

CONTENTS

Perspectives In Tension	2
<i>The Attitudes Of Leadership</i>	8
<i>The Meaning Of Headship</i>	10
<i>The Danger Of Building On Problems</i>	12
<i>The Mix Of Culture And Creation</i>	14
<i>The Scope Of Equality</i>	16
<i>The Scope Of Mutual Submission</i>	18
<i>The Women Of The Bible</i>	20
<i>The Unchallenged Opportunity</i>	22
<i>The Necessity Of Love</i>	24
Moving To Conclusion	26
An Ongoing Concern	32

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT WOMEN IN MINISTRY?

Does the apostle Paul give us the final word when he says, "There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"? (Gal. 3:28). If so, what did he mean when he wrote, "The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"? (1 Cor. 11:3).

While there are differences of opinion even among RBC staff members about how to resolve principles of equality and headship in ministry, this booklet is offered with the prayer that each of us will arrive at conclusions that are wise, loving, and biblical.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version, ©1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers

Copyright © 1992, 2001 RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cover Design: Terry Bidgood

Printed in USA

PERSPECTIVES IN TENSION

The story is told of a tragic car accident involving a father and son. The father was pronounced dead at the scene as his child was rushed off in an ambulance. Upon arrival at the hospital, the son was moved quickly to surgery. Orderlies, nurses, and doctors reacted with the awareness that every second counted. As the surgeon donned gloves and mask, however, the unexpected happened. Looking into the face of the boy for the first time, the doctor looked away saying, "I can't operate. This patient is my son!" Alarm spread among the surgical attendants. How could this be? The boy's father had died.

Many who hear this story for the first time find it confusing. The doctor's

reaction doesn't seem to make sense. The son was not adopted and never had more than one father. Few guess quickly that the surgeon was the victim's mother.

It is difficult to change habits of thinking. In spite of legislation designed to remove sexual prejudice from the workplace (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), gender-defined roles and expectations remain burned into our minds.

Many in our day are wondering to what extent such cultural perception has also shaped our views of women in ministry. A growing number of men and women believe that when a church refuses to allow a woman to preach, baptize, distribute communion, or lead a business meeting, it is being influenced more by human tradition than by the will of God. As a result, some denominations have

adopted policies calling for the ordination and full participation of women in all aspects of church life and leadership.

Until recently, most of the churches willing to ordain a woman pastor were those lacking a high view of Scripture.

Such trends deserve careful evaluation. Until recently, most of the congregations willing to ordain women to pastoral ministry were those lacking a high view of Scripture. It was usually the minister trained in a liberal seminary who taught his congregation that the apostle Paul could not be trusted when it came to his view of women in the church. There was no other way they could adequately

discount the limitations that Paul seemed to place on women in ministry.

Today, the picture has changed. The cause of women in ministry is being led by people who confess to a high view of Scripture. This group is raising questions not about Paul, but about traditional interpretations of key texts. The result is that widely respected Bible teachers and scholars are now saying they are not so sure the Scriptures require us to place ministry restrictions on women. Such men and women say that what they are sure of is that the Scriptures are not as male-oriented as they once thought. Many believe that male leadership in both the home and church has been so exploitative and abusive of women that any interpretation giving men authority over women is dangerous.

The result is that with the recognition of past mistakes, unanswered questions of interpretation, problems of application, and the endorsements of many respected leaders, an increased number of conservative Christians are opening up to the idea of woman-led churches.

“Christians For Biblical Equality” is one group that has published a statement in Christian periodicals calling for a rethinking of gender-defined roles for men and women in the home and church. A portion of their statement reads:

In the church, spiritual gifts of women and men are to be recognized, developed, and used in serving and teaching ministries at all levels of involvement: as small group leaders, counselors, facilitators, administrators, ushers, communion servers, and

board members, and in pastoral care, teaching, preaching, and worship. In so doing, the church will honor God as the source of spiritual gifts. The church will also fulfill God’s mandate of stewardship without the appalling loss to God’s kingdom that results when half of the church’s members are excluded from positions of responsibility.

For application to the family, this group says:

In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other in seeking to fulfill each other’s preferences, desires, and aspirations. Neither spouse is to seek to dominate the other, but each is to act as servant of the other, in humility considering the other as better than oneself. In case of decisional deadlock, they

should seek resolution through biblical methods of conflict resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other. In so doing, husband and wife will help the Christian home stand against improper use of power and authority by spouses, and will protect the home from wife and child abuse that sometimes tragically follows a hierarchical interpretation of the husband's "headship."

There is much that rings true in this call for biblical equality. We have too often overlooked the shared partnership of men and women and the many ways in which both have been gifted to serve one another and the body of Christ.

For instance, in the early church, both men and women had the gift of prophecy. While prophecy

is distinguished from the gift of teaching (Rom. 12:6-8), there are many similarities. Paul wrote that the one "who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" (1 Cor. 14:3). He also said that the result of prophecy was that the whole church could learn and be encouraged (1 Cor. 14:31). It's important to recognize that women had that kind of participation in the first-century church.

Spiritual equality is not the only principle to be applied to men and women in ministry.

There is a danger, however, in overcorrecting past mistakes. Spiritual equality is not the only principle to be applied to men and women in ministry. We need to remember that

first-century women had authority to prophesy only when they wore a head covering, which in Middle-Eastern culture reflected gender distinction and acknowledgment of male headship (1 Cor. 11:3-12).

It was this kind of “truth in tension” that provided the basis for the RBC booklet titled, *What Does God Expect Of A Woman?* (Q0505). In that study we saw that a balanced view of Scripture leads a woman to (1) feminine distinction, (2) selective submission, (3) spiritual equality, and (4) strength of character. In this booklet, we will reemphasize the same principles but with a special interest in how they relate to woman’s role in ministry.

We are indebted to those who have helped us to rethink our assumptions about the relationships between men and women. Much has been written

about the way Christ lifted women to a place of honor far exceeding the social attitudes and customs of first-century life. Much has been written to show the achievements of noteworthy women not only in biblical times but throughout all periods of church history. Equally significant and urgent are the calls for men and women to rediscover our unity and spiritual equality in Christ.

Much of the current literature, however, is once again emphasizing one side of the coin to the exclusion of the other. Many are making the assumption that spiritual equality in Christ is the one overriding truth that makes it necessary to explain away the gender-linked ministry roles found in the Bible. There is a certain justice to this overadjustment. In the past, the opposite occurred. The Bible was approached with a

view that caused women to be taken for granted, their gifts wasted, and their opinions ignored. The Bible was used to establish the kind of male dominance that lacked balance and regard for the spiritual equality and complementary roles designed by our Creator.

***One way to relieve
the tension is
to chop off one
end of the truth.***

This struggle for balance in our view of men and women is similar to the doctrinal tug-of-war that occurs with all sound doctrine. All truth is held in tension by counterbalancing factors. Law and grace, free will and sovereignty, faith and works, the love and fear of God, His permissive and directive will—all must be accepted in “both/and” rather than “either/or”

conclusions. The same is true in the issue of men and women. We are both called to submit to one another, yet men are called to sacrifice their interests for the sake of women in different ways than women are to selectively submit to men.

It would be easier to do away with either headship or equality. But in either case we would satisfy our minds at the expense of the other side of what the Bible says.

The following pages are presented in summary fashion to help us realize that there is not just one but many factors that must be considered before we can have a balanced, biblical view of women in ministry. Some of the specific details will remain to be worked out according to the study, wisdom, conscience, unity, and faith of individual congregations. We pray that what follows will prove helpful to such discussions.

THE ATTITUDES OF LEADERSHIP

Jesus gave us an example of what leadership was meant to be. To a group of men preoccupied with power and position, He defined leadership in new terms. He didn't live like a king or

throw His weight around. He led by loving, gave up His rights, adopted the ways of a servant, associated with downscale people, washed feet, and likened His leadership as

having more to do with serving tables than being served.

As Jesus honored and served men, He also honored and served women. He was counted as their friend and taught them in a

manner other teachers would not. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared first to a woman and gave her the responsibility of announcing His resurrection to the apostles (Mk. 16:9; Jn. 20:11-18).

Leadership according to

The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called "benefactors." But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves (Lk. 22:25-27).

Christ is self-sacrificing. To lead us to His Father's house, Christ suffered slaps of hatred that should have fallen on our faces. To lead us from the slavery of our sin, Christ exposed His back to whips,

His head to thorns, His hands and feet to nails, His side to a spear, and His lifeless body to a borrowed grave. To bring us out of darkness, He showed a leadership that first made Him a follower who was

willing to say, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42).

Then there was Paul who said, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). As a church leader who served in the Spirit of Christ, Paul was empowered by God with gifts of leadership. He was authorized to speak and lead in behalf of Christ, yet he didn’t use authority without love. He didn’t act like someone enamored with his own position and influence. He wrote letters, prayed, and wept for people who needed help. As a leader appointed by God, he labored not for the praise of men but for the approval and honor of the Lord, under whose authority and oversight he served.

Such leadership, if practiced today, would solve many problems. It would help men and women who live under the oversight of another to feel honored and

listened to. It would help persons “under authority” to feel respected by church leaders and heads of households who are not above washing feet, dishes, clothes, walls, and bathrooms. It is a leadership that could be more easily accepted by those who read, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls” (Heb. 13:17).

***Good
church leaders
are people who
speak and act
like servants.***

The question, however, is whether a godly woman is just as much a candidate as a man for all positions of leadership in the church. The answer to this question is rooted in what the Bible calls headship.

THE MEANING OF HEADSHIP

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul showed that gender is a factor when the church meets to worship. He reasoned from principles of

(1) headship, (2) creation order, (3) Greek customs of head coverings, and (4) natural law. The most important of these lines of reasoning, however, seems to be the first. In verse 3, Paul described an order of relationships rooted in the

Godhead. He called Christ the head of every man, man the head of woman, and God the head of Christ.

Much has been written in an attempt to clarify the meaning of headship. Does

it imply leadership and authority, or source and origin? Does it apply to men and women in general, or is it limited to the husband-wife relationship?

It is clear that when the

I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor. 11:3).

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:22-25).

apostle applied the principle of headship to marriage in Ephesians 5:22-25, he was describing a kind of loving, servant leadership. He asked women to submit to husbands, who in turn were instructed to

protect and cherish and nourish their wives.

But does this principle of leadership go beyond the husband-wife relationship?

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul made an issue of male

headship while discussing the cultural practice of head coverings in the church. Paul was concerned that women not violate the principle of headship by discarding customary head coverings while praying or prophesying. This raises questions. What did Paul mean by headship when it showed up as an issue in the church? Does it extend beyond marriage? Does it have a bearing on whether a godly woman can be a pastor or elder?

These questions can be answered by asking another question: Would ordaining a godly woman to the office of pastor or elder have less implications for headship issues than the head coverings Paul was concerned about? How would a woman-led church affect marriages? Husbands might not be as inclined to see their responsibility to be loving, spiritual, servant

leaders. Wives might not be as inclined to show the kind of submission Paul asked for in Ephesians 5.

Would a woman-led church have less effect on marriages than discarded head coverings?

It's not surprising that when Paul listed the requirements for a bishop (literally overseer, also called an elder), he called for spiritually qualified men (1 Tim. 3:1-7). We know that Paul was concerned about how the cultural problem of head coverings reflected on the cross-cultural issue of headship, so he certainly would not have encouraged the church to be overseen by a woman. How could it be wise, then, to risk a principle that Paul was so concerned about?

THE DANGER OF BUILDING ON PROBLEMS

What if we find ourselves under pastors or elders who don't reflect the example of Christ? What if our leaders don't have servant attitudes?

Problem Situations.

When faced with failures of leadership, the Bible makes it clear that God does not ask us to follow a bad example. He does, however, ask us to be willing to live with a bad example if necessary and even to fulfill our own obligation to those leaders whose judgment we question. What God asks for

runs contrary to the spirit of our day. Because of widespread abuses of authority and leadership on every hand we have a

Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed. And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved. Teach and exhort these things. If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings (1 Tim. 6:1-5).

generation that is inclined to go by the slogan, "Resist much. Obey little."

Because of such cynicism, we are likely to repeat the Old Testament mistake of Aaron and Miriam. While complaining about the Ethiopian woman their brother Moses had married (Num. 12), they apparently

began to question Moses' right of authority over them. They made a mistake, however, by forgetting that

their brother was their leader—not because he had chosen to be but because God had given him that responsibility. As a result, Aaron and Miriam angered God by complaining, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” (Num. 12:2).

Problem Texts.

Many years later, and with such equality-authority tensions still in view, the apostle Paul gave advice to a young pastor named Timothy. The apostle advised his understudy not to get drawn into arguments about the meaning of words that were being used by persons who, while rightly affirming truths of spiritual equality, were trying to avoid their obligation to Christian “employers” (1 Tim. 6:1-5).

Ironically, it is this same letter to Timothy that has become a modern battleground of “arguable

words.” Along with 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Paul’s instruction in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is at the center of countless arguments about the role of women in the church. Both sides of these debates tend to become preoccupied with highly arguable meanings of words rather than accepting the historic patterns and principles of Scripture.

Solutions cannot be built firmly on uncertain foundations. It is not wise to try to make something sure and solid out of those parts of the text that we sense to be debatable. As a result, we need to go back to basic questions. One of those questions is: Do we assume that the principle of spiritual equality overrides the kind of authority and order that God has built into society? If so, we need to take a closer look at the way God brings creation order to problems of culture.

THE MIX OF CULTURE AND CREATION

Paul's first letter to Timothy provided a young pastor with counsel for dealing with the troubled church in

Ephesus, a port city known for its fertility cults and temple prostitutes. The city also may have been the site of an emerging philosophy which taught that woman was created before man, that she was superior to her male counterpart,

and that a truly enlightened woman would not marry and have children.

For this reason, some are offering an alternative interpretation of 1 Timothy

2:12-15. They suggest that Paul was not forbidding women to teach or have authority over men. Instead he was saying that he did not allow women to teach that women are superior to

I desire therefore . . . that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, . . . which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control (1 Tim. 2:8-15).

men, but that those women who were inclined to teach such doctrine must assume the quiet demeanor of a learner. This explanation goes on to say that Paul was countering false teaching when he reminded Timothy that

(1) man was made first, not woman, and (2) rather than being the enlightened one, Eve was deceived, and that (3) childbearing is honorable in the sight of God.

The value of such an explanation is that it calls attention to the kind of doctrinal threats that were troubling first-century Christians. The trouble with such an interpretation, however, is that it is debatable. It depends on the insertion of words Paul could have easily included but didn't.

Comparing 1 Timothy 2 with 1 Corinthians 11 suggests that Paul referred to the creation order not only to offset false doctrine characteristic of first-century culture, but once again to establish a principle of servant leadership. In both passages Paul appealed to cross-cultural evidence that went back to creation to establish self-sacrificing male headship. In 1 Corinthians

11, he went so far as to say that man was not created for woman but woman for man (v.9) before going on to remind us that both men and women are now dependent on one another for their existence (vv.11-12). What 1 Corinthians adds is

The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. . . . For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. . . . Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman (1 Cor. 11:3,8-9,11-12).

that this headship is rooted not only in creation order but in the orderly relationships of the Godhead as well (v.3). If Paul was using such cross-cultural

evidence to reason for gender distinctions in the Corinthian church, it is likely that he was doing the same thing in his letter to Timothy.

It is at this point, however, that we need to take a closer look at how a divine creation order squares with our spiritual equality in Christ.

THE SCOPE OF EQUALITY

Studies show that women typically get three-fourths of the wages that men receive for the same work. Equality under the law is supposed

to make us gender-blind in the workplace. But we have a long way to go.

Many believe that a similar situation exists when it comes to equality and fairness issues in the church.

On one hand, equality is the law. It was the apostle Paul who declared for all the world to hear that the church is an equal opportunity institution (Gal. 3:28). This is the same Paul, however, who many believe has made it difficult for

women to be ordained for pastoral and elder-equivalent ministry. Even though he said that in Christ there is no male or female, he still described the criteria for church overseers in

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).

I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor. 11:3).

Man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man (1 Cor. 11:8-9).

male terms (1 Tim. 3:1-7), reasoned for male headship, called for the submission of wives, and required that women (possibly wives) wear head coverings while praying or prophesying in the church. That doesn't sound equal.

But Paul was not contradicting himself. When Galatians 3:26-28 is studied in context, it is clear that it is not a statement about social order but about the equal spiritual standing of

men and women before God. When it comes to the all-important matters of spiritual need, salvation by faith, eternal life, inheritance in Christ, and equal access to God through Christ, we come to God on level ground. We are co-heirs, co-laborers, and co-members of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:22-29). Each of us is equally loved and blessed by the Father. The One who has given birth to us in Christ does not prefer sons over daughters. Paul assured men and women alike that we are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ (v.26).

This spiritual equality is like our biological unity. What we have in common is far more important than our differences. That men and women are equal in personhood and created in the image of God with equal capacities for thought, emotion, and choice is far

more important than what we possess in masculine or feminine distinction.

***What we have
in common
is far more
important
than anything
that would set
us apart.***

God is not partial to either men or women. Both are assured of equal access to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. The problem, however, in our day is that just as some have tried to blur the biological line between masculine and feminine distinction, others have emphasized principles of spiritual equality to the exclusion of divine order. Nowhere is that more evident than in the way some are reinterpreting the biblical principle of mutual submission.

THE SCOPE OF MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Submission is a two-way street. Yet men have often found it convenient to assume that it is a woman's place to do submissive things like making coffee, taking notes, doing dishes, and cleaning bathrooms. Those of us who should have known better conveniently forgot what our "footwashing" Teacher said about leadership.

Jesus led by submitting Himself to the needs of those who would follow

Him. He sacrificed His comfort, His rights, and His high position in order

to love and lead us to His Father's house.

With the example of our servant-Lord in view, many in our day have corrected the assumption that submission is "woman's work." In the process, however, the tables have been turned. Some are now quoting the apostle Paul's command to "submit to one another" as if it wiped out all

Do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. . . . submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. . . . This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Eph. 5:17,21-25,28-30,32).

distinction of roles for men and women in the home and church.

Ephesians 5 teaches marriage partners to pattern their attitudes and behavior after Christ's relationship with the church. The implications are clear. Christ subjects Himself to the church in a different way than the church subjects herself to Him. The Father has given Christ authority to lovingly lead. As His bride, the church does not lead Him. She follows, so as to follow God.

Christ subjects Himself to the church in a different way than the church subjects herself to Him.

This does not mean blind obedience. A wife's submission is to be selective. As Abigail of the Old Testament showed us, helping a husband to

destroy himself, his wife, and his family is not the kind of submission God had in mind (1 Sam. 25).

Some will object, saying that Ephesians 5 is about the home, not the church. But Paul was describing the way the church acts at home. He wasn't writing to a building but to a church made up of single and married people. What some of us have forgotten is that we cannot separate our home problems from church life. The church is made up of families. Those same families take "the church" wherever they go.

That such submission does not turn women into mindless home appliances can be seen by looking at the women of the Bible. Both Old and New Testaments are marked by women of character who distinguished themselves by their desire to know and be used by God.

THE WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

The Bible shows that God's pattern, order, and norm for the sexes must allow for the prominent, public, and significant contribution of women. From Eve, the mother of us all, to Mary, the mother of our Savior, the women of the Bible form that complementary, interdependent half of our humanity apart from which man would have no existence or hope of heaven. Furthermore, a survey of the roles that women have played in history reveals the depth and richness of their contribution.

Miriam was a prophetess, and along with her brothers Moses and

Aaron shared the leadership of Israel (Mic. 6:4).

Deborah was a prophetess and judge of Israel who resolved disputes with the wisdom of God (Jud. 4:4). During her service, another woman named Jael was used by

God to kill an enemy king (4:21).

Abigail, who eventually became a wife of David, distinguished herself when she acted against the wishes of her evil husband, Nabal, and

thereby saved herself and her household (1 Sam. 25).

Esther was a queen who, by her courage and cleverness, was used by God to save her people.

Huldah was a

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:16-18).

prophetess of Israel who spoke words of judgment to a delegation of men that included Hilkiah the priest (2 Ki. 22:14).

Daughters of Israel will be among the prophets of the last day, according to Peter who quoted from the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-18).

New Testament prophetesses include Anna (Lk. 2:36) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9).

Mary Magdalene and a number of other women were counted among Jesus' close friends and were the first to be met by Jesus after His resurrection (Mt. 28:1-10; Mk. 16:9).

Mary and Martha were also among Jesus' close friends. Mary, at a time when women did not receive instruction from rabbis, was commended by Jesus for attentively listening to and being

taught by Him while her sister Martha busied herself with more domestic details (Lk. 10:38-42).

A survey of the roles that women have played in history reveals the depth and richness of their contribution.

Priscilla and her husband Aquila achieved honorable mention when together they taught Apollos the doctrine of Christ (Acts 18).

Phoebe was recognized by Paul as a servant and helper not only to the church at Cenchrea but to him as well (Rom. 16:1).

Junia(s) is possibly a woman who along with Andronicus is said by Paul to be "of note among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7).

THE UNCHALLENGED OPPORTUNITY

Women helping women is one form of service that no one can question on biblical grounds. More important, it is desperately needed. Over half of the world's population is accessible to the woman who senses the high calling of leading other women to Christ, and discipling and encouraging them through the hard journey of womanhood (Ti. 2:1-5).

Wherever we turn, women are looking for help with problems related to marriage, children, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, mental illness, and

countless forms of grief. Women struggling with addiction, eating disorders, divorce, or unemployment need encouragers.

The world is waiting for a vision of what can be done through women's

Speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the . . . older women . . . be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed (Ti. 2:1-5).

ministry as women reach out to other women, and through them to countless children, husbands, and friends.

In many churches, every form of service is open to women except that of pastor-teacher

or elder-equivalent positions: visiting hospitals, leading Bible studies, serving in music and outreach ministries, working with Christian support groups. A growing number

of churches are hiring women for fulltime positions to oversee the development of these growing and much-needed ministries.

Women are not limited to ministry to other women. But let's not underestimate the importance of women helping and mentoring other women. Some of this is in view when Paul encouraged mature women to teach younger women to live and love in a way that pleases God (Ti. 2:3-5).

***When God
opens a door,
no individual
or institution
can shut it.***

The other unchallengeable ministry for women is the role of service that God gives to all of His children, men and

women alike. No one can keep us from the specific contribution that God has called us to make. If God opens a door, no one can close it. If God closes a door, no one can open it. No government, institution, tradition, or person can keep us from doing what God has called us to do. For that reason, we need to relax in the confidence that our responsibility is not to force our services on our world but to let God do His work through us. Our responsibility is not to build a ministry but to faithfully, honestly, and lovingly do what is at hand.

Someone has said, "If people measure their lives by what others do for them, they are going to be very disappointed; but if they measure life by what they do for others, there is no time for despair."

All around us are men and women in need.

THE NECESSITY OF LOVE

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul wrote about spiritual and sexual distinction. In chapter 12, he described complementary function and unity. In chapter 13, he addressed the most

important of all issues. After dealing with God's sovereign right to design a humanity and a church based on cooperative differences, Paul showed what will either make or break God's plan.

Without love, and specifically without the kind of love Paul described, the differences will not work for one another but against one another.

From what Paul went on to write, we can conclude that all of the knowledge in

the world about sexual difference or equality will be of no value without love. Carefully written books and eloquently delivered speeches and scholarly addresses on woman's role in the church will be worth nothing in the eyes of God if

Earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Cor. 12:31-13:4).

not offered in love. All the faith in the world that one's ideas are rooted firmly on the authority of God's Word or in the heart of God's own Spirit is also something that will have no

profit unless it has love (13:1-3).

But Paul wasn't talking about just any kind of love. He was talking about love for men and women that "suffers long and is kind." He wrote, "Love does not envy; love

does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:4-7). And love does all of these things for the good of one another.

Our tendency is to try to be leading men or submissive women for all of the wrong reasons. As some have recently pointed out: “In the home, the husband’s loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife’s intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility. In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect

the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries” (from the *Danvers Statement*).

***Without love, men
become dominant
or passive,
and women
become usurpative
or servile.***

Are you confused about the role of women in the church? Are you angry because of the ways you have seen leadership mishandled? Are you fearful that something terrible is about to happen if things do not change—or if they do? Then take a deep breath and look into the eyes of Christ. He is the solution for leadership wherever it lands. Leadership is worthless unless it is patient, kind, not envying, not boasting, not throwing its weight around, not self-protective, but caring, helping, and feeling.

MOVING TO CONCLUSION

Both physically and spiritually, men and women are far more alike than different. Apart from our interdependence, neither could exist. Together in masculine and feminine distinction we reflect the likeness of God. In Christ, we are equally loved and accepted by God, equally baptized into the body of Christ, and equally accountable to honor and love one another. Together we are called to ministry—to serve God and to serve one another in the attitude of Christ.

By far the great majority of New Testament instruction treats men and women as spiritual equals who are both called to the kind of strength of character that occurs as Christ is formed in us.

Our overwhelming

physical and spiritual likeness and unity, however, must not blind us to the creative differences and marks of distinction that our Designer has built into us for our common enrichment and survival. Physically speaking, men do not honor themselves by going out of their way to be feminine. Women do not distinguish themselves or glorify their Creator by trying to be masculine. We do dignify ourselves by building on the complementary similarities and differences that God has built into us.

Ministry in the church has some of the same implications. Opportunities for ministry are far more alike than different. Men and women have been called to help one another with whatever gifts they have to offer. They are called to encourage, to challenge, and to teach one another. Only in roles of general

oversight is there a well-defined difference. Qualified men must accept responsibility for the elder-equivalent positions of church rule.

Is it possible that I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 describe ruling elders in male terms only because of the culture to which they were addressed?

Not in light of the fact that Paul linked marital headship back to issues of creation, the Godhead, and the relationship of Christ and the church. God's order for husband-wife relationships, as described in Ephesians 5, is important to the understanding of this issue.

When the principle of male headship showed up in Paul's discussion of the church, the apostle was protective of God's order for husbands and wives (1 Cor. 11:1-12). This is clear from the fact that Paul was

concerned that cultural head coverings be in place to protect the principle of headship order in man-woman relationships. He may have been thinking more broadly than just the marital relationship, but because he did not take pains to clarify that we can only assume that he was, at the very least, showing a concern for marital headship in the church. This concern for a relationship that is clearly described in Ephesians 5 is significant. We can be sure that Paul would have been much more concerned about pastoral modeling than he was about head coverings. Having a woman as a ruling pastor or elder would confuse husband-wife relationships in the church.

What are elder-equivalent roles? What is important is not the title but the function, office, and role. The New Testament itself

uses various terms such as *bishop*, *elder*, or *pastor* to describe the overseeing or ruling members of a church. Today some churches have deacons who provide the same rule of general oversight or church rule. If another church were to be overseen by a council called the X Group, then the X Group members would be the elder-equivalents.

Because of such differences of church organization, it is not possible or advisable to try to work out all the details for one another. What is important is that the church does not organize itself in a way that will confuse the order God has built into marital relationships.

While working through such issues, however, it is extremely important to remember that self-sacrificing marital headship is meant to bring out the best in a woman. As Christ

shows us by His relationship to the church, marital headship is rooted in great amounts of conversation, mutual submission, complementary participation, and freedom of choice and expression. While affirming the importance of the headship principle, we must remember the kind of participation and prophetic expression that women shared in Old and New Testament periods.

**What about
1 Timothy 2:11-15,
which forbids women
to teach or to have
authority over a man
and instead to be silent?**

In this passage Paul's word for "silent" did not mean that a woman was to refrain from speaking. He used the Greek word *hesuchia*, which was used elsewhere in the New Testament to suggest "calm or nondisruptive" behavior. Just as important,

Paul used an unusual word for “authority” that was sometimes used to imply absolute or autocratic rule. These factors need to be combined with the evidence that “teaching” (*didasko*) in New Testament times carried with it the formal overtones of Greek or Jewish style of master-student relationship. Therefore, it seems that Paul was once again calling for the kind of quietness (nondisruptive speech) that would not jeopardize male headship.

This teaching would have been especially important to Timothy. In Ephesus, he was exposed to pagan fertility cults that reversed the pattern of headship and promoted feminine dominance.

In light of what Paul said, is it right for a woman to teach a class of mixed adults in the church? This again is where each church or association

of churches must carefully and prayerfully work through its own accountability to the Scriptures. Much will be determined by how each church thinks it can best honor the counterbalancing issues of spiritual equality and marital headship. In many cases, the wisest course of action will also depend on the attitudes of the persons involved. In all cases, men and women who want to do the will of God can be sure that their Lord will give them the wisdom necessary to come to the kind of decisions that will protect the conscience, unity, and faith of their fellowship (Jas. 1:2-8).

What did Paul mean when he went on to say in 1 Timothy 2:15 that a woman “will be saved in childbearing”? Paul was not referring to salvation from sin. It is more likely that he was saying that

women are *saved from the shame* of their role in the fall (v.14) by the high honor of being a childbearer—apart from which no one of us would exist. A woman need not bear children to share in this distinguishing mark of womanhood. To enter fully into her “salvation from the fall,” however, she must come to faith in Jesus Christ—and then continue “in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.”

What about I Corinthians 14:26-40, which seems to forbid women from even prophesying or praying in the church (both of which are allowed in 11:5)? Some have suggested that when Paul said, “Let your women keep silent in the churches” (14:34), he was quoting and then refuting a commonly repeated prohibition well-known to the Corinthians. Paul’s response, however,

does not make it clear that he was making such a statement in order to disagree with it. Elsewhere (such as in Rom. 6:1,15) he showed how clear he could be when raising an issue that he wanted to discredit.

It seems safer to conclude that Paul was once again taking steps to protect not only the order and reputation of the church, but also the delicate balance of man-woman relationships. He told us, for instance, that he was writing to a church marked by disruption and confusion (v.33). It was also a church in which at least some of the women did not realize that in finding spiritual equality they were still accountable to principles of divine order and marital headship (1 Cor. 11:1-16).

Since the preceding verses speak of the need to judge whether or not a prophecy was of God

(14:29-33), some believe Paul was saying that women were to exclude themselves from this “oversight function.” (Here, when Paul spoke of being “silent,” he used the word *sigao* which means “to say nothing at all.”) If the judgment of prophecy is what the apostle had in mind, then he was saying that while male headship did not limit a woman from prophesying, it did restrict her from a level of public discussion that would have involved her in public debate and argument.

Another possibility is similar to what we have observed in our interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11. Some believe that when Paul said, “Let your women keep silent in the churches,” he might have been referring not to women in general but to wives. The Greek word the apostle used for “women” (*gunaikes*) could

refer to either married, unmarried, or women in general depending on the context. Here in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul used a word for submission, which when used elsewhere of a woman always refers to a married woman who was to be subject to her husband. (See *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 14:34-40.)

The second piece of evidence that shows Paul was referring to married women is found in verse 35. He said that the women he was concerned about were to “ask their own husbands at home.”

In any of these interpretations, at least one principle remains in view: A woman’s spiritual equality in Christ must complement rather than detract from the principle of spiritual headship.

AN ONGOING CONCERN

This booklet has been hard to write for many reasons. One concern has been that it would be used by some as another excuse to withhold honor and fair treatment from that “invisible” army of sisters on whose backs the church has moved. We plead instead with our brothers to join us in committing ourselves as never before to encourage and seek the counsel, participation, and expression of women at all levels of church life. Pastors, elders, and husbands who do not honor women in their decision-making are hurting themselves and the body of Christ in the process.

There is an even more important concern. Some might be so resentful of the exclusion of women from

pastor and elder roles that they are tempted to reject Christ Himself. Such an inclination to turn against Christ, however, is a signal to look within. We need to make sure that the real issue is not between our right to equal treatment and God’s right to be God. Just because He created us with complementary differences does not mean that He treats us differently when it comes to our need for love, prayerful conversation, forgiveness, security of relationship, full acceptance, eternal life, and legal rights to His everlasting kingdom. It is absolutely true that all who receive Christ will be received by Him. Men and women alike will be saved by believing that salvation is found not by trying but by trusting; and by trusting not in our merits but in Christ’s mercy (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 3:23; 6:23; Gal. 3:22-29).



Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God's Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

[CLICK TO DONATE](#)