

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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WOMEN IN THE CHURCH (Context and questions)

This study is an interactive exploration of the leadership roles of women among God's people. Beginning in the Old Testament, progressing through the ministry of Jesus, and concluding with the Acts and the Letters, the study systematically works through all the major passages regarding women in such roles. The format features an introductory section offering cultural or linguistic background to the texts examined, followed by exegetical questions about the passages along the order of the Bereans, who "with great eagerness examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Ac. 17:11).

Anyone engaging in exegetical study must use sound principles of interpretative method and procedure. Foremost is openness and honesty, particularly when the subject is as polarized as this one. The Bible student must recognize and distinguish between: 1) what Scripture clearly states (the absolutes), 2) what Scripture may infer (the possibilities), and 3) what Scripture does not say (silence). These categories exist in a decreasing hierarchy of certainty. Clear statements carry more weight than inferences, and inferences carry more weight than arguments from silence. To base one's conclusions on inferences or silence may impinge on the honesty of the effort, but to refuse to address inferences impinges on openness. Also important is context. All biblical materials, in so far as is possible, should be read against the background of their own times and in the context of their own original language. Finally, literary and theological context must be considered.

Inasmuch as the format of this study will be dialogical, addressing the critical biblical passages in the form of exegetical and interpretive questions, each person should work through the questions *before* reading the answers provided.

Patriarchalism and the Old Testament

The social structure of the entire ancient Near East was dominated by patriarchalism, a pronounced hierarchical system of relationships between superiors and inferiors. A strong relationship existed between the family and the family's god. The patriarch (father) was recognized as both legal and spiritual leader of the family, and his deity was the patron god of the whole family. Just as the patron deity was "lord" to the patriarch, so the patriarch

was “lord” to the family. Wives, children and slaves were under the full authority of the patriarch, who served as the family’s governor, priest and magistrate. The patriarch assumed responsibility for the well-being of the family, and he held the power of life and death over its members.

As the tight-knit patriarchal family grew beyond the bounds of convenient management, the clan or tribe assumed the role of the patriarchal family. The authoritative members of the clan were senior males and the patriarch of the clan wielded power over all. With the emergence of city-states, the functioned as a patriarch for the entire city, and indeed, was referred to as a “lord”, the same title normally given to a deity or a patriarch.

A woman in patriarchal culture was defined as either the daughter of her father or the wife of her husband. Other than in royal families, women generally did not act as individuals outside the family context. A girl was married shortly after puberty through betrothal arranged by her father. If her father was dead, her older brother or another male relative could substitute as the patriarchal entity. The girl’s consent was not solicited. At the time of her marriage, she would transfer all allegiance to her husband, including allegiance to her husband’s patron deity. Women of the Old Testament functioned within this larger matrix of ancient Near Eastern patriarchalism. Only rarely are women heard in their own voices, Miriam and Deborah being notable exceptions.¹

The task of the Old Testament student, then, is to ascertain to what degree this patriarchal system in the ancient Near East reflects a theological mandate. Was patriarchalism instituted by God as the proper social structure? Or, was this system humanly contrived so that God merely worked within it as he did all the other structures of human society, such as, law codes, covenants, city-states, war and the economy, without necessarily giving it his divine approbation?

Do the creation accounts of the first humans mandate patriarchy?

Genesis 1:26-31

Genesis 2:7, 18-25

Genesis 5:1-2

¹ R. Harris, “Women (Mesopotamia),” and P. Bird, “Women (OT),” *ABD* (1992) 6.947-957; C. Pfeiffer, “Patriarchal Organization,” *Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), pp. 28-31; V. Matthews, “Family Relationships,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Alexander and D. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), pp. 291-299; F. Bush, “Patriarchs,” *ISBE* (1986) 3.690-695.

The initial creation account is remarkably even in its treatment of the first man and first woman. Both were created in the image of God. The word used to describe them is אָדָם ('adam = human, people), related to אֲדָמָה ('adamah = soil, ground), a generic, non-gender specific term that later is used to describe them both (cf. Ge. 5:1-2). To the category of 'adam belong two genders, זָכָר (zakar = male) and נְקֵבָה (neqevah = female). Nothing in this initial account seems to mandate patriarchy.

The second creation account, which amplifies the first one, brings the creation of the humans into closer focus. Again, the primary word to describe the human is the generic 'adam. Not until the creation of the corresponding partner does the biblical writer use gender specific terms, אִישׁ ('ish = man) and אִשָּׁה ('ishshah = woman).

Those who argue for patriarchalism usually point to the order of creation (the man was created before the woman), Adam's privilege of naming the animals and naming Eve (where it is assumed that to name something implies having authority over that entity), and the description of the woman as "helper" or "partner". Since the man was created first, he is superior; since Adam alone named the animals and named Eve as well, he is superior; since the woman was called "helper" or "partner", she is inferior. The first of these arguments is doubtful, since the general order of creation, according to the first creation account, is ascending (i.e., the humans are created as the last and highest of all other creatures). If this holds true for the second account, then the one created first would not be superior, and in any case, it seems doubtful that the order of creation was intended to reflect a hierarchy of value. The second argument, that the naming of the animals makes Adam superior to Eve, is also questionable. The narrative of naming the animals is framed by a statement about the man's aloneness (2:18, 2:20b), so that the focus of the account is that of all the creatures God created, only the man was without a mate. It is true, of course, that later the man names Eve as the mother of all living (2:2:23b), but this need not imply a hierarchy of value. In a later narrative, Hagar, Abraham's slave wife, named Yahweh, but the passage can hardly mean that Hagar was superior to God (cf. Ge. 16:13). The third argument, the idea that "helper" or "partner" is a term of inferiority, does not hold true on linguistic grounds. The expression כְּנִגְדּוֹ עֵזֶר (ezer kenegdo = an aid fit for him) literally means "alongside him" or "corresponding to him".² This expression does not imply inferiority, since it is the term that regularly is used to describe God as the supreme helper (cf.

² E. Speiser, *Genesis [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 17.

Ex. 18:4; Dt. 33:26; Ps. 33:20; 70:5; 121:1-2; 124:8, etc.). Rather, the word suggests that the man's strength was inadequate in itself, hence, he needed a complementary partner.³ Finally, there is the statement that a man should leave his mother and father, clinging to his wife in marriage (Ge. 2:24). Here, surely, is a statement in direct tension with patriarchy. In patriarchy, it was the woman who left father and mother to cling to her husband, while her husband very often did not leave his parents but continued to live under the patriarchy of his father. That God should put it in the exact opposite manner suggests that the patriarchal system was not divinely ordered. In any case, as before, there seems to be no mandate for patriarchy.

Did the divine curse for Adam's and Eve's disobedience require patriarchy?

Genesis 3:8-13, 16-19

The question here primarily concerns the deception of the woman and the intent of the statement in Genesis 3:16b, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Is this statement intended as part of the curse itself (i.e., that because of her disobedience, Eve now must treat her husband as her master), or is it a divine observation that because of fallenness, the man will use his physical power to dominate the woman?

Those who follow the first line of interpretation emphasize that the woman was the first to sin, and therefore, she bears the greatest culpability. God's curse requires that she now be a bond-slave to her husband. The husband's rule over the woman is part of her sentence, and she must bear it until the end of human history.

There is good reason to question this interpretation. First, to single out the woman as more culpable than the man goes against the plain meaning of the text. Eve was not tempted when she was alone, but as the text clearly states, the narrative describes what happened while Adam was *'imma* (אִמָּא = with her, cf. Ge. 3:6). He raised no word of warning, even though it was he who had been given the original instructions about the forbidden tree and its fruit (Ge. 2:16-17). Whether Adam did not explain adequately God's command to Eve or whether she was confused on her own account is beside the point—in either case, Adam was as culpable as Eve. Further, when God took the pair to task for their disobedience, he addressed them both, not simply the woman.

³ G. Wenham, *Genesis [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 68.

Second, the verb מָשַׁל (*mashal* = to rule, dominate) more likely means “harsh exploitative subjugation”, in short, exploitation.⁴ Derek Kidner’s comment is instructive: “‘To love and to cherish’ becomes ‘To desire and to dominate’”.⁵ In the succeeding story, which is the first narrative describing a domestic marriage relationship after Adam and Eve, Lamech threatens to kill his wives if they oppose him (Ge. 4:19-24). This story seems to bear out the exploitation theme. Even if one adopts the reading that the “rule” clause is part of the divine curse rather than a divine observation, it still does not follow that the total subordination of women must exist without alleviation. Certainly no modern person objects to other distressful hardships in this passage that men and women have worked to alleviate, such as, anesthesia for childbirth or cultivation for crops to rid them of “thorns and thistles”.⁶ In any case, there seem to be adequate grounds for questioning that the curse is a mandate for patriarchy. Rather, there seem to be good grounds for viewing the statement as a blunt prediction by God that men will seek to domineer over women rather than care for them as “bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh” (cf. Ge. 2:23).

How do spiritually gifted women fit into the larger structure of patriarchy?

Exodus 15:20-21; Micah 6:4 (Miriam)

Judges 4:4-10, 14; 5:7, 12-13, 15 (Deborah)

2 Kings 22:11-20; 2 Chronicles 34:19-28 (Huldah)

Isaiah 8:1-3 (Isaiah’s wife)

Luke 2:36 (Anna)

Without question, spiritual leadership roles for women are rare in the Old Testament. The fact that they occur at all is cause for asking whether or not God was willing to supervene ancient Near Eastern patriarchal mores in order to accomplish his own purposes. If either by creation or by his sentence of judgment after the fall God had mandated that women must accept an inferior role, why are there any such incidences of women in spiritual leadership at all? While there is very little information about the

⁴ Wenham, p. 81.

⁵ D. Kidner, *Genesis [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967), p. 71.

⁶ Ironically, it once was even argued that anesthesia for childbirth was a subversion of the biblical mandate. When Dame Euphanie Macalyane requested anesthesia from her mid-wife, King James VI of Scotland had her burned alive as a warning to all who would evade Eve’s curse, cf. R. Fulop-Miller, *Triumph Over Pain*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1938), p. 335 as quoted in W. Hampel, “The Changing Face of Christian Responsibility Over Time,” *Ashland Theological Journal* 2004 (Vol. xxxvi), p. 55.

prophetic ministry of Miriam, Isaiah's wife and Anna, the fact that all are called "prophetesses" suggests that they were spiritually gifted. The prophet Micah lists Miriam and Aaron as leaders of Israel alongside Moses.

Deborah, of course, was both a prophetess and a judge, whose career is one of the most detailed of the judges. Huldah was consulted directly about the meaning of a Torah scroll found in the Jerusalem temple. Huldah's word to Josiah was based both upon her understanding of the Torah as well as her prophetic gift, and her message was "according to everything written in the book", in all likelihood, the Book of Deuteronomy, if the nature of the curses are any indication (cf. Dt. 28:15-68).

It is not without significance that Huldah was consulted by Josiah's officials, even though Jeremiah was almost certainly also available in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Chr. 35:25). It would be hard to argue that Huldah was consulted only because no male prophet was available. Some have suggested that perhaps Jeremiah could not read, since he delivered his oracles to his scribe Baruch by dictation (cf. Je. 36:4, 6, 18, and 32). Perhaps Huldah was literate. (We know that literacy was quite limited in the ancient world.) Another possibility is that Jeremiah may still have been quite young and had not yet developed fully his prophetic ministry and reputation. Huldah may have been the "senior" prophet in Jerusalem. In any case, it seems clear that Huldah did not just "happen to be available". Rather, the king's representatives sought her out precisely because they knew she was a recognized prophetess. This presumes a previous and ongoing ministry.

In Christian history, interestingly enough, the example of Miriam, Deborah and Huldah became a basis for ordaining women to sacred office in the late 4th century, where the liturgy for ordaining deacons contains this prayer: *O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah...do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit...*⁷

Even later, John Calvin disagreed with his student John Knox over whether God would accept a woman as a political leader, and he wrote to Knox, saying, "Two years ago John Knox asked me, in a private conversation, what I thought about the government of women. I candidly replied...that there were occasionally women so endowed, that the singular good qualities which shone forth in them made it evident that they were raised up by divine authority. ...I brought forward Huldah and Deborah [as examples]."⁸

⁷ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* VIII.xx.

⁸ W. Phipps, "A Woman Was the First to Declare Scripture Holy," *Bible Review* (April 1990), p. 15.

The presence of such women in roles of spiritual leadership in the Old Testament seems to indicate that God did not require any absolute prohibition based on gender. To be sure, the ancient Near East did not often allow women such roles, but the Holy Spirit was not bound by any such cultural conventions.

What bearing does the hope for the messianic outpouring of the Spirit have on the issue of women’s role among God’s people?

Joel 2:28-29

The future hope of a messianic age when the Holy Spirit would be poured out in greater scope than before is a constituent part of messianic prophecy (cf. Is. 11:2; 32:15; 42:1; 44:3 59:21; 61:1; Eze. 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Zec. 12:10). The Joel passage belongs to this same category. It envisions a time when the Spirit would be poured out upon “all people”, and this specifically includes both sons and daughters, both men and women.⁹ While patriarchalism as a cultural phenomenon seems to have severely limited the role of women among God’s people (and women such as Deborah and Huldah must be regarded as exceptions), God promised that in the future there would be an equal blessing to both genders not mediated through the patriarchal system. It would seem, then, that the messianic vision for the future implies that women would be *less* restricted after the outpouring of the Spirit rather than more restricted.

Conclusion

While God’s people in the Old Testament lived under the patriarchal system prevalent in the ancient Near East, there are good reasons for viewing patriarchalism as more cultural driven than divinely mandated. Patriarchalism seems more to be derived from the sinful tendencies inherent in the fall than by God’s ordination. Exceptions to the cultural rule of patriarchy, such as Deborah and Huldah and others, who were spiritually gifted to speak as God’s spokespersons, would seem to be theologically impermissible if God had restricted the role of women based on gender. Rather, their ministries suggest a divine perspective very different than what was culturally dominant. Further, a trajectory toward the future in the

⁹ The text literally reads וְגַם עַל הָעֲבָדִים וְעַל הַשְּׁפָחוֹת (= even upon the men-servants and upon the women-servants), which in turn indicates a blessing not only with respect to gender but also with respect to class.

messianic hope when the Holy Spirit would not be restricted by gender discrimination also suggests a divine perspective other than patriarchy.

Women in Judaism in the Time of Jesus

The patriarchalism of the ancient Near East became especially pronounced within Palestinian Jewish culture by the 1st century AD, so that it was the most patriarchal of all Mediterranean cultures.¹⁰ The only spheres in which women could function were the home and family. Women took no part in public life. Fathers had full authority over all the women in the family.

Expressions of this patriarchalism affected women in significant ways. Religiously, they had only marginal roles. The levitical code was interpreted so that women were restricted from any substantive participation in the synagogue due to the purity laws associated with their menstrual cycle. To form a synagogue, ten male members were required; females did not count.¹¹ Barriers of lattice separated women from men in the synagogue service, and in some synagogues, balconies or galleries were built for women to keep them segregated. They could attend, but only to listen, not participate.

Women could not read or study from the Torah, were not expected to recite the *Shema*, and often did not attend the pilgrim festivals in Jerusalem. They were not privileged to say the blessing at a family meal. While they were bound to observe all the prohibitions in the Torah, the positive ordinances were required for men but not for women. One tradition reads: "If a man gives his daughters knowledge of the Torah, it is as though he taught her lechery."¹² Though women were allowed to perform religious education in the home, generally such education consisted of only the most basic elements and only for children. Schools were for boys only. Women could never function as disciples of a rabbi. Women could not go further into the temple grounds than the Court of the Women, and during their menstrual period or childbirth, they could not go even into the Court of the Gentiles. With respect to legal issues, women were equally restricted. A woman's testimony, except under limited conditions, was considered invalid, because it was interpreted from Genesis 18:15 that all women were liars. Women

¹⁰ The following description of women's roles in 1st century Judaism depends largely upon J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 359-376; B. Witherington, III, *ABD* (1992) 6.957-961; and P. Trible, *IDBSup* (1976) pp. 963-966. Outside Palestine, the role of Jewish women seemed to be somewhat less restricted.

¹¹ It may be remembered that when Paul went to Philippi, he encountered a women's prayer group meeting by the river (cf. Ac. 16:12ff.). Such a women's group implies that there were not ten Jewish men in the city, the required quorum for a formal synagogue.

¹² Mishnah tractate *Sotah* iii.4.

were not entitled to inheritance. While men could obtain a divorce, women could not. Up until the age of 12 ½, fathers could arrange for their daughters' betrothals without their consent, or even sell them as slaves. Betrothal began a process of transferring the girl from the authority of her father to the authority of her husband. (After the age of 12 ½, a girl could not be betrothed against her wish.) Any bride price for a girl was kept by the father. In short, girls were considered to be a source of cheap labor and profit. Apart from betrothal and the more formal processes of marriage, men could acquire a wife simply by intercourse, money or a writ. The question was posed, "Is there any difference between the acquisition of a wife and the acquisition of a slave?", and the implicit answer of the Mishnah was "no". A common phraseology in the Mishnah is the repeated formula, "Women, slaves and children...", where these three categories were lumped together at the lowest end of the social spectrum. The power of a husband over a wife was so total that he was even allowed to sell her into slavery to repay a theft he had himself committed.

Women's roles in public life were as minimal as possible. In Jerusalem, a woman leaving the house would keep her face hidden by a double veil, a head-band covering the forehead with bands to the chin, and a hairnet. Her features could not be recognizable. (One ancient account narrates that a chief priest in Jerusalem once did not even recognize his own mother in public.) For a woman to go into public without this double veil was grounds for divorce, and according to some rabbis, exempted the husband from paying the usual sum of money due his wife upon the divorce. Only on her wedding day would a woman be seen without her double veil. Social rules forbade a woman from being alone with a man who was not her husband. The proper response to a married woman was to avert the eyes. A woman who had conversation with a man on the street could be summarily divorced. According to Philo, the Jewish women in Alexandria "never even approached the outer door" [of the home]. Not surprisingly, the Talmud treated the two most prominent women leaders in the Old Testament, Deborah and Huldah, with disdain.¹³

In summary, it is not altogether surprising to hear Rabbi Juda ben Elai (ca. AD 150) say, "One must utter three doxologies every day: Praise God that he did not create me a heathen! Praise God that he did not create me a woman! Praise God that he did not create me an illiterate person!" Women were taught simply to pray, "Praise God that he created me."¹⁴

¹³ *Megillah* 14b.

¹⁴ P. Jewett, *MAN as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 92-93.

Given the severely limited opportunities for women to participate generally in public life, how do the actions of Jesus impact this institutional marginality?

Luke 8:1-3

Mark 15:40-41

Luke 7:36-50

Matthew 21:31-32

Mark 5:25-34

That Jesus not only included women as his disciples, but also allowed them to travel with him, can only be regarded as astounding (Lk. 8:1-3; Mk. 15:40-41). Given the cultural restrictions placed upon women, this cameo into the life and journeys of Jesus is all the more remarkable. Had Jesus not maintained an unyielding ethic with regard to sexual relationships between unmarried women and men (cf. Mt. 5:27-30), no doubt the common accusation would have been not merely impropriety, but promiscuity. Still, while Jesus was accused of gluttony, drunkenness and fraternizing with the lower classes (e.g., Mt. 11:19//Lk. 7:34), no one ever accused him of sexual impropriety! As a celibate for the sake of God's kingdom (cf. Mt. 19:12), Jesus was free to interact with women as social equals. He did not flinch at being touched by women (Lk. 7:37-38, 45-46; Mk. 5:25-34), an openness that would have been rigorously avoided by most observant male Jews because of the inherent risk of defilement due to the woman's menstrual cycle.¹⁵

That Jesus could say that "prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" [i.e., ahead of the chief priests and elders, cf. Mt. 21:23, 31] was nearly incredible! No one in his generation would ever have dared to express such a sentiment. Of course, Jesus did not condone sexual sin, and in fact, required women so involved to leave such a lifestyle (cf. Jn. 8:11). At the same time, his willingness to forgive such sins was far beyond the expected range of compassion by his contemporaries.

Dorothy Sayers perhaps summarized it best,

¹⁵ The levitical code specified that a woman was unclean during her menstrual cycle for seven days (Lv. 15:19), and the rabbis interpreted this to mean seven days after her discharge of blood had stopped, cf. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), p. 935. Such ritual impurity was transferable to anything or anyone she touched (Lv. 15:20-23). Hence, the risk of a woman being ritually impure at almost any time was high. Jewish living arrangements for centuries had been such that women could be segregated, even in the home. This was accomplished by arranging rooms around a courtyard so that females could be segregated without compromising the rest of the home, cf. S. Bunimovitz and A. Vaust, "Ideology in Stone: Understanding the Four-Room House," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2002), pp. 37-39.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.¹⁶

Given the religious restrictions for women in 1st century Judaism, how do the discipleship relations between Jesus and women impact their status among God’s people?

Luke 10:38-42

John 4:4-42

Mark 7:24-30//Matthew 15:21-28

Matthew 20:20-23

Luke 13:10-17

Matthew 26:6-13//Mark 14:3-9

John 11:20-27

John 20:16

Jesus had women disciples. As unremarkable as such a statement might be for modern folk, it was revolutionary in 1st century Jewish culture! That Jesus allowed Mary to sit at his feet as a disciple was something no self-respecting rabbi would allow, and in fact, Jesus pointedly explained that Mary’s willingness to be so taught was superior to her sister’s domestic duties (Lk. 10:38-42). Jesus engaged a Samaritan woman in theological dialogue (Jn. 4:4-42), thus triple-violating the cultural norms. She was a Samaritan, she was a woman and she was voicing her opinion on theology—all of which Jesus tolerated without acrimony or rejection. His disciples were shocked (cf. Jn. 4:27)! He did the same for a Greek foreigner in Syro-Phoenicia (Mk. 7:24-30//Mt. 15:21-28). When the mother of James and John approached him, while he did not grant her request, still he took her proposal seriously, refusing to dismiss it simply because she was a woman (cf. Mt. 20:20-23). In a synagogue service, where women were supposed to be silent and unobserved, he boldly called forward an afflicted woman in order to heal her in front of everyone (Lk. 13:10-13)! Perhaps most remarkable of all, Jesus engaged Martha in a theological conversation about resurrection in which this woman offered a confession of faith every bit as potent as the

¹⁶ D Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (1971 rpt. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), p. 47.

more famous confession of Simon Peter (Jn. 11:20-27). Compare the two confessions:

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world (Jn. 11:27)

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:16).

When Mary Magdalene saw and finally recognized Jesus on Easter morning, her exclamation was, “My teacher” (rabboni)! This spontaneous exclamation suggests more than simply a formal, nominal title. It suggests that her relationship to Jesus was very much as a pupil to her teacher, something virtually unheard among typical Jewish rabbis. Jesus called both women and men to believe in him, not preferring one over the other. He called both men and women to be his disciples, teaching them and extending to them the privilege of sharing in his mission. Far from restricting them from engaging in theological discussion, he entertained their questions, took them seriously, and responded to them as intently as he did to those of males.

Given the general suspicion about women’s ability to be truthful, what theological significance might there be in the fact that the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection were women?

Matthew 28:1-10

Mark 16:1-11

Luke 24:1-11

John 20:1-2, 10-18

It is well-known that Jesus’ male disciples fled the scene at his arrest and crucifixion (Mt. 26:56; Mk. 14:50), but several of his female disciples stayed to the bitter end (Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 15:40-41; Lk. 23:27, 49, 55; Jn. 19:25-27). Peter, of course, followed at a distance but ended up taking oath on God’s name that he did not know Jesus (Mt. 26:31-35, 69-75; Mk. 14:27-31; 66-72; Lk. 22:31-34, 54-62; Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27). Then, on Easter morning, these same women courageously went in the early morning to visit Jesus’ tomb.

In the context of this early morning visit, Jesus appeared first to his women disciples (Mt. 28:8-10; Mk. 16:9-11; Jn. 20:14-18). Typically, when Jesus’ male disciples heard the testimony of the women, they did not believe it

(Mk. 16:11b; Lk. 24:9-11). Nevertheless, in God's reckoning the witness of these women was sufficient and credible. Some have even suggested that their witness to Jesus' resurrection was the first preaching of the gospel,¹⁷ and while this might seem to be an overstatement, it cannot be denied that they were the first both to see Jesus and to report on his resurrection to others. If God categorically disenfranchised women from theological roles altogether, it would at the very least be grossly inconsistent to call upon women as the first witnesses to the single most important event in human history—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!

If Jesus was open to women in much broader ways than was typical for Jewish 1st century culture, why did he not appoint a woman as one of the twelve apostles?

The difficulty with all speculative questions that cannot be based on hard data is that one's frame of reference undoubtedly will shape the answer. For those who already have decided that women cannot be leaders, the answer is patent: there were no women among the twelve apostles, because only men were eligible. Still, there may well be another factor to consider. This factor is that if the twelve apostles were to symbolize a new Israel, that is, a reconstitution of the eschatological Israel (something nearly all commentators suggest given the sacrosanct symbolic meaning of the number twelve¹⁸) then twelve males corresponding to the twelve sons of Jacob would seem to be appropriate if not necessary. Since the Assyrians exiled the northern nation in the 8th century BC, the independent existence of the twelve tribes had ceased to exist. To be sure, there were remnants of the northern clans, refugees who fled southward to Judah upon the advance of the Assyrians. Nevertheless, the general consensus was that by the time of Jesus there were only two and a half tribes left, Judah, Benjamin and half of Levi. The belief was that in the messianic age the twelve tribes would be reconstituted by divine intervention. Jesus' choice of twelve apostles could hardly be interpreted in any other way than a symbol of the messianic age, and his declaration that they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel clearly points to the eschatological, messianic climax (cf. Mt. 19:28). Hence, it would be difficult for such a symbol to have any clear meaning if some of the twelve apostles were women, since such a mixed group simply would

¹⁷ L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 60.

¹⁸ See, for instance, J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribners, 1971), p. 235 or N. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), p. 300.

not fit the Jewish paradigm. It is to the point, of course, that once one moves beyond the twelve apostles and this symbolism, there are women in positions of leadership in the early church, and among them, there is at least one who is given the title apostle in the broader sense of the word (cf. Ro. 16:7).

The Holy Spirit and Women's Leadership Roles

Two fundamental paradigms for leadership may be seen in the Old Testament. One was dynastic, in which leadership passed from one person to the next on the basis of pedigree, and the office of leadership was institutional. The most prominent dynastic offices were those of priests and kings. Aaron's sons were the high priests associated with sacrifice in the tabernacle and temple (Lv. 21; Nu. 25:10-13). The rest of the levitical clan provided other priestly services (Ex. 32:26-29). David's sons were the kings of Judah (2 Sa. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3-4, 19-37). While there were several dynastic changes in the northern kingdom of Israel during the divided monarchy due to *coup d'etats*, dynastic succession remained the fundamental paradigm.

The other paradigm for leadership was charismatic, that is, it was defined not by office or succession but by the direct calling of God. In contrast to dynastic offices, charismatic leadership was not institutional. The most prominent charismatic leaders in the Old Testament were judges and prophets. Gideon, the one judge who was urged to begin a dynasty, flatly refused (Jg. 8:22-23). Amos probably spoke for all the prophets when he declared, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son..." (Am. 7:14). Again and again the prophets remarked upon their divine calling for ministry as direct rather than inherited (Is. 6:1-8; Je. 1:4-10, 17-19; Eze. 2:1—3:15). The typical rubric for prophetic calling was "the word of the LORD came to..." or some comparable phrase (Ho. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Am. 1:1; Ob. 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zep. 1:1; Hg. 1:1; Zec. 1:1; Mal. 1:1). Hence, it is to be expected that the few women leaders one encounters in the Old Testament fall under the category of charismatic rather than dynastic leadership, since dynastic leadership, by definition, was reserved for male sons. Dynastic leadership roles were gender restrictive, but charismatic leadership roles were not.

In the messianic hope for a new era, the prophets predicted a fundamental change in these paradigms. In the first place, the Messiah himself would become the highest expression of all ministry calling, whether dynastic or charismatic. The Messiah would be both prophet, priest, judge and king. The only messianic title strictly along the lines of dynastic

leadership would be regarding his kingship as God's and David's own Son (Ps. 2; Is. 9:6-7). Most messianic titles, by contrast, are along the lines of charismatic leadership. In this way the Messiah also would be *the Prophet par excellence* (Dt. 18:15-19), chosen as *God's Servant* (Is. 42:1-4), *anointed with the Spirit* to judge the world (Is. 11:1-5), *and ordained as a high priest, though not by inheritance and not from within Aaron's family line* (Ps. 110:4). In fact, the New Testament Book of Hebrews makes much of the fact that Christ Jesus was not a high priest by dynastic transfer but by direct appointment (He. 6:20—8:6).

What would be true of the Messiah would be equally true within the Messianic community, the New Testament church. *Not a single leadership role in the Christian church was designed to be dynastic.*¹⁹ All leadership roles were charismatic, and therefore, all leadership roles were to be defined by divine calling and public recognition. This was no more than what was anticipated by the Old Testament prophets. Foreigners and those once excluded, for instance, would be welcome to participate in the worship of Yahweh so that God's house would be a place of prayer for the nations (Is. 56:3-8). Levites would hold no absolute priority for priestly service, but people from among the nations would now be privileged to serve as Levites (Is. 66:19-21). It was the firm conclusion of the New Testament writers that the priesthood of Aaron and his sons came to an abrupt halt with the priesthood of Jesus (He. 7:11-19; 10:11-18). No more kings from David's line are to be anticipated after the ascension and exaltation of David's greater Son, Jesus. In short, *the only two dynastic offices of the Old Testament have now been fulfilled and superceded in Christ Jesus!*

Does the closure of dynastic leadership and the opening of charismatic anointing upon all God's people have any bearing upon the role of women in the New Testament church?

Acts 1:14; 2:1-4

Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-18

Acts 12:12; 16:14-15; Romans 16:1-7, 12-13, 15; 1 Corinthians

16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2

Roman 12:1

¹⁹ Some Christian traditions, of course, argue for apostolic succession, a theory of ministry that originated in the last quarter of the 2nd century AD. Here, the bishop was held up as the true successor to the apostle who founded the see as well as the one responsible to preserve the truth the apostles taught. He was the guardian of the apostolic Scriptures and the creed. Still, this form of succession is not found in the New Testament, and many Protestant churches have rejected the idea accordingly, cf. R. Higginson, *EDT* (1984) p. 73. In any case, even apostolic succession did not proceed upon the grounds of dynastic descent.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9
 Revelation 1:5a-6; 5:9-10; 20:6
 Acts 18:24-26
 Acts 21:8-9
 1 Corinthians 11:5, 13
 Philippians 4:2-3
 1 Corinthians 14:26
 1 Timothy 2:8-10

Since gender restrictive roles are clearly linked to dynastic leadership (male sons only), and since the New Testament pattern for leadership is charismatic rather than dynastic, there seems to be no good reason for gender restriction to carry over from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Certainly the general trajectory is that the messianic hope opened up new avenues for service among God's people, and this included the service of women. Women, not just men, were present in the group that awaited the descent of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:14), and when the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, the Scripture says "all of them were filled", women the same as men (Ac. 2:1-4). If the descent of the Spirit was in any way an empowerment for Christian service (cf. Ac. 1:8), then it would seem that women as well as men were so empowered to be witnesses for God. Jesus' great commission to "preach the gospel" and "make disciples" and "baptize the nations" (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:45-48; Ac. 1:8) carries with it no gender exclusivity. The followers of Jesus who heard this commission went back to Jerusalem to await the gift of the Spirit to empower them to carry out this commission, and we know that there were women in the group (cf. Ac. 1:14). Are we to understand that the great commission to "preach" this gospel was for males only? Of course, some might argue that this "preaching" was not intended to be preaching in a church setting, but such an explanation requires special pleading. That the commission to "preach the gospel" was made to both men and women is no more than what Joel predicted, who stipulated that both "sons and daughters" and both "men and women" would now be empowered to prophesy (Joel 2:28-29; Ac. 2:16-18). Further, if the form of this prophesy was as Paul described it—the privilege of addressing the church to edify it by words of strength, encouragement and comfort (cf. 1 Co. 14:3-4)—then women as well as men were privileged to so speak. To be sure, in his letters Paul typically expresses his advice to "the brothers" (1 Co. 12:1; 14:6, 20, 26, 39), but it is equally clear that such language is not intended to be male exclusive, else Paul would not have left instructions for women who publicly "prayed" and "prophesied" in a

congregational setting (1 Co. 11:5, 13; 1 Ti. 2:8-10).²⁰ He certainly wants women to participate publicly in a way that is not culturally offensive,²¹ but nonetheless, he does not restrict them. The four daughters of Philip the evangelist, all of whom were prophetically active (Ac. 21:8-9), are clear cases in point.

The gift of prophecy is especially significant in this regard. First, prophecy by definition is a charismatic gift, not an institutional one. It was ranked by St. Paul as second only to apostles, higher even than teachers (1 Co. 12:28). That women could function freely in this leadership role clearly stands in vivid contrast to synagogue practice. Prophets spoke to the whole assembled church (1 Co. 14:4), and the content of their discourse included instruction, encouragement and strengthening (Ac. 15:32; 1 Co. 14:31)²² as well as teaching (1 Co. 14:19).²³ Paul considered the role of the prophet to be foundational for the establishment and growth of the whole church (Ep. 2:20).

The New Testament shows women in several other prominent roles as well. The meeting of the Jerusalem church at the “house of Mary the mother of John” (Ac. 12:12) suggests that she was a prominent figure in the church community,²⁴ and the fact that quite a number of early Christian house churches met in homes owned by women suggests their expanded role from what was typical under Judaism (Ac. 16:14-15; Ro. 16:5; 1 Co. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phlmn 2).

The idea of the whole church as a community of priests is also significant. Whereas priesthood in the old covenant was dynastic and

²⁰ When Paul speaks of males in 1 Ti. 2:8 (ἀνὴρ = male) and females in 2:9 (γυνή = females) following the controlling verb “to pray”, which governs both the males and the females, he intends to give an order for both genders concerning public prayer. Males (men) are to pray publicly “without anger or disputing,” while females (women) are to pray publicly while observing decorum in dress and backed by good deeds.

²¹ The actual expression in 1 Co. 11:5 is ἀκατακάλυπτος (= uncovered, unveiled). For a wife to publicly speak either by prayer or prophecy without the veil, the normal symbol in Roman culture for marriage, would be to invite the accusation of promiscuity, cf. B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1002), pp. 127-130. Still, while this advice tells how a woman should present herself when public speaking to a Christian congregation, in no way does it prohibit her. In fact, her veil is a sign of her authority to pray and prophesy (1 Co. 11:10)!

²² The qualifying verbs used here are: μαρθάνω (= to learn), παρακαλέω (= to urge, appeal to, exhort or encourage), and ἐπιστηρίζω (= to strengthen).

²³ Here, the qualifying verb is κατηχέω (= inform, teach, instruct).

²⁴ House churches met in the (usually larger) homes of more well-to-do members, and it was more-or-less inevitable that the hosts of the house churches would become leaders in the church itself, cf. D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), pp. 83-84. Such hosts were considered to be patrons, cf. P. Lampe, “Paul, Patrons and Clients,” *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. P. Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), pp. 496-497. In Greco-Roman society, a patron was viewed as an important person, and if not an institutional leader, one who naturally would be looked up to with respect.

reserved for Aaron's sons, priesthood in the new covenant is conferred upon the entire body of God's people. They are altogether a "holy priesthood" (1 Pe. 2:5, 9; Rv. 1:6; 20:6), a veritable "kingdom of priests" (Rv. 5:10), who offer themselves as "living sacrifices" (Ro. 12:1; 1 Pe. 2:5). With dynastic priesthood abolished in Christ and a new spiritual priesthood established in which all God's people are included, women as well as men can be priests (and with respect to other categories, Gentiles as well as Jews can be priests, too).

Further, women could be used by God as missionary-teachers, as was Prisca (Ac. 18:24-26). The fact that Prisca is usually named first before her husband probably was significant in the Greco-Roman world, where name order implies priority. In other words, Prisca's name was not just incidentally mentioned alongside her husband—she was named first because she was especially adept in opening the Scriptures to Apollos (cf. Ac. 18:18-19; Ro. 16:3; 2 Ti. 4:19).²⁵ Similarly, Euodia and Syntyche worked side-by-side with Paul in his missionary endeavors, along with his various male co-workers (Phil. 4:2-3).

Hence, one sees a clear widening of the scope for women in the early Christian church, a widening that never would have been possible in Judaism. This expanded role was directly due to the Christian belief that the messiah had come, and in his coming, a new era with new possibilities had been inaugurated. The old way of dynasty was over; the new way of the Spirit had arrived.

Is the nature of New Testament leadership defined primarily by authority or servanthood, by office or calling, by hierarchy or gift? What are the implications with respect to gender?

Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27

Matthew 23:8-12

Acts 14:23

Acts 20:28-31

1 Corinthians 12:28

1 Corinthians 16:15-16

2 Corinthians 1:24

2 Corinthians 11:19-21

Philippians 1:1

1 Thessalonians 5:12

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Titus 1:5-9

Hebrews 13:17

²⁵ B. R. and P. C. Patten, *ISBE* (1986) 3.973.

1 Peter 5:1-4
3 John 1:9-10

There seems little doubt but that in the New Testament, beginning with the teachings of Jesus and continuing through the teachings of the apostles, the older framework of authority, office and hierarchy had given way to a new emphasis on servanthood, calling and giftedness. Jesus flatly rebuked his disciples' tendency to rely on authoritarianism (Mt. 20:25-28//Mk. 10:42-45//Lk. 22:24-27), pointing out that this was the way of the secular authorities. Instead, he said that servanthood is the proper pathway of leadership. His own life as one who "did not come to be served, but to serve" is the fundamental paradigm for New Testament leadership. He sternly warned his disciples not to accrue to themselves titles of distinction, but he urged them toward humility (Mt. 23:8-12).

When leaders emerged in the New Testament church, their leadership was first of all defined by calling. It was the Holy Spirit who set some to be overseers and shepherds (Ac. 20:28). God is the one who appoints ministries in the church (1 Co. 12:28). God "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets," and some of those who were apostles and prophets were women (Ro. 16:7; Ac. 21:9). While Paul advised the Corinthians to voluntarily submit themselves to their leaders, he did so in the context of leaders who "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (1 Co. 16:15-16). About his own ministry, Paul was clear: *We do not lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy* (2 Co. 1:24).

The Corinthians valued their cultural, secular models of power, and hence, they valued leaders who "enslaved" and "exploited" and "took advantage"—even leaders who flaunted their authority by pushing themselves forward and slapping their followers in the face (2 Co. 11:19-21). Some folks may like this method, of course, but it is more a sign of dysfunction rather than health. About such exaltation of authoritarianism, Paul sarcastically quips, "I admit we were too weak for that!" Always, Paul viewed himself and his co-workers as "servants (or slaves) of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:1). To be sure, some "take the lead" in the Lord, but they are qualified not so much by their office but by their hard work (1 Th. 5:12-13).²⁶ It is their Christian character and godly behavior that sets them apart (1 Ti. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9). Yes, it is the responsibility of Christians to submit to and obey their leaders (He. 13:17), but it is equally the responsibility of leaders not to lapse into

²⁶ The NIV translation "over you" in 1 Th. 5:12 is unfortunate, since there is no such expression in the Greek text. Rather, the Greek text literally speaks of "the [ones] laboring among you and taking the lead of you in the Lord and admonishing you". Paul's point is clearly concerning leadership, not authority per se.

authoritarianism and the love of power (1 Pe. 5:1-4). Their leadership should be by example. In fact, those leaders who “love to be first” deserve rebuke (3 Jn. 1:9-10).

The implications of this kind of leadership are far-reaching. It means that the old paradigms of authority and hierarchy are ill-fitted for the new community of the messiah. With respect to gender, it means that the old system of dynasty and dominance are no longer to the fore. The more one argues for authority, office and hierarchy, the easier it is to argue for “male only” leadership. The more one recognizes leadership in servanthood, calling and giftedness, the more one is open to recognizing and appreciating the ministry of anyone God calls, be it either man or woman.

In the general listing of spiritual gifts, were spiritual gifts of leadership restricted to males only?

Romans 12:6-8

1 Corinthians 7:7

1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; 13:1-3, 8; 14:6, 26

Ephesians 4:11

1 Peter 4:9-11

No. In none of Paul’s lists of spiritual gifts does he ever give a gender restriction. If there were such a thing, one would have expected him to say so. For instance, in the choosing of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, there were clear criteria for qualifying a candidate (Ac. 1:21-22). He must be male (ἄνθρωπος = male), he must have been a follower of Jesus for his entire ministry from the baptism performed by John until the ascension, and he must have been an eye-witness of the resurrected Jesus. No such criteria are given with respect to spiritual gifts. Rather, all gifts seem to be open to all God’s people without distinction.

With respect to leadership functions, the instructions of Paul seem driven by giftedness, not categories. Hence, in Romans 12:6 he writes (my literal translation),

And having differing gifts according to the grace given to us...

...whether prophecy [let the one gifted do so] according to the proportion of the faith...

...or ministry [let the one gifted do so] in the ministry...

...or the one teaching [let the one gifted do so] in the teaching...

...or the one exhorting [let the one gifted do so] in the exhortation...

...the one taking the lead [let the one gifted do so] in diligence...

Paul's use of the word "us" (ὁμῖν) in Romans 12:6 seems generally applicable to the whole congregation, not just to the men in the congregation. In all his letters to all the churches one would be hard pressed to find a single instance where Paul writes to a church using the plural pronouns "us" or "you" and by this general usage refers only to the men without some qualifying statement in the context. Especially when writing to a church such as Rome, a church Paul had never visited, it seems gratuitous to assume he could urge its members toward the ministry of these leadership gifts and assume they would automatically know, without being told, that he referred only to males. Rather, a straightforward reading of the text suggests that anyone so gifted should be allowed to exercise his/her gift, and in fact, that the congregation should support them in doing so. This is the force of the NIV's rendering, "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith...if it is leadership, let him govern diligently." It is to the point, of course, that neither the word "man" nor any masculine pronouns are in the Greek text at all. Where they appear they are supplied by the translators and must be taken in the most generic way possible. Better, in this respect, is the older KJV rendering, "whether prophecy, *let us prophesy* according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, *let us wait on our* ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching...he that ruleth, with diligence." What is true in Romans is equally true in the other New Testament passages that address spiritual gifts. While several gift-lists include leadership roles of various kinds, including prophecy, teaching, evangelizing and pastoring, none of them are described as gender exclusive. Peter uses words like "each one" and "anyone" when describing leaders who speak "the very words of God" (1 Pe. 4:10-11). While Paul says that there are different gifts and workings of the Spirit, there is no hint that some of them are reserved for males only (1 Co. 12:4-6). Rather, Paul says God "operates all things in all" (1 Co. 12:6b).²⁷ He uses words like "to each one" (1 Co. 12:7) and addresses the whole church as a unitary body, making no gender distinction (1 Co. 12:12).

Are there adequate reasons for denying to Phoebe or other women the leadership role of deaconess, to Junia the leadership role of apostle, to Euodia and Syntyche the

²⁷ The term πᾶς is inclusive, and while the NIV adds the word "men", making it "all men," the word "men" is not in the Greek text.

leadership role of missionary, or to Prisca the leadership role of teacher?

Romans 16:1-2; 1 Timothy 3:11

Romans 16:7

Philippians 4:2-3

Acts 18:24-26

Four cases, especially, have become lightning rods for debate with respect to women in ministry. The first is Phoebe, described by St. Paul as a *διδασκάλω* (= deacon, minister, servant, Ro. 16:1) of the church in Cenchreae and a *προστατις* (= protector, benefactor, patron, Ro. 16:2). For the first title, older versions simply offered the translation “servant” (so KJV, older English renderings and some of the most conservative newer translations, e.g., ESV, NKJV). However, in other passages of similar context, (e.g., Phil. 1:1; 1 Ti. 3:8, 12), these same versions used the translation “deacon”. Why did they not use the word “deacon” for Phoebe? Was this a prejudiced translation? The question is at least legitimate! By the late 1800s the ASV had added the marginal note to Romans 16:1 “Or, *deaconess*” as an alternative to “servant” (followed, more recently, by the NIV and NASB). With the translation of the RSV (1952), the rendering “deaconess” moved up to the text itself to match the other passages with similar contexts (so also NAB, JB, Phillips, Williams), and since then the discussion has picked up in earnest over just what was Phoebe’s role.

Was Phoebe simply a “helper” (i.e., someone without any official leadership recognition who only did what she was told), or was she actually a recognized leader from the church in Cenchreae, possibly an independent business woman, able to travel and willing to represent Paul to the Roman church? The lines have been sharply drawn. William Hendriksen speaks for the restrictive position when he summarizes, *The lesson is clear. Two extremes should be avoided: (a) that of ordaining women to an ecclesiastical office when there is no warrant for doing so in Scripture; and (b) that of ignoring the very important and valuable services devout and alert women are able to render to the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*²⁸

Essentially, Hendriksen says that women can serve in the church so long as they keep their places and have no recognized leadership roles. N. T. Wright speaks for the alternative position, when he writes, *Attempts to make δίακονος (diakonos) mean something else [i.e., something other than a deacon] fail: to call her a “servant of the church,” with the NIV, does*

²⁸ W. Hendriksen, *Romans [NTC]* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 1981), p. 501.

indeed offer a valid translation of the word, but it merely pushes the problem on a stage, since that would either mean that Phoebe was a paid employee of the church (to do what?) or that there was an order of ministry, otherwise unknown, called “servant.” Wright concludes, She was in a position of leadership, and Paul respected her as such and expected the Roman church to do so as well.²⁹

Phoebe also is called a *προστατις* (= protector, benefactor, patron). The translation “helper” (KJV and other versions) fails to adequately do justice to the nuance that this term held in the Greco-Roman world. Greco-Roman society was composed of vertical relationships of dependency. Patrons held higher status, while clients were those dependent upon the beneficence of the patron. The *pater familias* (father of the household), for instance, was a patron to the members of his household. Freed slaves were expected to remain loyal and respectful to their patron (former owner) for the remainder of their lives, and the patron, in turn, would provide them with legal aid and economic opportunities. Patron-client relationships existed in politics and business as well, with the emperor himself considered as the most prestigious patron of all, since his clientele included senators, equestrians, the army, and all the citizens. With respect to Paul’s letters, Christian patrons and their private households were important in the life of the church. Congregations owned no buildings, so they used the household facilities of Christian patrons as places to meet for worship.³⁰ While it would be too ambitious to argue that patrons were the same as pastors, it would be hard to deny that patrons were persons of influence and leadership.³¹ To the Corinthians, for instance, Paul urges special regard for the patrons who offered their homes to the Christians, even urging the church members to “submit” to them (1 Co. 16:15-16). That Paul names Phoebe as a *προστατις* (patron) of the church puts her in the same category with various other such persons mentioned in his letters. Dunn sums it up nicely: *In short, Paul’s readers were unlikely to think of Phoebe as other than a figure of significance, whose wealth and influence had been put at the disposal of the church in Cenchreae.³²*

²⁹ N. Wright, “Romans,” *NIB* (2002) X.761-762. Sometimes the term *gynaikas* (= women) in 1 Ti. 3:11 is rendered as “deaconesses.” Though some versions use the possessive “their”, there is no comparable possessive pronoun in the Greek text. What IS in the Greek text is the introductory formula *hosautos* (= even so, in the same way), which in turn suggests a corollary order. If so, then what Paul has in view in 1 Ti. 3:11 is not the wives of male deacons, but rather, women deacons (so Williams, Montgomery, Weymouth, NIVmg, NEBmg, NRSVmg, NASBmg).

³⁰ P. Lampe, “Paul, Patrons, and Clients,” *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), pp. 488-498.

³¹ F. Filson, “The Significance of the Early House Churches,” *JBL*, 58 (1939) pp. 105-112.

³² J. Dunn, *Romans 9-16 [WBC]* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), p. 889.

Added to this is the fact that Phoebe seems to have been the courier of the Roman letter, which is why Paul composed his recommendation for her in the first place. Letters of recommendation in the absence of a general postal service were important, since they vouched for the integrity and authenticity of the bearer (not to mention the letter-writer). The Romans would not have known Phoebe, and such couriers were more than just letter-carriers. They were trusted representatives able to expand upon the letters in person (cf. Ep. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8). The courier likely would have been the first person to read the letter publicly, offering any appropriate explanations or expansions at that time.³³

The second case concerns Junia, named by Paul as an apostle and a Christian even earlier than himself (Ro. 16:7). Not only is she named as an apostle, she is numbered “among the apostles”. Since Paul mentions her apostleship in a letter to a congregation which he had never visited, the term “apostle” should be given its normal force as indicating a primary leader in the Christian community.³⁴ The primary issue concerns gender. Was Junia a woman?³⁵ Early English versions consistently render the dative form of the name Ἰουνιᾶν as the female Junia (ASV, KJV, the Latin Vulgate, etc.). In fact, prior to about 1950, Junia was consistently viewed as female, and John Chrysostom’s words may be taken as representative, when he wrote in the 4th century, “How great is the devotion of this woman that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.”³⁶ However, a new trend began in the mid-20th century of taking the name as a contraction of Junianus, and an “s” was added to some of the English translations, converting the name to the masculine form Junias (so RSV, NEB, NIV, NASB, NAB, JB). Unfortunately for this approach, however, is the awkward fact that the masculine form of the name has been found nowhere else in ancient literature, the feminine form has been verified in over 250 ancient examples, the reading is more naturally Junia (feminine), and it was so read from the early church fathers right up through the Middle Ages until relatively recently. The changing of this translation from female to male is doubtful, and the most natural way to read the passage is that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife.³⁷ Today, many if not most scholars agree

³³ W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), p. 46.

³⁴ It would be hard to argue, for instance, that the term apostle here should be given some special nuance when there is no context to call for it.

³⁵ The only textual variant for Junia is the name Julia, which appears in several early manuscripts, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 539. However, clearly this is a feminine name also.

³⁶ *Homilies on Romans*, 31.

³⁷ Dunn, p. 894 and Belleville, p.55.

that the name is certainly feminine, despite what Tom Wright calls “desperate attempts” to assert otherwise.³⁸

That Junia was an apostle marks her as a leader, probably a missionary. She certainly is not numbered among the Twelve, but equally, the phrase “outstanding among the apostles” hardly fits with viewing her as a simple messenger. Rather, as those apostles mentioned elsewhere who were not among the Twelve, she was a leader in Christian missionary work in the same way as Silas and Timothy, Paul’s companions (cf. 1 Th. 1:1; 2:7).³⁹

The third case concerns two women whom Paul mentions as leaders in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3). Paul describes them, along with Clement and others, as *συνεργῶν* (genitive plural form of “co-workers”).⁴⁰ They were women who “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel”. Typically, Paul uses the term “co-worker” for his fellow missionaries or fellow leaders in the churches (cf. Ro. 16:3, 9, 21; 2 Co. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:11; 1 Th. 3:2; Phlmn 1, 24). Precisely what role these two women had is not entirely clear, but it is hardly likely that Paul calls them “co-workers” and “contenders for the gospel” simply because they carried the suitcases. The very fact that they were in a dispute with each other and that their contention might lead to disruption within the whole congregation implies that they were persons of influence. Gordon Fee sums it up succinctly, *...here is one of those pieces of “mute” evidence for women in leadership in the NT, significant in this case for its off-handed, presuppositional way of speaking about them. To deny their role in the church in Philippi is to fly full in the face of the text. Here is the evidence that the Holy Spirit is “gender-blind,” that he speaks as he wills; our task is to recognize his gifting and to “assist” all such people, male and female, to “have the same mindset in the Lord,” so that together they will be effective in doing the gospel.*⁴¹

The fourth case concerns Prisca, the wife of Aquila (Priscilla is a diminutive form of Prisca). Like Euodia and Syntyche, Prisca and her husband are called *συνεργούς* in Romans 16:3 (plural accusative form of “co-worker”). More importantly, she is described as directly involved in the conversion of Apollos by instructing him in the “way of God” (Ac. 18:24-26). The fact that her name is usually mentioned first before her husband (cf. Ac. 18:18-19; Ro. 16:3; 2 Ti. 4:19), which is unusual in the Greco-Roman

³⁸ Wright, p. 762 and R. Cervin, “A Note Regarding the Name ‘Junia(s)’ in Romans 16:7,” *NTS* 40/3 (1994), pp. 464-470.

³⁹ L. Allen, “Romans,” *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 1345.

⁴⁰ The nuance of this word is more-or-less the same as the English word “colleague.”

⁴¹ G. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 398.

world, suggests that she was the more active or more capable member of the duo.⁴² By all accounts, Prisca certainly stood alongside her husband in the instruction of Apollos. In particular, Luke uses the term ἐκτίθημι (= to expound) to describe their teaching ministry, a verb that Luke uses elsewhere to describe Paul's teaching ministry in the Torah and the prophets (cf. Ac. 28:23). Hence, Prisca was actively involved in teaching the Christian message.

In summary, there are several New Testament references to women in active, leadership roles, and there are no good exegetical reasons for denying that they served as deacons, patrons, missionaries, and teachers. Along with those gifted in prophetic ministry, these women served alongside Paul and his other co-workers in the spread and confirmation of the gospel. Gretchen Hull points out that the typical response of nay-sayers in the face of these examples is to plead that they are "exceptions." But, as she also cogently points out, while exceptions might "prove the rule", they do not prove truth. Truth cannot have exceptions, since it is unchangeable. So, she asks, "How could rigid role playing be a timeless truth when Scripture itself not only gave 'exceptions' to such a concept, but also commended women for their actions?"⁴³ How, indeed?

The Restrictive Texts

While the New Testament uses several important designations and describes several important functions for the women among the followers of Jesus, including disciple, witness, apostle, prophet, deacon, missionary, teacher, patron and offering public prayer, there are two passages, especially, that are restrictive. They are:

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

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NIV)

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

1 Timothy 2:11-14 (KJV)

In addition, there are no passages in the New Testament directly describing women as pastors, bishops (overseers) or elders. The criteria in the pastoral

⁴² M. Shrover, *IDB* (1962) 1.176 and P. Lampe, *ABD* (1992) V.468.

⁴³ G. Hull, *Equal to Serve* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987), p. 119.

letters for bishops/elders is given in male terms, such as, “husband of one wife” (1 Ti. 3:2; Tit.1:6). Of course, it equally must be conceded that there are no passages in the New Testament directly forbidding women to be pastors, bishops or elders, but the biblical silence either way, especially when juxtaposed with the foregoing restrictive passages, is frequently taken to mean that God does not call women to serve in such roles. Finally, Paul’s statements about male headship in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, particularly when the definition of headship is interpreted in authoritarian terms, is taken to mean that any woman who would assume the role of a church leader is usurping her God-ordained role of submission. Women are to submit to men; men are to have authority over women.

Without question, these restrictive texts restrict something! The question is, “What, exactly, do they restrict?” The passages themselves raise highly debatable exegetical questions. If they are read in a universal way (i.e., for all times and all places), the result is quite different than if one reads them in a local context (i.e., for a particular time and place in a particular situation). What does “silence” actually mean? Very few churches—even those that are most restrictive—would go so far as to say that women could never speak in public at all. What does it mean to “usurp authority” over a man?

Admittedly, the Greek word translated “authority” (KJV) only appears this one time in the whole New Testament (Greek text), so its definition cannot simply be assumed. When Paul says that God is the “head” of Christ, Christ is the “head” of the man, and the man the “head” of the woman, what, exactly, does this mean? There also is the question about the term translated “women”, since it could equally well be translated “wives.” Are Paul’s instructions directed to all women in the church or only to those who are married? Why does Paul make a point about Eve rather than Adam being deceived? This, in turn, raises a further question: is leadership better to be left to a gender that is prone to deception or a gender that is prone to sinning willfully? In the levitical code, at least, inadvertent sin is treated as less offensive than sinning with a high hand. These, and a host of related questions, make the subject of women in leadership fraught with debate and controversy.

While most churches allow women to teach children or women to teach other women, considerably fewer churches allow women any roles where they would be serving as leaders alongside men or where they would be in a position to instruct or direct men. Some churches do not permit women to serve as deacons (Phoebe, notwithstanding!), and some do not permit women to preach or teach to a mixed congregation. In many cases women are refused ordination on the grounds of gender, since ordination would

mean that women might serve as pastors, elders or overseers. Ostensibly, this reluctance is based upon the restrictive passages cited above, though more subjectively one wonders whether or not male insecurity might also be a factor. Certainly the issue frequently is emotional, combative, doctrinaire and set forth in terms of “Bible-believers” (for the restrictive position) versus “liberals” (for the non-restrictive position).

Do Paul’s instructions about headship and submission necessarily exclude women from positions of leadership in the church?

1 Corinthians 11:3-12

Ephesians 1:10, 22: 4:15; 5:21-33

Colossians 1:18; 2:10, 19

1 Peter 3:1-7

Two terms, especially, call for careful definition. The first is the term “head” (κεφαλή), which Paul uses to describe the relationship between God and Christ, Christ and man, and man and woman (1 Co. 11:3). A fierce debate has ensued in recent years. Obviously, Paul is using a metaphor, but what is the reality behind the metaphor? Two primary alternatives are offered.

The first is that the metaphor “head” means “authority over.” This idea is based upon the human head (or the brain) as the control center of the body, and hence points to a hierarchical structure. God is the “head” of Christ in the sense that Christ submits to the will of the Father. Christ is the “head” of man in the sense that he holds authority over the human race. Man is the “head” of woman in the sense that he has authority over woman. The woman is therefore “under” the man.⁴⁴ The usage of the term “head” with the preposition “over” (Ep. 1:22)⁴⁵ and its connection with the ideas of “rule” and “authority” (Col. 2:10) reinforce this hierarchical interpretation. As such, male headship interpreted in terms of “authority over” precludes women from serving in leadership positions where they would be over males. Women cannot serve as pastors, bishops or elders. They cannot teach in a gender-mixed setting. They cannot speak publicly in church services where their speaking could in any way be construed as directive.

⁴⁴ W. Grudem, “Does κεφαλή Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* 6 NS [1], pp. 38-59; J. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 167.

⁴⁵ ὑπέρ with an accusative indicates something that excels, surpasses or is over and beyond, cf. *BDAG* (2000) p. 1031.

The second alternative for understanding the metaphor “head” contends that it does not refer to “authority over” but rather “source”, more or less like the modern metaphor of the “head of a river” or the idea of a source of life. Here, God is the “head” of Christ, not as a chief or ruler, but as source or origin of the incarnation.⁴⁶ In fact, in Christian theology Christ and the Father are co-equal members of the Trinity, not a hierarchy of persons. To be sure, in the incarnation Christ voluntarily submitted to the Father’s will. Still, the fact that this was a submission of loving obedience with respect to death on the cross implies that it must be understood in terms of the human life of Jesus, not an eternal hierarchy of power. Rather, the classical Christian understanding of the Persons of the Trinity has been in terms of co-equality, co-existence and co-eternality, not ontological hierarchy. If one urges such a hierarchy with respect to Christ outside the incarnation, one comes very close to Arianism, the ancient heresy condemned in the Nicene Creed.⁴⁷ Had Paul intended to stress rulership or hierarchy, he would have been more apt to use the word ἀρχή (= ruler, authority) than κεφαλή. In using the word “head,” Paul intends to teach that God is the “source” of Christ, since Christ is the incarnation of God. Christ is the “source” of the man, since God created all things through Jesus Christ, and in fact, creates anew all those who believe in him. Likewise, the man is the “source” of woman, since in the creation the woman was taken from the man.⁴⁸ That this is the ancient understanding of this metaphor is clearly stated by Cyril of Alexandria in the 5th century.⁴⁹

Of course, the question is appropriate: what does it mean to say that man is the source of woman or that the husband is the source of the wife? From the standpoint of perceptions in the ancient world, the head was considered the source of life, analogous to the root of life.⁵⁰ Philo, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, used the head to describe that from which

⁴⁶S. Bedale, “The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 5 [2], p. 214 and B. & A. Michelsen, “What Does *Kephale* Mean in the New Testament?” *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 97-110.

⁴⁷ One might do well to consider the words of St. John Chrysostom (AD 345?-407) in this regard: “‘But the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.’ Here the heretics rush upon us with certain declaration of inferiority, which out of these words they contrive against the Son,” cf. *Homilies on First Corinthians*, xxvi. Chrysostom goes on to argue that if Paul had intended the idea of rule and subjection, he would have used the imagery of master and slave, not headship.

⁴⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 392-428), for instance, comments on woman with man as her head by saying, “...since she had taken her being from him,” *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*.

⁴⁹ No less than four times in treating the passage in 1 Corinthians 11 does Cyril (d. AD 444) indicate that “head means source”, cf. C. Kroeger, “The Classical Concept of Head as ‘Source’”, *Equal to Serve*, ed. G. Hull (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987), pp. 268-269.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, 91a.

inspiration comes.⁵¹ More to the point, Paul uses the word κεφαλή to describe Christ as the source of growth and sustenance for the church.

We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. (Ep. 4:15)

...the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. (Col. 2:19)

Hence, in marriage the husband is the “source” or “resource” of the wife, which implies his duty to protect, support and sustain. Certainly, this metaphor speaks to the husband’s leadership capacity, but at the same time, it does not restrict the wife.

At a practical level, several things should be observed. First, if headship restricts a woman from speaking in public in a way that could be construed as directive, then Paul contradicts himself by recommending and allowing women any leadership role at all. As we have seen, he does, in fact, allow women considerable room in “directive” type ministries (e.g., Prisca, Phoebe, Junia, Euodia and Syntyche). Further, public prayer and prophecy, however one defines it, can hardly be exempt from being directive. True, Paul urges that husbands are the head of their wives, just as Christ is the head of the church (Ep. 5:23), but he prefaces this statement by an affirmation of mutual submission of one to the other: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ep. 5:22). This is hardly the language of hierarchy! Just as wives are to offer voluntary submission to their husbands, so also, husbands are to give themselves up for their wives, just as Christ surrendered his life for the church (Ep. 5:24-25).

The second term requiring careful definition is the verb ὑποτάσσω (= to submit to, to be identified with).⁵² It should first of all be observed that Paul’s instructions about submission concerns wives and husbands specifically, not women and men generally. While the New Testament is clear that wives should voluntarily submit to their husbands out of freedom, the New Testament does not require that women unilaterally submit to men. When this verb is used with respect to wives and husbands, it appears in the middle voice, which in turn implies a voluntary act.⁵³ Had Paul wished to

⁵¹ Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments*, 125.

⁵² For the range of meanings in early Greek literature, see H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 1897.

⁵³ Middle voice verbs are a form in which the subject of the verb acts in such a way as to affect itself, hence, a voluntary action. Paul does not use the active voice (which would mean “to subject to” or “to subordinate”). Rather, he uses the middle voice which stresses the voluntary nature of the act, cf. J. Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 38-41. Peter uses this verb in the same middle voice with respect to wives and husbands (1 Pe. 3:1ff.).

say that wives are compelled to submit, he would have used verbs like ὑπακούω (= to obey, to be subject to) or πειθαρχέω (= obey). In fact, Paul does indeed use the first of these verbs with respect to children obeying parents (Ep. 6:1; Col. 3:20) and slaves obeying masters (Ep. 6:5; Col. 3:22). He uses the second to refer to citizens obeying magistrates (Tit. 3:1). However, he does not use either to refer to wives and husbands.⁵⁴ Rather, he urges wives to voluntarily submit to their husbands as unto Christ, and he urges husbands to love their wives even to the point of self-sacrifice.

There may even be another factor in Paul's use of the verb ὑπατάσσω. In the 1st century, a popular form of marriage devised by Augustus, called *sine manu* (= marriage "without hand"), provided that the wife and her dowry remain under the jurisdiction of her father's family. Periodically, the woman must go back home to her own family, maintaining loyalty to them. Her relatives, in turn, controlled her property, though income from her dowry was surrendered to her husband. Her family could remove her from the home of her husband and marry her to someone else if they so desired. For Christian couples in which the woman's parental family was pagan, the risk of an unstable marriage was considerable. *Sine manu* marriage threatened permanence, and by the time of Claudius in the middle of the 1st century, attempts to abolish it by legislation began to appear, though it did not finally fall into disuse until the 2nd century. *Sine manu* marriage was the most common form in the empire during Paul's era, and Ephesus and Corinth were Roman cities. Some scholars suggest that Paul's language using the verb ὑπατάσσω might be better understood in the sense of "to be identified with", that is, that "just as the husband was asked to leave his family, the wife was being asked to leave hers and attach herself to her husband, [so as] to be identified with him" (rather than remain under the jurisdiction of her parental family).⁵⁵ In any case, it is doubtful to argue that Paul required unilateral subjugation of women to men based on this verb.

Does Paul's "male" language in his criteria for elders and bishops necessarily exclude women from positions of leadership in the church?

1 Timothy 3:2-13

Titus 1:6-9

⁵⁴ Oddly enough, the older wedding ceremonies actually used the expression in the statements of intent, "Wilt thou obey him...", even though this expression is not found in the Bible. However, this wording owes more to the spirit of the times than to biblical fidelity.

⁵⁵ Kroeger, "The Classical Concept of Head as 'Source'", pp. 280-282.

In listing the qualifications for overseers, elders and deacons, Paul uses male language in specifying that such leaders must be the “husband of one wife” (1 Ti. 3:2, 12; Tit. 1:6). Accordingly, many have read these passages as requiring exclusively male candidates. However, there are some mitigating factors that often are overlooked.

First, for any proper interpretation, one must determine what kind of criteria Paul actually intends for these leaders. Are they categorical (that is, are they intended to exclude certain people by categories) or are they character qualifications (that is, are they intended to describe the kinds of moral qualities that leaders should have). The use of male language was commonly used for all people—male or female—in typical 1st century writing. Paul does this himself when he regularly refers to members of the Christian fellowship as “brothers” (cf. Ro. 1:13; 7:1; 8:12; 10:1; 12:1; 15:14, 30; 16:17; 1 Co. 1:10-11, 26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24, 29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6, 20, 26, 39; 15:1, 31, 50, 58; 16:20 and etc.). No one seriously argues that when Paul says “brothers” he thereby intends to exclude the “sisters”. When Paul urges in the context of the Eucharist that “a man ought to examine himself” (1 Co. 11:28), no one concludes that women are therefore exempt. Rather, Paul’s male language is universally understood to be inclusive. Had Paul wanted to categorically restrict women from being overseers, elders or deacons, he would have said, “An overseer/elder/deacon must be a male”, or alternatively, “An overseer/elder/deacon must not be a woman.”

Oddly enough, if the interpretation were followed consistently that Paul is here intending to exclude certain categories, then one would also have to argue that no one could be an overseer/elder/deacon who was unmarried, since it says “husband of one wife.” Such an argument would exclude Paul himself (not to mention, Jesus)! The same could be said of parenthood, since the criteria include the management of family and children. Would we then argue that a man who had no offspring was disqualified from leadership?

It seems apparent that Paul’s criteria are quite definitely along the lines of character qualifications, not categorical restrictions. This is even more apparent since these criteria include deacons, and we know that Paul names Phoebe, a woman, as a deacon of the church in Cenchrea (Ro. 16:1). That Paul says a deacon is to be “the husband of one wife” does not seem to exclude Phoebe! Also to be considered is that when Paul uses the introductory formula ὡσαύτως (= similarly, likewise) in 1 Timothy 3:11, his language suggests that a corollary is in view. This has led not a few translators to offer the alternative rendering of γυναικας (= women) as “deaconesses” (so NIVmg, NASBmg, NEBmg, Montgomery). This point

may be more ambiguous, since it cannot be settled on the grounds of grammar alone. It certainly is possible to translate this word as “wives,” but nothing in the context requires it, and there are good arguments for translating it as deaconesses.⁵⁶

How can the demand for women to be silent in the congregation be reconciled with the statement that women have authority to prophesy or pray publicly?

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

1 Corinthians 11:10

Paul’s instructions concerning the public exercise of certain spiritual gifts aim at maintaining orderly congregational worship (1 Co. 14:40). To this end he restricts certain verbal expressions in public. Those with the gift of speaking in tongues are not to exercise it publicly if there is no one present to translate their offering of praise into the common language of the congregation (1 Co. 14:13-25). Prophets who wish to speak must do so one at a time rather than interrupt each other by attempting to speak simultaneously (1 Co. 14:29-33). In both these restrictions (14:28, 30), Paul uses the expression *sigatw* (= let him be silent).⁵⁷

In this context of calling for orderly worship, Paul also addresses *gunai?kej* (= wives, women), and here he uses the same verb *sigatwsan* (= let them be silent, 14:34).⁵⁸ While formally the term *gunai?kej* could be translated either “wives” or “women”, in this case it is almost certain that Paul intends the former, since he mentions “their own husbands” (*tou>j i]di<ouj a`ndraj*). Wives (not women generally) are commanded not to speak in the worship service, but to remain silent, and if they have questions, they are to ask their own husbands at home. This command for wives is part of a triple series in

⁵⁶ There is nothing in the Greek text corresponding to the possessive “their”, which appears in many English versions notwithstanding. If wives were intended, one would have expected such a qualifier to be present. “An argument in favor of deaconesses is that the term is used absolutely. If wives of deacons were meant, a qualifier would be expected, ‘their wives.’ A further argument is the introductory term, ‘likewise,’ which prepares the reader for a reference to women exercising ecclesiastical functions,” cf. G. Denzer, “The Pastoral Letters,” *JBC* (1968)II.354.

⁵⁷ The intransitive form of the verb *σιγᾶω* means silence, either by saying nothing or by stopping speech, cf. *BDAG* (2000) p. 922.

⁵⁸ It at least should be mentioned that several ancient texts transpose verses 34-35 to follow verse 40, and at least one text has the same set of verses in *both* places, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 565.. This textual dislocation has convinced a number of scholars that the verses are interpolations, probably an early marginal gloss that was subsequently incorporated into the text, cf. G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 699-705. For the purposes of this study, we shall treat the verses as authentic for the sake of argument, keeping in mind that there is a case for the alternative position.

which silence is enjoined: tongues-speakers are to be silent if there is no interpreter; prophecies are to be suspended if necessary to ensure that no more than one person is speaking at a given time; wives are not to interrupt the service by discussing issues among themselves or calling out questions to their husbands. The command for silence is absolute. Paul's point is that to carry on a running dialogue with someone else while the worship service is in progress is "disgraceful".⁵⁹

It is patently clear, of course, that Paul's instructions here are situational. He does not intend to say that those gifted in languages or prophecy are never to speak in church or that women are never to speak in church. In fact, earlier in the same letter he not only permits women to pray and prophesy publicly, he also affirms that a woman with a head covering has the authority to do so (11:10). Rather, his instructions are clearly against disrupting the worship service. Wives must be in submission to the orderly principles of church worship. What was to be true in Corinth was equally true in all other Christian assemblies.

Does not Paul forbid women to teach, that they are morally inferior to men, and that their obligation is to be silent?

1 Timothy 2:11-15

This passage is by far the most controversial in the New Testament with respect to the role of women in the church. In the first place, there are significant translation difficulties.

How should one translate the term $\eta\gamma\alpha\mu\eta\tau\eta$ (either "woman" or "wife").

How should one translate the expression $\eta\sigma\upsilon\lambda\lambda\eta\sigma\alpha\tau\iota$? Does it mean she is to "learn in silence" (i.e., don't speak out publicly, so KJV) or she is to "learn quietly" (i.e., she is not to disrupt worship, so NASB)?

To whom or what is she to be in "full submission" ($\pi\alpha\sigma\chi\alpha\sigma\tau\iota$)? The object of this submission is unstated. Does Paul mean she is to be in submission to the church, in submission to men generally, or in submission to her husband?

How should one render the phrase $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\pi\iota\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\sigma\sigma\omega$? If one translates it absolutely, "I do not permit", it indicates habitual practice (so NIV). If one translates it periphrastically, "I am not permitting", it indicates a temporary

⁵⁹ The addendum "as the Law says" is difficult to place, since there is no passage in the Torah that states such a rule in this way. It may be that Paul is making a general reference to the law with its combined testimony that no one person can become a law to themselves. This certainly is demonstrated by a whole series of rebellious incidents in the ancient community (cf. Nu. 11:1ff., 12:1ff., 14:1ff., 15:32ff., 16:1ff., etc.).

restriction for the present time, e.g., “I am not [i.e., at this time] giving permission for a woman to teach...” (so JB).

What is the meaning of *au]qentei?n*, a rare word that appears only here in the New Testament? It certainly is not the usual Greek word that Paul uses to describe authority.⁶⁰ Does it mean “to have authority over”, implying a prohibition of female leadership altogether (so NASB)? Does it mean “to dominate”, implying an abuse of leadership power by women who are already leaders (so Berkeley Version)?⁶¹

In addition to translation issues, there are significant interpretive issues, particularly in the latter part of the passage.

Why does Paul say Adam was created first? Does he intend this as a statement about rank (i.e., Adam was superior to Eve) or a statement correcting a popular Ephesian myth (i.e., a myth advocating that the woman was the first created being)?

Is Paul’s statement that the woman was deceived intended as a derogation toward all women (i.e., women are not to be trusted) or the refutation of an Ephesian myth (i.e., a myth advocating that the woman was the source of all wisdom)?

How is the woman “saved” through child bearing? The grammar is complex, for literally it reads, “*She* shall be saved....if *they* remain in faith...” Who is the “she” and who are the “they”?⁶²

At the very outset, it should be remembered that a basic principle of all sound interpretation is that ambiguous passages should give way to clear passages.⁶³ However one falls on the above translational and interpretive options, it would be wise to avoid putting too much doctrinal weight on this text alone, since it has more than its fair share of ambiguities.

⁶⁰ Usually, Paul uses the word *ἐξουσία* for authority.

⁶¹ Since this word appears nowhere else in the New Testament, the translator must rely upon definitions that come from other Greek sources in antiquity. Definitions in antiquity for the verb *αὐθεντέω* (the text in 1 Ti. uses an infinitive form of this verb) range from to “have full power over” to “perpetrate authority over” to “murder” to “have absolute sway”, Liddell & Scott, p. 275. From the period of Paul, Moulton & Milligan indicate that it carries the nuance of being an autocrat, cf. *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 91. Colin Brown notes that the passage in 1 Ti. “might be interpreted not as an absolute prohibition of women teaching but as a repudiation of allowing them to domineer and lay down the law,” “Woman,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. C. Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3.1066. Hence, the most up-to-date lexical treatment of this verb says it means “to assume a stance of independent authority...to dictate to”, cf. *BDAG* (2000) 150.

⁶² The NIV has changed the “she” to “women” for a smoother English rendering, but it may very well distort Paul’s meaning. In any case, it is not what Paul wrote.

⁶³ B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 104.

The most restrictive approach to this passage (sometimes labeled “hard patriarchalism”) sees it as a categorical prohibition. Here, women are to be silent in a congregational setting. They can listen, but they cannot say anything. They must be in total submission to men. Under no circumstance may they teach men. They can have no leadership role in the church, at least if such a role would require them to be directive to men, for they were divinely created to be in submission to men. To do otherwise would usurp the woman’s God-ordained role to be under male authority. The order of creation is hierarchical. Adam was created first; therefore, males are superior. Eve, not Adam, was deceived in Eden. Women are by disposition inclined to be fooled, and therefore, they are more apt to be tricked into transgression.⁶⁴

A less restrictive approach (sometimes labeled “soft patriarchalism”) reads the passage as allowing women to learn quietly so long as they do not disrupt the worship service. They should be in submission to their husbands, and they cannot be a teacher of men, though they may teach other women and also young children. They cannot serve as overseers or elders, since such a role would be a usurpation of the God-ordained pattern that men are to be the primary leaders in the church, but they can serve in lesser roles (e.g., administrative, supportive, secretarial, etc.). The creation sets the hierarchical order. Men were created first; therefore, men should be the primary leaders. Eve was the first to fall into disobedience; therefore, women should not be the primary leaders. However, women may serve in subordinate roles in the church so long as they serve under the jurisdiction of a male leader. They may speak publicly, so long as they do so in submission to their husbands or fathers or male congregational leaders.⁶⁵

An egalitarian approach reads the passage as a temporary restriction upon women in the Ephesian church due to the rise of a matriarchal heresy with roots in Ephesian paganism and the beginnings of Gnosticism. This position emphasizes the cultural context of Ephesus (1 Ti. 1:3), a Roman city with an extensive history in mother goddess worship and whose patron deity, Artemis, was famous throughout the Roman world. When Gnostic ideas began to infiltrate Ephesus via Judaism, the notion of feminine mediators was advanced so that men could only learn the esoteric knowledge of the Gnostics from women, several of whom are known by name. To be sure, what we know of Asian Gnosticism comes from documents somewhat later than the writing of the pastoral letters (2nd century AD), but at the same, many scholars have suggested that incipient Gnosticism (i.e., an early

⁶⁴ This approach is most typical of fundamentalist, separatist churches.

⁶⁵ This approach is to be found in many traditional evangelical churches.

developing form of Gnostic thought) probably underlies not only the Pastoral Letters, but also Paul's Colossian letter and perhaps the letters of John. The female was perceived to be the primal source of spiritual knowledge, an idea present in Ephesian myths but transferred over into formative Gnostic teachings. Such mysticism held that Eve pre-existed before Adam, and in fact, was responsible for infusing him with life. Sophia Zoe (= Wisdom-Life), an alias for Eve, created Adam before the fleshly Eve was removed from his side. She breathed life into him, and she is the one who holds the power of enlightenment. Adam was ignorant of the true state of affairs, tricked into believing that he was created first. His enlightenment—the Gnostic secret knowledge that his source of life was the feminine-divine—could only be revealed by the woman, and the Gnostics' claim was that they held the key to this enlightenment.⁶⁶ If the foregoing culture of Ephesus lies behind Paul's statements in 1 Timothy, then the reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 takes on quite a different cast. Certainly, there could hardly be a more pointed disagreement between St. Paul and the Gnostic mythologies:

GNOSTIC LITERATURE

The Hypostasis of the Archons, 2.89

The spirit-filled woman came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." And when he saw her, he said, "You are the one who has given me life."

On the Origin of the World, 2.5.116

But let us not tell Adam because he is not from among us, but let us bring a sleep upon him, and let us teach him in his sleep as if she [Eve] came into being from his rib...

ST. PAUL

1 Timothy 2:13

For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

1 Timothy 2:14

And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

That some sort of feminine aggression was prominent among Ephesus' false teachers seems apparent, for Paul rebukes the ostentatious dress of such women who flaunted themselves in public worship (1 Ti. 2:9-10). He calls to silence any women leaders who were given to malicious talk (1 Ti. 3:11; 5:13) and rebukes those spreading "godless myths and old wives' tales" (1 Ti. 4:7). Near the end of the letter, he warns against "godless chatter" and

⁶⁶ Incidentally, this Gnostic teaching about the feminine-divine is part and parcel of the best selling novel by Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), which seeks to perpetrate on a modern audience the same heresy that arose in the ancient world. For a full treatment of incipient Gnostic influence and its relevance to 1 Timothy 2:11-15, see R. and C. Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

“opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Ti. 6:20-21). His language about “what is falsely called knowledge” is an admirable description of what we know of Gnostic thought a few decades later. How far developed Gnostic ideas were at this early stage is difficult to ascertain, but the similarities are striking. In any case, Paul was blunt: such female-perpetrated heresies already had induced some to turn away from the true gospel of Jesus Christ to follow Satan (1 Ti. 5:17).

If this is the context, then Paul’s restrictions in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 are to be read in their local setting. He is not issuing universal demands that women never speak in church, never occupy positions of leadership, or never are allowed to teach. Rather, he is emphatically shutting down a virulent heresy in Ephesus, demonstrating by his citations from the Book of Genesis how distorted was this false teaching. The feminists were wrong: Adam, not Eve, was created first. Eve, not Adam, was deceived by the snake.

With respect to the translational and hermeneutical issues mentioned earlier, the egalitarian reading opts for the following. Paul’s instructions are directed especially toward women leaders who had adopted from their own Ephesian culture (whether pagan or Gnostic) the notion of female supremacy. His instructions to “learn in silence” are absolute, though temporary. He wants these women to immediately stop their inculcation of such ideas and to submit themselves to the authority of the whole church (as opposed to taking a stance of independent authority). He flatly forbids such women to become autocrats over the men in the church. The false teaching was flawed from its origin. The assertion that the woman was created first was flatly contradicted by the Genesis record as was the notion that the woman was the primal source of all wisdom. In fact, Eve was deceived by the snake!

In the end, Paul’s words are not universal restrictions against women in church life. They are local restrictions against women who advocated some sort of female primacy over men.

Even if there is ambiguity in some of the biblical texts, would it not be best to restrict women from leadership positions so as to err, if at all, on the side of safety?

1 Corinthians 1:1; 9:1-2, 16-17

Romans 12:6-8

Romans 11:29

Galatians 3:26-28

At first glance, the advice to err on the side of safety seems reasonable. However, if such advice had been followed consistently, the Christian world would never have moved beyond the advocacy of slavery or racial discrimination! The same Paul who is so often touted as being restrictive toward women also clearly writes: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Ga. 3:26-28). If this is true, then the notion of erring on the side of safety is misdirected. The early church, through great difficulty, overcame the natural prejudice of the Jew toward the non-Jew. It took the church many hundreds of years to move beyond the horrors of inequality expressed in slavery. Racial and class prejudice are threads in the same garment as gender prejudice. Sometimes one hears the argument that “women and men are spiritually equal, but they must keep their separate places nonetheless”. What if one were to use that same logic and apply it to different nationalities? What if one were to use that same logic and apply it to different social classes? In fact, such arguments were once employed by Christians who wished to maintain the institution of slavery!

Paul’s apostleship may be a case in point. Paul typically begins his letters by identifying himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ (e.g., 1 Co. 1:1). Not everyone was eager to accept him on such terms. There were other apostles, and Paul frankly conceded that he was an apostle “abnormally born” (1 Co. 15:8), since he did not see the risen Christ until after the ascension. Still, even though his apostleship was derogated by some, Paul did not back down. To the Corinthians he wrote, “Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Co. 9:1-2). The proof of his apostleship was his calling and ministry. Had Paul taken the tack that he should err on the side of safety, he would never have become a missionary to the Gentiles! He would have fallen short of God’s purpose for him, and the church would be the poorer for it.

The same approach is appropriate for women in ministry. Their calling and gifts are self-authenticating to the church. So, as Paul urges the Romans, “If [a person’s gift is] prophesying, let him/her use it in proportion to his/her faith! If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ...if it is leadership, let him govern diligently” (Ro. 12:6b-8). If God’s gifts and callings are irrevocable, and Paul says that they are (Ro. 11:29), then the advice to “play it safe” may seem noble but, in the end, may work against

God's will. What might seem "safe" may end up being in defiance of what God has ordered.

In the end, the final question is, "Did God change his mind?" Did God...

- ...choose Miriam as a prophetess and leader in the exodus,
- ...call Deborah to be a judge in ancient Israel,
- ...inspire Huldah, the prophetess, to interpret the meaning of the Torah scroll for Josiah,
- ...allow women to be disciples of Jesus,
- ...use Mary Magdalene and the other women as the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection,
- ...baptize women with the Spirit so they could spread the gospel,
- ...anoint the daughters of Philip with the gift of prophecy,
- ...use women as patrons of house churches,
- ...give women authority to prophesy and pray publicly,
- ...inspire Prisca to enlighten Apollos more fully about the gospel,
- ...call Euodia and Syntyche to be fellow-missionaries alongside Paul,
- ...use Phoebe as a deacon and protector of the church in Cenchrea,
- ...call Junia to be an early apostle of the church,

...and then, abruptly near the end of Paul's life, simply cut it all off like a cat's tail? This seems to be a very unconvincing and tendentious reading of the biblical text. Even if one were to concede that a woman in leadership is outside the norm, it still remains that God often worked outside such norms. In the ancient world, the law of primogeniture was linked to patriarchy, and the rights of the eldest son were sacrosanct. It is in this sense that God calls Israel his "firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22-23), and it is for this reason that Christ Jesus is called God's firstborn son (Ro. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; He. 1:6; Rv. 1:5). Nevertheless, "God's path of promise frequently overturns the 'firstborn rules' convention in order to draw attention to character, disposition of the heart toward God and leadership abilities."⁶⁷ Many examples of God circumventing the norm of primogeniture exist in the Bible, including Shem over Japheth (Ge. 10:21; 9:27), Isaac over Ishmael (Ge. 16:15; 17:19-21), Jacob over Esau (Ge. 25:23), Ephraim over Manasseh (Ge. 48:12-14), Perez over Zerah (Ge. 38:27-30; Mt. 1:3), Moses over Aaron (Ex. 6:20; 7:1), David over his brothers (1 Sa. 16:6, 11; 17:13-14), and Solomon over Adonijah (1 Kg. 1:5-6, 17; 1 Chr. 3:5). God's calling and gifts take precedence over such cultural norms. By analogy, Paul says that God's choice of the younger over the older illustrates a basic principle, and the

⁶⁷ W. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), p. 139.

principle is this: God's purposes stand, not by works but by him who calls (Ro. 9:10-13). If one takes seriously the Bible as God's Word, then he/she must be equally serious about accepting the whole counsel of God—what it says everywhere, not merely what it says somewhere. If, in fact, God changed his mind, allowing women roles of leadership in the Old Testament and the earliest period of the church, and then suspending their privilege for the rest of the church age, it leaves Paul and other biblical writers in some sort of final conflict with themselves, a sort of theological schizophrenia.

Paul's advice to Timothy, who was derogated for being too young, may be fitting advice for any woman who aspires to ministry: *Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry* (2 Ti. 4:5). This, and only this, is the "safe" route!