church.

2. There is the **linguistic principle**: One must look at the original of a particular text, i.e. the Hebrew and Greek wording, rather than be dependent on translations.

When you look at it with an open mind, there is a clear “sexist bias” in many translations. And I must confess, alas, that is even more true of the NIV than of other recent translations—at least, this is the impression I have. For example, Rom 16: 1-2: Phoebe is called “servant” and “succorer” of the church in the KJV. The words involved are *diakonos* [ordinarily translated “minister” or “deacon”] and *prostasis* (a word that almost always has the connotation of leadership; the verb is used elsewhere in the NT to convey the idea of leadership in the church). The NIV translates these words as “servant” and “a great help”. RSV: “deaconess” and “helper”. NEB: describes Phoebe as “a fellow Christian who holds office in the congregation at Cenchreae” and “a good friend”.

RSV: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a **deaconess** of the church at Cen'chre-ae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a **helper** of many and of myself as well.”] The best translation would be “a minister” and “a leader”.

1 Tim 3: 1: “If any **man** desires the office of a bishop.” Should be translated, “if anyone desires....”

3. Then there is the well-known **historical principle**. One must take the historical, as well as the literary, context into consideration.

Here it is important to take a look at (a) **the place of women in first century Judaism**.

Ecclesiasticus 42:13-14: “Better is the wickedness of a man than the woman who does good, and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.”

The well-known Synagogue Prayer (at least from 1st cent): “I thank thee that thou has not made me a Gentile... a slave...or a woman.”

Women took no active part in the worship of the synagogue or in the study of the Torah. The rabbis did not teach women (contrast Jesus and Paul!). One must take a look at the NT in this context.

Or, (b) consider the word *kephale* (1 Cor 11:3 and Eph 5:23). There is no evidence anywhere in either secular Greek literature or in the Greek OT that the word (or its Hebrew equivalent, for that matter) ever had the connotation of “decision-making” as it does today. The popular distinction between “head” and “heart” is a modern one, as is the idea that one thinks with the head (=brain). In the Bible, a person always thinks with or in his heart!

In considering (c) the prohibition of women teaching in 1 Tim 2:8-15, one must bear in mind the context of both Judaism (where there was no possibility for a woman to give or to receive formal religious instruction) and the fact that women were teaching in Ephesus (and also the fact that they were teaching false doctrine).

4. One should seek to **interpret a particular text within the context of the author's writings as a whole, not as an isolated fragment** of his thought. This is all the more important in the case of difficult passages.

Thus we must look at **Paul's theology as a whole**—his style of theologizing, his missionary approach, his ecclesiastical concerns. For example, **Gal 3:28** — “For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”— is **the statement of a clear theological principle**. Paul is expounding the significance of Christian baptism. The three major distinctions in society—religious, socio-economic, and sexual—have been transcended in Christ. Whatever significance they might continue to have in the world, they no longer are relevant to life in the Christian community.

**A passage like this should take precedence over passages focused on specific problems** (e.g. disorders in that most disorderly of all NT churches, namely, Corinth; and the danger of false teaching at Ephesus, the background of 1 Timothy).

Paul's concern in 1 Cor and 1 Tim is to maintain **order in the Christian community**. The witness of the church must not be compromised by disgraceful social behavior.

It is helpful to compare Paul's approach to the problem of **slavery in Philemon** with his approach to the role of women in public worship. Paul was **an advocate of orderly social change, rather than violent social upheaval**. Thus it was his practice to share the ministry with Gentiles (though he was an orthodox Jew), slaves (though he was not only a property owner but also a Roman citizen), and women (though he was male).

5. Then there is the hermeneutical principle that theologians call “**the analogy of faith**”. Here one assumes the consistency of Scripture as a whole. One should not interpret a particular text in a manner that contradicts a major tenet of God's Word.

Thus, (a) **the husband** who imitates the attitude of Christ in his relationship with his wife will remember the **servant model** that his Lord has provided (Mark 10:35-45).

And (b) the doctrines of **Creation** and **Redemption** offer the context of theological discussion of the subject. Also, the doctrines of **God** (who is not male or female in the Bible) and the **Church** (gifts are given without reference to gender) and the biblical teaching concerning **Christian Liberty**. The NT is concerned with the proclamation of “liberty to the captives” rather than “bondage to the free”! **All of these doctrines, I would submit, point in the direction of the egalitarian position.**

6. One should always seek to **interpret obscure and difficult texts by what is clear**.

If you come to passages like 1 Tim 2, and 1 Cor 11 and 14 **after you have surveyed all of the NT evidence**, you will realize that what they teach is not as clear as you might have thought!

Rather, **the “surface meaning” of these texts seems to contradict the agreed meaning** both of clear texts like Gal 3:28 and the description of the actual practice of the early church.

It is hard to take a fresh look at the Bible without being influenced by all that you have heard already. But I urge you to make a stab at it!

7. Finally, **a study of the history of biblical interpretation** may shed light on the passage at hand.

Take a look at **the church's attitude toward slavery** in, say, the beginning of the 19th century.... Or, for that matter, to **segregation** in the Deep South of the USA (where I grew up).

Or attitudes toward **woman's role outside of the home** (education, profession, secular rule, voting, the professions, etc.)

**Changes have taken place, and we now recognize that the older views were not based on Scripture after all, but simply on tradition.**

History teaches us that it may take the church a long time to work out the implications of Scriptural teaching on a subject.

E.g.   the doctrine of the **Trinity**  
          the abolition of **slavery**  
          the doctrine of **Scripture**  
          the doctrine of **the church**.

We need to recognize the fact of the progressive understanding of the Christian faith by God's people down through history. As **John Robinson**, pastor of the original Pilgrim Fathers said to his parishioners as they set sail from Holland to the New World in search of religious liberty—a concept which, incidentally, was not generally recognized by a large body of the Christian church at the time. He exhorted them to remember that perhaps “God hath still fresh light to shed forth from his Word.”

So as we continue to look at this pressing problem facing the church in our day—namely, the perception by most people outside of the church and many people within it that, rather than being an advocate for women's liberty, the church tends most frequently to promote views that denigrate women and inhibit the development and exercise of their God-given gifts—let us always remain open to the possibility that God may yet bring fresh light to us for the pages of his holy Word. And let us not be blinded to that light because we, like the Pharisees in the Gospels, prefer the traditions of men rather than the liberating Word of God.

*W. Ward Gasque*