

Women and Men in Jesus' Kingdom Revolution

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Prologue

The phone rang. "Would you come teach our fellowship on women in leadership?" asked Susan, a fellow InterVarsity staff. In my mind, a red light flashed a warning. The words of James 2 ran through my mind: *Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.*

Little did I know that my journey to understand women's roles in the church was about to take a decisive turn.

I had already reached an uneasy plateau on this journey. Years before, when I came to college, I met InterVarsity students and staff who perplexed me. They had won my respect as I saw how intently they studied the Bible, how diligently they applied it, and how friends of mine began coming to faith through their witness in word and deed. However, their practice of having women teach and lead groups that included men violated the Christianity I'd been taught.

I felt caught on the horns of a dilemma. On one horn, I had wrestled through the New Testament in high school, and emerged convinced that biblically, women should not teach and lead men. On the other horn, some female teachers during my college years had changed my life. I'll never forget the sermon on sin given by one campus missionary, Shannon Lamb; another, Lisa Engdahl, led studies in the book of Mark that introduced me to a remarkably deep, high quality Bible study.

How can God work so powerfully to transform me through women teaching and leading, if that's sinful? I wondered. My experiences led to me re-examine the Scriptures. I committed myself to living by whatever the Bible taught, as best as I could understand

it. Four years, and many studies and commentaries later, I felt certain that the Bible actually supported women in Christian leadership, and I tried hard to live accordingly.

But now a group of students honestly struggling with the same issues had invited me to teach them what I thought the Bible said, and I had to give Susan an answer. *Am I certain enough to teach on this?* I thought. "I'll pray about it, and get back to you."

A couple days later, I called her back. "I'm sorry, I have to say no," I said. "I've studied this issue enough to form my own convictions, but I'm not sure enough to stand in front of a group and teach on it."

There, I thought, I've responded with integrity. But I couldn't get the invitation out of my mind. A few days later, I realized I could have given another answer rather than just yes or no. My conscience urged me to call her back.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I shouldn't have said no. I'm convicted that I need to do more study, until I get to the level of confidence where I can teach, regardless of what conclusion I come to." Honestly, I was afraid my newly gelled convictions would be undermined by what I found if I pushed my studies deeper.

But I firmly believe in changing my convictions to match my understanding of the Bible rather than vice versa. So I swallowed hard and set out for the local theological library, conveniently located 3 blocks from my house. I needed to study whether the historical evidence showed that women had actually participated as leaders in the church.

What I found surprised me.

I firmly believe in changing my convictions to match my understanding of the Bible rather than vice versa. I needed to study the historical evidence...

Part 1

Jesus and Women

...As the Revolution Begins

A Strange Revolution

A man rose in the synagogue and prayed, “Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” After he sat down, a woman stood up: “Lord, I thank you that you made me what I am.” Historians tell us these prayers formed a common part of worship in first century Judaism.¹

Into that context strode a revolutionary proclaiming the long-awaited coming of God’s kingdom. But what a strange kingdom it was: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your slave,” he taught. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” How can you build a revolution, let alone a kingdom, on such logic? “You must lose your life to gain it.” “The first will be last and the last first.” It was a revolution not of swords and spears, but of love. His followers struggled to understand how this was supposed to work, and he drilled it into them again and again.

This revolutionary, Jesus of Nazareth, intentionally crashed like a wild ox through all the fences erected and maintained by cultured and elite people. He hugged lepers, ate with tax collectors and sinners, proclaimed prostitutes would enter his kingdom before religious rulers, preached to Samaritans, and proclaimed the gospel in Gentile territory several times.

Everything in Jesus’ kingdom runs upside-down and backwards. Or more accurately, it operates as the only sane kingdom in this broken, violent, desperate world.

Naturally, we want to know how Jesus intends men and women in his kingdom to relate to one another. Let’s look at his teaching and practice, and then at the teaching and practice of the early church communities—the first outposts of his

¹ For example, see N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: Pastoral Epistles*, SPCK date, p.

kingdom in this world. From those we’ll draw some conclusions about what biblical behavior in this area might look like today.

Women in Jesus’ Interactions and Illustrations

When I visited Turkey recently, I saw how much more free women were to be in public and interact with men than where I grew up, in Afghanistan. That was even before the Taliban severely tightened the restrictions on Afghan women. Throughout the Middle East, both official laws and social customs vary widely. The same was true in Jesus’ day, although conditions for women were probably not as extreme: Jewish women weren’t as restricted as women today under the Taliban, nor as free as Turkish women today.

Wherever he traveled, however, Jesus surprised and at times offended people by how freely he interacted with women. He startled a Samaritan woman by speaking to her, and even his disciples were amazed he was speaking with a woman.² Simon

the Pharisee was offended Jesus would let a prostitute touch him.³ And Jesus made an important man, the ruler of the synagogue, wait while he pressed an outcast woman to tell him all about her problems, then affirmed her faith.⁴

Jesus chose to use women as teaching illustrations, too, though he must have known that would be incendiary. He taught that God was like a poor woman who lost part of her dowry.⁵ The idea of comparing God to a woman must have rankled the men who regularly thanked God they were not women!

Jesus also held up women as examples of righteousness. He highlighted a destitute widow as

² John 4:7-9,27

³ Luke 7:39

⁴ Mark 5:22-34

⁵ Luke 15:8-10

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an eternal model for giving,⁶ and he chided a Pharisee, Simon, by comparing him negatively to a prostitute; Jesus said she was doing what Simon should have done.⁷ He intentionally pressed the gender boundaries socially both in his teaching and his conduct, making others uncomfortable because he was so comfortable talking with women, giving to women, receiving from women, and honoring women.

Jesus and Women—Who Can Be A Disciple?

Every great leader understands the power of symbolic action, and Jesus was no exception. One of the key symbolic actions of a leader is choosing influential advisors. So, for example, we watch closely to see who each newly elected president will appoint to the cabinet. For example, Bill Clinton chose more women and non-white leaders than any previous president. The media reported these choices with great interest, because those people symbolized what the new administration would stand for—who would have real power and influence.

Jesus' central strategy for launching his revolution of love was to gather a group of disciples—meaning students or apprentices—to train them in the ways of his new kingdom. He chose rough-and-tumble fishermen, a tax collector who worked for the Romans, and a zealot who was committed to overthrow the Roman Empire by any means necessary. These choices emphasized he was forging a revolution that would bring together people from wildly divergent political perspectives and professions. But just how far would the boundaries extend? Who could join his new movement, and who could not?

Matthew reports, “And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”⁸ Jesus clearly indicated that his disciples included both men and women, and Matthew makes sure to record that clearly.

⁶ Mark 12:41-44

⁷ Luke 7:40-50

⁸ Matthew 12:49-50 (All Bible quotes taken from the NRSV unless indicated otherwise)

Kenneth Bailey taught New Testament for 40 years in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus, and made himself a student of Middle Eastern culture. He comments on this passage: “In our Middle Eastern cultural context, a speaker who gestures to a crowd of *men* can say, ‘Here are my brother, and uncle and cousin.’ He *cannot* say, ‘Here are my brother and sister and mother.’ The text specifically affirms that Jesus is gesturing ‘toward his disciples,’ whom he addresses with male and female terms. This communicates to the reader that the disciples before him were composed of men *and* women.”⁹

Luke also highlights that Jesus' inner group of followers included many women: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary,

called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.”¹⁰ He emphasizes another surprising point—the women supported Jesus' ministry financially. Bailey remarks that for Luke to admit this in writing would be astonishing in his culture because of the stigma it would cast upon Jesus' followers.

The New Testament names fifteen specific disciples of Jesus, other than the twelve: seven men and eight women. It's noteworthy that almost one-third of the disciples named in the Bible are women.¹¹ As Jesus established his topsy-turvy kingdom, he ensured women were at the center. The cadre he trained to lead the revolution after his death and ascension included a significant number of women. The gospel writers didn't miss his potent symbolism, and under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, they included it in their accounts.

Women's Advocate

Luke presses the point further through the following chapters as he deepens his treatise on

⁹ Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, IVP 2008, p. 192.

¹⁰ Luke 8:1-3

¹¹ Scholer, David M., “Women in Ministry Seminar” outline notes, Apr. 25, 2001.

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discipleship. We're familiar with the story where Martha, working in the kitchen, became annoyed that her sister Mary wasn't helping her. What was the real problem? Was it Mary's laziness or unwillingness to serve? And what is Luke's main point in including this story?

I remember being in a similar context as a child in Afghanistan. When our family visited an Afghan family, the men would sit and talk in the living room, waiting for the meal. The women remained hidden in the back of the house, working in the kitchen, and would only appear to bring out each course. They made an exception for my mother, since she was a foreign guest. (Grandmothers also had the right to eat with the men, as respected elders.) Later, I learned that after the men and guests had eaten, the women would eat the leftovers.

Luke describes a shocking event within that kind of culture: "Mary...sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." This same phrase was used by Paul, who said he was "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel,"¹² to indicate he was that rabbi's disciple. To those around Jesus, and to Luke's readers, Mary was clearly behaving like a disciple of Jesus.

"But Martha," Luke continues, "was distracted with all her preparations." Distracted from what? When Jesus reproved her, he said, "there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." The problem *wasn't* providing a meal for everyone. Jesus had already shown he could handle that—even for 5,000 people! No, Martha was irritated because Mary had assumed the position of a rabbi's disciple, a role only appropriate for men, instead of cooking, serving, and cleaning—the proper place for a woman in that society.

But Jesus supported Mary's taboo-smashing behavior. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

—Luke 10:38-42

one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." He was telling her that Mary had made the right choice, and he would not allow anyone to prevent her—even her older sister (who therefore held authority over her). His point to Martha was that she had missed the one necessary thing. So he advocated for Mary; he would not let that one thing be taken from her.

I would argue that the main point of this passage, within the flow of Luke 8-10, is that sitting at Jesus' feet, learning from him, constitutes *the one crucial quality of a disciple of Jesus*.

You cannot be a disciple if you're distracted, if you're not learning from him. And he will not allow that to be disrupted. Strikingly, Jesus chose to make this vital point in reference to a woman.

Why Twelve Men?

But this raises a huge question. If Jesus was so committed to including women, why didn't he incorporate women among the twelve? The gospels don't say explicitly, but they give us a fairly good idea. As I mentioned, Jesus performed powerful symbolic actions throughout his ministry—from riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to instituting a new meal using the Passover bread and wine.

If we trace these symbolic actions, we can see they tell a story, a story that describes the greater meaning of Jesus' ministry. First, his baptism and 40 days of testing in the wilderness reenacted Israel's birth as a nation: They came through the Red Sea, then wandered in the wilderness for 40 years of testing. Jesus was saying, "I am Israel's Messiah, recapitulating the nation's journey"—but this time being faithful where old Israel had failed.

After Israel wandered in the wilderness, Joshua led them into the Promised Land, where he established territories for the twelve tribes. Jesus, following the same story, chose twelve men to

¹² Acts 22:3

symbolize that he was establishing a new, renewed Israel.¹³

So why no women? Because Jesus carefully performed symbolic actions that would be understood clearly in his day. Even today, most people seem to overlook the female disciples, though they are mentioned explicitly in the gospels. In his time, I think anything other than twelve men would have confused the picture. A parallel question is, “Why didn’t Jesus include any Gentiles?” Jesus and Paul both insisted that the new covenant people is open to Gentiles.¹⁴ Yet Jesus didn’t include a Gentile—again, it would have obscured the symbolism.

The rest of Jesus’ life shows that he certainly didn’t try to avoid scandal by keeping to the boundaries of respectability. He honored Samaritans, prostitutes, and soldiers—and gave women prominent roles in his earthly ministry. Unlike the visions of God’s kingdom that most people held in his day, the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus includes Gentiles, slaves, and women.

Jesus chose twelve Jewish disciples. Yet we do not restrict Gentiles from church leadership. He chose only free men, but slaves were leaders within the early church.¹⁵ By the same token, the fact that he chose twelve men should not lead us to restrict women from leadership positions.

Trusted Witnesses

Imagine you’re on trial for a crime you didn’t commit. Two key eyewitnesses actually saw someone else commit the crime, but your lawyer insists they can’t testify. Why not? Because they both have criminal records, which the prosecutor would use to discredit their character. In the end, your lawyer argues, their testimony would actually hurt your case more than it would help.

The first witnesses to bear testimony to Jesus’ resurrection—arguably the single most important historical event in the gospels—were all women.

Historian N. T. Wright calls these women “the apostles to the apostles.”¹⁶ In his work on the historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection, he highlights them as strong evidence that the resurrection stories weren’t fabricated later, because no one in that culture would invent women as the key witnesses. Jewish law disqualified women as witnesses in court, and no one gave their testimony much credibility, if any. Yet Jesus sent women as his first witnesses, continuing to emphasize the radical nature of his revolution. In his kingdom, women were entrusted with the most crucial testimony of all.

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¹³ Matt. 10:1-4, Mark 3:13-21, Luke 6:12-19

¹⁴ For example, see Jesus’ commissions in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8; Paul’s argument through the book of Romans; and Ephesians 2:11-3:13.

¹⁵ Col. 4:9, Phil. 1:10-16.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright in a spoken address, “Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?” referring to his book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 607.

Part 2

Women in the Early Church

...as the Revolution Expands

Did you ever use a pair of those 3-D glasses, with one red and one blue lens? I'm fascinated by optical illusions, and spent hours with them for as a child. I quickly figured out that if I just looked through the red lens, I couldn't see any red markings, but any blue or green marks would pop out clear as day. If I switched lenses, the opposite was true.

We've seen how Jesus honored women and insisted that they could be his disciples. But weren't certain positions reserved for men within the leadership structure of the New Testament church?

Without blaming or pointing fingers, it's important for us to observe that both the Protestant and Catholic traditions have taught very strongly—and for almost their entire history—that certain positions are reserved for men. I think this has created a lens through which we've read the Bible. Like the red lens, it filters out anything implying radical gender equality, and highlights anything implying hierarchical gender differences. When I say “radical gender equality,” I don't mean to erase differences between the genders; I believe male and female clearly complement one another, reflecting different aspects of the image of God.

But let's do an experiment and switch lenses for a few minutes. Let's set aside that hierarchical assumption, and just for argument's sake, assume the early churches strove to practice a radical equality of male and female, as well as a radical equality of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free. How would the New Testament texts appear to us then?

Communities Swimming Against the Current

After Jesus' ascension, his kingdom revolution continued—in fact, exploded. Thousands joined

within months, and within one or two decades his revolution had taken solid root with new kingdom communities forming on three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The apostles wrote letters to some of these communities, which reveal that they struggled greatly to live out Jesus' topsy-turvy kingdom values in their cultural contexts. Each new place the gospel came into meant more cultural values that had to be subverted in order to hold true to Jesus' kingship—issues Jesus hadn't needed to teach on, such as whether Gentiles had to be circumcised, and whether his disciples should eat meat offered to idols.

They even struggled a great deal with the values Jesus had clearly demonstrated himself. For example, not giving preferential treatment to the rich over the poor cut against the grain of human nature so strongly that that issue cropped up like weeds in community after community. Evidently, the thorn-bush of racial preference is one of the most persistent aspects of normal human

operating procedure, judging from the fact that Paul had to address Jew-Gentile conflicts in almost every epistle he wrote. Gender inequalities also cropped up again and again. The pictures painted in Acts and the epistles show that the Holy Spirit and the early church leaders consistently pressed these communities to live out the Jesus' radical values, including counter-cultural treatment and roles of women.

Signs of the Spirit

Acts opens with the story of 120 disciples following Jesus' instructions to pray and wait for the Holy Spirit to empower them. Luke, the author, makes the point that this group included women, such as Mary the mother of Jesus.¹⁷

The Holy Spirit and early church leaders consistently pressed these communities to live out Jesus' radical values, including counter-cultural treatment and roles of women.

¹⁷ Acts 1:14-15

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this [speaking in tongues] is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’

—Acts 2:14-18

Suddenly in chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled his promise, shaking the building they were in, and beginning to shake the social structures of Jerusalem itself.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit demonstrated that this invitation to join the kingdom of God was open to *everyone*—people from many nations heard the gospel in their own languages. Through the miracle of tongues, God ensured that the very first church plant was multi-cultural, reflecting the kingdom of God on earth.

Acts 2 then records the first sermon by an apostle: in it, Peter explained this crazy phenomenon by quoting Joel’s prophecy about the last days. Joel had emphasized that God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, pressing the point by mentioning people across a spectrum of ages, classes—and genders.¹⁸ Evidently, Peter believed that this wild diversity of those who receive the Holy Spirit—male and female, old and young, slave and free—confirmed the gospel. Joel had said this widespread outpouring would be the sign God’s Messiah fulfilling the purposes God had from the very beginning. The first community of the kingdom of God on earth, in Jerusalem, embodied Jesus’ values of good news for everyone.

However, very quickly the new church began to struggle to maintain the unity of the Spirit, as their habitual prejudices crept in. By chapter 6, they

were overlooking the poor, elderly, cultural-minority women—the Greek-speaking widows.¹⁹ The Spirit had to keep intervening to help Jesus’ new people live in equality and fairness.

Paul’s Partnerships with Women

As the kingdom communities began to multiply, the apostle Paul worked steadfastly to follow the tradition of the gospel as it had been handed down to him. Today, Paul has a bad reputation on many university campuses as a misogynist and male chauvinist. But in Acts and in his own writings, we see that Paul vigorously followed Jesus’ lead by smashing down the traditional barriers of gender, as well as ethnicity, economic class, and age. We see this in his relationships with women in a wide variety of partnerships. Let me trace a few we find mentioned throughout Acts and Paul’s epistles.

Priscilla and Aquila

How does this sound to you: “Robin and Batman”? It clashes in our ears; the order is wrong. As you read Acts, pay attention to the sequence in which Luke lists names. He systematically puts them in order, naming the most prominent or influential first in each case—which would make natural sense in the first-century cultures. In Acts 13, for example, he lists the leaders at Antioch, starting with Barnabas (appointed by the twelve) and ending with Saul, the newest leader. Then, he says, the Holy Spirit told them to send “Barnabas and Saul” on the first missionary trip. In verse 9, Luke suddenly tells us Saul was also called Paul, just when Paul rebuked a magician who is a false prophet. From that point on, Luke refers to “Paul and Barnabas,” rhetorically highlighting what was happening in the narrative—Paul stepping into prominence and becoming the more influential partner.

Luke utilizes this same careful rhetorical device again when he introduces us to “a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla,”²⁰ listing the husband first, as usual in the Roman and Greek cultures. He mentions Priscilla almost as a side note. It’s unusual to name the wife, but not too unusual. But a few verses later, Luke describes “Priscilla and Aquila” accompanying Paul, and then tells us they were left by him in Ephesus to

¹⁸ Joel 2:28-29

¹⁹ Acts 6:1-7

²⁰ Acts 18:1-3.

carry on the work there, just like he'd left Silas and Timothy to carry on earlier in Berea. Luke describes them teaching another powerful teacher, Apollos, thus: "when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately."²¹

Why go out of his way to switch the name order? Luke, the meticulous historian, carefully communicates the social nuances of the communities he's describing. Paul does the same in his letters—he greets them three times: once he names Aquila first, but twice he puts Priscilla (Prisca) first.²² It seems that Paul and Luke don't consider her merely a supportive companion to Aquila, as he taught and led the church. If anything, they see her as more prominent than Aquila, or at very least as an equal influencer, even when teaching and correcting a prominent male leader, Apollos.

Different Kinds of Partnerships

We notice what we've been conditioned to see. My 8-year-old daughter's friend recently taught us a car game: "Cruiser, Bug, Convertible." You score a point if you spot any of these cars and call it first. Guess what we see on every road now? Even when I'm driving alone, it's funny how many bugs, convertibles, and PT Cruisers I notice. I'm sure we pass many more Hondas and Toyotas, but we haven't trained ourselves to spot those. You may have had the same experience if you've ever gotten a new car—suddenly you see that model everywhere, though you may have never noticed it before.

How did Paul himself regard his partnerships with women? I think we've been conditioned to see hierarchy—so we see it everywhere. At least two of Paul's writings seem to exclude women from teaching and speaking in church, and three more seem to set husbands over wives in marriage. That's five texts suggesting he taught a male-female hierarchy. We'll examine those later, but do they give the full picture? Let's keep looking through the other lens of "radical role equality" to see what pops out in Paul's own writings.

Romans 16

Before archaeologists begin to dig, you or I could walk by a site filled with fascinating artifacts and

remain completely oblivious: we'd see only a hill of barren, dead-looking dirt. But once the experts begin to excavate, a whole new picture of ancient history emerges from beneath what looked like an ordinary, even boring, hill. Paul's list of greetings in Romans 16 may be like that for us: initially it seems like verse after verse of dusty, 2,000-year-old names of strangers. You may have walked by it many times and barely given it any notice.

But let's excavate this list a little. It actually reveals a fascinating picture of one of the earliest revolutionary outposts of Jesus' people, the church in Rome. Before we start, remember that the early Christians had no church buildings. Historians estimate there may have been 50-100 Christians in Rome, meeting in fairly small groups in various members' houses throughout the city.

As we start, notice that Paul begins by endorsing someone, most likely the trusted friend who carried his letter to the recipients, as he does in many of his epistles.²³ "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae...for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well." Intriguing! Paul seems to have entrusted his longest and most masterful epistle to...a woman. Second, he highlights her role as a deacon of the church in another city. He uses the masculine form of the word "deacon," which, according to Greek scholars, signifies it is a title for her. (Some

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ² so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. ³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ⁴ and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.

—Romans 16:1-6

²¹ Acts 18:18-28.

²² Rom. 16:3, 1 Cor. 16:19, 2 Tim. 4:19.

²³ 2 Cor. 8:16-24 (Titus and two "brothers"), Eph. 6:21-22 (Tychicus), Phil. 2:25-30 (Epaphroditus), Col. 4:7-9 (Tychicus and Onesimus), Titus 3:13 (Zenas and Apollos), Philemon 1:10-14 (Onesimus).

versions translate the word as “servant.” But in other places, they leave it as “deacon,” the English form of the Greek word *diakonos*. Why change it here but not there?) Third, he’s not embarrassed to name her as one of his benefactors. A benefactor played a significant role in Greek culture, often as a patron for a philosopher or artist. Paul openly states that he relied on her for help, which probably included finances.

Who Can Do Gospel Ministry?

Paul begins his greetings in verse 3, with an interesting term: “Greet Prisca and Aquila, who *work* with me in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word for work, *sunergos*, has become our word synergy—the idea of two things working together to produce more than their sum total. Ancient farmers yoked two oxen together because they could pull ten times the load that one ox could pull. By “work with me,” Paul conjures up this image of a synergistic partnership.

Paul calls a number of people his co-workers (*sunergos*) in the gospel. This list reads like a New Testament hall of fame: it includes Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Luke, and Apollos. It’s striking that Paul would call women his “co-workers” in the gospel, too.²⁴

Clearly Priscilla and Aquila had widespread influence, since Paul says that not only is he thankful for them, “but also all the churches of the Gentiles.”²⁵ Next, he greets the church in their house, indicating that they were probably leaders of one of the house churches.

He then greets Epaphroditus, the first convert in Asia—highlighting that it’s already a pan-continental revolution! Then comes Mary, “who has worked very hard among you.” That term “worked very hard” (*kopiao* in Greek) often connotes leadership. Paul frequently uses it for gospel work done by apostles and elders, or for

²⁴ Scriptures naming partners as “co-workers” include: Prisca & Aquila (Rom. 16:3-4), Urbanus (Rom. 16:9), Timothy (Rom. 16:21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Clement (Phil. 4:3), Philemon (Philemon 1), Demas (Philemon 24), Luke (Philemon 24), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:9), Paul (1 Cor. 3:9), others (Col. 4:11), Euodia, Syntyche, Clement and others (Phil. 4:2-3). Thanks to Tom Allen for compiling this list (“Descriptive New Testament Passages of Women in Ministry and Leadership”).

²⁵ Rom. 16:4

teaching, preaching, “having charge of” people in the church, and admonishing them, although occasionally he means manual labor.²⁶

Phew! Six verses in, he’s already named three women (and only two men), and he’s implied each of them has a significant church leadership role. But now—buckle your seatbelt!

Who Can Be An Apostle?

Before we unearth this next artifact, we need some background. Quick quiz—name the apostles. Can’t do it? Most of us get lost after Peter, James and John; there seem to be a number of obscure names among the twelve. But here’s my point: are the original twelve the only apostles? I have heard people teach that Matthaïas²⁷ should not have been chosen in Acts 1 to replace Judas, because clearly God intended to make Paul the twelfth apostle. Contrary to that popular notion, Scripture actually names several people outside the twelve as apostles: Barnabas, James the brother of Jesus, Epaphroditus, and Jesus himself.²⁸

With that background, we’re ready to dig out verse 7: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” Two controversies swirl around this greeting. First, starting around the thirteenth century, many translators have changed the feminine “Junia” to “Junias” or other masculine forms, because they assumed a woman could *not* be named as an apostle. However, not a single ancient manuscript includes that extra letter. Furthermore, we have no record of any man named Junias in all of Greek

²⁶ For example, Paul says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who *labor* in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17); and “respect those who *labor* among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Paul uses *kopiao* 16 times: 3 times in Rom. 16, referring to Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and Persis (4 women); 6 times about himself (5 times for gospel work, 1 time for working with his hands: 1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Cor. 15:10, Gal. 4:11, Phil. 2:16, Col. 1:29, 1 Tim. 4:10); 3 times for elders, other apostles, leaders in general (1 Cor. 16:16, 1 Thess. 5:12, 1 Tim. 5:17); 2 times for general manual labor (1 Cor. 4:12, Eph. 4:28); and lastly for manual labor as an analogy for gospel ministry (2 Tim. 2:6).

²⁷ Acts 1:15-26

²⁸ Acts 14:14, Gal. 1:19, Phil. 2:25, Heb. 3:1.

*It’s striking
that Paul would
call women his
“co-workers” in
the gospel.*

⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother--a mother to me also. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

—Romans 16:7-16

literature, whereas there were plenty of women named Junia, including the sister of the famous Roman general, Brutus.²⁹

Second, the phrase “prominent among the apostles” could be interpreted to mean not that Andronicus and Junia *were* apostles, but that they were well-known or held in high regard *by* the apostles. This meaning is highly unlikely; otherwise, wouldn't translators throughout history have assumed that meaning instead of changing the name to Junias?³⁰ John Chrysostom, a church leader in the 300's, actually preached a sermon about how marvelous a woman Junia must have been to be called an apostle, based on this verse. I'm intrigued not only that he thought Paul was naming a woman apostle, but that by his time, only a couple hundred years after Paul, it began to seem strange for a woman to be named as an apostle. Paul mentions it here as if it is not strange at all—at least, no more strange than anything else in Jesus' revolution of love.

²⁹ You can find an excellent compilation of the scholarly work on both sides of this issue in the article “Junia, a Female Apostle” by Dennis J. Preato at <http://godstowomen.org/juniapreato.htm>

³⁰ Preato cites 10 different English translations that interpret this term to mean that Junia is an apostle, whether or not they change the name to Junias: ASV, NASB, NIV, TEV, NAB, KJV, NRSV, NKJV, NCV, and REB.

Paul goes on to greet 22 more individuals, six of whom are women. Paul could have easily sloughed women to the bottom of his list; instead, he opens with four of the first seven being women, and he gives each of them a fair amount of prominence.

One more point, from verse 12: Paul highlights three more women using the same word, workers (*kopiao*) that we saw in verse 8 for Mary, and which Paul often used of his own apostolic work: “Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.”

Romans 16 provides the biggest hill for us to dig up archaeologically, but Paul's greetings in his other epistles give a similar picture, with women often named as co-workers or having churches meeting in their houses.³¹

Viewing these through the hierarchical lens, we see some troubling aberrations that need ironing out; viewing them through the lens of radical role equality, we see a picture in which many of the newly established kingdom communities defied their culture's expectations for women, and in which the apostolic ministry teams also included a goodly number of women who receive credit for making prominent contributions, including “deacon,” “benefactor,” “apostle,” “worker” and “co-worker.”

Visibly Living the Message

A message may be communicated more powerfully by actions than by words. We saw this in Ghana, where we had taken some home video while visiting a rural community.

“Why are you here?” villagers would ask.

“We're helping to build a wall for a new school, the Amazing Grace School.”

“Are you architects, or engineers...?” they'd ask.

Our answer caused raised eyebrows and puzzled looks. “No, we raised some money for materials, and we have been helping the masons by carrying cement and bricks for them.”

When we showed this video later, our Ghanaian host pointed out what strong reactions our answers provoked. We, of course, hadn't picked up on the body language in a very different

³¹ For example: Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3), Nympha (Col. 4:15), Claudia (2 Tim. 4:21), and Apphia (Philem. 1:2)

culture. But he remarked that white Americans carrying bricks for the black Africans—that had sent a very powerful message in that village.

The power of that message struck me deeply, because in the 1950's my grandfather had faced a similar dynamic in Zambia. He had gone with a mission organization to bring the gospel. He told me, "Within two years I could see it was set up so the white man would always be in charge. I guess I've always been a trouble-maker, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut. It was wrong. So I made a big fuss, and soon I was assigned to sweeping the missions compound." He soon left that mission, and began planting churches with an African preaching partner. After some years they determined they had raised up enough African leaders, and my grandfather packed up to leave.

The white missionaries reacted strongly. "You can't leave the Africans in charge: you know how they are!" "I do know them, and I know the Lord," my grandfather replied. To him, insisting that "the white man" was more innately capable of ministry and leadership undermined the very essence of the gospel.

When I traveled to Turkey, it struck me how surprised the Turkish people were to see a team of Christians being led by a woman. Turkey is one of the most westernized and modernized Muslim countries: Women have been allowed in public without head veils, as well as permitted to get an education and hold jobs, since the 1920's.

Yet seeing a woman in charge of a team that included men was still a visceral shock to them. Imagine how true that would have been in a Middle-Eastern context 20 centuries ago! Having women leading would have communicated a freight-train worth of symbolism about the nature of this gospel message. Paul's church-planting teams included both men and women, and he gladly left churches in the houses of various women. The symbolism could not have been clearer: this revolutionary new kind of community had eradicated all the social barriers held so dear by various cultures.

Focusing the Issue

When I began studying about male and female roles in church leadership, I had the impression that about ten biblical passages taught that men have some kind of authority position over women.

I found that only seven passages address this issue, and (surprisingly, to me) only two of those texts deal specifically with speaking or authority in the church;³² the other five address marriage.³³ Although the two topics relate to one another, I found it helpful to unlink marriage from Christian leadership.

Let's turn first to the two passages typically cited to show Paul was against women in church leadership, at least over men.

1 Corinthians 14—Orderly Worship

Recently, a missionary friend of mine in the Middle East faced a problem. Christian ministry in Muslim contexts is incredibly difficult, but this particular problem didn't involve hostility, persecution, or resistance to the gospel—although he's experienced all of those. He had successfully gathered a group of local Christians and seekers for Bible teaching, and they were wonderfully eager to learn.

The problem was this: several women kept disrupting the teaching by talking amongst themselves at full volume. Sometimes they were commenting on or questioning the teaching; often they were chatting about hot gossip items. Though this sounds quite rude, they didn't mean to be disrespectful or uncooperative. They simply hadn't had much school education, being women in a Middle-Eastern Muslim culture. They had no idea that in a learning environment you need to sit silently and listen, submitting to the person teaching or speaking. To solve the problem, the missionary and the more mature Christians had to teach them the proper way to learn: to sit quietly,

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³² 1 Cor. 14:34-35, 1 Tim. 2:11-15

³³ 1 Cor. 11:3, Eph. 5:21-33, Col. 3:18, 1 Tim. 2:8-15, 1 Peter 3:1-7

to listen attentively, to think about how to apply the teaching to their own life, and to ask any questions later.

Chaos in Corinth

The early Christian community in Corinth faced a similar problem. In fact, their meetings were quite chaotic because of many dynamics. The issue of women speaking and disrupting the meeting seems to have been a relatively minor problem, compared with people shouting out prophecies and prayers in various tongues simultaneously in what sounds like a highly competitive environment. Paul actually devotes three full chapters to a very lengthy teaching and exhortation against this—1 Corinthians 12-14.

As he wraps up this long section, he summarizes: Let only two to three people speak in a tongue, one at a time, making sure there's an interpreter so everyone can understand. Let people with prophetic words give them in an orderly way, one at a time.³⁴

Then he adds two verses about women—"women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church"³⁵—before returning to his main point: "So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order."³⁶

Three Observations

Let me make a few comments here. This is the first time Paul has singled out women in this three-chapter discourse—which leads me to believe that the women were causing only a minor disruption by speaking, compared with the other kinds of chaos going on.³⁷

Second, he exhorts them to ask their husbands later if they want to know anything. That tells us these women speaking in church were *asking clarifying questions*, which Paul wants them to ask at

³⁴ 1 Cor. 14:26-31

³⁵ 1 Cor. 14:34-35

³⁶ 1 Cor. 14:39-40

³⁷ In these three chapters, Paul writes at most 4 verses about women speaking, compared with 44 verses about prophets and speakers of tongues (12:28-13:2, 13:8-10, 14:1-32 and 37-39).

²⁶ What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. ³² And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, ³³ for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. (As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?) ³⁷ Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. ³⁸ Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. ³⁹ So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; ⁴⁰ but all things should be done decently and in order.

—1 Corinthians 14:26-40

another time and place so they wouldn't disrupt the meeting.³⁸ From this it would be quite a stretch to argue that these women are teaching or exercising any kind of authority.

³⁸ The word "should be subordinate" in this translation can also be translated "should subject themselves" (as in the more conservative New American Standard Bible, or NASB). Strong's Lexicon points out that it can mean either "to arrange under, to subordinate," which would mean here that the church should keep the women subordinate, or "to subject oneself, to obey, to submit to one's control," which means the women would be choosing to be subject. Strong's elaborates, "A Greek military term meaning 'to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader.' In non-military use, it was 'a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.'" (Strong's Greek Lexicon, entry 5293, *hupotasso*). I find it interesting, and strange, that many translators choose the *military* sense rather than the non-military sense of the word for this passage!

Third, Paul has actually mentioned women in worship previously, just before he started this section on orderly meetings. He spent half of chapter 11 arguing about the appropriate attire for women who are praying and prophesying in the churches.

I won't wade into the quagmire of interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 here. No commentator, as far as I know, calls that text clear and easy to interpret. However, it does seem clear from that section that Paul allows women to pray and prophesy! So it would make no sense for him to abruptly forbid that three chapters later. If he wanted to prohibit public speaking, chapter 11 would have been the natural place to do so. However, putting a stop to women's disruptive questioning fits seamlessly with his main point in chapters 12-14.³⁹

In these chapters, as Paul strives to help one of Jesus' new communities live out the radical new way of life, he emphasizes a way that puts love at the center. All the spiritual gifts should be given space to operate—let everyone be free to prophesy and speak in tongues, both signs of the new kingdom in our midst—but only in loving ways. No one should be allowed to create chaos during community worship times: neither competition by prophesying and speaking in tongues for self-promotion, nor disruptive questioning by uneducated women.

1 Timothy 2—Confronting False Teaching

The second major text often used to support the idea women should not teach men appears in 1

Timothy 2:11-14. Taken without regard to context, it seems to teach exactly that: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” Sounds quite clear—and pretty cut-and-dried.

But let me ask you a personal question: Don't you hate it when someone quotes you out of context? What you say can be twisted to mean something very different than you intended, even when your *words* are quoted accurately.

Quoting the Bible out of context can be quite dangerous. My dad likes to say, with a smirk, “The Bible says, ‘There is no God.’” And he's right—literally. The full verse says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” My dad's point is that the context makes all the difference, and we must always be on the lookout for “proof-texts”—quoting little snippets of Scripture that seem to support a certain position. Often they sound good until you examine their context. To be careful Bible students, we should always check the context of the passage we're dealing with.

These four verses of 1 Timothy 2 appear in the middle of a larger section (1 Tim. 2:8-15), and we should attend to the context in a couple ways. Taking any of these verses without regard for their *social* context would make most Christians uncomfortable, as we'll see in a moment. Second, they're in the context of a logical argument, and Paul gives a *conclusion* of this section in verse 15. If we can't understand how the conclusion flows naturally, then have we really understood his argument? Let's take these two points in order.

If we assumed the verses in this section are clear to us today on first reading, they would appear to be a disjointed string of random teachings. We would wind up choosing which of Paul's applications to disregard and which to enforce:

- Men everywhere should raise their hands when they pray (v. 8).
- Women may not wear braided hair, pearls, gold, or expensive clothes (v. 9).
- Women must be silent and submissive (v. 11-12).

³⁹ You can see for yourself the struggle translators have faced. The NRSV translators put this whole section about women in parentheses as if it didn't seem clear to them how it fit in. The NASB punctuation makes more sense of the words, as well. Some translations, like the NRSV, cut verse 33 in half, making “as in all the churches of the saints” the beginning of the next sentence. However, this would mean Paul wrote a redundant sentence. Judge for yourself; here's how the NASB punctuates it: “³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; ³³ for God is not a *God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. ³⁴ The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. ³⁵ If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.” Most other translators with conservative tendencies agree, including the King James, Young's Literal Translation, the Bible in Basic English, and Weymouth.

- Women may not teach or have authority over a man (v. 12).
- Adam was not deceived, but Eve was deceived (applying this however you will—v. 14).
- Women will be saved by bearing children (v. 15).

Some of these points sound bizarre, and others contradict New Testament teachings outright. Collectively, they seem like puzzle pieces jumbled together without apparent rhyme or reason.

The critical issue, I propose, is to read this whole section in light of the various religious pressures confronting Timothy and the church in Ephesus; two of the biggest were Gnosticism and the worship of Artemis.⁴⁰ Let's take a brief safari through those worldviews, then look at Paul's teaching in that context.⁴¹

Gnosticism—A Counterfeit Revolution

If you've ever heard the idea that sex is inherently bad, you've been exposed to Gnosticism. Gnostic ideas threatened to undermine the heart of Jesus' gospel in the first centuries, and still threatens to do so today.⁴²

Gnostics offered a competing gospel, which taught that anything physical or of the body was evil and corrupt. They preferred purely spiritual things and taught that those were good, pure, and holy. This radical dualism (still alive and well in

much of Christianity today, I'm afraid) places all the importance on the soul and none on the body.

It seems they were split over application in the first centuries. One version of Gnosticism taught, "Holy people abstain as much as possible from all things having to do with the body and physical pleasures." Paul refers to this a little later: "they forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods."⁴³ Whenever we react to lust by labeling all physical desires as bad, we're heading down this path. The Bible teaches that everything God created is fundamentally good, including our bodies, no matter how much they are corrupted by sin.⁴⁴

The other version taught, "Do whatever you like with your body. Eat, drink and be merry; participate in all kinds of orgies and sensual activities. Why not? Since the body doesn't matter, you don't need to discipline or limit it." Paul's exhortation for women to be modest, and for Timothy to pursue purity⁴⁵ directly confronts this branch of Gnosticism. Judging from Paul's emphasis in his letters to Timothy, these kinds of practices, along with greed, seem to be major false teachings the Ephesian church faced.⁴⁶

Artemis—A Traditional Religion

Tourists flocked to Ephesus to visit one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; the enormous Temple of Artemis (a.k.a. Diana) sat on a hill for all its glory to be seen far and wide.⁴⁷ Visitors came both to see the amazing architecture and works of art, but also to participate in the worship rituals, which involved temple prostitution. Greeks and Romans often included sexual activity in their religious practices, rooted in the fact that fertility was such a life-defining, life-controlling issue.

⁴⁰ The worship of Caesar also dominated the daily life of everyone in Ephesus. We see Paul deal with these pressures in other places, such 1 Tim. 1:17 and 6:15, and in the letter to the Ephesians, but this section of Timothy seems primarily directed against issues coming from these two religions.

⁴¹ To be precise, I ought to say "proto-Gnostic," because we have no direct historical evidence that Gnosticism had reached its fully mature forms at the time Paul was writing, such as Gnostic documents. However, I contend that if you simply read 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Ephesians, and other Pauline writings alongside the Gnostic texts we have from the second century, it becomes apparent Paul must be addressing very similar teachings and viewpoints (and likewise with John's writings). If Gnosticism hadn't flowered fully yet, I think the main shoots and buds were sprouting at the time. 1 Timothy 2 and "On Origin of the World" (which I quote later) offer a prime example, as I shall demonstrate. For simplicity, I'll simply use the term Gnosticism.

⁴² Gnosticism has hung around for a long time. Most recently, it's been popularized by Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

⁴³ 1 Timothy 4:3

⁴⁴ Genesis 1:1-31 teaches this clearly: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (v. 31). Jesus demonstrated it in the strongest possible way by taking on human flesh and bone (see John 1:14 and 20:24-28): Gnostics deny the incarnation because they can never conceive of anything good being associated with a body or even the creation.

⁴⁵ 1 Timothy 4:2, 5:12

⁴⁶ A quick read-through of Titus will show that Paul's concerned with very similar issues facing the church in Crete.

⁴⁷ Acts 19:23-28

Paul's Exhortations in First Century Ephesus

I think this whole section begins to fit together when we read it in this light, so let's relate Paul's various points to these religious practices. He starts by exhorting men that, as opposed to Gnostic thinking, their physical behavior does affect their spiritual life: fighting or arguing makes them unholy and hinders their praying. I don't think Paul is forbidding men from folding their hands to pray; I think he's using a visual image of men in prayer that they would all recognize (though we may not), and his emphasis is not on posture but on praying and living in holiness and without being contentious.

Similarly for women; wearing braided hair, pearls, gold, and expensive clothes may have made them look like temple prostitutes. Paul wants to make it clear that Jesus' revolution doesn't involve any sexual rituals like the pagan religions. And Paul probably wants to challenge women not to dress with ostentatious displays of wealth. The new revolution abolished the walls between rich and poor, and dressing this way would be thoughtless to poorer women. (We may need to think today about whether our practices and clothing make everyone feel welcome.) Some scholars think Paul's also concerned about the immodesty of high-fashion clothing, which sometimes included sheer fabrics or otherwise revealing clothing.

Verses 8-10, then, appear to be addressing specific cultural problems that threatened the gospel within Timothy's local context; not teaching that braided hair and gold rings are universally sinful, but that around Ephesus, they could easily be misconstrued in a way that would undermine the heart of the gospel.

Let Women Learn

Verses 11 and 12 contain the strongest language found anywhere in the Bible prohibiting women from speaking and teaching. Let's take these puzzle pieces one at a time.

⁸ I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹ also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

—1 Timothy 2:8-12

The brutal practice of North American slavery included keeping slaves illiterate. Slave owners knew if the slaves learned to read they would become a much greater threat to the system; illiterate, they had to trust what the slave owners taught them. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass gained power partly by learning to read and educating themselves.

One ancient Jewish saying claimed, "Better to burn the Torah than teach it to a woman."⁴⁸ Opposing this, Paul insists women should be allowed to learn.⁴⁹

Recently, as I was teaching a college group, several students fired challenging questions at me. That was fully appropriate, because it was an apologetics Q & A session. To tell the truth, I had to provoke them a little bit; usually, they sit and

learn in silence with full submission, because they have been conditioned to do so since kindergarten. For both women and men, it's the proper learning posture. I contend that here, as in 1 Corinthians, Paul isn't prescribing a different posture for women, but instructing them to behave like the men already do.

Jesus' revolution includes everyone—and the power to learn and to be educated, especially in the gospel, must be for everyone. Those who haven't had much schooling, or who have other conceptions of religious worship services, had to be taught how to learn and how to behave so others could learn as well.

Pagan Priestesses

Verse 12 sounds even more emphatic and universal. We need to ask, did Paul intend this teaching to stand independent of its context? Let's look first at its social context, then its grammatical context, and finally its place in the context of Paul's logical argument here.

⁴⁸ y. *Sotah* 3:19a,3 quoted in Witherington III, Ben. *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Vol. 1*, IVP, 2007, p. 226

⁴⁹ Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters*, SPCK, 2004, pp. 21-27.

¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

—1 Timothy 2:12-15

Some Greek and Roman pagan religions were wildly popular with women, partly because they could gain prestige as priestesses and exercise authority as well as sexual power over men, a rare opportunity for women in Greco-Roman society.

It was probably very confusing for the Ephesians to experience this new revolution of Jesus, where slaves and

women had as much freedom and authority as masters and men. They might have easily assumed that women such as Priscilla and Lydia would have the same kind of authority that women had in the cult of Diana. Paul wants Timothy to teach the Ephesians that this clearly contradicts the gospel of Jesus.

***Authenteo*: A Unique Term**

Paul's word choice gives us more evidence that he's addressing this social context. The Greek word that Paul uses for *authority* here (*authenteo*, "to have authority over a man") appears nowhere else in the entire New Testament.⁵⁰ In fact, it has a negative connotation in many of the other places it appears in Greek literature.⁵¹ Place yourself in Paul's shoes. Let's say you're writing a cookbook,

and you need to include a warning for children not to use knives. Would you choose wording like, "Do not permit any child to stab with a knife"? It would sound like you're warning against a very specific usage, perhaps even a negative usage, of knives; and all the more so if the word "stab" appears nowhere else in the entire cookbook. To prohibit knife usage all together, you would want to use a more general term such as "cut" or possibly "chop."

If Paul wanted to forbid women universally from having leadership within the church, it's hard to believe he would use such a negative term. Further, it makes very little sense to choose one that's unique in the Bible.⁵² It would make more sense for him to use the terms for Christian leadership he and the other writers use throughout the New Testament.⁵³ More likely, he's forbidding the women from exercising negative sexual and religious authority, like the pagan temple prostitutes.

Setting Adam and Eve in Order

So the social and grammatical context of verse 12 explains why Paul would prohibit women exercising a certain kind of authority over men; now, to understand why he prohibits teaching, let's look at the flow of his logical argument. Verses 13-14 give Paul's supporting reasons, before his conclusion in verse 15. What on earth is Paul's point about Adam and Eve?

Documents discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, contain a number of Gnostic texts written in the second through fourth centuries, including the fascinating *On the Origin of the World*.⁵⁴ These texts teach about an evil creator who, rebelling against the Almighty Father, created a physical world and trapped some spiritual souls in corrupt physical bodies. They include rewritten versions of the

⁵⁰ This is technically known as a hapax.

⁵¹ The Kroegers have researched this word *authenteo* extensively. It's a fairly rare word in all of Greek literature, but does appear in various other Greek and Roman writings for a total of 328 times (Scholer, 4/25/01); it has a spectrum of meanings ranging from "domineer" or "usurp power" on the mild end, all the way to "stab" or "kill." Some cult writings may even use it for a ritual sexual act—"to stab" or "kill" in a sexual sense as part of an act of worship. (Kroeger, Richard & Kroeger, Catherine Clark, "May Women Teach," in *World Christian magazine*, Summer Reader 1990, pp. 48-49.)

The Strong's Greek lexicon gives these definitions: "King James Authorized Version: 'usurp authority over.' 1) one who with his own hands kills another or himself 2) one who acts on his own authority, autocratic 3) an absolute master 4) to govern, exercise dominion over one" (Strong, James, *Greek Lexicon*, entry 831).

⁵² Belleville, Linda L., in *Discovering Biblical Equality* (Pierce & Groothuis, eds.), IVP, 2004, pp. 207-217.

⁵³ The New Testament often uses the word *exousia* for authority (107 times, according to *Strong's Greek Lexicon*, entries 1849 and 1850) and *dunamis* for power (120 times, entry 1411), as well as a number of other words Paul could have used here, including *hegeomai*, *huperochē*, *proistemi*, *epitage*, *poimaino*, and *archo*.

⁵⁴ All the Nag Hammadi texts can be accessed on the web in various translations; search for "Nag Hammadi library." In the text excerpt quoted here, it's helpful to know that in Greek, Sophia means Wisdom; Zoe means Life; and in Hebrew, Eve means Life or Living.

creation story, myths and genealogies, and “secret knowledge” that will save the elect—i.e., rescue the enlightened elite from the physical world.

Throughout 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Paul raises concerns about “myths,” “speculations,” “old wives’ tales,” “profane chatter,” and “what is falsely called knowledge.”⁵⁵ Although we can’t be sure this particular teaching was around when Paul was writing,⁵⁶ I believe something like it would help make sense of this passage by fitting so many pieces of this puzzle neatly together.

For a moment, let’s assume similar beliefs were circulating in Ephesus during Paul’s time. Since Eve was created first and gave life to Adam, they argued, “woman” is first and spiritually superior to “man.” Poor, pitiable “man” was deceived and brought sin into the world. Therefore, “woman” is the keeper of the secret knowledge—the key to salvation. To be saved, men must relate to women who hold that knowledge, perhaps sexually or in some other way.

If that were the false teaching Paul’s confronting, then in verses 13-15 he’s reversing the argument: In the real Genesis account, he’s saying, Eve was formed second, not first; the woman was deceived, not the man; “woman” will be saved by the gospel, not by secret knowledge; and therefore women should behave modestly, get married, and have children, not become cultic priestess-prostitutes.

We could see how dangerous such false teaching would be, and why Paul would so emphatically prohibit women from teaching such things and trying to exercise this brand of authority over men.

After the day of rest, Sophia sent her daughter Zoe, being called Eve, as an instructor, in order that she might make Adam, who had no soul, arise, so that those whom he should engender might become containers of light. When Eve saw her male counterpart prostrate, she had pity upon him, and she said, “Adam! Become alive! Arise upon the earth!” Immediately her word became accomplished fact. For Adam, having arisen, suddenly opened his eyes. When he saw her, he said, “You shall be called ‘Mother of the Living.’ For it is you who have given me life.”

—from *On the Origin of the World*

⁵⁵ 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 4:1-3, 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 2:14-18, 4:3-4. Paul also gives evidence that these types of teaching were more widespread, influencing Crete as well as Ephesus: for example, Titus 3:9-11.

⁵⁶ These documents weren’t written until at least the second century.

Putting the Puzzle Together

Verse 15 makes very nice sense as a conclusion, if Paul's been addressing these issues. Let me paraphrase his argument as I see it:⁵⁷

8 I want men to pray everywhere they go, living and acting in a holy way without anger or arguing;

9 and in the same way, for women to live and act in a holy way: not dressing like temple prostitutes or like rich women who flaunt their wealth,

10 but dressing themselves with the beauty of Christ—that is, doing good in this world with acts of godly love and service.

11 Since all Christians need to learn the gospel, let the women learn—and teach them how to sit quietly and listen with humility, being teachable to the preacher.

12 I absolutely do not allow any woman to behave like women in other religions: they may not use their sexuality or any other power they have to manipulate or control man. They may not teach myths, genealogies, and speculations that depict women as more spiritual or better than men, such as that Sophia created Eve, who then out of pity gave the man a soul and brought him to life;

13 because—in the true creation account—God fashioned Adam first; Eve didn't even exist when he was given life.

14 And Adam was not a foolish brute because he was male, deceived and needing a woman's help to gain any spiritual insight. Actually, the woman was tempted and chose to sin first.

15 So women will not be saved by tracing their genealogy back to Zoë (a.k.a., Eve) and Sophia, or by any other “secret knowledge” or “inner light.” Any teaching that spirit is pure and the body is evil badly misses the mark. The gospel of salvation through Jesus includes living a healthy bodily life: accordingly, women should generally get married and have children, as God commanded Adam and

⁸ I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹ also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

—1 Timothy 2:12-15

Eve, and should live in faith, love, and holiness, with modesty.

Verse 15, read in that kind of context, not only dovetails with all the entire preceding verses, but also fits with the New Testament's teaching of the gospel.

Summary of Women in Church

To recap, the New Testament gives us evidence that women played just about every role men played in this new community created by Jesus, from the gospels through the epistles. Except for the group of twelve Jewish men Jesus chose to symbolize the renewed Israel, he put women in the very center of his revolution. He defied cultural taboos by letting women be his disciples, ministry supporters, evangelists, and the key witnesses to his resurrection.

The revolutionary nature of Jesus' people continued as new communities were founded. Paul named Phoebe as a deacon and benefactor, Junia as an apostle, and Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and many other women as co-workers in the gospel. He greeted many women who had churches meeting in their houses, including Nympha, Apphia, and Claudia. Paul entrusted Phoebe to carry the epistle to the Romans, and both Luke and Paul particularly highlighted Priscilla who shared the work of teaching, evangelizing, and leadership with her husband, Aquila, Paul, and other men.

Further, Paul clearly stated that women prayed and prophesied in church meetings, though he did not allow them to ask disruptive questions during meetings. He also forbade women from exercising negative authority and promoting false teaching, which he certainly forbade men from doing as well. It strikes me as remarkable that in all his writings, Paul only *twice* discouraged women from speaking. Both times he discouraged disruptive questions and in one he also forbade false teaching. Both times he defended women's right to learn the gospel. What a shame Paul has a

⁵⁷ This isn't a translation, but my attempt to capture the heart of Paul's logical argument verse by verse.

reputation as a misogynist and a sexist writer! Few men in all of history have promoted the equality of women in leadership both in writing and in practice as strongly as the apostle Paul.

It seems to me that the New Testament writings understood in their context, especially the teachings and actions of Jesus and Paul, promote women and oppose misogyny in powerful ways.

Epilogue

What I found at the theological library surprised me: a few inscriptions, grave markers, and other artifacts from the first several centuries that show the names of women who held roles of bishop, deacon, prophet, evangelist and so on.⁵⁸

But if women shared church leadership with men during the first and second century, when and why did this practice die out? As I researched, I found that church leaders began writing against women leaders sometime around the middle of the second century—about 100 years or so after Paul. Why? If we follow the flow church history through the centuries, a fascinating pattern emerges.⁵⁹

Ebb and Flow

About a hundred years ago, a small community began meeting on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, led by a one-eyed African-American man, the son of slaves. People spoke in strange languages and gave prophecies; others received miraculous healings; people confessed and repented of sin and committed themselves to holiness; missionaries on fire for the gospel went around the world from the Azusa Street Revival. Visitors reported being surprised by the ethnic diversity—white, black, Latino, Asian, and newly arrived Europeans all worshipping together. One historian notes, “A 1906 Azusa staff photo shows blacks and whites, men and women—all in leadership. An unsigned article in the November 1906 issue of *The Apostolic Faith* said, ‘No instrument that God can use is rejected on account of color or dress or lack of education.’”⁶⁰

Sadly, serious problems attended this move of God. Reports often exaggerated the miraculous events. Within a few years, doctrinal and ethnic tensions split the group. Latinos were asked to

leave, and the rest split along black and white lines. Eventually, men took almost exclusive leadership of the various resulting movements.

You will find many elements of this story repeated throughout the 20 centuries of the church. New movements of God’s Spirit bursts forth in surprising and fresh incarnations of Jesus’ kingdom, often characterized by bold witness, fervent prayer, widespread repentance, and a return to holiness; and simultaneously, barriers between rich and poor are torn down; ethnic walls are demolished; and, often, women exercise remarkable leadership.⁶¹ Sometimes these elements come in over time: John Wesley did not believe women should preach when the Methodist revival began, but “in his later years Wesley publicly affirmed and privately encouraged women to preach, regardless of the prevailing public opinion.”⁶²

But within one to three generations, many of those powerful manifestations of God’s power tend to become diluted as the movement becomes institutionalized and more formal. The economic, ethnic and gender barriers tend to regain power. In 1609, the Baptist movement began in the Netherlands, and we know of several powerful female Baptist preachers; women preached until 1660, when leadership was restricted to men.⁶³ By the mid-1800’s, women had lost the right to vote in church conferences and to speak when men were present.⁶⁴ In 1895, the Nazarenes were

⁵⁸ I’ve lost my original list of sources, but http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/Chronology_Ordination.htm gives a fairly comprehensive list, though it doesn’t cite its sources.

⁵⁹ I developed a rough theory at that time based on the Montanist movement. Several people have propounded much more well-researched and thought-out versions of this, as recorded in Grenz, Stanley J. and Kjesbo, Denise Muir, *Women in the Church: a biblical theology of women in ministry*, IVP 1995, pp. 36-56.

⁶⁰ http://www.dunamai.com/Azusa/azusa_pages/story_behind_Azusa.htm

⁶¹ My theory, noted above, is that the earliest such cycle appeared in the mid-second century, when a group called the Montanists emerged, very much like the Azusa Street Revival. The church father Tertullian joined as soon as he learned about their teachings, though they were condemned as heretics, probably because they promoted continued prophetic utterances and women in leadership. Scholars are divided on whether the group was orthodox or problematic; from what we can piece together, I think they fell into similar excesses as Azusa Street—indeed, as the Corinthians and perhaps most other fresh moves of the Holy Spirit. Two centuries later, Augustine restored Tertullian’s followers to good standing in his church. We can note, in any case, that at this point (roughly A.D. 200) the main stream of the church already stood against prophetic utterances and tongues, women in leadership, and had become anti-semitic.

⁶² Grenz and Kjesbo, pp. 42-45.

⁶³ Scholer, “Women in Ministry Seminar.”

⁶⁴ Grenz and Kjesbo, *ibid.*

founded in Pasadena, and by 1915 over a quarter of their clergy were women. In 1946, women were excluded from leadership, and today they may not even pray aloud in Sunday worship services.⁶⁵

I've been convinced that this happens as cultural values overtake kingdom values. The strange logic of Jesus' revolution begins to seem confused, upside-down and backwards. As the waves of the culture crash repeatedly over the new community, the tide soon turns and many of the values slowly erode. Evangelism becomes less passionate, sacrificial giving dwindles, prayer becomes less vibrant, and barriers begin to build. Hierarchical power structures trump servant leadership. The poor and subdominant cultural groups get relegated to the fringes. And women get excluded from leadership positions.

Yet the tide of culture will not prevail against the solid rock of Christ's church. Mighty as those waves seem, they are driven and tossed by the wind. I believe we stand at a time in the world's history where we can see the effects of the onward march of the rock solid gospel of Jesus the Messiah. For example, slavery still exists today, but the majority of the world's governments no longer condone it. Human rights hold sway in international tribunals and courts. Creation care has become an agenda for nations around the globe. And many nations grapple with equal treatment for women to a degree I believe is unprecedented in world history.

To be sure, we will never escape the effects of the curse until the Shalom of God's kingdom comes in full, and every person and nation is held accountable for their deeds. However, we continue to pray as the Lord taught us, "Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven," and we continue to work toward that end by grace, in the power of the Spirit, doing the good works God created beforehand for us to do in this world, confident that the power of God's love and justice will indeed triumph in the end.

A Closing Word to Women

A wise friend of mine recently remarked, "I still think women don't believe they're made in God's image." Sisters, I believe God wants to pour his Spirit and love into the gaping emptiness many women feel, and reaffirm that humankind is

created in God's own image, male and female. Please open yourself up to that affirmation of God and God's word. To be a woman is not to be inferior. Female is not fundamentally flawed. We will all know this in our souls in God's new creation, but until then, resist the voices that would undermine the truth of God's word in your heart.⁶⁶ Use the gifts God has given you. If people try to prevent you from using them, respond with revolutionary love; submit,⁶⁷ just as Jesus submitted to the court and the cross, knowing that God will raise you up and vindicate you⁶⁸ as he vindicated Jesus, our king.

A Closing Word to Men

Brothers, let us be untiring in fighting to advance the values of Jesus' revolution of love. Let us follow Jesus' example, and stand up for our sisters just as Jesus himself did. Let us advocate for them, graciously and lovingly, whenever women's leadership is called into question. Let us encourage them when they face opposition and disheartening situations. Let us work along side women, valuing the gifts God has given to the body and to the world in our sisters, calling the best out of them. Let us use all the power and influence at our disposal to empower them and sponsor them into positions of leadership. And let us work hard to love women as Jesus does, and treat them as we would want to be treated, because he has commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

⁶⁵ Scholer, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Genesis 1:27, 1 Cor. 11:11-12, Gal. 3:25-29.

⁶⁷ This comment needs an entire article to explain, but let me just say here that Jesus did not violate his conscience or his integrity as he submitted. That takes great creativity and courage, and *that's* the kind of submission I'm encouraging, not being a doormat or people pleaser.

⁶⁸ 1 Peter 5:5-6

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“A Chronology of Women's Ordination” http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/Chronology_Ordination.htm This site lists dates women were ordained or were banned from ordination in various branches of the church. They give no references, but the dates line up quite well with the credible sources I have found in my research.

“God's Word to Women” http://godswordtowomen.org/women_history_articles.htm has a list of excellent articles on women in various leadership roles in the Bible and church history, including an article on Junia, the apostle.