

# **Theological Determinants of Gender Roles: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence**

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## Introduction

The question of God's intended place for woman in the scheme of things is widely debated in our day. The Bible has frequently been interpreted in such a way as to support the thesis that women are inferior to, and must be subservient to, men. This is a topic of much current debate within many religious groups, and it is an issue well known for generating more heat than light. The Scripture passages involved illustrate and highlight the perennial difficulties of relating the Bible to contemporary Christian morality and social customs. Passages frequently quoted in support of women's inferior status include the Edenic narrative where Eve "gives the apple" to Adam, the fact that Jesus did not include any women in the circle of the twelve apostles, and numerous passages in the writings of Paul in the New Testament.

The hypothesis of this research is that, *when taken in context and interpreted according to the canons of historical-critical exegesis, the Christian Scriptures affirm the equality of male and female, both within and without the Church.* Given the nature of the task, this research will employ literary analysis rather than a more traditional empirical study. Specific attention will be given to the ways in which sex-role issues have been and are being addressed within the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

Such a study has importance both for Christian and for secular therapists, in that religious faith is often a significant dynamic in the lives of persons who present themselves for therapy. To the extent that inadequate understanding of the Bible perpetuates gender roles which are at odds with the development of full personhood in the image of God for both men and women, a basic familiarity with the arguments to be presented in this research will allow therapists to better enter the frame of reference of their clients and to offer a more adequate framework for understanding.

## The Historical-Critical Interpretation of Scripture

Biblical exegesis is the study, interpretation, and explanation of Scripture. Historical-critical exegesis involves the interpretation of the Bible according to certain presuppositions, first among which is the belief that the Bible is the inspired, trustworthy, written Word of God (Hull, 1987). Such a presupposition affirms that the biblical texts have been so often confirmed both by experience and research, that the presumption of accuracy is granted to the manuscripts, i.e., that they are completely reliable transmitters of God's message.<sup>1</sup> Presumption of accuracy of the manuscripts, however, does not guarantee accuracy or uniformity of interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup>Although the purpose of this research is not to demonstrate the evidence for biblical accuracy, numerous resources are available which address this question (Geisler and Nix, 1974; McDowell, 1975; Sunday School Board, 1984).

Historical-critical study involves the attempt to discern the date, authorship, and recipients of the biblical materials, which involves the examination of materials internal to the manuscripts as well as external, archaeological and historical study. Modern interpretation must begin from a baseline that understands the most likely literal meaning of the text for those persons to whom it was first written. It is necessary to establish whether the text is prose, poetry, allegory, parable, or some other form of writing, for such considerations bear directly on methods of interpretation (Mollencott, 1977; Ramm, 1956). For example, few scholars would interpret Mark 9:47 literally: “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” Nor do many modern ministers follow Jesus’ instruction to “take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic” (Mark 6:8-9).

Often, the most literal translation of a Greek or a Hebrew word has a very different meaning today than in biblical times. Careful scholarship will be alert to this possibility, and will not assume a single translator’s effort to be the best possible rendition of the text into English. Adequate exegesis requires both knowledge of the original languages and the use of lexicons and commentaries to get a sense of the range of meaning that particular words imply. The context in which the text rests is of equal concern. How does the text in question fit into the argument of the chapter in which it lies? How does it fit into the argument and flow of the book that includes it, and into the major themes of the Bible as a whole?

Careful scholarship will identify points at which facts become hypotheses, and will choose the simplest and clearest interpretation, unless there is good reason to choose otherwise. Convolved interpretations must be supported by meticulous research, and questionable passages need to be interpreted in the light of teachings that are not in doubt. Where the meaning remains unclear, the best course is to admit this, and avoid founding doctrinal positions on such passages.

The historical-critical method asserts that it is not enough merely to accept the Bible. The Bible must also be interpreted honestly and accurately. If all the data were known, surely the difficulties would be resolved; meanwhile murky and confusing passages must be interpreted in the light of things that are more certain. Particularly with regard to issues that are hotly debated, an effort needs to be made to assume an objective viewpoint and to let the Bible say what it says.

Historical-critical exegesis provides control over interpretations of Scripture in much the same way that experiments provide control over scientific hypotheses (Mollencott, 1977). If appropriate exegetical tools (controls) are employed, while there may still be significant divergence of opinion, it simply is not true that any theory whatever can be supported from the Bible. Subjectivity cannot be entirely removed, but it can be limited!

It is almost impossible to approach Bible study without bringing along preconceived ideas, but the goal of exegesis should be the seeking of truth, rather than the proof of a point already decided. As Mollencott observed (1977, p. 105), “We must allow the facts of Scripture to teach us in what way it is inspired, rather than forcing Scripture to conform to our own theories about it.” It is axiomatic that the Holy Spirit does not grant infallible interpretations to any human person, for persons are no less likely to make errors of interpretation than they are to make errors in other areas of their lives. Piety is an aid to interpretation, but it is no substitute for knowledge, intelligence, and study (Ramm, 1956).

Not even God can teach a person whose mind is made up. When persons study the Bible, they are listening for the voice of God, not for the echo of their own voice. This means that true scholarship allows Scripture to speak against one's own viewpoint, if careful study indicates that this is the case. This is not easy to do, particularly when the points at issue are emotionally laden, but it is crucial. As Berkouwer has said,

the Word has to be free to remake and reform the Church over and over again. The moment the church loses interest in working the mines of the Word because it thinks it has seen all there is to see, that moment the Church also loses its power and its credibility in the world. When the Church thinks it knows all there is to know, the opportunity for surprising discovery is closed. The Church then becomes old, without perspective, and without light and labor and fruitfulness (1970, p. 40).

Because, for Christians, Jesus Christ was God incarnate, God-in-the-flesh, the supreme revelation of God's Person, the life and teachings of Jesus are the lens through which the rest of Scripture is to be viewed. After examining the social and cultural context of the world of Jesus, this study will begin by examining his central teachings concerning women. Since the writings of the Apostle Paul present some of the most problematic passages about women, these passages will be examined next, followed by a discussion of male and female relationships in the world at large, as well as in the Southern Baptist Convention.

### Views of Women in the Roman World

Women were not highly regarded in the ancient world, even in "enlightened" Greece. Aristotle held that males and females are not only unequal, but that this "inequality is permanent" (Aristotle, 1941, 1.1259B). Socrates often referred to women as the weaker sex, arguing that being born a woman is a divine punishment, since a woman is "halfway between a man and an animal" (Plato, 1965, 42A-C, 90C, 91A).

Although the Jews were granted unique insight into the Person of God, they were slow to understand the implications of this knowledge in many areas, not least of which their ideas about women. The Jewish Rabbis of Jesus' day had three famous teachings about women. It was proverbial among them that "It is better to burn the Law, rather than to entrust it to a woman" (Mishnah, 1933, Sotah 3:4), that is, women cannot learn, and they are not intelligent beings. It was Jewish custom that "The testimony of one hundred women is not equal to that of a man" (Mishnah, 1933), for women are not trustworthy. And the daily prayer of the Jewish male was, "O Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a slave, a Gentile, or a woman" (Babylonian Talmud, 1974, Menachoth 43b), for these creatures are not fully persons.

### What Jesus Said About Women

It was into a world such as this that Jesus came. Even his birth flew in the face of the sex-role norms of the day. God did not ask any male's permission for Mary to become miraculously pregnant

without a human father. God's messenger spoke to Mary directly (Luke 1:26-38), and Mary did not say that she needed to check this out with her parents, with her fiancée, or with the leaders of the synagogue! Her response was, "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38<sup>2</sup>). How different her response was from that of such notable persons as Moses in Exodus 3 and of Gideon in Judges 6, who were reluctant conscripts to divine service, to say the least!

It is worth noting that the New Testament stresses the *humanity* of Jesus, but never his maleness (Mollencott, 1977). As Scanzoni and Hardesty observed (1974, p. 56):

Jesus was a man, but he was also Man. English obscures the distinction, but New Testament writers are careful to distinguish between *aner* (male), and *anthropos* (human). When speaking of the Incarnation, they invariably choose *anthropos* (e.g., Philippians 2:7; Romans 5:12, 15, etc.).

Unlike other Jewish men, Jesus spoke freely to women in public. He treated women as persons, not as property. He taught theology to women, and he had women as disciples (though not among the Twelve). In Matthew 19:3-8, when questioned about divorce, Jesus, as usual, gave the Pharisees more answer than they expected. In addressing the relationship God intends for men and women, Jesus referred them back to the account in Genesis 1:27-28.

### Marriage and the Garden of Eden

Genesis 1:27 clearly states that *both* the male and the female were made in God's image, so the image cannot be a physical or a sexual likeness. God is not a physical being. Scanzoni and Hardesty contended that the image of God is not only rationality, but also "relationality":

All persons, male and female, are created by God with rational self-awareness and also with the capacity for self-transcendence. The fellowship of husband and wife, of parents and child, and even the fellowship within the church reflect the dynamic mutuality and reciprocity of the Trinity, which agreed, "Let us make man in our image" (1974, p. 23).

After all, God *could have* created humans to reproduce non-relationally, perhaps through parthenogenesis, as in some lower animals (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). Our being able to relate to one another seems from the beginning to have been very important to God.

When the Scripture declares that God created humanity "in his own image" (Genesis 1:27), the remainder of that verse says precisely what that image is: "male and female he created them." To be "in the image of God" is to *be* male and female (Jewett, 1975). The image of God is not mysterious, but is *the relationship between* male and female (Scalise, 1986; Jewett, 1975; Barth, 1975). Such an understanding provides a biblical and theological basis for understanding the nature of God's call as a call to "partnership in the work of the Gospel" (Philippians 1:5).

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (1978).

The creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 do not necessarily imply inferior status for the woman. Rather than implying male superiority, they could just as easily be interpreted to mean that the *woman* was the crown of creation! Genesis 2:18 says that Adam needed a “helper.” The Hebrew word here is *ezer*, which does not in itself connote inferior status. In fact, apart from this reference to Eve, *ezer* appears seventeen times in the Old Testament,<sup>3</sup> and each time it refers to God (Bristow, 1988). Man was made from dust, but that did not make him subordinate to the earth (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). If men are superior to women because they were made first, then cows are superior to men, and fish are superior to cows (Bristow, 1988)! Verse 20 speaks of a “suitable helper.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, used the word  $\mu$  (*homoios*) here, which means “of the same nature, like, similar.” Within the general idea of similarity,  $\mu$  also signifies equality in force and equality of rank (Liddell and Scott, 1968).

In Genesis 1:28, God gave the task of governing the creation to both the man and the woman. The caretaker role of God’s creation began as a shared responsibility, a partnership. The partnership consisted of both a man and a woman. And, since both partners were created in God’s image, it was a partnership of equals. Each sex had distinct characteristics, but these differences did not make them unequal. Rather, each sex complemented and completed the other.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that after Adam and Eve sinned, God did not play favorites. God held them equally responsible for the sin; both were punished for their disobedience (Genesis 3:16-17).

Some persons use the Edenic curse as support for male domination and restriction of women to the home. It makes no more sense, however, to argue from this passage that all women must engage in child-related occupations than it does to argue that the only suitable occupation for men is farming (Hull, 1987). Further, for persons who use this passage to advocate male domination to be consistent, they should also refuse to use pain-alleviating drugs, should get rid of all labor-saving devices, and should get their food by sweating in the fields without power tools (Mollencott, 1977)!

So far as was recorded, Jesus never referred to the Fall. Jesus did not ever say that women are, because of Eden, weak and easily deceived. He did not blame womankind for the first sin, nor remind women that men will rule over them because of it. Rather, Jesus treated women as persons created—and re-creatable—in his image and likeness (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974).

In calling attention to this one-flesh concept of marriage, Jesus affirmed the type of partnership that existed *before sin entered* the human experience. According to *God’s design*, man and woman, in marriage, become “one flesh.” “One flesh” means that a husband and wife become one in goals, hopes, dreams, and outlook. They share everything. They may not always agree on everything, but they should have a unity of spirit, a unity of purpose in life. In the best sense, one partner brings out the best in the other so that together they grow into something more than they could be separately.

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<sup>3</sup>Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalm 20:2, 33:20, 70:5, 89:19, 115:9, 121:1-2, 124:8, 146:5; Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14; Daniel 11:34; Hosea 13:9.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis 2:24 has the man leaving father and mother to be united with his wife, which suggests a matriarchal family model.

## Priority and Propriety

Turning to the larger patterns of Jesus' relationships, Luke 8:1-3 shows that in fact women were a part of Jesus' group of disciples. Probably because of the social climate, which regarded women as property and not as persons, Jesus did not include women in the inner circle of the Twelve. He did, however, include them in his traveling band as a separate group. Even that arrangement was risky, and could have brought charges of immorality, though there is no record that it did.

At times, the value which Jesus placed on women as disciples embarrassed his male followers. Once when the disciples came upon Jesus talking to a woman in public, they were greatly surprised but did not challenge him (John 4:4-42). Moreover, in this particular act, Jesus violated three taboos: he was (1) talking with a woman, who was (2) of a racial group the Jews disdained (the Samaritans), and (3) who had a terrible reputation. Not only this, but this woman became the means of bringing many persons, both male and female to believe in Jesus. This encounter with "the woman at the well" is important for another reason. It was in this conversation that Jesus said that "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

God is neither masculine nor feminine. Such categories and distinctions have little meaning in the transcendent sphere. Further, though the biblical appellations for God are generally male, this is not always the case. Numerous Old Testament passages use female images for God and for God's relationships with human persons (Psalm 131:2; Proverbs 3:15-17, 8; Isaiah 42:14, 46:3, 49:15, 66:13), and Jesus used such metaphors as well (Matthew 23:37). Even so conservative a teacher as G. Campbell Morgan acknowledged that in the Godhead there is Fatherhood, Motherhood, and Childhood, though he was not more specific than this (Morgan, no date).

In Luke 13:18-21 Jesus gave two parables about helping the Kingdom of God to grow. In one of the parables, the growth process begins with a man's activity; in the other, the growth process is put into action by a woman. Jesus was teaching that, in *his* Kingdom, women would not be mere bystanders. They would be movers, innovators; they would have a part in making things happen under God's leadership. Jesus meant for women to identify with his mission. He meant to involve women, as well as men, in spreading his teachings. Women, too, would help the Kingdom grow.

Look at the familiar parables found in Luke 15: the parable of the Lost Sheep (vv. 1-7), the parable of the Lost Coin (vv. 8-10), and the parable of the Lost Son (vv. 11-31). Here again, the parables belong together, and Jesus did not leave us to our own resources to decide what he was teaching with them. As a concluding remark to each of the first two parables, he compared the man's and the woman's experience to God's experience when one sinner repents.

Just as there was rejoicing when the shepherd found his sheep, there is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents. The shepherd celebrated; God celebrates! Likewise, as there was rejoicing when the woman found her precious coin, there is rejoicing when one sinner repents. The woman celebrated; God celebrates! Here Jesus presents a man *and* a woman as God's representatives. A man *and* a woman are cast in roles that represent God's concern for humanity. They *both* sought and found the lost. Jesus taught that

a woman can represent God just as a man can represent God. Again, who was it that Jesus used to proclaim his message to the Samaritans (John 4:7-10)? A woman.

Luke's gospel also records the story of Jesus' conversation with Mary and Martha (10:38-42). What usually goes unnoticed in the story is that Jesus was here teaching a woman theology right along with the men. And in response to Martha's challenge, Jesus indicated that Mary had not only the right, but the responsibility to learn.

That Mary *did* learn, and learn well, is shown in John 12: 3-8, the account of her anointing Jesus' feet. The disciples were remarkably unperceptive when it came to understanding why Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. Over and over they were caught up in their petty squabbles and eagerness to be important, and they failed to hear what Jesus was trying to tell them about his death. But Mary listened. Somehow along the way, though the men missed it, this devoted disciple from Bethany had grasped the real meaning of Jesus' mission. In a society and in a day when women were neither encouraged nor expected to understand deep truths, Mary had understood the deepest truth of all.

No woman went to sleep in the garden. No woman denied Jesus. No woman betrayed him, or nailed him to the cross. But it was a woman (Herod's wife, Matthew 27:19) who tried to save him! Risking life and virtue, it was the women who dared to stand among the soldiers at the foot of his cross, and to come at dawn to the tomb, convinced that the sealed and guarded stone would somehow move. Who was it who received the first news of the Resurrection (Luke 23:55-24:15)? Two women. And who received Jesus' rebuke for not believing their report (Mark 16:14)? The men.

Jesus moved more slowly with women's issues than some would go today. He followed the delicate balance between challenging his followers and alienating them. And the result was that he made significant progress in directing attention toward God's fuller purpose for women. Even more significant than Jesus' esteem for women and his disregard for the Jewish taboos concerning women is the fact that he modeled Christian ministry on the role of service, a traditionally female role (Matthew 20:26; Mark 10:43, Ruether, 1975).

All in all, Jesus' teaching concerning the place of women in the divine plan is implied in his response to the Pharisees concerning the Law: "God gave you the Law [which you have misunderstood and used to subjugate women] because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not this way in the beginning" (Matthew 19:8).

When, at the death of Jesus, the veil in the Temple was torn in two by the hand of God (Luke 23:45), part of the meaning of this event was that the tragic division between man and woman (as well as the even more tragic division between humanity and God) was now potentially removed—and will be *actually* removed if persons are willing to accept it. "For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Ephesians 2:14, 18)!

The teaching of Jesus was the beginning of the revolution which now is moving Western culture toward androgyny. God's own action in Christ provided the push which began to turn human history on its hinges.



### What Paul REALLY Said About Women

The Apostle Peter, writing to encourage the early Christians in the province of Asia (modern Turkey), said that Paul had written some things that were “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16), which is certainly true about his teachings concerning women (Woodruff, 1979). Taken at face value and separated from the context in which they were written, some of the Apostle Paul’s writings on the subject of women are very negative and chauvinistic, and there are two major responses that are generally made to these statements. The first view, and possibly the most popular, can be summarized by the statement, “I believe the man is the head of the family,” or “I believe women should submit themselves to their husbands (or even to all men).” To reach this conclusion, certain scriptures are emphasized to the exclusion of others, and the cultural setting in which the Bible was written is virtually ignored. Many women who supposedly subscribe to this “submission” viewpoint are, in reality, domineering and manipulative persons. They say, “My husband is the boss,” but they manage to do just what they please; and any person who challenges their views is quickly and loudly accused of going against the Scripture (Spencer, 1985). This view, of course, fits quite well with the sex-role patterns of our culture, through which women traditionally gain power indirectly through manipulation and helplessness (and such acting without integrity, forced or not, leads to low self-esteem and depression, Gannon, 1982).

The other view, equally extreme, is at the opposite end of the spectrum. Persons who hold this view are determined to live by the truth as they understand it, regardless of its origin (and whether or not it accords with Scripture). Some in this group could be appropriately called the “anti-Paul” group. They say that Paul did not like women, that he had a low view of women, and that his writings on the subject of women are not inspired (Bristow, 1988).

There are some very grave dangers connected with both of these viewpoints. The first one encourages an empty-headed view of Scripture, an accept-but-don’t-think attitude. It suggests that a person should be quick to do what the Bible says, without trying to *understand* what it says. The second view attacks the credibility of Paul’s writings as far as inspiration is concerned. But if the passages related to women are not inspired, then the logical conclusion follows that everything else Paul wrote is questionable. The answer lies, as it usually does, somewhere between these two extremes.

Of all the New Testament personalities, Paul stands out as the most dramatic example of a life changed by Christ. In an instant God changed Paul’s direction in life as well as his attitude. From a persecutor of Christians he became the champion of Christ’s cause. Since the Scripture is self-consistent and non-contradictory, being inspired throughout by the same Spirit, there *must be another way* to understand Paul’s words about women when they seem to fly in the face of the attitude Jesus demonstrated toward them.

Any adequate examination of Paul’s views in regard to the role of women must be grounded in Galatians 3:28. Galatians may very well have been Paul’s earliest letter, and scholars are in agreement as to what Paul meant in this verse—they agree that it sets forth a lasting principle: “So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus” (Today’s English Version). This is Paul’s earliest word, and his later comments

on the subject seem to have been due to the furor that erupted as the various Churches tried to figure out how to put this principle into practice.

### Paul's Cultural Setting

Perhaps the largest missing piece of the puzzle will be discovered by taking a closer look at the world of Paul's day. Even though all persons are equal before God in Christ, in the first century society as a whole, they were far from equal. In the eyes of most people, wives were classed with slaves. Women definitely were second-class citizens. There were no debates on the subject of women's equality. No one seriously considered the possibility that women were as good as men. Society was not ready to accept the revelation that all persons are created equal by God.

Paul had not led a sheltered life. He knew that this was true. He knew that he could not change deep-rooted thinking on a large scale with a snap of the fingers or even with a strong pronouncement. Besides, his primary goal was not to bring in a new age of social reform, with equality granted to both women and to slaves. Paul was convinced that Jesus would return in his lifetime, and he often urged Christians to support the social order, so that unbelievers would perceive Christianity positively and not write it off as a disruptive social and political movement, missing its deeper, spiritual message of *eternal* freedom (Hull, 1987).

Although Paul's writings (following the teaching of Jesus) contained the principles that, when followed, would eventually do away with slavery, racism, and male supremacy, he tried not to sidetrack the basic message of Jesus as Savior by changing all social injustices overnight (Mollencott, 1977). But it is necessary to look farther and deeper than this. In order to place Paul's teachings in context, the whole panorama of his writings must be considered.

Most scholars believe that Paul wrote the letters of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians during his first imprisonment, around A.D. 61-62. In two of these letters (Ephesians and Colossians), Paul instructed wives to be submissive to their husbands. In Philippians, he did not. A look at a map will reveal a crucial fact about this. Ephesus and Colosse were in the province of Asia, while Philippi was in the province of Macedonia.

The women of Macedonia enjoyed more personal freedom and a higher social status than was usual for women in the first century. They were often involved in community and civic affairs. In Asia, wives were considered to be simply household property, and they got about town about as often as the bathtub did. When the men had parties, they went in the company of a special group of cultured prostitutes who were trained in social graces and worldly pleasures. These women were known as courtesans, or *hetairai* ( ) (Bullough and Bullough, 1978). (In fact, the Latin term for prostitute, *meretrix*, means "she who earns," implying that this was the only way a woman could earn money! [Bristow, 1988]).

In his first recorded letter, Paul granted complete freedom and equality to women (Galatians 3:28<sup>5</sup>), and it is a fact of life that people have to learn how to use freedom. Freedom abused is freedom lost. When the women in Macedonia were presented with the concepts of freedom and equality in Christ, they knew how to handle these privileges because they had had some practice. Not so for the Asian congregations! There, the social customs were very different. The women had no role models for Christian freedom, and no prior experience with “personhood.” As they attempted to apply Christian teachings to everyday living, they made many mistakes, which Paul tried to correct.

Paul’s comments about women that give us most trouble were written to Ephesus (where Timothy was pastor, hence the similar instructions in Paul’s letter to Timothy), Colosse, and Corinth. The social customs with regard to women were very similar in these cities. In his letters to the Macedonian cities of Philippi and Thessalonica, there are no such comments.

In fact, a review of the situation in Macedonia reveals a rather important insight into Paul’s attitude toward women, that is, that he involved women in the work of the Kingdom in ways similar to men when he was free to do so. Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche were leaders in the Philippian church. Since women in Macedonia enjoyed a degree of freedom that was not granted to women in Ephesus and Corinth, Paul never felt the need to set such strict guidelines for women in those congregations. The people in that area were accustomed to seeing respectable women involved in public life, and there was no risk in allowing women to take places of leadership in the churches there. It is interesting to note that, over the years, a degree of friendship developed between Paul and the Philippian church that was closer than he experienced with any other church!

Far from being an advocate of male supremacy, Paul was actually the first great champion of sexual equality—after Jesus (Bristow, 1988). While the apparent meaning of most English translations of certain “hard passages” in Paul is to subjugate women, informed scholarship is able to demonstrate that this is probably not what was meant, even to the Asian churches<sup>6</sup>. Paul chose his words carefully, deliberately avoiding those Greek terms which, had he used them, would have communicated to his readers precisely those misconceptions which our English translations imply today (Bristow, 1988)! One of the greatest ironies of Christian history is that Paul’s words—as translated—have been claimed as authority for accomplishing the very thing he did not intend.

The passages most often cited in support of male supremacy are 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:33-36, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and Ephesians 5:21-33. In considering the teaching of these passages, it is important to place them alongside Paul’s actual practice in the churches, and the many points at which he commended women for leading God’s people and for proclaiming God’s Word (Hull, 1987).

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<sup>5</sup>It would seem that Paul intended by this teaching to counteract, point by point, the three-fold prayer by which Jewish males thanked God for not having been made a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.

<sup>6</sup>Bilezekian, 1985; Bristow, 1988; Davis and Rowatt, 1985; Hull, 1987; Jewett, 1975; Kroeger, 1987; Mollencott, 1977; Ruether, 1975; Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974; Spencer, 1985; Stagg and Stagg, 1978. These authors treat these passages in much greater detail than will be done in this essay.

### What Paul Said in 1 Corinthians

Long before Paul's day Corinth had become the proverbial term for immorality. From 400 B. C. onward, "to Corinthianize" was recognized as a label for involvement in sensual sins, specifically in unrestrained intercourse with prostitutes. Paul was in Corinth when he wrote the description of pagan immorality that is recorded in Romans 1: 18-32. Of all the churches that Paul founded, Corinth had the most problems, and it is not hard to see why understanding and living the Christian life was so difficult in that atmosphere.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Sociologists have confirmed that standards of decency in behavior change from time to time and from place to place. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul struggled with a continuing problem for Christian persons—how to determine an acceptable relationship between social customs and Christian behavior:

(2) I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.

(3) Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (4) Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. (5) And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. (6) If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. (7) A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. (8) For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; (9) neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (10) For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

(11) In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. (12) For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. (13) Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? (14) Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, (15) but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. (16) If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

Volumes have been written interpreting this passage, and the arguments involved are more intricate than can be treated here. (One of the key concepts in this passage involves Paul's use of the word "head" [ *kephalé* ], which will be treated below in the discussion of Ephesians 5.) Some contend (Mollencott, 1977; Jewett, 1975) that in verses 6 through 10 and 13 through 16, Paul sets forth the traditional rabbinic teaching concerning women, while verses 11 and 12 represent his struggle to bring this teaching in line with what he himself had written in Galatians 3:28 and with the example of Christ.

At the time Paul wrote, the women were exercising their equality in Christ, and apparently they were moving too fast. Not only did they take active roles in the worship services, but they also ignored

social custom as they prophesied with their heads uncovered. In verse 5, Paul granted that the women might pray and prophesy (preach) in the services under the leadership of the Spirit, but he insisted that they continue to wear the customary veil. Because of the flagrant prostitution that was associated with Corinth, in that particular place and at that particular time, a woman could not discard her veil or loosen her hair without destroying her own reputation. Violating this custom was considered so serious that a husband could use it as grounds for divorce and was not required to return the marriage dowry (Mishnah, 1933, Ketuboth 7:6). Paul granted that women could pray and prophesy in public worship, which was a huge step forward, but he said that they did not have the right to act or to dress in a way that reflected badly on themselves, their husbands, the Christian community, and ultimately on God.

While verse 3 is sometimes interpreted to represent a “chain of command” in which authority passes downward from God to Christ to the Holy Spirit to the man to the woman to the child to the slave, and finally to the animals, this is probably not the case. Had Paul wanted to convey that image, he would have logically begun either with God at the top or with woman at the bottom, and he did not do this. Rather, Paul began with a middle member, and wrote in a more circular manner. The emphasis seems to be on unity rather than on hierarchy (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). Indeed, the idea that Christ was less than God formed the basis of the early Christian heresy called Arianism, which was the impetus for the calling of the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 (Baker, 1959). It was this council which resulted in the adoption of the now-familiar Nicene Creed, which states that Jesus is “one in Being with the Father” (Armed Forces Chaplains Board, 1974, p. 718).

Jesus himself clearly claimed to be God, saying “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), and “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). If Paul was not arguing that Jesus was less than equal with the Father, then neither was he arguing that the wife is less than equal with her husband.

1 Corinthians 14:33-36. Later, in chapter fourteen (vv. 33-36), when Paul gave instructions for the women to be silent in church, it at first looks as if Paul has either changed his mind since chapter eleven, or else he has contradicted himself. Neither is likely, and contradiction is unacceptable. Further, a literal and strict observance of this passage would mean that women could not even *sing* in worship, either with the congregation or in a choir. Women would not be able to repeat the Lord’s Prayer or to participate in responsive readings (Bristow, 1988). A more plausible explanation is that Paul was talking about two different things:

(33b) As in all the congregations of the saints, (34) women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. (35) If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (36) Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

In chapter eleven, Paul was referring to the speaking of women in response to the recognized leading of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit led, they spoke God’s message to fellow believers. Chapter fourteen seems to refer to an altogether different kind of talking, not to prophesying. It seems to be connected with the confusion mentioned in verse 33, and probably with the ideas earlier suggested about the wearing of veils.

Greek has many words that can be translated “speak.” Paul did not write that women are not to teach or preach, or proclaim, or affirm, or any of the other nuances that are expressed by these words. Instead, Paul wrote that women are not to *laleo*. Like the other verbs, *laleo* can denote the act of saying something very important; but of all the verbs that can be translated “speak,” only *laleo* can also mean simply “to talk” (Bristow, 1988). The social context again provides some insight into this dynamic. Kari Torjesen Malcomb, who grew up in China as the daughter of missionary parents, may offer a helpful perspective:

My mother used to compare the situation in Corinth to the one she and my father faced in northern China. Back in the 1920s when they were first to bring God’s message to that forgotten area, they found women with bound feet who seldom left their homes and who, unlike the men, had never in their whole lives attended a public meeting or a class. They had never been told as little girls, “Now you must sit still and listen to the teacher.” Their only concept of an assembly was a family feast where everyone talked at once.

When these women came to my parents’ church and gathered on the women’s side of the sanctuary, they thought this was a chance to catch up on the news with their neighbors and to ask questions about the story of Jesus they were hearing. Needless to say, along with babies crying and toddlers running about, the women’s section got rather noisy! Add to that the temptation for the women to shout questions to their husbands across the aisle, and you can imagine the chaos. As my mother patiently tried to tell the women that they should listen first and chitchat or ask questions later, she would mutter under her breath, “Just like Corinth; it just couldn’t be more like Corinth” (Malcomb, 1982).

Thrilled that they could speak *at all* in public worship, the women were going beyond what seemed proper. Paul was not trying to put women down. He was trying to control the excesses of their behavior as they tried out their newfound freedom in the society of their day.

### What Paul Said to Timothy

Timothy was the pastor of the church at Ephesus, and the status of women in the society there was similar to that in Corinth. In Ephesus, also, pagan priestesses and shrine prostitutes were routinely used in worship. Including women as worshippers rather than as cultic prostitutes was a major change, and considering this social structure, the women were moving too quickly in trying to exercise their freedom:

(8) I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.

(9) I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, (10) but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

(11) A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. (12) I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. (13) For Adam was formed first, then

Eve. (14) And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (15) But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (1 Timothy 2:8-15)

Here again, understanding what Paul really was saying, considering the context, is less than obvious—yet careful study offers some light. It is interesting that those who interpret this passage in favor of male dominance rarely examine verse 8, which implies that the men in the Ephesian church had their own difficulties! Not only this, but, in contrast with Corinth, the women in Ephesus must not have been wearing veils at all, else no one would have known what they had in their hair. While many modern persons understand this passage as excluding women, few persons take it to be prescriptive for current adornment, dress, or hairstyles, demonstrating an interesting selectivity of perception (Honeycutt, 1984).

As Paul moved throughout Asia Minor establishing Christian churches and subverting Hellenistic understandings about the world, he frequently encountered difficulties in helping new believers to understand how Christianity was different from their pagan roots. Such controversies and contaminations are frequently in the background of Paul's letters to young churches, and one of the cardinal principles of Pauline interpretation is to attempt to understand precisely which false teachings he was attempting to refute.

One of the chief philosophies in opposition to Christianity in Paul's day was that of Gnosticism, which comes from (*gnosis*), or knowledge. It seems rather certain that the false teachings in Ephesus about which Paul was concerned were those of Gnosticism (Bristow, 1988). Gnostic writings often rewrote the story of Adam and Eve, contending that Adam/Eve was first an androgynous person who was then split apart, or that Eve was created before Adam. For Gnostics, the primeval eating from the "Tree of Knowledge" (of good and evil) was a good thing, not disobedience. Paul refutes both of these teachings about Eden in verses 13 and 14. It is noteworthy that he does *not* move from that point to assert male superiority based on the Fall, which was the traditional rabbinic model (Bristow, 1988).

Verse 12 has been the lodestone for much suppression of women in the church, and bears examination. The question of teaching—especially false teaching—was already a problem in Ephesus, even among the men (1 Timothy 5:15; 2 Timothy 3:6-7). Because women in the Ephesian culture had no prior experience with doctrine, having never been permitted to study before, they were especially vulnerable to misunderstandings. Hence, they were to study (2:11), to do their homework, before attempting to teach. (Paul gave similar instruction to uninformed men in Titus 1:10-11.)

The words "to have authority" are interesting as well. They are the translation of (*authentain*), which means "to domineer," and which occurs only here in the New Testament (Kubo, 1975). This would indicate that the problem in Ephesus had to do with women who, in their eagerness to appropriate their equality in Christ, were usurping authority from others, teaching things for which they had neither gifts nor training (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974).<sup>7</sup> Such behavior was antithetical

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<sup>7</sup>Women were certainly able to teach elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 21:9), and even to explicitly teach men (Acts 18:26). Priscilla is sometimes suggested as the author of Hebrews, which is written in the best Greek in the New Testament (Purdy, 1955)!

to the Christian virtues of love and mutual respect. The really amazing thing is that Paul continued to insist that women needed to learn, even in the face of the high-handed attitudes of some of them.

Paul's advice to Timothy, the young pastor in Ephesus, in 1 Timothy 2: 8-15 was to "let the women learn"—theology, as Mary from Jesus—but let them do it in a seemly fashion. Letting women "learn" seems like a small advancement to us, but it was a significant step forward, nonetheless. Remember the saying of the Rabbis: "Better to burn the law than to entrust it to a woman." Spiritually, women were completely free. But socially, and in the Churches, they needed to go more slowly, challenging old ideas as Jesus did—without alienating others unduly. *Remember that Paul never found it necessary to make such rules as these for the Macedonian Churches.*

### What Paul Said to the Ephesians

In the other letter directed to Ephesus (this time to the church at large), the letter known as Ephesians, there are also some difficult passages. In the fifth chapter of this letter, verses 21-33, Paul gave his well-known and often-quoted guidelines concerning submission in marriage:

(21) Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(22) Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. (23) For the husband is the head of the

wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. (24) Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

(25) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

(26) to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, (27) and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (28) In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (29) After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— (30) for we are members of his body. (31) "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" [Genesis 2:24]. (32) This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. (33) However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Two things need to be observed from the outset: first, Paul is here writing to married couples, not to men and women in general, and he is assuming that both husband and wife are Christians (for comments on an unbelieving husband, see 1 Peter 3:1-7); and second, that the traditional interpretation of these verses has often driven women to be dishonest. Many wives give lip service to submission, but that is all. The innovative wife develops a strategy to get what she wants while publicly supporting her husband's headship role. Such manipulation surely was not the result Paul intended to achieve when he designated the husband the head of the wife.

Now if Paul was here affirming a male-dominance model for marriage, then he has offered nothing either unique or Christian at this point. Male dominance was the virtually universal practice in marriage in

ancient Mediterranean culture. Further, to assert, on the basis of this passage, that such a hierarchy must be maintained, else the Christ-church analogy breaks down, makes no more sense than to claim that all nations must have a monarchical government because other forms of government fail to represent God's kingship over all the earth (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). A close examination of Paul's words in Ephesians 5 reveals that he was *subverting* the concept of male dominance rather than defending it.

In interpreting these verses, it may be helpful to note that they were written in, and are to be understood in, the context of being filled with God's Spirit (5:18). It is this Spirit that enables persons to relate to each other in the ways which Paul now outlined. Additionally, this passage is written (if not often interpreted) more toward men than toward women (143 words to 47 words in the Greek).

Discussions about this passage sometimes note that a "committee" (such as the family) needs a chairperson, or nothing will ever be accomplished by that committee. After all, "if two men ride on a horse, one must ride behind" (Shakespeare, 1936, III, v). Such an analogy suffers from inadequate perspective. Two riders may sit side by side in a carriage, with the horse pulling them, and two Christians may sit side by side in a marriage with God leading them, too (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). Even on a single horse, who is to say that the two riders cannot change places from time to time?

There are three words in this passage that are keys to understanding it. These words are "head," "submission," and "love."

"The husband is the head of the wife." In English, the word "head" means the literal head of one's body or, figuratively, the leader of a body of people. In Greek, however, there are two words for "head." The first of these, (*arché*), means "head" in terms of leadership, point of origin, or first in importance and power. English words which employ this word as a prefix include "archaeology," "archetype," "archives," "archangel," "archbishop," "archenemy," and "archduke." If Paul had intended to say that husbands are to rule over wives, this is the word he would have used.

Instead, Paul used the word (*kephalé*), which means the literal head of one's body, or "foremost" in terms of position (such as a capstone or a cornerstone). was never used to mean "leader" or "boss" or "chief" or "ruler." It was also a military term, designating a person who went in front of the troops, the leader in the sense of being in the lead, the first one into battle. Thus, there are two Greek words that can be translated "head," one meaning "boss," the other meaning "physical head."

The Septuagint supports this distinction. Hebrew is like English, in that there is only one word that means both "physical head" and "ruler." This word is *rosh*. When translating from Hebrew into Greek, wherever *rosh* meant "physical head," or the first soldier leading others into battle, it was translated ; wherever it meant "chief," or "ruler," it was translated , or some form of that word; and this distinction was carefully preserved throughout (Bristow, 1988). Thus, while modern readers may assume that Paul meant that the husband is the "boss" or the "ruler" of the wife, he actually was careful *not* to say that.

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” The words “submit to” occur in this passage three times. Church members are to submit to each other, and wives are to submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ. Thus three types of relationships are defined by the words “submit to.”

If the word translated “head” meant “boss,” then the word translated “submit to” would be expected to mean something like “obey.” There is such a word in Greek which means “submit to” in the sense of “to obey” ( ὑπακούω, *hupakouo*), which Paul used in Ephesians 6:5 to refer to the relationship between slaves and their masters. There is another word which means “submit to” in the sense of “to obey one in authority,” ( πειθαρχέω, *peitharcho*), which Paul used in Titus 3:1 to tell Christians to be obedient to governmental authorities.

When referring to wives or to the church, however, Paul used neither of these words. He used a form of the word ὑποτάσσω (*hupotasso*), which was not usually used of either children or of slaves. In the active voice, ὑποτάσσω might be used of a conqueror, meaning “to subject,” or “to subordinate.” But Paul did not tell husbands to ὑποτάσσω their wives. Rather, he used the imperative, middle voice form ( ὑποτασσέσθε, *hupotassomenoi*), which had a reflexive meaning—the subject of the verb acts upon itself rather than being acted upon (Bristow, 1988). One of the most widely accepted Greek-English lexicons defines ὑποτασσέσθε as “submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love,” with specific reference to its usage in the letters of Paul and Peter (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 855).

It is most interesting that the verb for verse 22 is actually carried over from verse 21 in Greek, so that a literal translation reads, “Being subject to one another in the fear of Christ, the wives to their own husbands as to the Lord.” Since the verb for “wifely submission” is *the very same word* as the verb for “mutual submission” in the church, there is absolutely no reason to separate these concepts (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974).

The usual interpretation of this passage suggests that the wife must sacrifice herself for her husband, which encourages husbands (being human, after all) to be selfish, egocentric, and filled with a sense of pride and power (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). While this passage *does* use the model of Christ’s self-sacrifice and self-humbling as a model for marriage, the comparison is a model for the *husband*, not for the wife at all (verse 25, Mollencott, 1977)! The model for the husband is the self-emptying of Jesus, which Paul described in Philippians 2:3-8:

(3) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. (4) Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

(5) Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

(6) Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
 (7) but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
 (8) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The word used in verse 8 for Jesus' obedience—which is the model for husbands—is *hypotageō*, the word for the obedience of a slave to a master. It certainly could be argued that the obedience to God commanded of husbands is more severe than the yieldedness required of wives—at least in this passage!

Actually, voluntary yieldedness in love is required of *all persons* if they are to accept God's offer of salvation through Christ. There is no way to be born again without yielding one's personal sovereignty to the Lordship of Christ (Howell, 1979). Self-sacrifice in the New Testament, however, presupposes that a person has *developed* a self which can be yielded, and is not the same thing as masochism (Stancil, 1987). True obedience to the message of the New Testament involves helping persons to move outside cultural norms and to become whole persons in their own right as a first step toward later *being able to choose* a mature self-sacrifice on the model of Christ. Our culture does not tend to offer women such a choice, impressing them into an unexamined servitude to men that brooks little opposition. *Freedom to choose* is at the very heart of the gospel (Galatians 5:1)!

*Phronesis*, then, refers to an attitude of “reciprocal deference that becomes and marks out those who are filled with the Spirit. It is opposed to rudeness, haughtiness, selfish preference for one's own opinions, and stubborn insistence on one's own rights” (Vaughn, 1963, p. 113). On the global scale, it refers to a person's voluntary yielding of her or his private will to God's universal concern for the world, a concern which goes far beyond selfish or private interests. *Phronesis* refers to a person's commitment to establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.” In English, “love” has multiple meanings which range from enjoyment to sexual intercourse. Where on this continuum does Paul's instruction to husbands lie? Again, Greek has several words for “love.” The verb which means “love” in the sense of sexual desire (*eros*, *erōo*) does not even appear in the New Testament. The word which means “fondness,” “friendship,” or “deep liking” (*phileo*, *phileo*) was not the word Paul chose here. The word he chose was *agapao* (*agapao*), which is the most frequent word for love in the New Testament.

*Agapao* is a kind of love that is not so much a matter of emotion as it is attitude and action. It is a love that seeks that which is in the best interest of the other, that which meets the other's legitimate needs.

*Agapao* is almost identical with *phileo* (*phileo*). Both involve choosing to relinquish one's self-interest to serve and care for another's. Both mean being responsive to the needs of the other. And both are prescribed for all Christians, not just for husbands and wives (Bristow, 1988).

Such love does mean that often the wife will lay aside her own interests and desires in order to assist and encourage her husband in every way possible. But it also means that just as often, the husband will put aside his rights, privileges, and personal convenience in order to assist and encourage his wife. And often they both will choose to make sacrifices for the sake of their children (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974).

## When All is Said and Done

These troublesome passages provide an example of Scripture in which regulations are laid down that applied specifically to a certain society at a certain time. Not for one second would most American Christians say that women should refrain from braiding their hair or from wearing jewelry. It is poor exegesis to attribute one part of a passage to local custom and time, while applying a second part of the same passage universally, especially when that second part is set over against clear teaching elsewhere in Scripture. It seems that any definitive and widely accepted interpretation of these “hard passages” is impossible at present. Careful study is able to offer alternative interpretations that challenge the traditional interpretations, not to the satisfaction of all, but sufficiently to demonstrate that only by imposing presuppositions upon these passages can they be used as foundations for doctrinal positions. The hermeneutic principle in question is that of interpreting murky or disputed passages in the light of that which is more certain. Respect for God’s Word does not force meaning where meaning is unclear (Hull, 1987).

There are no easy answers, but this approach seems to answer the most questions, is most consistent with all of the Bible’s teachings, and squares most closely with the example given by Jesus himself. The crux of the matter centers on the fact that since women in Macedonia already enjoyed a degree of freedom, they knew how to express their new freedom in Christ in responsible ways. Their expressions of freedom did not threaten the stability of the home. This assumption is supported by the fact that Paul did not give husband-wife guidelines to the Macedonian congregations.

Although *in Christ* the Christian women of Ephesus and Colosse and Corinth were just as free as the women of Philippi and Thessalonica, *in the world* they were not. They had to be patient. With his guidelines for their personal relationships, Paul directed them to face up to that reality. Today, as then, principles of good taste and sound judgment apply to all Christians. Every Christian is obligated to consider any act in the light of the reputation of the Church as a whole and the Lord after whom Christians are called.

Actually, the tables have been turned in some respects. Women’s participation in the life of the church is not scandalous today. Rather, just the opposite is true. To close off certain opportunities to women may be to invite a black mark on the Christian gospel.

## Male and Female in the World

Galatians 3:28 is the centerpiece of Paul’s understanding of women as they are made free in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (italics added). Neither Paul nor Jesus ever intended that human freedom be for salvation only, nor that freedom be exercised in the Church alone. Jesus taught that he intends for his followers to permeate all of society with his teaching—like leaven, like salt, like light. This concept is basic, fundamental, essential to God’s purpose. Obviously, Galatians 3:28 must be applied to all areas of life, inside and outside the Church.

The prospect of equality, however, is often threatening even to women. It is almost too good to be true. If women dare to hope for freedom, there is the fear that the hope will be dashed. The idea of

equality is threatening to men as well, because *men* hold all (or very nearly all) of the open power and authority in the world, and *they* determine the ways in which power may be used. In 1988 as well as in 1864, the granting of freedom to slaves is scary business.

It is the *men*, not the women, who have defined the roles in the family, the Church, and the society as a whole. The *men* have decided (over the centuries) that women aren't able to do "real" work, due to deficiencies of mind and body as perceived by—yes, the *men*. The only things women have been seen as fit for are the things men don't want to do. Women are supposed to be submissive, passive, dependent, without initiative, and unable to think or to make decisions. They are supposed to be immature, weak, and helpless, existing only to serve the men. Women's tasks are to help the men be men, to help their sons to become men, and to help their daughters to become effective servants of men.

Why is it that women are asked the question, "Do you work?" It is because "work" is defined as the things men do, and "women's work" is not considered "real work"—it's not really "doing anything" (Miller, 1986). "Women's work" usually includes not only cooking and housekeeping, but also parenting. When marriage is thought of as the wife's "career," then she is expected to work harder and in a different way at the marriage and at parenting than is her husband (Hull, 1987). Perhaps this is why many fathers don't do much fathering—because nurturing and facilitating growth in their children is not perceived by our culture as "doing anything important."

"Women's work" also includes handling all the feelings for the family. Men are "allowed" to have feelings for only a short period of years, and after that they are expected to become "tough and manly," and to be virtually done with feelings for life. This is, of course, a myth. So women are supposed to help men hide their feelings, their weakness, their helplessness and their tears, and to support their effort to pretend that they don't have them. This is part of the reason why granting equal personhood to women is so frightening to men. It is hard to endure someone's taking your props away; but it is even harder if you have pretended all along that you didn't need them in the first place (Miller, 1986)!

Humanity has long been chained by a limited and distorted view of itself. The prevailing theory is that "mankind" (notice the term) is basically self-seeking, competitive, aggressive and destructive. But this overlooks the fact that this theory was developed *by men's estimate of themselves*, because women are not seen as being "real persons." This view overlooks the fact that more than one-half of the persons in the world contradict it day in and day out, as they nurture, cooperate, serve others, give of themselves, and facilitate personal and interpersonal growth (Miller, 1986).

The world is at the brink of self-destruction precisely because it has overlooked its most critical and most basic needs—emotional and relational needs—by assigning them to women and then by pretending that they don't exist. Humanity has reached the end of the road that is built on the set of traits held out for male identity: advance at any cost, drive out all competitors, and kill them if necessary (Miller, 1986). The characteristics most highly developed in women and perhaps most essential to humankind—relational needs—are now our best hope for bringing in the biblical hope for a world at peace. We humans must learn again to love, to feel, and to serve rather than being served.

In the contemporary world, serving others is for losers. It is low-level stuff. But *Jesus* said:

You know that in the world the recognized rulers lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority. That is not the way with you; among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give up his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Men need to reclaim this lost part of themselves, and women need to again see feelings and relationships as the treasure that they are. When sex-roles are thus transcended, persons can be “just persons,” individuals in their own right, accepted simply for who they are (Basow, 1986).

What was it that Jesus and Paul *really* said about women? Galatians 3:28 says it all: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The changes implied by that statement did not become actual practice overnight, either for slaves or for women. But the concept of equality and unity in Christ was the beginning of the revolution, it was the breach in the dike, and its consequences are only *now* beginning to be worked out.

#### Male and Female: In the Southern Baptist Convention

Whatever one believes the New Testament teaches about the role of women in the Church, in actual practice churches look to them for much more than a subordinate place. For example, it is a common saying among Baptists that without women the churches would fall dead (Daley, 1969).

Women carry the burden of the teaching load in nearly every Baptist church. Without the women there would often be no music program, and there would be no ongoing missions. It is the *women* who are largely responsible for making the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) one of the most missionary-minded of all modern denominations, and they have done it in many cases *in spite of* the men. Though generalizations are hazardous, it might be said that, on the whole, today’s Baptist woman is better informed about the Church and its needs, better equipped to work with people, and more deeply committed to Christ than are most men.

The Church’s pattern of discriminating against women often leads to rather absurd situations. If women are as susceptible to error as some persons contend, then why are they allowed to teach children, both boys and girls? If women are supposed to be silent in church, why are they allowed to sing solos, play musical instruments, and even lead the choirs? If women are not supposed to be teaching men, why are they allowed to write Bible studies, Sunday School lessons, magazine articles and books which instruct men as well as women (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974)?

In the county-seat church I served as pastor, of all elected positions, 86/168, or 51% were filled by women. That seems pretty even, if one looks no farther. The fact was that, without the women, the missions and music programs of our church would have been non-existent. In teaching positions, 28/40, or 70% of our Sunday School teachers and leaders were women. There were *no* men working in the

preschool or children's areas, and we essentially paid a male youth minister to teach the youth, because no non-staff members would do it. In terms of our Church Training leaders, 5/7 or 71% were women.

Having looked at the male-female distribution in the church's teaching ministry, observe what was the case in positions that have to do with *money*. Bear in mind that the tasks of teaching are grouped around the areas of nurturing, fostering growth, and dealing with feelings; while the tasks of those who handle money are grouped around the areas of power and control. In our church, the male-female distribution in power positions was, at the time of my study (1984): Deacons, 12/0; Budget Committee, 12/3; Teller Committee, 10/3; Building Committee, 6/1; and Trustees, 3/0. The trend is clear.

Looking at the larger picture of women in Southern Baptist life, one notes that in 1869, Kentucky became the first state convention to admit women as messengers. Until recently, however, women messengers were never counted, and their registration cards were ignored . . . they were never allowed to speak, anyway (Daley, 1969).

During the Southern Baptist Convention in Richmond, Virginia in 1888, one messenger expressed anxiety about what the Baptist women were doing in their separate meeting down the street. Assured that they were just having a prayer meeting, the nervous brother replied, "But you can never tell what the women may pray for if they are left to themselves!" What the women *did* in 1888 was to form the Women's Missionary Union (WMU). Though the WMU quickly became the driving force for missions among Southern Baptists, the WMU was not allowed to make its own report to the Convention for forty years. In 1929, when a woman first addressed the SBC (to make the WMU report), several men (Kentuckians, in fact), tried to prevent her from speaking. When they failed in this, some walked out (McBeth, 1983).

To show how things have changed, in 1978, a woman drew the largest crowd as she addressed the Pastor's Conference before the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1885 women were excluded from the SBC; in 1963 a woman was elected Vice-President of the Convention; and in 1978 women composed 42% of its messengers. In 1901, a few women were allowed to sit in the back of the classrooms at Southern Baptists' only seminary, but they could not raise questions or write exams, and they could not receive degrees. In 1983 the six Southern Baptist seminaries had more than 2,000 female students (20%), plus female trustees and female faculty, including at least two who were ordained ministers (Honeycutt, 1984).

The mention of women and ordination in the same sentence highlights an issue that is presently hotly contested among Southern Baptists. Now if women were intended by God to be deacons and pastors, the Church should have seen this long ago, and not have waited until the feminist movement forced its consideration. If Christians have refused to ordain women in order to hold to a tradition that may not be clearly biblical, then they have not acted worthily of those called to follow Christ (Daley, 1981).

Although there is no undisputed reference to female deacons in the New Testament (which would imply ordination), some of Southern Baptists' most respected scholars have been of the opinion that female deacons are referred to in Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11. A. T. Robertson, for one, was of this opinion, as was B. H. Carroll—and Carroll of all men could never be accused of being "liberal" (Carroll, 1947-1948).

Listen to these words of John Taylor, one of the best known and most influential Baptist preachers of the Kentucky frontier: “Should not a woman [of the proper character] be invited to prayer or prophesying in the church? Nothing but the pride or folly of man would object to it. . . . It is a pity a church should lose any gift that is among them, merely because it is found in a female” (Taylor, 1823). If one of the criteria for being able to represent Christ in the world is held to be that a person has to be of his gender (i.e., male), this is to endorse the absurdity that masculinity is superior to divinity. It is to say that, “for half the human race, sexual differentiation is a handicap so crippling that no amount of personal talent, intelligence, piety, or even divine enabling can make them fit ministers of the gospel” (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974, p. 171).

Exegesis has not supported such a position, and historical study reveals that there have been female deacons in Baptist churches for as long as there have *been* Baptist churches—though probably only in a minority of churches. Perhaps the earliest comment on the roles of Baptist women was a statement by John Smyth, an English Baptist, who wrote in 1609 that the local church has authority “to elect, approve, & ordeine her owne Deacons both men & woemen” (Whitley, 1915, p. 509). The minutes from various Baptist churches in England in the 17th and 18th centuries confirm that they did have female as well as male deacons (McBeth, 1979).

Early English Baptists, especially the General Baptists, also had female preachers. Most were not ordained, but most male preachers at that time also lacked formal ordination (McBeth, 1983). Baptists in colonial America also had women in some leadership roles. In his 1774 book entitled *Customs of Primitive Churches*, Baptist historian Morgan Edwards noted that many Baptist churches had deaconesses and eldresses. The fervent Separate Baptists in the South, who later contributed so much to the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention, routinely had deaconesses as well as deacons.

Even after the formation of the SBC in 1845, churches in the South often had deaconesses. After 1890, however, most Southern Baptist churches ceased to have deaconesses, and the practice largely disappeared until its recovery in this generation. It is noteworthy that the rise, decline, and resurgence of women in the diaconate parallels the rise and fall of the concept of the work of deacons as being *ministry* rather than *administration*. Men have *kept the power*, but have not *done the work* of ministry. Churches are beginning to see what they have missed.

It is also important to remember that because Baptists believe in a *personal, divine call* to the Christian ministry, ordination is not really something that the Church does. It is something *that God does*. The crucial point, for women as well as for men, is not whether they are *elected* to the diaconate by the Church, but whether they have been *called by God* to that ministry.

Perhaps the best attitude toward women in ministry is that of Peter long ago with regard to Gentiles and the gift of the Holy Spirit: “So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God” (Acts 11:17)! After all, Southern Baptist churches that have ordained women as deacons report almost without exception that the experience has been beneficial beyond all expectations (McBeth, 1979).

### Implications for Change

This study has examined the most frequently cited biblical passages that relate to male-female sex-roles, both within and without the Church. This examination has concluded that, if the witness of the New Testament as a whole is carefully studied, then, first of all, Jesus clearly implied the equality of women in the plan and purpose of God, and he went well beyond the customs of his day in including women in his ministry.

It has been argued that a proper understanding of the writings of Paul must begin with and be anchored in Galatians 3:28. It was pointed out that the most troublesome passages in Paul's writings become more clear when the cultural context of the churches to whom he was writing is considered. When Paul insisted on continuing subordination of women in some areas, he was guarding the reputation of the churches, not laying down timeless principles.

### Implications for Baptists

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this? There are at least four. First, there is nothing new about Baptist women serving as preachers and deacons, for the practice goes back to the very beginnings of Baptists. Second, Baptists have never had—and do not now have—unanimous agreement on the proper roles for women in the Church. Third, the officers chosen and ordained in Baptist life have always been under the jurisdiction of the local church, and never under the authority of an association or convention. And fourth, Baptists need to be candid enough to admit that what they *ought* to do may nor may not always be the same as what they *have* done.

If I may speak more personally, we as Southern Baptists are currently struggling to be faithful both to biblical authority and to our understanding of God's will as these relate to theology and sex roles. Sometimes disagreeing in our conclusions, we agree in our commitment to the authority of Scripture, to the reality of God's call to ministry, to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in giving the gifts of the Spirit, and to the autonomy of the local church. We affirm that God can do whatever God wants to do, but that God will not contradict himself, nor do anything contrary to his nature as revealed in the Bible. We affirm that God does not call people to do things that are contrary to the Scripture; and we recognize that women, as they make a full-time vocational commitment to Christian ministry, are convinced that they are responding to nothing less than the clear and personal call of God.

Finally, we affirm that Southern Baptist churches are free under God to call whomever the Spirit may lead them to select as ministers, and we affirm that churches may ordain or refrain from ordaining persons according to their own interpretation of the biblical witness. But we must also remember that interpreting the Bible correctly requires that we examine the totality of its message, not merely one part, nor a verse here and there.

Perhaps the day will come when it may be said of Christian men and women in the present as it was said of them by an ancient historian: "Together they pray, together they prostrate themselves, together

they perform their fasts, mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the church of God” (Tertullian, 1885, 4:48).

### Implications for Therapists

Religious faith is quite often a significant dynamic in the lives of persons who present themselves for therapy, whether they seek out overtly Christian counselors or not. For many of these persons, their faith has constricted their living and has lessened their sense of selfhood and personal worth. Because this happens so often, therapists frequently, and understandably, conclude that religious faith hampers psychological wholeness.

This study has demonstrated that, with respect to the development of psychological sex roles, a truly biblical faith moves persons toward increasing depths of personhood and self-fulfillment. Numerous authors have argued that authentic biblical faith enhances life rather than diminishing it, and offers a strong and consistent framework of meaning for human life (Allport, 1960; Fowler, 1981, 1984; James, 1902/1958). If the arguments presented here have been at all persuasive, then psychotherapists will take both the Christian Scriptures and Christian commitment more seriously in evaluating the world-view of their clients. Further, they will consult with and refer to pastoral counselors as colleagues who can assist clients in their journey toward a mature faith.

### Conclusion

Long ago, the prophet Joel looked forward to a time when “your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28, italics added). Southern Baptists have long been accustomed for their sons to prophesy, but it is still unusual for their daughters to do so. The issue is really not so much theology as it is justice and liberation. Justice issues are never popular, because they threaten the status quo. It seems easy to forget that the prophets of old cried out, speaking for God, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24); and “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Did not Paul write that Jesus himself

is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man [ , humanity] out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility. . . . For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2:14-18).

May it become so in our day.

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