

A Community Without Barriers

Women in the New Testament
And the Church Today



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Introduction

This study was prepared for use by the members of the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York City. The materials were written for class presentation and discussion.

In these materials I am attempting to share what I believe I have learned from the Bible over a number of years of studying and teaching the scriptures. I am very clearly aware that there are many disagreements among Christians about how to apply the scriptures to the issue of the role of women in public worship of the church, and I have no illusions that what I have to say will resolve those disagreements. My aim here is to express with clarity what the scriptures teach, as best I can, and to deal with some of the many disputed questions that arise around these issues. I hope that these notes will point to a coherent way of understanding the scriptures – a way which others on all sides of the question may clearly understand and may confirm, refute, or modify. In this manner, I hope to contribute to the important discussion that is going on in many churches today.

Since I am writing this introduction at the end of the series of studies, I want to summarize here some of the main points of the study.

Section 1: Women in the Ministry of Jesus.

Since so much of the debate concerning the roles of women has focused on passages in Paul's letters, it may seem surprising to begin with a study of Jesus' relationships with the women he encountered and especially to spend so much time and space on it. The emphasis on Jesus, however, grows from the simple fact that we are Christians, disciples to Jesus Christ, and his attitudes and practices, therefore, stand in the very highest authority for us (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus established for us a high standard of complete fairness in the way he treated women. Many of the stories in the gospels reflect the fact that women were often distrusted, despised, vulnerable to accusation, and at the mercy of men, yet Jesus treated women and spoke to and about women in exactly the same way he did with men. He welcomed women as disciples (as no other rabbi did), and revealed divine truths to them as he did to men. Jesus

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was clearly aware of the prejudices of his society against women. In the case of a sinful woman who wept at his feet and a woman trapped in the act of adultery, Jesus defended them against the men who condemned them.

Knowledge of the ever present limitations on women in society plays a role in analyzing why Jesus chose 12 Jewish men as his apostles and official witnesses of his resurrection. From one point of view, “the Twelve” were a reconstitution of the 12 men who gave their names to the 12 tribes of Israel, and thus they represented a renewal of the people of God. From another point of view, however, in a society in which women usually could not testify in court because they were thought to be inherently untrustworthy, it would not have been realistic to expect a hostile world to accept the testimony of women as “official” witnesses of the resurrection. Among his body of followers, however, Jesus chose women to be the first witnesses of the resurrection to the apostles, who were in turn to be witnesses to the world. Jesus made a point to show that he, unlike the world at large, trusted the testimony of women.

Section 2: Women in Ancient Societies

This section primarily provides a selection of quotations both from the ancient Middle East and from the Greco-Roman world to illustrate the situation of women and to raise the question of the role of society and culture in understanding biblical passages. The impact of culture and society is always present in understanding a biblical passage, but issues of culture by themselves should never be determinative in evaluating whether a particular practice, example, law, or teaching still applies to Christians today.

Section 3: Women in the Writings of Paul : 1 Corinthians

Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul was dealing with Christians who had enthusiastically received the Gospel, but had misunderstood and misapplied it in many ways. Paul consistently strove to call them back to the message of the cross of Christ and its full meaning. For Paul, any teaching or practice that distorted the message of the cross or kept people from hearing it was totally unacceptable.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul clearly assumed that women both prayed and prophesied along with men in the church in Corinth. Prophecy was one

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of the most important gifts of the Spirit for building up the church, and Paul had no desire to stop either the women or the men. Given the beliefs of both Jewish and Greek societies of that day, however, such public roles for women could often be considered scandalous and could put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel. Paul emphasized that the women especially must show a careful observance of propriety by wearing head-coverings which would show their respect for God's creation and society's order when they pray or prophesy.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, a specific problem led Paul to rebuke certain women. Though Paul emphasized that he wanted all the Corinthians to prophesy, certain wives were evidently questioning their husbands, not by way of prophecy but in a way that apparently brought disgrace. Paul commanded them to be silent along with others who were disrupting the worship and causing it either to offend outsiders or to fail to build up the community.

Section 4: Women in the Writings of Paul: Galatians 3:25-29

Here Paul set forth the ideal of the Gospel in breaking down barriers that divided human society. The church struggles today as it did then with the ongoing reality of ethnic divisions, class divisions, and gender divisions, but Paul's inspired vision of a community in which there is no Jew and Greek, no slave and free, no male and female challenges the church always to move toward being a community without barriers.

Section 5: Women in the Writings of Paul: 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Paul wrote to Timothy to help him deal with false teachers in Ephesus who were forbidding marriage and were finding an opening into the congregation through women who were evidently rejecting their marriages, teaching in a domineering manner, and dressing in a way that expressed their disdain for propriety. Paul insisted that such teaching and such styles of dress and behavior should stop. He wanted the women to reject the false teaching by affirming marriage and bearing children and thus to return to the truth of the Gospel. Only by doing so could they be saved, rather than be destroyed by the heresy.

As in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul's restrictions on women here were not arbitrarily applied to them simply for being women. Rather the

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instructions responded to a particular dangerous situation. Paul's injunctions were not intended to be separated from their context and applied to all women in all settings.

Section 6: Dealing with Differences in a Community

This section examines three paradigms from Paul's letters for handling important differences of belief and practice among Christians. These arise in various situations of Paul's ministry. The variations depend on the particular circumstances and the needs of the people involved.

(1) The first paradigm occurs when Christians who differ from one another treat each other with mutual respect and accept their differences in belief. (2) The second arises when a Christian of strong faith or conscience yields his or her personal freedom for the sake of a person of weak faith or conscience in order not to destroy that person's faith or keep them from coming to Christ. (3) The third paradigm appears when Paul finds himself defending the freedom of a whole group of believers such as the Gentiles and refusing to compromise in any way that would diminish their freedom in Christ. All three of these patterns have resonances in our day in various controversies within the church.

Section 1

Women in the Ministry of Jesus

Jesus encountered and interacted with a great variety of women during his ministry. These interactions provide us with a paradigm of how the Gospel of the Kingdom of God manifests itself in life within a particular setting and culture and establishes values that stand in sharp contrast to the prejudices of that culture. In the course of looking at these examples we will also deal with the question of why Jesus chose 12 men as his apostles and how this fact relates to the service of women.

1. Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Matthew 1-2; 12:46-50; 13:55-56; Mark 3:21, 31-35; 6:3; Luke 1-2; John 2:1-12; 19:25-27; Acts 1:14.

By far most of the treatment of Mary in the Gospels is within the narratives of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. Luke especially focuses on Mary and gives us a strong impression of the character and strength of Mary.

In the course of church history, the figure of Mary strongly influenced the situation of women in later centuries. Her role in the Gospels was interpreted in the light of growing interest in asceticism, celibacy, and the ideal of virginity. She combined two important roles – mother and virgin. She came to be seen as a perpetual virgin in every sense of the word and thus as an ideal of celibacy. Her name could also evoke the ideals of a tender mother, a mother with special access to her son. Indeed, she came to be designated the “Mother of God.” Yet she was a mother without any taint of real sexuality. “Virgin” became part of her name: the “Blessed Virgin Mary.”

Thus, this imagined figure of Mary set an ideal for womanhood that no actual woman could attain. A woman could choose either the preferred “religious” route of virginity and asceticism, or she could be a lay woman and have children, an important but lesser standing.

In contrast to this later mythology of Mary, the Gospels give no indication at all of any ascetic ideal or perpetual virginity for Mary. Her virginity was not counted as a special state of purity but simply as a physical

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condition that showed that the birth of Jesus was miraculous (and could be linked to scripture). There was a virginal conception, but Mary did not continue physically to be a virgin after Jesus' birth. Matthew indicates that Mary and Joseph were married by the time Jesus was born (Matthew 1:24-25) though Luke suggests that they were still only betrothed (Luke 2:2). Gospel passages that refer to Jesus as Mary's "*first-born son*" (Luke 2:7) or list "*his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas*" and mention "*all his sisters*" (Matthew 13:55-56) indicate that after the birth of Jesus Mary lived simply as the wife of Joseph and bore at least seven more children.

The Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 shows the meaning of Mary's role. By lifting up this woman from her lowly estate, God was performing the first act of the great transformation of the world that was the aim of the kingdom of God. The first great manifestation of the values and purposes of God being imposed on the contrary values of the world was the elevation of a woman so that all generations would call her blessed.

Each time Mary is mentioned as Jesus' mother during his ministry, the Gospels seem to indicate some separation between Jesus and his mother. In the most colorful incident, the marriage at Cana recounted in the Gospel of John, it was Jesus' mother who informed him simply, "*they have no wine*" (John 2:3). Jesus' response was surprising for its abruptness and mysterious character: "*O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come*" (John 2:4). The Gospel recounted this statement not to show that Jesus was impolite to his mother but that his ministry had its own timetable that could not be rushed even by his mother. She was not put off by Jesus' words and she told the servants, whom she apparently knew well, "*Do whatever he tells you*" (John 2:5) – perhaps a hint that she already perceived Jesus' remarkable power.

Later, as controversy swirled around Jesus, Mark recorded that "*his family ... went out to seize him, for people were saying, 'He is beside himself'*" (Mark 3:21). A few verses later Mark stated that "*his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him*" (Mark 3:31). They may have been worried for Jesus' safety in the midst of charges of demon possession, but Jesus refused to go out to them.

John showed that Jesus' honor for his mother was manifested at his crucifixion. As he was dying, Jesus carefully committed his mother, who was

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standing near the cross, to the care of “*the disciple whom he loved*” (John 19:26). Thereafter, evidently, Mary considered the beloved disciple as her son and stayed for some time with him. The New Testament says nothing of Mary’s later life or of her death.

2. The Samaritan Woman at the well

John 4:4-43.

This remarkable narrative follows the account of Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21. Here, Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman in exactly the same manner as he spoke with Nicodemus. He showed the same degree of seriousness, the same concern to lead both to deeper insights, and the same perception as to where they each were in their own spiritual development. The social contrast between Nicodemus, a highly educated Pharisee, a member of the Jewish council and “*a ruler of the Jews,*” and this Samaritan woman, married five times and living with someone who was not her husband, could not have been more stark.

Jesus’ words provide not the least hint of condescension or of any thought that this woman was not worthy of Jesus’ time. Though Jesus understood her less than ideal marital situation, he spoke of it not to condemn the woman but to highlight her independence and honesty: “*You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’...this you said truly*” (John 4:17-18).

Commentators often note that the woman seemed a bit uncomfortable at Jesus’ words (as Nicodemus had been) and that she switched the subject from her marital situation to a religious controversy. It is noteworthy, however, that Jesus did not try to embarrass her but followed her lead in turning the conversation to talk about the worship of God.

Indeed Jesus chose this conversation with this woman as the moment for several important revelations and teachings.

(1) He told her of the “*living/flowing water,*” just as he had told Nicodemus about being “*born again/from above.*” As he had with Nicodemus, Jesus led the woman from a literal interpretation of his words toward a spiritual understanding. In the Old Testament prophets, living/flowing water serves as a metaphor of God’s life-giving activity in the world: Jeremiah 2:13; Zechariah 14:8; Ezekiel 47:8-9.

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In the Gospel of John, Jesus used the image of living water to link together the ideas of “water” and “Spirit.” Earlier Jesus had also linked water and spirit in his conversation with Nicodemus, when he spoke of being born of water and Spirit. A few chapters later, the Gospel described Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem: “*Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’* Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37 – 39).

Thus to this Samaritan woman, Jesus chose to begin to reveal the reality of the Spirit, which even Jesus’ closest disciples did not fully understand until years later. That Spirit which would satisfy eternally one’s thirst for God and allow one truly to worship God represented the core of Jesus’ revelation about a new relationship with God.

(2) Jesus revealed to her the coming of new forms of worship not centered in any particular location or among any particular group. Rather Jesus said that in any place people may “*worship the Father in spirit and truth*” (John 4:23). It is the revelation that “*God is spirit*” – intimately connected to that “*living water*” – that breaks down the barriers of racial, ethnic, and gender separation among people.

By conventional norms, this Samaritan woman was separated from Jesus by three impenetrable walls: she was a woman; she was a Samaritan; and she did not worship God correctly. Their conversation ought not to have taken place. But Jesus knew that the character of God as Spirit – as that living water that can flow into any person so that God becomes an intimate presence in that person’s life – breaks down all those walls.

Jesus clearly understood the history of those barriers between people and consciously chose to break the barriers. He refused to be put off by the known hostilities and theological and cultural differences between Samaritans and Jews. He refused to respect the barrier that said that he was not to speak to, much less teach, a woman (John 4:9, 27). Jesus broke these barriers because he knew the character of the God whom he was revealing to the world. God seeks worshipers defined by the presence of the Spirit and by the truth (the reality/genuineness) of their worship. Samaritans, Jews, men,

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women – all approach God equally.

(3) Jesus revealed his Messiahship (John 4:25-26). In the Gospel of John, it is to this Samaritan woman that Jesus chose first to affirm his identity as Messiah. He found in her an openness of heart and a level of understanding that suggested that such a revelation to her could be fruitful.

She in turn led others of her town to listen to Jesus and to come to believe in him as the Christ. Thus, remarkably, the Gospel of John suggests that the first real community of believers in Jesus was among the Samaritans, led to their own personal faith (though they were reluctant to admit it) by this Samaritan woman (John 4:39-42).

3. The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee

Matthew 20:20-23; 27:56 (She may be the same as the Salome mentioned in Mark 15:40.)

The mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, is a rather enigmatic figure. She is not mentioned when Jesus called James and John by the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:21- 22; Mark 1:19-20). There, we are simply told that James and John left their father Zebedee in order to follow Jesus. James and John, of course, became part of Jesus' inner circle of the Twelve.

It is only later, near the end of Jesus ministry, when his large band (perhaps a hundred or more) were about to come to Jerusalem, that we learn that the mother of James and John was traveling with Jesus' followers (Matthew 20:20-22).

She and James and John shared the same faith in Jesus as the Messiah, who was about to establish the Kingdom of God. Neither she nor the apostles really understood what that faith meant, but they were certain that they wanted to participate in the coming kingdom to the fullest. Thus she spoke for them (cf. Mark 10:35) in asking *“that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom”* (Matthew 20:21).

It is important to note that the Gospel of Matthew was not suggesting that she had a particularly inadequate understanding of Jesus. Rather, in many ways, she represented the level of understanding of all of Jesus' disciples during his ministry. They all tried to understand Jesus in terms of their prior

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expectations of a Messiah and had no hint of what a crucified Messiah might be.

It was only at the very end that this mother of two of the Twelve, was granted a glimpse of what following Jesus could mean. Matthew described her as one of the women who stood at the foot of the cross beholding the reality of a crucified Messiah (Matthew 27:56). She had wanted her sons to sit at the right and left of Jesus. It was indeed beside this crucified king that James and John would serve. Within little more than a decade, James had been executed for his faith in Jesus.

4. Peter's Mother-in-law

Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39.

We know little about this woman, but her presence lets us glimpse the ordinary life situations that Jesus served. In Peter's small fisherman's house lived Peter, his wife, his brother Andrew (perhaps his wife), and Peter's mother-in-law.

She was suffering a devastating fever. Jesus "*took her by the hand and lifted her up*" and she immediately returned to her normal life (Mark 1:31).

5. A Widow in the town of Nain

Luke 7:11-17.

Jesus saw a funeral procession and recognized the desperate plight of this woman, who was a widow who had just lost her only son. Without husband and without son, she literally had no means of support that she could count on. Jesus "*had compassion on her.*" He stopped the procession and raised the young man to life "*and he gave him to his mother*" (Luke 7:15). By helping this woman, Jesus revealed to the people that "*a great prophet has arisen among us*" and "*God has visited his people!*" (Luke 7:16).

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6. A Woman of the City who anointed Jesus

Luke 7:36-50.

Jesus was at the house of a Pharisee named Simon eating dinner when he encountered this woman identified as “*a woman of the city, who was a sinner*” (Luke 7:37). Her name was never given, and she said not a single word. Rather her actions became an eloquent testimony to her faith and love. She appeared with an alabaster flask of ointment. Standing behind Jesus, as he was reclining with his feet pointed away from the table, “*she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment*” (Luke 7:38). Simon saw this situation as a test of Jesus as a prophet. Could he discern what sort of woman this was? For Simon, Jesus clearly failed the test (Luke 7:39).

Jesus, however, knew full well just who this woman was. Unlike Simon, however, Jesus saw not her history of sin but rather the fact that through Jesus she had come to experience forgiveness and new hope, and that this forgiveness had filled her with gratitude and love. Jesus seemed to be the only person in the room who was not embarrassed or indignant at what this woman was doing and expressing by her action. He understood evidently the depth of her emotion and the limited means of expression that were available to such an ostracized woman, for whom there would never be a proper occasion to speak to a Jewish rabbi. But her experience with Jesus or her knowledge of his actions toward others gave her confidence to risk shame and rebuke and to pour out her emotions at his feet. Jesus understood precisely the eloquence of her actions and gave her a voice through his own words. He showed emphatically that he honored what this ostracized woman was saying far more than he valued the views of his prominent host.

This remarkable incident highlights how Jesus looked at people in a dramatically different manner from the way others did. Simon looked at the woman and saw her low estate as a woman marked by impurity that would bar her from ever approaching him. Jesus looked and saw a real person full of love, gratitude, and faith that made this woman far closer to the Kingdom of God than Simon was.

Jesus drove the point home to his host by the parable of the two debtors. Without speaking a word, this woman acted in such a way as to show dramatically the deep relationship between love, forgiveness, gratitude,

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and faith. Forgiveness and love are intertwined with each other (Luke 7:47).

7. Women Disciples: Mary Magdalene

Luke 8:1-3 (with Jesus in Galilee).

Matthew 27:55-61; Mark 15:40-47; John 19:25 (at the crucifixion of Jesus).

Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-18 (at the resurrection of Jesus).

Mary Magdalene was a woman transformed. All that is known of her background is that she was from the town of Magdala on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee (“Mary Magdalene” is a name like “Jesus of Nazareth”). Jesus had healed her of a major derangement and enslavement of mind: *“from whom seven demons had gone out”* (Luke 8:2). None of the Gospels described either Mary’s condition before her healing or the incident when Jesus healed her. But Luke clearly implies that in healing her Jesus had given Mary back her life. Hers was a story comparable to that of the man from Gerasa with many demons, recounted in Luke 8:26-39. Because of that encounter with Jesus, Mary had chosen to give her life to Jesus by following him.

It should be noted in passing that many well-known traditions about Mary Magdalene that are often represented in Christian art and legend have no basis in the Gospels. There is no basis for thinking that she was the *“woman of the city, who was a sinner”* and who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:37). Nor is there any basis for identifying her with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who also anointed Jesus. These are traditions first found in Christian literature in the 6th century. Thus there is no basis for the tradition that Mary Magdalene was a great sinner (a prostitute) and an exemplary penitent, as she is often represented in art. Legend also made her a companion of John the Apostle in Ephesus and said that she was buried there.

The fact that Mary Magdalene’s name was given first in all the listings of the women who followed Jesus probably indicates that she had a leading role among Jesus’ followers. Since the events of Luke 7-8 apparently occurred during the first year of Jesus’ ministry, Mary was evidently healed early in the ministry and joined the group of disciples about the same time as

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many of the twelve. Unlike the twelve, she was not required to travel with Jesus in the band of disciples, but she freely chose to join them. She also was apparently one of those who supplied the needs of the traveling band out of her resources (Luke 8:3).

Matthew and Mark also indicated that Mary and some of the other women were ministers (*diakonein*) for/to Jesus (Mark 15:41). The use of this verb suggests that they were following Jesus' example since he taught that he came not to be served (*diakonein*) but to serve (*diakonein*) and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Mary Magdalene is the only person whom all four Gospels state was present at Jesus' crucifixion and the only person that all four Gospels indicate received the first revelation of Jesus' resurrection. She therefore functioned as one of the principal witnesses to the reality of the central saving event of the Gospel. All the Gospels agree that others were present and give differing lists, but Mary Magdalene is the one name common to all the accounts.

Matthew and John (along with the longer ending of Mark [16:9-20]) show that the first resurrection appearance of Jesus was to Mary Magdalene. In Matthew 28:9-10, she and "*the other Mary*" were greeted by Jesus as they left the tomb. They "*took hold of his feet*" assuring themselves that he was not a hallucination, and they "*worshiped him*" becoming the first to give homage to the risen Lord.

Mary Magdalene's close relationship with Jesus was especially vivid in John's account of the resurrection (20:1-18). Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found the stone moved. She hastened to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who came and examined the empty tomb but departed mystified and hopeful but still not knowing what to make of what they had seen. Like them, Mary did not yet realize that Jesus had been raised, and she remained distraught outside the tomb. She saw two angels (but evidently did not recognize them as angels), who asked her why she was weeping. Mary replied, "*Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him*" (John 20:13).

She turned and saw another man, Jesus, standing there but thought he was the gardener – just as later, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not at first recognize Jesus. Jesus asked why she wept and "*Whom do you seek?*" Mary responds with her concern that the body of Jesus be properly

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cared for: “*Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away*” (John 20:15).

Jesus saw how distraught Mary was and transforms the situation by simply calling her name: “*Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher)*” (John 20:16). In the words “*my Lord*” and “*Rabboni*” are captured the relationship of a true disciple, who has submitted herself to one master and teacher as the guide of her life. Jesus told her of his coming ascension and sent her to bear witness to the other disciples.

Mary came to the others and was the first to be able to break through their confusion, doubt, and hope with the simple message, “*I have seen the Lord*” (John 20:18).

Jesus was in complete control of all his appearances and chose those to whom he would appear. It is striking that he chose to give the role of first witness to Mary Magdalene (and other women). Although in most Jewish courts of that day, women could not act as legal witnesses because they were thought to be inherently untrustworthy, Jesus chose to allow Mary Magdalene to be the first to say, “*I have seen the Lord.*” In that society with its prejudices against the reliability of the testimony of women, only male disciples could be put forward as witnesses of the resurrection to the outside world. But Jesus made sure that it was Mary Magdalene and the women around her who are his own first witnesses to the witnesses. Luke reveals that when Mary Magdalene and the other women bore witness to what they had seen at the tomb, the male disciples acting in accord with the common prejudices of the day, “*did not believe them,*” because their “*words seemed to them an idle tale*” (Luke 24:12). Jesus himself, however, soon confirmed the witness of Mary and the others by appearing among them (Luke 24:24-25, etc.).

8. Women Disciples: Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward

Luke 8:3 (in Galilee)

Luke 24:10 (at the resurrection)

A good summary of what we can learn about Joanna is provided by the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*:

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“One of the female followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry ... Joanna was one of the women who provided monetary or material aid out of their own pockets and efforts to help Jesus’ band of disciples. Later, Joanna was a witness to the empty tomb who reported what she saw to the apostles (Luke 24:10). Thus her name is probably preserved because she was known ... as a witness to the life, death, and empty tomb of Jesus. ...

“Joanna is also notable because she was the wife of Chuza, one of Herod Antipas’ estate managers. Thus, she is an example of how the gospel affected people connected with the established authorities, people who were financially comfortable compared to most of the Galilean populace. We are led to believe that this rather prominent woman left her family and home to travel with Jesus and to provide assistance for his itinerant band of disciples. We may also see here an example of how the gospel breaks down class barriers and nullifies social taboos, for in the Jewish society of Jesus’ day women were not allowed to be disciples of a prominent Jewish teacher, much less to be part of his traveling entourage. In 1st-century Judaism, such behavior would have been considered scandalous for any woman but especially for a married woman. Thus, to some degree Jesus presents both a religious and a social threat to the structure of early Judaism, for he gave both men and women the opportunity to be full-fledged disciples.”

Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 3, p. 855: “Joanna.”

9. Women Disciples: Susanna and many others

Luke 8:1-3.

When we observe the fact that there was a substantial group of women – like the otherwise unknown Susanna – from various backgrounds who made substantial sacrifices to follow Jesus and to travel with his band of disciples, the question may well arise concerning the role of these women in the larger body of Jesus’ disciples.

Question: Why were “the Twelve” all Jewish Men?

It has often been argued that because Jesus appointed twelve men as his apostles, he believed that women are unworthy or incapable of any public function within the church. It should be noted, however, that Jesus **never**

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gave any suggestion that such a meaning should be attached to his choice. Note also that being men was not the only thing the Twelve had in common. They were all Jewish as well, perhaps all from Galilee, and certainly all from Palestine. Even though there were large Gentile populations living in Palestine, and Jesus even attributed to some Gentiles a faith greater than he had found in Israel (including the Twelve), he did not choose any Gentile or Samaritan to be among “the Twelve.” Jesus’ choice of twelve Jewish men living in Palestine for special assignment, however, excluded neither women nor Gentiles nor people outside Palestine from public service for him. Rather, other reasons guided Jesus’ choice.

1. The Twelve correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel.

The number twelve itself was important. In Matthew 19:22 Jesus said to the Twelve, “*when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*” (also Luke 22:28-30) “The Twelve” were in this way a crucial part of the meaning of Jesus’ ministry. His was a renewal movement within Israel during his ministry, a mission to “*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matthew 10:6; 15:24). In the twelve men whom he named his twelve apostles, Jesus symbolically reconstituted the twelve patriarchs / tribes of Israel.

The number twelve was important enough that it had to be maintained. When Judas betrayed Jesus, the remaining eleven could not simply do without him and continue with the mission Jesus had given them. The Twelve had to be reconstituted by appointing Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26).

Note that the simple term “the Twelve” (not the twelve apostles or the twelve disciples) was the term particularly used for this group by Paul and by the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, Paul seems even to have made a distinction between the Twelve and “*all the apostles*” when he said concerning Jesus’ resurrection, “*...he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred ... then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles....*” Mark used the phrase in Mark 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43. Matthew, Luke and John also often used the simple designation, “the Twelve” (Matthew 26:14, 47; Luke 8:1; 9:1, 12; 18:31, 22:3, 47; John 6:67, 70-71; 20:24; Acts 6:2.)

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The various New Testament writers used the term “*apostle*” in different ways. Matthew and Mark used the term “apostle” only once (Matthew 10:2; Mark 6:30). Matthew sometimes spoke of “*his twelve disciples*” (Matthew 10:1; 11:1; 20:17; 26:20). Luke (in Luke and Acts) uses “*apostle*” much more commonly, and it often seems to be the equivalent of “the Twelve” (Acts 1:26; 2:37). Paul, who wrote 20-30 years before Luke, also used the term “*apostle*” many times, but he never used it as the equivalent of the Twelve. Rather he usually used it to refer to himself and to other apostles who were not necessarily part of the Twelve.

Thus, though the Twelve were both disciples and apostles, there were also others who fitted those titles. One of the important things about the Twelve was their number and its important symbolic meaning as they represented the new people that Jesus was calling into existence by proclaiming the Kingdom of God. As leaders of this new people, Jesus said, they would judge the old kingdom of the twelve tribes of Israel.

2. The Twelve were official witnesses.

Jesus intended for the twelve to serve as witnesses of the resurrection to the outside world (Acts 1:8, 15-26; 2:14, 32; 3:15; 5:32). According to the views of that time, women could not be witnesses in court since they were considered inherently untrustworthy. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian and apologist, for example, gave the commonly accepted interpretation of Deuteronomy 19:15, which required two witnesses to establish any charge in court:

Put not trust in a single witness, but let there be three or at least two, whose evidence shall be accredited by their past lives. From women let no evidence be accepted because of the triviality and rashness of their sex; neither let a slave bear witness because of the baseness of their soul, since whether from greed or fear it is likely that they will not attest the truth.

– Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.219.

In context, Josephus was trying to show how enlightened and humane the Jewish Law was.

The Mishnah, the written form of Jewish oral law that was largely in force in Jesus’ time, stated that the law about “*an oath of testimony applies to men but not to women*” (Mishnah *Shebuoth* 4:1) and rules that the testimony

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of women could not normally be accepted without corroborating proof. Only in very limited circumstances did women live outside the oversight of a male who had responsibility for them and spoke for them. Oaths of women were not binding unless the men responsible for the women confirmed them.

The same fundamental suspicion of the trustworthiness and judgment of women has continued until modern times. Only in 1920, for example, were women trusted with the right to vote in the United States.

But note that Jesus chose women as the first witnesses of his resurrection. Even his own disciples were so distrustful that they disbelieved the women's testimony to Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:10-11). But Jesus proved the testimony of the women to be true.

3. The Twelve were expected to travel with Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples evidently often stayed together in open country. He insisted that one who wished to follow him must know that *"Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head"* (Luke 9:58, cf. vv. 57-62). Jesus chose the Twelve *"to be with him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons"* (Mark 3:14-15). It was a very remarkable thing that Jesus even permitted women disciples to travel with this itinerant band of men led by a rabbi. That itself would have seemed scandalous. But for Jesus to include them among the Twelve and thus require a group of women to join this group of itinerant men and live with them as they moved from place to place would have raised the scandal to the point of damaging the women. In that time to summon a group of married and unmarried women *"to be with him"* in his travels would have transformed Jesus' amazing acceptance of women into something that might permanently brand them as immoral in the eyes of their families and society.

Observations

All of these reasons, both positive and negative, were important in ancient times and could not be ignored. The symbolism of the twelve tribes was far more powerful among the Jewish remnants of ancient Israel than it might appear to us today. The focus on the renewal of the people of Israel exclusively was ended with the commission Jesus gave to his followers after his resurrection (Matthew 28:19). Similarly, the role of bearing witness was shaped by the times. The effectiveness of a witness is destroyed if the

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testimony of the witness is discounted in advance because of the prejudice of the hearer against the witness. Such a realization in no way suggests, however, that in a later time, when the testimony of women is taken seriously and the competence of women has at last been recognized, limitations on women's ministry should be maintained because of ancient prejudice. Jesus himself never linked his choice of twelve Jewish men to any limitation on the ministry of others – Jewish or Gentile, male or female, slave or free – and neither should the church in our day.

10. A Woman with bleeding.

Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56

The woman who touched Jesus' garments is highlighted in the Gospels at least partly because her faith in Jesus caused her to break a taboo. She had been ritually unclean for years because of her menstrual bleeding – a distinctly female debility – and anyone she touched also became ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:25-30). Without permission she pressed through the crowd to touch Jesus' garment. There is no way that she could really know in advance that any good would come from this contact, only that she would impart ritual impurity to the teacher.

Indeed, when Jesus unexpectedly knew that someone had touched him and turned to speak with her, the woman approached him filled with a combination of "*fear and trembling*" and what must have been joy since she could sense that she had been healed. She possibly expected condemnation for causing ritual uncleanness, but Jesus had not sensed impurity coming into him but power going out of him to heal. Instead of condemnation, the woman received Jesus' blessing. Just as Jesus' power had healed her body, his words of praise for her bold faith and his instruction to "*go in peace*" gave healing to her fears.

The expectation of hope and blessing for people who were outcast and desperate was so great around Jesus, that this woman broke a powerful taboo and reached out to touch him. Her faith was justified. For Jesus this "unclean" and desperate woman was just as important as Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, whose house he was hurrying to visit.

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11. Herodias and her daughter

Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29

Women as a group are not particularly idealized in the Gospels, and the narratives do not hesitate to identify sinful and villainous behavior by women. Jesus did not interact with Herodias and her daughter, but the damage they caused by demanding the execution of John the Baptist affected Jesus' ministry.

12. A Syrophoenician Woman and her daughter

Matthew 15:22-28; Mark 7:25-30

Like the woman who touched Jesus' garment, this woman too was highlighted because of her "improper" behavior. She was a pagan / Syrophoenician / Canaanite woman crying out to a Jewish teacher, "*O Lord, Son of David*" (Matthew 15:22). She was also intruding on Jesus and his disciples during a period when Jesus had left Galilee to travel in the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon and was trying to remain hidden from the persistent crowds (Mark 7:24).

The Gospels emphasized how strange and disruptive her behavior was by recording Jesus' initial negative reaction to her. The negative reaction was not to her as a woman, though her actions were certainly outside proper behavior for a discreet woman, whether in Greek or Jewish society. Rather, Jesus initially put her off because she was not Jewish, since his ministry was among his own people and he had come to Phoenicia only to spend time with his disciples away from the throngs.

Modern commentators often find Jesus' negative reaction to this Syrophoenician woman unexpectedly harsh and inexplicable. It is more likely, however, that to ordinary readers of that day, his words would have sounded completely normal and exactly what they could imagine that they would have said in such a situation.

What makes the story remarkable is what happens next. When the woman persisted in her entreaty on behalf of her daughter and even accepted Jesus' harsh words intended to put her off, Jesus did not get angry with her or continue rejecting her in any way. Instead, he recognized her faith and her love for her daughter that had caused her to step outside accepted behavior

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for a woman. He heard her desperate cry for help, and he praised her in the highest terms: “*O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire*” (Matthew 15:28). It was precisely such a faith that was bold enough to break down conventional barriers at reach out in faith to Jesus that Jesus most valued. With similar words he honored a similar faith manifested by a Gentile centurion (Matthew 8:10).

13. A Woman caught in adultery

John 8:1-11

Jesus simply refused to be a law enforcer. Even though the testimony of the male scribes and Pharisees, whose testimony would have been acceptable in court, was that “*this woman has been caught in the act of adultery*,” Jesus chose compassion that restored the woman to her life and opened the possibility of transformation, and he rejected the self-righteous judgment of her accusers.

The accusers evidently expected some such unacceptable response from Jesus. That is why they brought her to him. They challenged Jesus with the authority of Moses and the Law in order to undermine his well-known tendency to compassion and forgiveness. But Jesus was not intimidated. He did not argue with them, but after a pause he responded with a command that did not undermine the law but did challenge the honesty of the accusers: “*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her*” (John 8:7). The way Jesus turned their accusation on themselves caught the accusers by surprise and caused a level of introspection that they had not planned. After the accusers departed, Jesus expressed to the woman his acceptance of her and his challenge for her to change her behavior: “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again*” (John 8:11).

One can easily understand how such actions by Jesus would create a distinct reputation. Women who felt the sting of ostracism and condemnation from the society around them felt confident to approach Jesus sure that he would not scorn or reject them.

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14. The Pharisees test Jesus about the legality of divorce.

Matthew 19:3-12 (cf. 5:31-32) Mark 10:2-12

When the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking, *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* (Mark 10:2), they knew that the law very clearly envisioned the reality of divorce and made provisions for it (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). A man was permitted to divorce his wife if he found any indecency in her by writing a certificate of divorce and giving it to her. A woman was not permitted to divorce her husband. This one-sided understanding of the law made women especially vulnerable to the will of their husbands, which could sometimes be capricious or malicious.

Jesus, however, asserted that the provision of the Law of Moses, which reflected the dominant position of men over women after the curse of Genesis 3:16, did not express the original will of God which Jesus’ disciples should follow. Jesus rather quoted from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 which express the situation before the “fall.”

These passages indicated that both male and female were *“from the beginning of creation.”* Rather than a woman being transferred like property from her father to her husband and being at the disposal of her husband to divorce if he wished, God’s original intention indicated that *“a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh”* (Mark 10:7-8). Jesus emphasized that men and women have stood on equal footing before God from the beginning and that the man has no right over the woman to treat her as property or to dissolve their relationship based on no more than his desire to do so.

15. Mary and Martha

Luke 10:38-42

When Jesus visited the house of two sisters, Martha and Mary, the two responded differently to his presence. Martha fulfilled the expected role of the woman of the house by busying herself with serving her guests. Mary, however, unexpectedly acted in a way that was more acceptable for a rabbi’s male disciples: she *“sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching”* (Luke 10:39). Martha saw that Jesus accepted Mary as she took on this role, and Martha challenged Jesus to instruct Mary to help her with her work.

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When Jesus responded to Martha, he did not condemn Martha or denigrate her work in any way. She had made a choice for what she believed was proper for her to do, but when she attempted to impose her choice on her sister, Jesus refused to help her.

Indeed, Jesus went further. He showed his concern for Martha's spiritual welfare as well as for Mary's. The way that she had allowed her choice to make her "*anxious and troubled about many things*" and to make her feel that she must insist that Mary follow her in her choice reflected a problem. Far from telling Mary to change her choice, Jesus urged Martha to consider Mary's choice and to consider the simplicity and focus that it ought to life. He insisted that "*One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her*" (Luke 10:41-42).

Throughout this conversation, there is no hint that Jesus treated either sister in any way different from the way he would treat a male disciple or friend. He respected their choices and evaluated those choices by the way they affected the spiritual life of the person. He gave his forthright guidance to them without any condescension or disrespect and without in any way changing his love for them.

The ease with which Jesus accepted Mary as a disciple who sat at his feet and listened to his teaching is remarkable in the context of the practice of other rabbis of that time. A famous piece of guidance for teachers was given in the Mishnah, a compilation of Jewish oral law:

"Talk not much with womankind. They said this of a man's own wife: how much more of his fellow's wife! Hence the Sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit Hell"
(Mishnah, Aboth 1:5).

16. Martha and Mary at the raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-44

When Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, fell ill, the sisters informed Jesus in the hope that he would come and heal Lazarus. The Gospel notes that "*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*" (John 11:5), but he delayed to come to them until Lazarus was dead.

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When Jesus finally arrived, Martha went out to meet him and expressed both her disappointment and her continued faith in him, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you”* (John 11:21-22). Her second statement expressed the fact that she was open to learn more of what Jesus could do beyond what she had already expected of him.

Jesus responded, as he so often did in teaching situations, with a statement that could have more than one meaning: *“You brother will rise again.”* Martha answered by expressing her belief in the resurrection at the last day. By her response, however, she seemed to ask if such a relatively conventional belief were all that Jesus meant.

Jesus recognized Martha’s readiness to learn and to believe more about Jesus in that time of crisis. Just as he had revealed special insights to Nicodemus and to the Samaritan woman, Jesus opened to Martha a greater mystery about himself than she had understood before: *“I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”* (John 11:25-26)

Martha’s response was strikingly similar to Peter’s confession of Jesus in Matthew 16:16, but even more emphatic. As one of Jesus’ close disciples, she confessed, *“Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world”* (John 11:27). Jesus thus chose Martha to reveal to her that he was the embodiment of resurrection and life, and she responded to this astonishing revelation with complete faith.

When Mary came to Jesus, she also expressed her disappointment in almost the same words Martha had used. Jesus recognized her deep grief and wept with her before going to the tomb. When he came to the tomb, he sealed the revelation that he had granted to Martha by raising Lazarus from the dead.

17. Jesus is anointed by Mary.

John 12:1-8

Here the service of Martha for Jesus and the passionate love of Mary toward Jesus were clearly manifested at a banquet six days before Passover.

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Martha served the meal and Mary anointed Jesus' feet with a costly ointment and wiped them with her hair. As in Luke 10:38-42 when a similar contrast between the sisters arose, Mary's devotion received primary attention. But here the contrast is not really between Mary and Martha but between Mary's act of devotion and the cynical and disrespectful comment of Judas Iscariot about her gift. Jesus rebuked the male disciple / betrayer and approved Mary's extravagant gift as belonging to his burial.

18. The Widow who gave a two copper coins

Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

Sitting in the temple, Jesus called his disciples' attention to a widow who put two small copper coins into the temple treasury. Her gift was worth practically nothing in comparison with the large gifts of the wealthy. Jesus, however, knew the motivation behind the gifts. The wealthy gave gifts that entailed neither risk nor any necessary dependence on God, because the gifts came from abundance. She, however, risked everything in her dependence on God by giving to him all her living. As a widow she may have had very few resources indeed, but God had preserved her till that moment, and she trusted that he would continue to care for her. Jesus, therefore, pointed out this destitute but faith-filled woman in order to teach his disciples how to trust in God.

19. A woman anoints Jesus.

Matthew 26:6-13 Mark 14:3-9 [Luke 7:36-50 John 12:1-8]

In a story very similar to John 12:1-8 (but set in the house of Simon the Leper just two days before the crucifixion), an unnamed woman anoints the head of Jesus with costly ointment. Again, there were some who were indignant, and criticized her for the waste. Jesus, however, defended her: *"Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me"* (Mark 14:6).

The woman said not a word, but Jesus became her voice. He gave her act a significance that probably reached far beyond what she had envisioned, saying that she had anointed his body for burial. Jesus wanted to stress so emphatically the importance of this woman's beautiful deed that he added,

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“And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:9).

20. Women weep for Jesus on the way to Golgotha.

Luke 23:27-31

After the crowds had largely turned against Jesus at his trial and had cried out for his crucifixion, there were still a large number of women who followed Jesus on the way to Golgotha and *“bewailed and lamented him”* (Luke 23:27). Jesus paused to talk to the women and used their grief to foretell the coming disasters that would befall the people.

21. Women at the Cross: Mary the mother of James and Joseph

Matthew 27:56 Mark 15:40 (at the cross)

Matthew 28:1 Mark 16:1 Luke 24:10 (at the resurrection)

22. Women at the Cross: Salome

Mark 15:40; 16:1 (at the cross and resurrection)

Possibly the same as the mother of the sons of Zebedee

23. Women at the Cross: Mary the wife of Clopas

John 19:25

24. Women at the Cross: The sister of Jesus’ mother

John 19:25

Possibly the same as Mary the wife of Clopas.

Though little is known about most of these women, the lists given in the Gospels provide the names of at least several of the women who followed Jesus all the way to Golgotha while almost all of the twelve fled in fear. In addition to the names listed above, the group included also Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, whom we discussed earlier.

Mark describes them as women *“who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem”* (Mark 15:41). These women had, like the male

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disciples, left behind homes and spouses to follow the Messiah. Now they saw their hopes apparently crushed with the crucifixion of Jesus.

As they had ministered to Jesus in life, they also tried to minister to him in death. A group led by Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the morning after the Sabbath to anoint the body with spices. Thus Mary Magdalene and the other women were the first to witness the reality of Jesus' resurrection and to be commissioned by Jesus to be witnesses to the remaining eleven apostles (Matthew 28:9-10). Jesus thus honored their devotion by giving them an important role in leading the body of this followers from doubt and despair to faith.

Observations: What do we learn from Jesus?

1. All of Jesus' interactions with both women and men were within a particular historical setting and culture. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ placed Jesus within the limitations of a particular time, place, culture, set of opportunities, problems, expectations, popular prejudices, etc. God is universal and unlimited. But when God chose to come in flesh in the incarnation, he came in one place, at one time, among one people with all their hopes and prejudices and problems. Thus in the Gospels we continually see Jesus interacting with women and men not on an abstract or theoretical level but in the concrete problems of their everyday lives. The Gospel that he brought had to be played out and take particular form in that concrete setting and culture.

Every human cultural setting is very complex and encompasses a wide range of human choices. Of necessity, every action of Jesus took place within that complex setting of his time and place. But one of the best ways that we can see the distinct outline of Jesus' distinctive way of life, is to see how and when he pushes against the typical prejudices and practices of his time. Jesus' interactions with women stand out very distinctly within his culture.

2. Jesus treated every woman he encountered with respect and without condescension. The commonplace jokes or derogatory comments about women that were widely known in ancient (and modern) times are totally absent from Jesus' language. Jesus treated men and women exactly alike without making any show of it. He simply assumed that both women

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and men are valuable, intelligent, beloved by God, and worthy of his time and care. Jesus welcomed the presence of women as friends and compatriots and never in the least suggested that they should be confined to “women’s work” or “women’s roles.” He spoke freely with women and made no attempt to silence them as if their thoughts were not as valuable or trustworthy as men’s. When he found women silenced by ostracism or condemnation by people around them, he gave them voice by valuing and praising their actions and their faith and by calling them to obedience to God.

3. Jesus was aware of the prejudices and barriers set up against women in the society in which he lived, and he went out of his way to break them down. He carried on a serious theological discussion with an ostracized Samaritan woman. He was wholly unembarrassed by the love and extravagant gratitude of a sinful woman who had experienced forgiveness from God, and he insisted that a judgmental Pharisee should learn from her. He resisted a whole posse of scribes and Pharisees to spare a woman caught in adultery and to give her the opportunity of a new life. Although the Law of Moses had been interpreted to give men almost total power in dissolving their marriages, Jesus insisted that such power was not the will of God.

4. Unlike any other Jewish teacher known from that period, Jesus welcomed women disciples. He allowed women to travel with his band of disciples if they wished, even when they were leaving behind homes and husbands to follow him. Many women found his teaching so powerful and freeing that they traveled with him during his Galilean ministry and followed Jesus on his long roundabout journey from Galilee to Judea to confront the leaders in Jerusalem.

The expectations and prejudices of the day limited the role that women could play as the official witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection to the outside world. But Jesus made women his own first witnesses by commissioning Mary Magdalene and other women to tell the apostles of his resurrection. Jesus showed that he considered the women fully as trustworthy and capable as the rest of his disciples.

Jesus showed how much he valued women by granting to several of them special insights of revelation. It was to the Samaritan woman that he first affirmed that he was the Messiah. It was to Martha that he first described himself as the resurrection and the life.

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5. Jesus never gave the least hint that women were always to be silent among his disciples when they came to worship God. Quite the contrary, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that none of the barriers of place and practice that were such matters of dispute at that time really matter to God. The only criterion that God is concerned about is whether the worshiper worships in spirit and in truth – genuine Spirit-filled worship that corresponds to the truth that God is Spirit.

Jesus' Distinctive Profile

The distinct outline of Jesus' life stands out clearly and challenges his disciples to follow him. In later generations, the church almost completely lost the vision of Jesus for accepting all people, both women and men, as full human beings who are to serve as his disciples as fully as their spiritual gifts allow. But the figure of Jesus never ceases to be relevant to the life of the church or to challenge it. As long as we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, his example sets the highest and most authoritative standard for our behavior as a church, the body of Christ.

Jesus was astonishingly bold in the way he valued and empowered both women and men in the highly restrictive culture of his own day. The tendencies to treat people as stereotypes were everywhere around him – tax-collector, sinner, woman of the city, Pharisee, woman caught in adultery, scribe, ambitious mother, Samaritan, zealot, woman in the kitchen, uneducated fisherman, courtier's wife, Gentile centurion, and many others – yet Jesus invariably cut through the stereotypes and looked at each person as a whole and valuable individual. In our own day, Jesus' example challenges his followers to do the same. We face far fewer restrictions against treating all people equally than Jesus did, and yet we often have the same tendency to stereotype people as Jesus' contemporaries did. When barriers of gender, race, ethnic group, class, and economic status keep people from being treated equally in the body of Christ, we have not yet learned the lesson of our Master.

Section 2

Women in Ancient Societies Examples and Observations

The process of understanding for ourselves the cultural context in which the Bible was written is often difficult but is usually worth the effort. I hope that the quotations that are cited later in this section will at least provide a few glimpses into the reality of the situation of women in ancient societies and will provide some illumination for the Biblical text.

This section begins, however, with some observations from experience about how cultural factors affect all reading of the Bible by any of us and about our responsibility in dealing with issues of culture when we read and apply the Bible.

Observations on Questions of Culture

1. Culture is an ever-present factor when we read the Bible. Every passage in the Bible is written in human words to a human audience and deals with matters that concern human beings. As human beings, the people described in scripture, the writers, and readers are all limited to a particular time, place, and set of experiences.

Human culture is a vast, varied, multi-layered language of life, in which the meaning of both our words and actions are understood by ourselves and others. All that we think, say, or do from the most ordinary to the most outrageous, has meaning and subtle nuance within our culture.

So also every word in the Bible is a word in human language that was spoken or written by a person in a particular time, place, and circumstance. Since the language of culture continually changes but also has continuity because it is all human, the more we can understand the cultural context of the Bible, the more likely we are to understand the people who wrote it and the impact of their words.

2. Sometimes people speak of cultural conditions in Bible times as

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though their existence would limit the authority of the Bible. But whether something in the Bible is “culturally conditioned” is **never** decisive in determining whether it is important for us to imitate, follow or obey in our time and place. Since every word, action or situation that the Bible contains has a cultural component, other factors and consideration determine the permanent relevance of a particular teaching or example. But understanding cultural context can almost always help us to understand a scriptural passage with greater clarity and confidence.

It is God who determined that his word would come to us with particular cultural clothing. God has decided to express himself to us humans in language that we can understand, and thus he has given us stories, poetry, prophecy, laws, proverbs, laments, letters, histories, visions, etc., that all come to us both as human words and as the word of God. Those words also reveal to us that God came among us in a particular human being named Jesus, whose life was the ultimate meeting of human limitation in a particular time and place and of divine transcendence and eternity. *“The Word became flesh.”*

Because **God** chose to use human words, experiences, and history to reveal himself, **it is God who makes the understanding of the cultural context of his word important.** God placed his word and himself firmly within human life so that we could know him. It is that fundamental truth that sets the task of understanding for us.

3. But human culture is also the arena in which all the values that are **against** God are also expressed. Culture is not a sacred language but the language of human life with its possibilities for good and evil. Regularly in the Bible we observe God’s judgment on the culture of a particular people, expressed in the language and images of those people.

4. Understanding cultural context simply allows us to understand more clearly what is meant by a particular statement or practice and to avoid misunderstanding because of changes in our own cultural language.

5. Detailed cultural knowledge is never necessary to understand the basics of the Gospel, though the Gospel must be expressed to some extent in

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the language and culture of a people if they are to be moved by its power.

6. Once we come to some degree of clarity about what a particular statement or practice in the New Testament meant to the people who originally experienced it, **we must take the responsibility to make a judgment in the light of the Gospel about how that text applies to us. Our understanding of God and his will shapes our decision how to implement a particular practice today.** For example, when we find that the New Testament repeatedly commands Christians to “*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20. etc.), we must take responsibility of understanding the meaning of that command in its original context and deciding how to apply it in our context. We can ignore the command; we can fulfill it literally; or we can adapt the “holy kiss” to some other expression of greeting and intimacy practiced in our culture. But we will do something with the command. **We cannot escape that responsibility.** This is a process that all of us engage in all the time when we are reading the Bible. We also engage in this process of such cultural evaluation together as a community. The results of these individual and community judgments shape the character of the Christian community of which we are a part.

7. The process of such interpretation is profoundly **theological**. Through this process we express what we believe about the character of God and what we believe is important to God. We show how we believe that God evaluates our lives and our relationship to him. Though sometimes a particular issue may seem trivial, usually a larger understanding of the nature of God’s will and our response to that will is at stake. Is God, for example, concerned that each believer accept a certain formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity or that each church follow a precise pattern of worship practice and church organization? What does God really want in relation to us as his creatures? How we interpret the scriptures will affect how we answer such questions and our answers will in turn affect how we interpret scripture. We cannot escape this process of interaction. We can only strive to enhance the clarity of our understanding of the scriptures and to grow in our spiritual discernment by God’s grace. All of us are always still human beings with very limited understanding. Only our trust in God’s grace grants us boldness

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in spite of our inadequacy. In dealing with the issue of the role of women in public worship, as scores of other issues, the deeper question is always **“Who is the God we worship, and what is his will?”**

Women in Societies around Israel:

The following quotations and descriptions are by no means comprehensive in treating the situation of women in the ancient world around the Mediterranean and Middle East, but they do help to portray the kinds of attitudes toward women that were common in the area. They provide some of the cultural and religious background to the New Testament and help us to define more clearly the distinct attitude toward women in the ministry of Jesus and the early church. A standard Bible encyclopedia provides the following summary overview of the position of women in the societies around Israel. For the most part, the role of women in Israelite society was very similar to that of women in the societies around Israel.

“Nowhere in the ancient Mediterranean or Near East were women accorded the freedom that they enjoy in modern Western society. The general pattern was one of subordination of women to men, just as slaves were subordinate to the free, and young to old. Women’s life centered on marriage, children, and the home. Domestic tasks were time-consuming, involving spinning, weaving, fetching water, grinding corn, baking bread, washing clothes, care of children, etc. Women also worked in the fields or produced goods for sale in the home; in wealthy families they supervised female slaves.”

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1988, vol. 4, pp. 1089-90: “Woman.”

Law and Society of Ancient Israel

The society of ancient Israel, like all the societies around it, was thoroughly patriarchal in organization. The Law of Moses itself was expressed entirely from the point of view of the men/fathers of the society as those to whom the laws are addressed.

Although people sometimes assume that the Law of Moses was

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totally independent of other traditions of law in neighboring societies, a closer examination of the Law shows that in many cases it regulated and shaped the basic patterns of society that were common in the ancient Near East. The Law in ancient Israel assumed the existence of a large body of what we might call common law that was part of the society of the region as a whole. In many cases that involved civil law and practice, the Law of Moses did not attempt to establish an ideal society but served to limit and regulate common, widespread practices. Such situations often make it difficult for us to perceive whether a law's specific regulations represented the permanent will of God or whether they were simply an accommodation to the practices of society.

For example, the collection of laws that immediately followed the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 is often called the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21-23). This collection began with laws about slavery (Exodus 21:1-32). It began, however, not by imposing slavery but by regulating it. It even included regulations about the selling of one's children into slavery. For example,

"When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt faithlessly with her." (Exodus 21:7-8).

The fact that the very first laws of the Book of the Covenant dealt with slavery and the selling of children into slavery does not, I believe, mean that these institutions are particularly God's will or that God imposes slavery on society and requires that a society practice slavery and the sale of children into slavery in order to be doing God's will. It does not even mean that God approves of slavery. Rather the Law here simply took the already existent patterns of society common in the Middle East and mitigated their evils and regulated them within the society of Israel.

Similarly the law on divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 did not give regulations that set up or imposed the practice of divorce. Rather, it simply assumed a process of divorce from common law and provided a limitation on the free implementation of that common law.

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no

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*favor in his eyes because he has found **some indecency** in her, and **he writes her a bill of divorce** and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and **if** she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter husband **dislikes** her and writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or **if** the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ **then** her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance”*
(Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

The practice of divorce was simply assumed in the law. The statements about divorce were in an introductory subordinate clause (“*When a man takes a wife ... if then she finds no favor in his eyes ... and he writes her a bill of divorce ... etc. etc. ... then her former husband ... may not take her again ...*”) The actual law was in the main clause beginning with “*then*” in v. 4. What preceded simply set up the case. The law limited common practice by prohibiting a woman who had been divorced by her husband and had married another man from ever going back to her first husband.

Non-Israelite Laws

Sometimes one can see the positive impact of the Law of Moses on the common law of the area by comparing examples from other law codes of the ancient Middle East.

An example from the Code of Hammurabi can provide a point of comparison and show the patriarchal nature of the whole society. When a man injured a woman under another man’s control, reparations had to be paid not to the injured woman, but the man she belongs to. The level of reparations depended on whether the two men were of the same class or not. When a citizen killed another citizen’s daughter, he, himself was not executed for murder, but rather his daughter was executed. Thus he was deprived of property equal in value to what he had destroyed. If he killed the daughter of someone of a lower class, neither he nor his daughter was executed. He could simply pay a fine as his punishment.

“If a citizen struck another citizen’s daughter and has caused her

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to have a miscarriage, he shall pay ten shekels of silver for her fetus.

If the woman has died, they shall put his daughter to death.

If by a blow he has caused a commoner's daughter to have a miscarriage, he shall pay five shekels of silver.

If that woman has died, he shall pay one-half mina of silver.

If he struck a citizen's female slave and has caused her to have a miscarriage, he shall pay two shekels of silver.

If that female slave has died, he shall pay one-third mina of silver."

Hammurabi Laws 209-214. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts [ANET]*, p.175. (Cf. Exodus 21:22-25)

The typical understanding of divorce procedures in the societies around Israel is represented by an Assyrian law:

"If a citizen wishes to divorce his wife, if it is his will, he may give her something; if it is not his will, he need not give her anything; she shall go out empty." Middle Assyrian Laws 37. *ANET* p. 183.

Since the use of veils and head-coverings becomes an important practice in the early Christian community in Corinth, we may note that laws in Middle Eastern societies are very explicit about the importance of women's veils in expressing their standing in society in relationship to men. Wearing a veil was a sign of a reputable woman of a certain class. The criminal penalties attached to being improperly veiled or unveiled or to allowing anyone else to be improperly veiled show that these customs carried great weight and could be enforced strictly.

"Neither wives of citizens nor widows ... who go out on the street may have their heads uncovered. The daughters of a citizen ... must veil themselves. ... A sacred prostitute whom a man married must veil herself on the street, but one whom a man did not marry must have her head uncovered on the street; she must not veil herself. A harlot must not veil herself; her head must be uncovered. He who has seen a harlot veiled must arrest her, produce witnesses, and bring her to the palace tribunal; ... they shall flog her fifty times with staves and pour

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pitch on her head. However, if a citizen has seen a harlot veiled and has let her go ... they shall flog that citizen fifty times with staves; ... they shall pierce his ears, thread them with a cord, and he shall do the work of the king for one full month.

Female slaves must not veil themselves and he who has seen a female slave veiled must arrest her If a citizen wishes to veil his concubine, she shall have five or six of his neighbors present and veil her in their presence and say, "She is my wife," and so she becomes his wife." Middle Assyrian Laws 40-41 ANET 183.

The Law in Israel and the Dominance of Men in Society

Women were highly valued, but their value was usually expressed in relation to the men who were almost always responsible for them. Women had no regular role of authority or independence in relation to men. Even the Ten Commandments, the most basic commands of the Law, were clearly written with the adult male as their intended audience. For example, the tenth commandment reads, "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's*" (Exodus 20:17, cf. Deuteronomy 5:21). The wife was listed among various items of property that belong to the man. There was no corresponding commandment for a woman not to covet her neighbor's husband. The husband was not thought of as belonging to the wife in the same way as the wife was part of the property of the husband.

At the same time it should also be noted that in numerous ways the status of women in the Law of Moses was distinctly higher than in the laws of Hammurabi quoted above. For example, when one man killed the daughter of another, the Israelites did not kill the daughter of the killer as recompense. Rather the killer himself was responsible for his action.

Authority in Society

Society, tribe, clan, and family were all organized around the authority of the fathers. The local government of cities was organized around the "elders at the gate" – a kind of city council that functioned both as law

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court and legislature. In normal circumstances, women had no part in these structures of authority, power, and decision-making in Israelite society.

A woman belonged to her father until he agreed to give her (for a bride price) to another man. This agreement was called a betrothal and was practically as binding as marriage. The father's decision was often made entirely without the daughter's participation, often while she was still a child.

Once the husband took possession of her, he controlled the legal rights of his wife. If conflict arose, he could divorce her at will, but she could not divorce him. Again, note the assumptions about divorce reflected in Deuteronomy 24:1-3:

*“If a man marries a woman who **becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her**, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,² and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man,³ and her second husband **dislikes her** and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house....”*

The Law intended that all the relationships between husband and wife should be good and fulfilling, but provided regulations to limit the abuse of the absolute power of the father or husband (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:13-30).

Even the beneficial regulations, however, show a dominance of father and husband that could lead to very problematic and vulnerable situations for women. For example, if a young virgin were raped by a man and thus defiled so that no other man would likely marry her, the rapist must pay her father 50 shekels of silver (the equivalent of a bride-price) and must marry the girl and forfeit his right to divorce her (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). Such a regulation was beneficial in that it kept the young woman from starving in abject poverty, but it still required her to be married to her rapist.

Women as spoils of battle

The following passages show some of the ways that in times of war women were treated as plunder by the Israelites.

In the aftermath of war against Midian, instructions to the Israelites allowed virgin girls to be kept alive for the soldiers, while all other captives including male children and married women were killed.

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“Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man,¹⁸ but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man” (Numbers 31:17-18).

In general, when a city was conquered by siege, the women of the city could be taken as part of the plunder.

¹⁴ *“As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves” (Deuteronomy 20:14).*

When soldiers chose to marry a woman captured in battle, special procedures had to be followed.

¹⁰ *When you go to war against your enemies ...¹¹ if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife.¹² Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails¹³ and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife.¹⁴ If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her (Deuteronomy 21:10-17).*

Exceptional Women.

Several different factors could raise a woman above the situation normally designated for her in the structure of society. In ancient times, of course, women were fully as intelligent as men, just as they are today, but because of the cultural assumptions of society and the lack of education for women, special gifts or circumstances were required to raise a woman to a position of authority or prominence.

1. Charismatic gifts of Prophecy, Leadership, or Judgment.

These examples, though not numerous, show that God worked through women leaders of Israel as well as through men. In each of these cases, God clearly approved of these women using their gifts in his service and in behalf of the people.

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Miriam, the prophet and sister of Moses, led the celebrations after the crossing of the Red Sea. She continued with Moses and Aaron to be a prominent leader among the Israelites, though Moses was always the most authoritative leader.

“Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. ²¹ And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea’” (Exodus 15:20-21, cf. Numbers 12)

Deborah, the prophet and judge, led her people in times of peace and war. The military leader Barak was unwilling to go to war unless she accompanied them.. Judges 4-5:

“Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.” (Judges 3:4-5, cf. Judges 4-5).

Huldah the prophet was recognized as the authoritative voice of the Lord among the people of Jerusalem.

“ So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter); and they talked with her. ¹⁵ And she said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel...” (2 Kings 22:14-19).

2. Political power or position.

Athaliah, daughter of king Ahab and queen of Judah. 2 Kings 11:1-16. Athaliah was an example of a particularly destructive woman who became a queen in Judah and nearly destroyed the entire royal dynasty of David.

Esther, the Jewish woman who became queen of Persia. Esther 1-10.

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Esther was the great example of a woman who saved her people by her personal courage in a time of great crisis.

3. Wealth.

The worthy woman or wife of noble character was celebrated in Proverbs 31:10-31. The vivid description of her life reflected the importance of women in wealthier families. They directed what was in effect the garment industry of ancient Israel as well as overseeing the everyday operations of substantial estates while their husbands served the cities as judges and legislators at the gates of the city. The passage urged that such women, whose work was mostly unseen by the world outside their own households, be recognized and praised. It also asserted that such virtuous women were rare indeed – “*who can find*” such a woman? (Proverbs 31:10).

Susanna – in the apocryphal book of Susanna – was a virtuous woman of high standing in society, who was falsely accused by lecherous elders and saved by Daniel.

Judith – in the apocryphal book of Judith – was a wealthy woman who assassinated the merciless Holofernes, whose army that was attacking Israel.

Women in the Intertestamental Period

The literature of the Intertestamental period (when most of the *Apocrypha* was written) provides us with examples of remarkable women. Susanna was a paradigm of modesty and wifely innocence. Judith was an exemplar of virtue and courage after the pattern of Jael and Deborah in the scriptures. The mother of the martyrs in 2 Maccabees 7 was an archetype of fearlessness in the face of great suffering and of total dependence on God for deliverance from persecution.

But while the literature gives examples of these exceptional women, other texts that were intended to give guidance to the pious expressed a very negative view of women in general and warned of the danger that they pose for the man who wishes to be wise and to serve God. A woman was seen as a source of temptation and corruption for men and as a regular cause of shame and disgrace.

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Sirach 25:21-26 (written about 180 b.c.)

*Do not be ensnared by a woman's beauty,
and do not desire a woman for her possessions.
There is wrath and impudence and great disgrace
when a wife supports her husband.
A dejected mind, a gloomy face, and a wounded heart
are caused by an evil wife.
Drooping hands and weak knees are caused
by the wife who does not make her husband happy.
From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die.
Allow no outlet to water,
and no boldness of speech in an evil wife.
If she does not go as you direct,
separate her from yourself.*

Sirach 42:12-14

*Do not look upon any one for beauty,
and do not sit in the midst of women;
for from garments comes the moth,
and from a woman comes woman's wickedness.
Better is the wickedness of a man
than a woman who does good;
and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace."*

Passages like these reflect the development of a view of women (based on reflections on Genesis 3) that blamed women as a group for the presence of sin and death in the world and that saw women as creatures inherently inferior to men, whose good is worse than a man's evil.

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Women in the Greek and Roman World

Several sources provide us with examples of instruction concerning the roles of women in Greco-Roman society. **Plutarch** was a first century Greek biographer, essayist, and priest of Apollo at Delphi (northwest of Corinth). For two of his friends who were newly married he wrote “*Advice to Bride and Groom*” (collected in a large anthology of essays known as the *Moralia*, 138-146).

The essay was filled with good advice about mutual respect, whole-hearted cooperation, and cheerful intellectual companionship. It also assumed and expressed the pattern for a proper marriage in Greek society – that of complete subordination of a wife to her husband in all things. This pattern was both thought to be proper according to custom and nature and was also established by law. Similar guidance and advice can be found throughout the Greco-Roman period.

The guidance was particularly for wives, who were almost always expected to maintain a high standard of morality and deference to their husbands. By contrast, women who were slaves, prostitutes, concubines, or anything other than wives, were often considered to be available to married men for extra-marital companionship and sexual relationships. Men were seldom held to the same high standard of sexual purity as their wives were.

The Disgrace of Public Affection or Conflict between Husband and Wife

Plutarch urged that a married couple should keep all expressions of affection or conflict away from the public eye. Plutarch based his advice on the fact that such expressions of public interactions between husband and wife were considered “*disgraceful*.” When, in the following quotation, he wrote, “*but if it is disgraceful*,” Plutarch used exactly the same phrase in Greek that Paul used in his argument in 1 Corinthians 11:6: “*but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.*”

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“Cato expelled from the Senate a man who kissed his own wife in the presence of his daughter. This perhaps was a little severe. But if it is disgraceful, as it is, for a husband and wife to greet each other and kiss and embrace in the presence of others, is it not more of a disgrace to air their recriminations and disagreements before others, and ... to indulge in admonition, fault-finding, and plain speaking in the open and without reserve?” (Moralia, 139).

Such a passage helps us to understand how “disgraceful” it would have appeared for women to question or disagree with their husbands in a public assembly, as seems to have been happening in the worship assemblies of the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

The Need for Wives to Follow Their Husbands’ Attitudes

Plutarch advised that harmony between husband and wife could be attained by the wife completely taking on the feelings of her husband.

“The wife ought to have no feelings of her own, but she should join with her husband in seriousness and sportiveness and in soberness and laughter” (Moralia, 140).

Another guide for young women written probably in the 2nd century b.c. gave similar advice:

“A woman must live for her husband according to law and in actuality, thinking no private thoughts of her own, but taking care of her marriage and guarding it. For everything depends on this....

*“She will conduct their home with simplicity, speaking and hearing fair words and holding views on their common mode of living that are compatible with his, while acting in concert with those relatives and friends whom her husband praises. And if her husband thinks something is sweet, she will think so too; or if he thinks something bitter, she will agree with him. Otherwise she will be out of tune with her whole universe” (quoted by Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, 135-36.).*

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Jewish writers of the Greco-Roman period reflected similar views of male dominance in marital relationships, sometimes in even stronger terms. The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, boasted about the commands given in the Law of Moses:

“The Law commands us, in taking a wife, not to be influenced by dowry ... but to sue from him who is authorized to give her away.

The woman (wife), says the Law, is in all things inferior (cheiron) to the man (husband). Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man” (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2 [24] 200-201).

A Double Standard for Male and Female Morality

If a Greek husband was planning to engage in licentious or immoral acts, his wife should count it as a sign of respect for her that she was not included. Such advice came from the highly respectable Plutarch.

“The lawful wives of the Persian kings sit beside them at dinner, and eat with them. But when the kings wish to be merry and get drunk, they send their wives away, and send for their music-girls and concubines. In so far they are right in what they do, because they do not concede any share in their licentiousness and debauchery to their wedded wives. If therefore a man in private life, who is incontinent and dissolute in regard to his pleasures, commit some peccadillo with a paramour or a maidservant, his wedded wife ought not to be indignant or angry, but she should reason that it is respect for her which leads him to share his debauchery, licentiousness, and wantonness with another woman” (Moralia, 140).

Similar advice was given in the 2nd century b.c.:

“A woman must bear all that her husband bears, whether he is unlucky or makes mistakes out of ignorance, whether he is sick or drunk or sleeps with other women. For this later sin is peculiar to

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men, but is never proper to women. Rather it brings vengeance upon her. Therefore a woman must preserve the law and not imitate men. And she must endure her husband's temper, stinginess, complaining, jealousy, abuse, and anything else peculiar to his nature. And she will deal with all of his characteristics in such a way as is congenial to him by being discreet” (Pomeroy, p. 135).

In Classical times Demosthenes had argued that men usually kept prostitutes (*hetairai*) for pleasure, concubines for personal service, and wives for the production of legitimate children (*Against Neaera*, 122).

Husband and Wife in Religious Life

Plutarch urged that a wife should have the same friends and gods as her husband. The worry was widespread that women might be drawn into “foreign superstitions” such as Judaism and Christianity or various other religions. Numerous passages in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 7:13; Acts 17:4, 12, 34; 13:50) highlight women among the converts to Christianity. Acts 17:4 mentions converts among “*the first women*,” i.e., women of prominent families. Acts 17:12 mentions “*Greek women of high standing*.” The convert named Damaris mentioned in Acts 17:34 was probably such a woman. In reaching into any of the upper echelons of society, both Judaism and Christianity found their best response from women. The Greek men, on the other hand, had persistent distrust of any religious activities performed by women. Plutarch advised as follows.

“A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all strange rituals and foreign superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favor” (Moralia, 140).

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The Importance of Women's Modesty and Silence in Public

A woman should if possible be covered and silent in public. In the following passage, Plutarch began with an anecdote about Theano, the wife of Pythagoras the philosopher, and herself known for being a rare woman philosopher. Her example is intended to show that even a notably intellectual woman was extremely modest about uncovering any part of her body in public. In the same way, Plutarch argued, a respectable woman should not uncover herself by speaking in public. A virtuous wife should speak only to her husband, and only he should speak in public. One may well imagine how “shameful” it appeared to such sensibilities for women to “pray or prophesy” in an assembly, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 11:5.

“Theano, in putting her cloak about her, exposed her arm. Someone said, ‘A lovely arm.’ ‘But not for the public,’ she replied. Not only the arm of the virtuous woman, but her speech as well, ought to be not for the public, and she ought to be modest and guarded about saying anything in the hearing of outsiders, since it is an undressing (apogymnosis) of herself; for in her talk can be seen her feelings, character, and disposition.”

“Pheidias made the [statue of] Aphrodite of the Eleans with one foot on a tortoise, to typify for womankind keeping at home and keeping silence. For a woman ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband, and she should not feel aggrieved if, like the flute-player, she makes a more impressive sound through a tongue not her own” (Moralia, 142).

A Roman historian from the first century a.d. also expressed the fact that women were not expected to participate in public gatherings.

“What have women to do with a public assembly? If ancestral custom is preserved, nothing” (Valerius Maximus 3.8.6).

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The Danger of Women's Decoration

Similarly, a respectable woman was advised not to wear expensive clothes, braided hair, or jewelry since such things suggested immorality.

“To buy goods from far-off lands or items that are expensive or highly esteemed is clearly no small vice. To wear dresses that are elaborately styled and dyed with purple or some other color is a foolish indulgence in extravagance. So that a woman will neither cover herself with gold nor jewels nor will she braid her hair with artful device; nor will she anoint herself with Arabian perfume; nor will she put makeup on her face or rouge her cheeks or darken her brows and lashes or artfully dye her graying hair; nor will she bathe a lot. For by pursuing these things a woman seeks to make a spectacle of female immorality. The beauty that comes from wisdom and not from these things brings pleasure to women who are well born” (Pomeroy, 135).

Such a passage helps us to glimpse the fact that when Paul told Timothy that “*women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion*” (1 Timothy 2:9-10), he was not advising a style of life that was contrary to culture but a style that exactly fitted what was thought to be respectable for virtuous women in the society of his time.

Section 3

Women in the Writings of Paul Observations on 1 Corinthians

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he dealt with an extensive series of problems in the church at Corinth. The Christians at Corinth had enthusiastically received the Gospel but had misunderstood or misapplied its message so that the Gospel and their Christian life had become distorted in various ways.

The fundamental problem, as Paul showed in chapter 1, was that the Corinthian believers had not understood what it meant to apply the Gospel of the cross of Christ to their lives. The result of that basic misconception led to a variety of problems including division and conflict, a lack of love for each other, and a sense of competition among themselves as people vied with each other in wisdom and spiritual gifts. They also practiced various kinds of immorality that the believers justified because of their supposed spiritual wisdom, and they even accepted a denial of the resurrection. Remarkably, in spite of the many problems, Paul expressed a warm love for the Corinthians and a confidence that God would bring them through these critical issues intact (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). In dealing with the many individual problems, Paul never lost sight of the fundamental problem of drawing the Corinthians back to an understanding of the core meaning of the Gospel expressed in the cross of Christ. It was that fundamental task that gave shape to the way he approached the many individual problems in the church in Corinth.

A number of the problems involved relationships between men and women and raised questions about the way the Gospel should be applied to those relationships. In every situation, Paul and the Christians were dealing with practices, sensibilities, and prejudices within their community and in their society at large. The Corinthian church itself contained a considerable variety of people who had been Jews or pagans before their commitment to Christ. These people continued to have relationships with acquaintances and family outside the community and tried to reach out to both Jews and pagans with the Gospel. In that context, Paul was deeply concerned that they create

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no unnecessary blockages that would keep people from listening to the message of the Gospel.

Many of the problems arose because the believers had distinctly heard Paul's message of God's grace and of a new freedom in Christ. They heard the message of freedom without fully hearing the transforming message of the cross of Christ and the call of God to the new values of a holy life defined by the cross. They experienced the new power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They celebrated their remarkable ecstatic experiences and felt individually elevated by speaking in tongues, for example. They felt like kings (1 Corinthians 4:8), but they resisted the Holy Spirit's guidance toward self-sacrificial love and profound change in their lives.

1 Corinthians 5

In 1 Corinthians 5, for example, Paul dealt with the church's boasting and arrogant pride at one man's claim of the freedom even to live in incest "*with his father's wife*," a kind of immorality, Paul said, "*that is not found even among pagans*" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 6). Many of the Christians seemed to think that the way they could best express their new freedom was to break taboos, sexual and otherwise. Paul had, after all, told them that "*all things are lawful for me*," as he described freedom from the Law (1 Corinthians 6:12). Now, Paul corrected them with a powerful warning and strove to help them understand what freedom in Christ should mean.

1 Corinthians 6

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul answered some Corinthians who were apparently arguing that only a person's spirit was important and that the body did not matter. Therefore, they believed men could flout God's teaching about immorality by going to prostitutes, many of whom were associated with the famous Corinthian temple of Aphrodite, goddess of erotic love. This practice broke the commandment of the Law of Moses, but fell right in with commonly accepted practice in pagan Corinth. There, a sharp distinction was made between women who were available for men to use (such as prostitutes, *hetairai*, many slaves, and even concubines), and those who were viewed as respectable wives. The former were out in public for

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pleasure and the latter were kept at home to bear legitimate children. [Note the quotation above from Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140].

Paul could have simply commanded the Corinthians to stop, but he went much further. He challenged the believers to think differently about themselves based on what God had done for them in Jesus Christ. They were “*bought with a price*” and, therefore, must “*glorify God in your body*” (1 Corinthians 6:20). They needed to “*know that your bodies are members of Christ*” and thus must not be made “*members of a prostitute*” (1 Corinthians 6:15). He quoted from Genesis 2:24 (“*the two shall become one flesh*”), a passage usually applied to husband and wife, and applied it surprisingly to intercourse with a prostitute. Thus, he emphasized that there are not two kinds of women, one for men’s pleasure and another for respectable family life. All relationships matter. What you do with your physical body matters very much since “*your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you*” (1 Corinthians 6:19). In such immoral acts, people sin against their own body, which belongs of God (1 Corinthians 6:18). Thus, Paul strove to teach them not simply a code of action, but a way of thinking deeply rooted in the core of the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 7

In chapter 7 Paul began responding to a series of questions raised by the Corinthians in a letter they had written to Paul: “*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote*” (1 Corinthians 7:1). Throughout his answers, which evidently continued into chapter 16, Paul was pointedly concerned with urging the Corinthians toward patterns of life and action that would be beneficial for the whole congregation by building up love, concern, and respect for each other in the congregation. He was also very concerned about the particular situation in which the Corinthians existed, what Paul called “*the present distress*” (1 Corinthians 7:26).

The Corinthians evidently did not feel a sense of distress or urgency as strongly as Paul did and were more interested in implementing the new individual freedom in Christ that they thought they had found, even at the expense of the larger community of believers. Paul did not wish to deny their freedom, which he himself had taught them, but he wanted to urge them to consider an even higher value, namely a love (*agape*) for each other that

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would seek what was best for the whole community rather than the individual. He called this *agape* love the “*more excellent way*” (1 Corinthians 12:31) and described it in chapter 13.

In chapter 7 Paul dealt with a problem that seems almost the opposite of that in chapter 6, namely, whether the believers should practice forms of abstinence in sexual matters, whether it was good not to marry, and whether it was good for married couples to practice sexual abstinence for spiritual reasons. The situation was complicated, and Paul’s answer was complex. He affirmed that “*it is well for a man not to touch a woman*” (1 Corinthians 7:1), since that was his own choice of a single life of chastity. He argued that the single person can be especially devoted to “*the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord*” (1 Corinthians 7:33-34), but he emphatically stated that not everyone has the “*gift from God*” to be able to live successfully in chaste singleness.

Paul warned married couples that they should be very cautious about religious practices of sexual abstinence, and should only do so by mutual consent and for a limited time. He emphasized that their relationship must be absolutely mutual, and carefully expressed their mutual obligation using exactly the same words for the woman as for the man: “*For the wife does not rule (have authority) over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule (have authority) over his own body but the wife does*” (1 Corinthians 7:4).

The first half of Paul’s statement was the common view and practice in the ancient Greco-Roman world, and that view of the husband’s authority continued in most situations till today. The second half of Paul’s statement – describing the mutuality of the marriage relationship by making the wife’s authority exactly the same as the husband’s – was a revolutionary concept in the world. Throughout his teaching in chapter 7, at no point did Paul suggest that only the man had the right of authority in the marriage relationship. The fact that he did not affirm such authority makes this passage stand out in a striking way from most of marital advice and practice of the ancient world. Paul described not a hierarchy between husband and wife but a loving mutuality that took both the body and the spirit seriously. He also urged the Corinthians not to underestimate the power of sexual

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temptation or their vulnerability to such temptation. They must make decisions both with mutual love and with realism.

Paul again used the same kind of close repetition of a statement first for one sex then the other when he described the devotion of the unmarried man or woman to the Lord (1Corinthians 7:32-34). In describing both the situations of the married and the unmarried, Paul expressed himself very clearly in a way that put man and woman on the same level.

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 also shows how strongly the situation of the church influenced Paul's instruction. He urged Christians to remain in the state in which they were converted to Christ, whether married or unmarried, slave or free, circumcised or uncircumcised. Paul knew and affirmed that Christians had freedom to marry or not marry, etc., as they wanted. But that freedom could be limited by circumstances. Thus, Paul wrote, *"I think that in view of the present distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage"* (1 Corinthians 7:26-27). The *"present distress"* that Paul wrote about appears to be the expectation that Christ would shortly return to end this age: Paul said, *"I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none ... and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away"* (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

Even though Paul stated clearly that there was no sin involved in getting married, Paul believed the situation of the Church required that he stress the point that each Christian should consider this distressful time in making decisions: *"Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches"* (1 Corinthians 7:17).

Note that although Paul gave great weight to this matter and called this a *"rule in all the churches"* (literally, *"thus I command in all the churches"*), it seems clear that Paul's guidance that a person should remain in the state *"in which God has called him"* should not be taken as a permanent *"rule in all the churches."* It was rather guidance that fitted that particular time and situation of the church community. In reality, we in the church today do not apply this command or even encourage people to follow it. We

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have recognized that this “*rule in all the churches*” was linked to the specific spiritual situation of that period.

The expectation of Christ’s return, which was so powerfully vivid for Paul, is certainly still an expectation that we all live with, but our spiritual response to the expectation has changed radically. In spite of Paul’s “*rule in all the churches*,” we do not discourage marriage and family; rather we encourage both. By this changed attitude, we are not repudiating Paul but recognizing that what he said fitted the spiritual needs and expectations of that particular time. We strive to see how a similar concern for the spiritual, emotional, social, and sexual well-being of Christians that Paul expressed is to be implemented in our time as we draw from the same spiritual values that he drew on.

1 Corinthians 8-10

Similarly, when Paul discussed “*food offered to idols*,” he recognized fully the freedom that the Corinthians were experiencing – the realization that “*an idol has no real existence*” and thus can neither bless nor pollute food (1 Corinthians 8:1-4). Thus one can “*eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience*” (1 Corinthians 10:25). He affirmed that freedom is wonderful. Unless! Unless the salvation of a believer whose “*conscience is weak*” is endangered by the action. If the “*weak*” believer “*is defiled*,” “*wounded*,” “*caused... to fall*,” and thus “*is destroyed*” by the active freedom of the stronger believer, then the fundamental meaning of the Gospel is undermined, since he is a “*brother for whom Christ died*” (1 Corinthians 8:7-13). Then freedom must be limited by love and by the meaning of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Paul concluded the discussion of food and prepared for the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11 by saying, “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Some criticized Paul for not standing up in a stronger way for his freedom in Christ and his rights as an apostle (1 Corinthians 9). But for Paul the point at which an action became a stumbling block and cause of offense that blocked people

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off from Christ was the borderline of love. His freedom in Christ might reach far beyond that point, but love did not. The border had no fixed position, however. Love had to be continually sensitive to the other person for where the stumbling block might lie that would keep a person from hearing the message of the Gospel.

The Gospel is the story of God's all-out intervention to save his beloved human creatures from sin and death by his amazing grace. God went so far as to come among us in Jesus Christ and even to die on the cross for our sins while we were enemies to him and did not want his love. Paul emphasized that when we seek to do everything we can for people *"that they may be saved"* we are only imitating Christ. Paul certainly saw himself as imitating Christ: *"I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."*

From hard experience, Paul knew how easy it was to cause offenses among those he was trying to reach with the Gospel. The profound importance of reaching the lost with the Gospel had caused him personally to strive to blend in among the various social and religious groupings around him so that he could have the opportunity to teach them the good news of Jesus: *"I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings"* (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). Paul knew that in many situations it must be the needs of the lost person who is far from God that must determine his actions rather than his own preferences or beliefs. He must have the same open attitude toward those far from God that Jesus had if he was to share in the blessings of the Gospel. Therefore, he urged the Corinthians to have a similar attitude. It was easy for them to offend the people around them who needed to hear the Gospel and thus block some people off from the purpose of God in sending Jesus Christ. Thus, he instructed them, *"Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved"* (1 Corinthians 10:32-33).

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1 Corinthians 11

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul immediately dealt with a situation (the first of several) in which the actions of the Corinthian church were causing potential “*offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.*” The various offenses from chapter 11 to 14 all seem to have to do with public situations in which the church was meeting, and outsiders and all members of the community were free to be present and observe and react to what happened.

It has sometimes been argued that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which discussed head-coverings for women and men when they pray or prophesy, had to do with private settings rather than public assemblies. Both the context and the content of the passage, however, point to a public setting in the church. Paul’s introduction of the new subject in 1 Corinthians 11:2 (“*I commend you because...*”) directly pairs this section with the following section, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, which clearly deals with public worship and the Lord’s Supper and begins, “*But in the following instructions I do not commend you...*” (1 Corinthians 11:17). The two sections deal with two special areas of offense to outsiders and to the church that Paul wanted to treat before he began his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12.

The content of the passage also treats matters that are inherently public as Paul spoke of them. Veils and head-coverings were public signs of relationship and attitude that others could see and understand. There is no indication, for example, that Paul or anyone else thought that it was necessary for a woman to wear a head-covering in order to pray in private situations. In addition, the activity of prophecy, as Paul described it, is inherently a public activity. In 1 Corinthians 14:3-4 Paul said that “*the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... [and] edifies the church.*” Paul viewed prophesying as one of the most important activities in the church and one that he most wanted to encourage.

In evaluating all the problems in chapters 11 to 14, Paul held the activities of the church to a clearly spiritual standard that was yet practical enough that it could be implemented in their everyday life. In relation to outsiders, Paul insisted – on the negative side – that the actions of the Corinthians not be “*disgraceful*” or “*degrading,*” not show that the

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congregation was divided, not contradict the Gospel by saying “*Jesus be cursed,*” nor cause outsiders to “*say that you are mad*” (1 Corinthians 11:6, 14, 21-22; 12:3; 14:23). On the positive side, Paul instructed that their actions should show decency, order, respect, mutual concern, and love. They should be filled with spiritual power so that an outsider would be convicted by what they said and “*falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you*” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

In relation to members of the community, the key term was “love,” to which Paul devoted the entirety of chapter 13. Love shows itself practically in mutual respect, in concern for each other’s needs, in discerning that the church is the body of Christ, in recognizing the unity among the variety of spiritual gifts, in avoiding all forms of competition among Christians, and emphasizing aspects of worship that “build up” the community rather than those that are focused on personal religious experience. Paul taught that the goal of their assemblies was that the community be built up spiritually through teaching and worship.

The Corinthians’ Problem

In treating the first of these problems in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul was responding to a situation in Corinth about which the Corinthians had evidently inquired by letter (1 Corinthians 7:1). Since we do not have the letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul, we do not know exactly what they asked, but from the shape of Paul’s response, we may speculate that their inquiry might perhaps have gone something like this:

“We honor the traditions about Christ being for both men and women that you have taught us. Indeed we see that the Holy Spirit lives in every one of us and gives spiritual gifts to all of us. Both men and women prophesy, speak in tongues, and pray among us. Since this is so, we have decided to reject the old use of head-coverings as a sign of differentiation between men and women in the congregation. Since each person speaks by the Spirit, each person is independent and should show no submission to anyone by dress or demeanor.

It is true that our practice has caused quite a stir, and many in Corinth have accused our women of shameful behavior and dishonoring God because they do not wear the traditional head-covering, but we believe that such accusations should be ignored. Our

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freedom in Christ is too precious to be compromised. Don't you agree?"

This portrayal of what the Corinthians were concerned about is based on what Paul said about them in this letter. They believed that they were very advanced in their spirituality in Christ. Paul described them with biting irony: *"Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!"* (1 Corinthians 4:8). They competed with each other as to who was the most advanced in spiritual gifts. They celebrated the Lord's Supper but without a sense of community, i.e., *"without discerning the body"* (1 Corinthians 11:29), because they are primarily concerned with their individual attainments as Christians.

Paul's Command Concerning Head-Coverings

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul's response to the Corinthians' question – however that inquiry was expressed – was emphatic and fairly straightforward. It was, no doubt, easily understood by the Corinthians. The response, however, is so fully interwoven with the practices and sensibilities of its own time that it presents the modern reader with many difficulties that have caused commentators to take many different points of view on it.

It is clear that Paul commended the Corinthians for valuing the traditions that he had taught them (1 Corinthians 11:2), and perhaps his commendation implies that only a portion of the congregation was having problems with the issue he described. In the verses that follow, Paul seems simply to have assumed without argument that it was proper for both men and women to *"pray or prophesy"* (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). As in chapter 7, Paul used carefully parallel sentences in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 to describe first a man (*aner*) *"who prays or prophesies"* and then a woman (*gyne*) *"who prays or prophesies."* The clauses differ only in what the man or woman was to wear. Paul's concern was with what the Corinthians were saying by their actions through the ways in which men and women covered or uncovered their heads. He described head-coverings and head-*un*-coverings, confident that the Corinthians knew exactly what such veils or styles of haircut were and what they meant to the people around them, even though it is very difficult for scholars today to define exactly what practices he was describing.

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This “language” of head-coverings was very powerful, however. If the wrong head-covering was worn, it conveyed dishonor (*kataischyno*), shame or disgrace (*aischron*), and degradation (*atimia*). If the right head-covering was worn, it conveyed authority (*exousia*) and glory (*doxa*). He stated that for a woman not to be covered (evidently with a veil) was as shameful as if she had her hair cut short or shaved off: *“but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut short or shaved off, let her be covered”* (1 Corinthians 11:6).

In the context, it is clear that Paul assumed that the Corinthians would feel that the shame of a respectable woman having her hair cut short before the world would be unbearable. By equating that sense of shame with a woman having her head uncovered when she prayed or prophesied, Paul wanted them to understand that their neglect of these head-coverings could bring serious disrepute on the individual women and on the community. If they understood this, he believed that they would have a powerful motive to respect this sense of shame and to make sure that all women were covered when they prayed or prophesied. Similarly, for a man to have his head covered brought dishonor (*kataischyno*), and thus he must always uncover his head when he *“prays or prophesies.”*

In spite of a great deal of research, most historians admit that we today cannot reconstruct exactly what kinds of coverings (or, some suggest, hairstyles) Paul meant to prescribe in these instructions. Because of this uncertainty and ambiguity in understanding the cultural language of head coverings in Corinth, there has been a great diversity of opinions among serious interpreters in understanding how Paul’s very emphatic requirements of veils and head-coverings should be applied today.

Links to a Creation Pattern

Paul interpreted the meaning of the differing head-coverings of men and women and the importance of wearing them by reference to the creation narrative in Genesis: *“For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.)”* (1 Corinthians 11:7-9). Here Paul combined elements from both Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1:27 stressed that at the climax of creation God created “man” (Hebrew, *adam* = *human being*) both male

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and female and that both are in the image of God. In Genesis 2, the climax of creation comes at the end of a search for a proper companion for man/human (*adam*) when God takes a part (“*a rib*”) from the human being (*adam*) and creates a partner and ally for him. There is an immediate recognition: “*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (ishah), because she was taken out of Man (ish)*” (Gen. 2:23). As a means of understanding the meaning of head-coverings, Paul seems to have viewed Gen. 1:27 through the lens of Gen. 2 and its distinction between the creation of man and woman. Because of that distinction, which Paul alluded to rather than explained, the head-covering was important: “*For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority (exousia) on her head, because of the angels*” (1 Corinthians 11:10). The many scholarly discussions of the meaning of this sentence almost always end in uncertainty. In my opinion, Paul is possibly contradicting those Corinthians who thought that removing women’s head-coverings was a sign of her authority to pray and prophesy. Paul rather says that the head-covering expresses the authority of the woman to speak in prayer or prophecy without disgracing herself or the church both before other people – and the angels. The meaning of Paul’s phrase “*because of the angels*” adds yet another mystery to the many in this passage. No commentary has yet, I believe, provided an adequate interpretation. In this passage we are clearly listening to a discussion in which we today – from a distance of two thousand years – simply do not understand all that was at stake for Paul and the Corinthians.

Paul seems emphatically to have rejected the idea that the Corinthian women and men could leave behind their role in the structure of society and creation that was expressed and symbolized by head-coverings. Paul was writing within a society in which it was practically unknown for a woman to speak in any public assembly. Plutarch, the first century Greek philosopher and essayist, described a woman speaking in public as being as shameful as if she undressed in public (*Moralia*, 142; above p. 44). Yet Paul clearly affirmed that women both prayed and prophesied in the public situation of an assembly where outsiders or other Christians could observe and perhaps be offended by such seemingly shameful acts. Since women (and men) were using gifts given to them by God’s Spirit, their actions could not be rejected out of hand but could only be directed so as to have the maximum positive impact for the Gospel. Paul was evidently arguing that

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prophecy and prayer by women was kept from being shameful by the women and men strictly adhering to what was considered proper in head-covering so as to express their appropriate place in the flow of creation. Both men and women prayed and prophesied (1 Corinthians 11:4-5), but a man must not have his head covered while a woman must have her head covered. Neither part is optional. Very much as Paul had given his “*rule in all the churches*” in 1 Corinthians 7:17, here he stated, “*we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God*” (1 Corinthians 11:16).

The Meaning of Headship

Numerous puzzles remain for the interpreter, for example, the various meanings of “*head*” (*kephale*) throughout the passage. The word meant first and foremost a literal head. It could also be used metaphorically in various senses: top, first in order, source. Paul moved back and forth between metaphorical and literal meanings, and it is not always clear which he had in mind. Paul chose to use the word “head” metaphorically because it linked nicely with the concrete problem, head-coverings in worship.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul stated, “*Now I want you to realize that the head (kephale) of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*” In English, the word *head* is often used metaphorically to mean “one in authority or command.” Thus we speak of the head of a department or the head of the army or the head of a company, and we mean the person who is in charge or in authority in those situations. Because of this very common English usage, Paul’s statement has often been understood to describe a hierarchy of authority: Christ is the authority over man, man is the authority over woman, and God is the authority over Christ.

The problem with this common interpretation, however, is that the Greek word *kephale* is not used like the English word *head* to mean “authority” or “the one in command.” The standard major Greek dictionary, usually known as “Liddell and Scott” does not include “authority” or anything similar among the many possible metaphorical meanings of *kephale*. Extensive modern studies of ancient Greek literature have not found a single instance outside the Bible where *kephale* means “authority” or “the one in command.”

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There are a very few instances of such a usage in the Greek translation Old Testament called the Septuagint. As it happens, the Hebrew word for head (*rosh*) is used metaphorically very much like the English word to mean “chief, authority, commander,” etc. The word *rosh* appears in the Hebrew Old Testament 560 times. About 180 of these uses are in the metaphorical sense of “authority, chief.” The Septuagint translation is notoriously literal as a word-for-word translation from the Hebrew. If *kephale* in Greek could be used to mean “authority” or “commander” as it is in Hebrew and English, the translators would certainly have used it in such passages to translate *rosh*, since it is the natural word equivalent of *rosh* (“head”). In almost all of these 180 instances, however, the translators resisted their natural tendency toward word-for-word translation and substituted some other Greek word that could properly mean authority, chief, or commander (such as *archon*). In less than 10 instances, did they translate *rosh* literally as *kephale* in a situation where it could mean “authority.” These are apparently the only instances in ancient Greek in which *kephale* has this meaning.

What does *kephale* mean in 1 Corinthians 11:3? Paul uses this word metaphorically several times in his letters. In those passages where he develops the metaphor enough that we can understand its nuances, the word *kephale* usually seems to describe the source of life and nourishment for the body. In the first century, people almost always thought of the **heart** rather than the **head** as the location of the mind and thus as the source of thought, decision, and command. The head, however, was the top of the body, the part through which all breath and nourishment came, the part that combined all the senses, the part that provided identity through the face, and the part without which the rest of the body could not live. In Colossians 2:19 Paul challenged the church to hold fast “to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.” Similarly, in Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul urged the church “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.” In both passages Paul’s emphasis was on Christ as the source of life, nourishment and proper growth for the body.

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Similarly in 1 Corinthians 11, many interpreters (perhaps most) see 1 Corinthians 11:8 (“*For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.*”) as the best clue to Paul’s meaning for “head” in v. 3. Just as in the passages quoted from Colossians and Ephesians, “head” here describes the source of life, now seen in the process of creation. Christ was the agent of all creation (1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:3; Col. 1:15-16); man was created first (Gen. 2:7); woman was created from man and in relation to man (Gen. 2:22), God as father was the source of the incarnation of Christ (Galatians 4:4). For Paul, and evidently for others, it was this sense of an ordered flow of existence that was symbolized in an important and moving way by the head-coverings that people wore or avoided during worship. The distinction between men and women in this regard did not define any difference in their access to the Spirit of God or any difference in the ways they expressed those spiritual gifts. Paul did not interpret this pattern as an inferiority of women any more than Christ’s relation to God within the Godhead is one of inferiority. Thus he makes a point to add vv. 11-12 in order to emphasize that in the Lord man and woman are mutually interdependent, and that even the order of creation can be interpreted to show that man derived from woman just as much as woman derived from man. The Spirit gives his gifts to both men and women.

Observations

Thus, 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, speaks of men and women doing exactly the same things in worship: *praying and prophesying*. Both of these were public activities that used the gifts that the Spirit had given to both women and men to serve the community. Though their equality – given by the Spirit of God – could easily be felt to be scandalous in the society of that time, the offense was lessened or removed by the respect they showed for the symbols of the order of society and creation, namely, by their head-covering. In these verses, the word “head” on one level clearly spoke of a literal head which was uncovered or covered. This action thereby expressed on a second, metaphorical level the order by which life was given in creation and thus a respect for the structures and proprieties of society. When that propriety was observed, the Christian women and men were free to follow the lead of the Spirit in prophesying or praying. If the Corinthians refused these proprieties and thereby tried to assert that they had escaped from the responsibilities of society or God’s creation and were free to “*give offense to Jews or Greeks or*

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to the church of God,” then they dishonored their head both literally and metaphorically.

Throughout this argument, just as in his other discussions of remaining unmarried (1 Corinthians 7) or eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8), Paul never questioned in the least the fundamental right of women and men to fulfill their freedom in Christ. But Paul was very sensitive to the specific situation of the church and expected the Christians of Corinth to learn to be just as sensitive. *“Judge for yourselves, is it proper...?”* he asked. Again, *“If it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil.”* Again, *“Does not nature itself teach you...?”*

He was also careful to remind the Corinthians that these external signs of respect for order and propriety – important as they were in avoiding offenses that could block the message of the Gospel – did not mean that women were in any way of secondary importance to men or inferior to them. Thus in the midst of an argument that could be construed to subordinate women to men, Paul was careful to include a statement that spoke of the status of men and women “in the Lord” in contrast to that recognized in society: *“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is born of woman. And all things are from God”* (1 Corinthians 11:11-12). As in chapter 7 and in 11:4-5, Paul uses carefully parallel clauses and phrases to set men and women on equal terms. He seems to have been aware that the way in which he had used the creation story to argue that women need to wear head-coverings (1 Corinthians 11:7-9) could be understood to indicate that women were subordinate creatures to men. He wanted emphatically to repudiate such an understanding. In the Lord neither woman nor man has a standing separate from the other. Paul showed that the creation story should not be read to indicate subordination. God had structured his creation so to manifest interdependence not hierarchy. In the initial creation, woman’s life was derived from man, but ever since that beginning, man’s life has been derived from woman. Paul suggested that this is not accidental, but intended so that neither sex could claim superiority over the other. Rather both needed to realize that the true source of the life of both man and woman is God. As we have noted before, in a society in which it was commonplace to state explicitly that women were inferior in mind, will, morality, and body to men, Paul’s statements are remarkable indeed.

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Paul's concern about head-coverings, I believe, derived not from an eternal divine law about headgear, but from a concern for the salvation of those who were being offended by the practices of the Corinthians. In that day it was scandalous for a woman, even the most intelligent or gifted, to speak in public. The freedom that the Spirit had given to the believers had to be handled carefully with external signs of propriety if it was not to bring fundamental disrepute upon the community. Such a seemingly "*disgraceful*" action would cause offense to outsiders and might well block them from listening to the all-important convicting message of the Gospel that these men and women were trying to express through their prophecy. But when the appropriate signs of propriety were used, then men and women may pray and prophesy, speaking to people "*for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*" (1 Corinthians 14:3).

Today, that same desire not to impede the Gospel is required of the church as well. Over the course of two thousand years, many of the actions described in this section have changed their meaning. It is not longer felt to be "*disgraceful*" for a woman to cut her hair or to speak aloud in a public place. In 1 Corinthians 11:13 Paul asked the question, "*Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*" He clearly expected that the Corinthians would agree that it was **not** proper. If the same question were asked today in our society, the answer would be just the opposite: "Of course, it's proper." The actions that caused offense in the first century and could keep people from hearing the Gospel no longer have that effect. Indeed the very actions that Paul commanded in order to avoid offense – insisting on veils or head-coverings – would be likely to cause offense in our context today. Recognizing these changes in no way undermines the importance of the text but simply recognizes that Paul was speaking to the Corinthians in the language of their own culture and sensibility. The point that he was making is still relevant – make sure the Gospel gets through to people – though the way that purpose is achieved will vary from culture to culture.

The important principle in this section is that the church must find ways for the Spirit's gifts to all the believers to be used without causing destructive effects from those gifts ("*offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God*"). Paul wanted both men and women to be able to contribute to the public life of the community by praying and prophesying as the Spirit

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worked in their lives. This was not a matter of people claiming their rights or striving to gain power in the church. For Paul the issue was the power and right of the Spirit of God to work freely in the community and to “*apportion to each one individually as he will*” (1 Corinthians 12:11).

I believe that in our day and our context, the church is in danger of creating a double offense. The first offense has to do with impeding the Gospel in the same way as the Corinthians did. Ironically, the causes of offense among people in our context are almost exactly the reverse of what they were in the Corinthian context. In our context the church is likely to cause offense to people both outside and inside the community and create a blockage to the Gospel when we as the church systematically silence women. We thereby act publicly as a community in a way that says to the world around us that we consider women in some way inferior to men, not trustworthy, not capable of being used by God in a public way. We perhaps do not intend that message, but our actions in the context of our society carry that meaning, just as the refusal of the Corinthian women to wear head-coverings carried a negative meaning whether they intended it or not. We thereby send a message to the world that is completely contrary to the Gospel and offensive to all of us. We inside the church avoid feeling the offense by convincing ourselves that the message that people receive is not the message we intend, but the problem remains.

The second offense has to do with the work of the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit apportions his gifts “*to each one individually as he wills*” (1 Corinthians 11:11), we are in danger of opposing the Spirit or “quenching the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19) when we systematically deny the gifts that he sometimes chooses to give to women to build up the community in public ways. In ancient times, in spite of strong societal opposition to women speaking in public, Paul found ways for women to “*pray or prophesy*” without causing excessive scandal. In our day, when there is no such societal opposition, can we do less?

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1 Corinthians 14

1 Corinthians 14 is the concluding section of Paul's treatment of "spiritual gifts" (*pneumatika*) and "gifts of grace" (*charismata*) in chapters 12-14. Throughout this section it is clear that the Corinthians valued spiritual gifts very highly, though Paul indicated that in some important ways they were seriously misguided: *"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed. ... I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!'"* (1 Corinthians 12:1-3). Throughout 1 Corinthians 12 and 14:1-33, Paul indicated that all Christians in Corinth experienced spiritual gifts (*pneumatika* and *charismata*) of various kinds. He stressed that the variety and apportionment of gifts was not the choice of the community but rather the work of God. The great variety of gifts all came from the same Spirit / the same Lord / the same God (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). He urged the Corinthians not to try to compete with each other in the spectacular quality of their gifts, since *"All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills"* (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Gifts Given to All

As Paul described the proper understanding and use of spiritual gifts, he gave no indication that the gifts were split along gender lines with only the men being given the gifts that involved oral speaking while women only experienced those that were for private use. Such a division would be just as strange as if the Spirit only gave public gifts to Jews rather than Gentiles or to slaves rather than free people. Indeed, as we have seen, Paul already indicated in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 that both men and women prayed and prophesied in public assemblies where proper head-coverings were important. This experience of the gifts of the Spirit by both men and women in Corinth reflected the reality of the church at large. It was highlighted already in Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2:17-18: *"God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, ... and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."*

In all of his exhortations about spiritual gifts Paul treated the gifts of the Spirit and the use of those gifts as available to all. Note the following

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passages and the way they indicate the universal availability of the Spirit's gifts:

1 Corinthians 11:4-5: *"Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head..."*

1 Corinthians 12:4-11: *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another ... to another ... to another ... to another ... to another ... to another ... to another ... All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses."*

1 Corinthians 14:1-5: *"Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. ... Those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I want all of you to speak in tongues but even more to prophesy."*

1 Corinthians 14:23-24: *"If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reprovved by all and called to account by all."*

1 Corinthians 14:26: *"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."*

1 Corinthians 14:31: *"For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged."*

For Paul it is a given that all Christians share in the Spirit "for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul desires for all of them to grow in their experience of the gifts of the Spirit and

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wants **all** of the Corinthians to experience the gift that contributes most to their growth, namely the gift of prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14:31 Paul makes the connection: Just as **all** need to learn and **all** need to be encouraged so **all** may potentially prophesy. The same word “all” is used three times to indicate the universal purpose of the universal need for prophecy.

The Problem in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

In the context of this seemingly inclusive understanding of the gifts of the Spirit for all Christians, it is somewhat surprising to come to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 which apparently, as the verses are usually translated, seem to exclude women completely from many of the very gifts of the Spirit that Paul has been discussing such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, giving an utterance of wisdom or an utterance of knowledge, or interpreting tongues. Paul stated,

“Women (wives) should remain silent in the churches (assemblies). They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (assembly)” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

This instruction comes near the end of Paul’s discussion of the misunderstanding and misuse of spiritual gifts in Corinth and is the last in a series of three instructions from Paul to deal with disorderly conduct in the assemblies. In each of these three of instructions, Paul commanded some group or individuals to be silent. In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul seems clearly to have been dealing with a problem related to the whole discussion of 1 Corinthians 14.

To modern readers, however, the exact character of the problem is not clear, because we simply do not know what was going on in the Corinthian assembly. Paul’s statements here were clearly part of his overall attempt to remedy the destructive disorder that had marred the assemblies in Corinth. Paul urged that *“all things should be done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40), but what was the character of the disorder?

1. Was the problem that the women were saying anything at all in the assembly?

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2. Did disorder arise because the women kept speaking out in a disorderly way that disturbed the orderly prophetic speech of others?
3. Was the problem that certain wives were using their new-found freedom in Christ to challenge the authority of their husbands by questioning them in the assembly and thus dishonoring them in public?
4. Was the problem that women were asking inappropriate questions concerning the prophetic speech of others?
5. Are these verses actually a quotation from a particular faction in the Corinthian church that was trying to silence the women of the congregation on the basis of the Law of Moses, while Paul emphatically opposed their action?

All of these and other variations have been supported by serious students of this text. In the Churches of Christ we have generally followed the first option: We have regularly accepted the view that Paul was teaching that for women to say anything at all in the assembly is wholly unacceptable and that he permanently silenced all women and girls in any public aspect of the church's life (except congregational singing). This interpretation has a long history in the church extending back to the third century. Throughout the centuries it has almost universally been justified on the basis of the inferiority of women to men: their gullibility, lack of intellect, carnality, excessive emotionalism, or other characteristics. These weaknesses were believed to make women inherently unsuited for roles of responsibility not only in church but in all aspects of public life.

This option of totally silencing women, however, is in many ways the most difficult to maintain without presenting Paul in direct contradiction with himself. It is very difficult to understand why Paul would have engaged in a lengthy discussion of women's head-covering when they pray or prophesy, if he knew that they were to be forbidden to pray or prophesy.

In order to maintain the most restrictive view of women, we have to push aside other passages from Paul in the same letter to the Corinthians:

(1) We must hold that when Paul speaks of "*every woman who prays or prophesies...*" (1 Corinthians 11:5), he simply does not mean it. Or we must create a scenario in which women pray and prophesy in some fundamentally different setting from the men, even though Paul speaks of

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both groups praying and prophesying without even hinting at any such difference.

(2) We must also hold that when Paul says “*I want all of you ... to prophesy*,” he actually intends to exclude half of the congregation without saying so. Similarly, when he speaks of “*the whole church*” or when he says, “*you can all prophesy one by one*,” he does not include the women in “*the whole church*” or in “*you...all*.” Such a procedure of interpretation imputes self-contradiction or dishonesty to Paul.

Personal Observations: My Own Journey

In my experience, practically everyone who argues for a particular way to understand and apply 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 does so out of a combination of Biblical study and personal experience. These factors interact with each other and influence the direction that a person’s understanding of the text flows. I am no different from others. I can remember that my earliest questions regarding the way this passage has been interpreted and applied in church arose in my mind more than 40 years ago when I was in junior high and high school and helping my mother and father in their work.

My first questions about the common church interpretation had to do with how arbitrary it seemed to silence women and exclude them from teaching men in any way, and how the practice seemed unrelated to the reality of people’s ability or preparation. My father was a minister in a number of relatively small churches in various parts of Texas and Montana. My mother worked and taught actively beside him, teaching women and children.

As I became more and more aware of the way they worked together, I learned that my mother was the more diligent and advanced Bible student between them. Dad often told how when he had started preaching (before I was born), they had worked closely together, and a great deal of his preaching was based on mom’s study of the Bible and preparation of sermon outlines together with him. In later years my mother wrote a number of adult-level Bible study books for Sunday school classes. My sisters and brothers and I used to help in assembling those Sunday school workbooks. In those days, however, books would not be used in adult classes that included men if the books were authored only by a woman. My dad, therefore, would write

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some small part of the books – writing was not his gift – so that the books could be listed with both of them as authors and could be used in mixed classes. It struck me even then that it was strange to believe that God would set up such an arbitrary system that had no relation to ability or fitness.

In later years, as I got into studies of church history, and as I read more about how the silencing of women was defended and enforced, I learned that throughout most of church history, the practice was not thought to be arbitrary at all. Rather, as was indicated above, the silencing of women was almost universally defended on the basis of the belief that women were inherently inferior and unsuited to teach or have authority. Often they were said to be inferior in intellect, more gullible than men, too emotional, or too morally lax. Such arguments have continued to be used until very recent times even though they are demonstrably false and morally offensive. Women and men are different from each other on average in many ways, but neither group is morally, intellectually, or emotionally inferior or superior to the other. Nor is either group more responsible or less gullible than the other. Both groups have individuals all across the spectrum in all these categories, and it is important to evaluate individuals rather than whole categories of people.

Restrictions on women were very broad in the congregations in which I grew up. Women and girls were forbidden to teach any boy or man who was baptized or to do or say anything in the public worship except join in congregational singing. On the other hand, those congregations did not continue some practices that I knew my grandmother honored, such as women always attending church wearing a veil (usually on a hat) and never cutting their hair.

When I learned through study that the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 that I had grown up with was by no means the only possible reading of the text, and that it involved a substantial conflict with 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 (a passage that I seldom heard about), I began to question the interpretation more and more. As I taught 1 Corinthians in churches during the years after I began preaching (about 38 years ago), I had occasion to study the passage repeatedly. I began to see that the passage itself – unlike the interpretation I had grown up with – did not require making Paul

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contradict himself, nor did it require making God's treatment of women and men arbitrary.

The Context of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

In 1 Corinthians 14:26-36 Paul was dealing with the highly participatory style of worship that the Corinthian church practiced. This manner of worship may well have been typical of the early congregations that valued the presence of the Spirit among them (perhaps in contrast to those that simply imitated the far more staid patterns of synagogue services).

Paul stated, "*When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*" Paul specified "*each one*" (not "each one of the men" nor "each one of the male leaders"). He clearly assumed that all of the Corinthians were participating in bringing various contributions to the worship. Paul did not indicate that he particularly liked this way of building their worship service, but neither did Paul tell them to stop worshiping in this manner. He simply told them to judge all they do by the standard of "*edification*" or "*upbuilding*." He wanted them to evaluate everything by whether it genuinely built up the community. What mattered was whether what was said or done had a truly positive effect on hearers to help them come to know Jesus Christ or grow in their Christian life. He gave no indication that *who* spoke was important.

The question of who spoke became problematic only when people were speaking in a disruptive manner that destroyed the "*edification*" role of worship. Paul believed that the Spirit was genuinely present among them and that the presence of the Spirit was one of the most important characteristics of their life together. He wanted to affirm the Spirit's powerful work among them but did not believe that manifestations of the Spirit were uncontrollable so that those who were speaking by the Spirit could not change or stop what they are doing. As he said, "*the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets*" (1 Corinthians 14:32).

In this context in which he was urging order and edification in the midst of a Spirit-filled worship service to which all contributed, Paul specified three groups in Corinth that needed to be quiet in order to contribute

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to the edification of the worship by helping all things to be done “*decently and in order*” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Those Speaking in Tongues

The Corinthians (men and women) who were speaking in tongues posed two problems. They were too numerous, and they too often spoke ecstatically without interpretation. Paul required the Corinthians in this situation to limit the tongue-speakers to two or three and to allow them to speak only with an interpreter. Otherwise, he said, “*let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God*” (1 Corinthians 14:28). The Greek verb Paul used for “*keep silence*” is *sigan* meaning “be silent, stop speaking, become silent.”

It is appropriate to ask whether Paul was creating a piece of universal legislation that forbade all churches (in Alexandria or Ephesus, for example) from ever having a period of worship in which four or more might profitably speak in tongues. The answer, I believe, is no. He was counteracting a particular problem among the Corinthians and applying the restrictions that they needed in their situation.

Was Paul permanently silencing these tongue speakers? Obviously not. If what they were saying was said in a context in which it genuinely contributed to the edification of the church, it was fine. But when it was done in a way that brought disrepute and damage to the community and blocked the message of the Gospel – “*outsiders or unbelievers ... say that you are mad*” (1 Corinthians 14:23) – then it must be stopped. Paul affirmed, “*I want all of you to speak in tongues,*” but he nevertheless silenced the practice of this gift of the Spirit when it was not being used for building up the community.

Those Prophesying

The Corinthians often apparently had several prophets (both men and women) speaking at the same time in a way that set them in competition with each other. In this way, even the gift of prophecy had been robbed of its effectiveness in edifying the church (1 Corinthians 14:4). Again Paul used the verb *sigan* (“stop talking”) to instruct those who were prophesying to yield to each other rather than insisting that what they had to say was most important:

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“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent (sigan)”
(1 Corinthians 14:29-30).

Again the issue was an important matter of order and edification. Even what Paul considered the greatest spiritual gift next to love (which always by its very nature builds up the community) could be used in a destructive manner. Still, Paul emphasized, *“you can **all** prophesy one by one so that **all** may learn and **all** be encouraged”* (1 Corinthians 14:31). The silencing of the prophets was temporary and fitted the situation and problem in the church. It was not understood as a permanent restriction.

The Women / Wives

The third in the series of Paul’s instructions about order and silence focused on women/wives in the congregation and has been the most debated.

As we have already noted, the basic problem in understanding what this passage meant to Paul and the Corinthians arises from the fact that at first reading this passage seems to stand in contradiction to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Paul’s instructions requiring women to wear head coverings when they pray and prophesy becomes nonsensical if Paul was about to impose an absolute prohibition against women speaking at all.

We should not, however, begin by accepting that Paul simply contradicted himself. Such an apparent contradiction in a letter is often a strong indication that there are elements of the situation that were known to Paul and the Corinthians but that are not so clear to us. We need to remember that we are reading Paul’s words from a distance of 2,000 years, and we are reading only one side of the two-sided conversation.

Though we will probably never know exactly what was happening in the Corinthian worship, several elements of the passage can give us clues to the setting and help to alleviate the apparent contradictions.

Husbands at Home

First, we should carefully notice what Paul proposed as remedy for the problem the women were causing: *“If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home”* (1 Corinthians 14:35). As was noted earlier, a single Greek word (*gyne*) can mean either

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“woman” or “wife,” and another word (*aner*) can mean “man” or “husband.” Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians these words often carry the sense of “wife” and “husband” (for example, 1 Corinthians 7:2-4). The wording of 1 Corinthians 14:35 points in the same direction. In his instructions, Paul specifically indicated that the “women” (*gyne*) that he was referring to have their own “husbands” (*aner*) at home. Thus Paul’s own phraseology and specific instructions point to fact that the problem in Corinth was a situation involving wives and husbands rather than women and men in general. In chapter 7 Paul detailed the fact that there were numerous women in Corinth who did not have Christian husbands at home, whom they could ask about some question from the assembly. These included unmarried women, women married to non-Christians, divorced women, and widows. The fact that Paul specified asking husbands at home as a solution to the problem, strongly suggests that the problem involved wives questioning their husbands in the assembly, an activity that in Greek society would easily be considered disruptive or insulting.

Talking, Questioning

An indication of what was happening in the assembly can probably be found in the word translated “to speak” (*lalein*). The word’s basic meaning (taken from a standard lexicon of Classical Greek) is “to prattle, chatter, babble; properly to make an inarticulate sound, as opposed to articulate speech; but also generally, to talk, talk of.” In first century Greek the verb *lalein* kept its old meaning but was also commonly used meaning “to speak, say something, express something, talk, proclaim.”

Paul used *lalein* more often in 1 Corinthians 14 than in any other section of his writings. It was especially appropriate for speaking in tongues because “tongues” were ecstatic, inarticulate speech that sounded to outsiders like meaningless chatter or babble. When Paul used *lalein* by itself in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 he probably used it in the sense of “talk, chatter” to indicate disturbing talk that was contributing to the disorder of the assembly. Some scholars have emphasized that the use of the Greek present infinitive indicates repeated or persistent practice – a continual “piping up” or interruption of what was being said by others [See Carroll Osburn, *Women in the Church*, 2001, pp. 198-199]. Verse 35 suggests that Paul was in particular thinking of wives asking questions of their husbands or others during the

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assembly. The chatter and questioning in the assembly could not be justified because it could be done elsewhere and because it disturbed the worship.

Paul gave two reasons why what was happening at Corinth was a problem that could not be permitted to continue.

“As the Law says...”

First, the wives were not permitted to keep talking, “*but should be subordinate, as even the law says,*” Paul said. The reference to the law has puzzled many commentators. Most commentaries note that no law can be found in the Old Testament that forbids women to speak in this manner. Worship in ancient Israel did not follow a pattern in which such a question would arise. Many interpreters suggest that Paul is probably referring to Genesis 3:16, where God tells Eve that because of their transgression she will suffer pain in childbirth, “*yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.*” The Genesis passage, however, does not say or even hint that the husband’s rule must take the form of the wife’s silence in the worship assembly. That application only began to be made in the synagogues in the Intertestamental period. There, apparently, Jewish communities instituted assemblies for worship and study in which women/wives were not allowed to speak and were often physically separated from men.

Insofar as possible, Paul wanted the assemblies to contain no scandalous or jarring elements and thus “*give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:32). Or as he said earlier, “*to those under the law I became as one under the law – that I might win those under the law.*” The common attitude of Jews or Greeks in that period is, as we have seen, not hard to document. Josephus, the famous Jewish historian of the first century, wrote,

“The woman (wife), says the Law, is in all things inferior (cheiron) to the man (husband). Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man” (Against Apion. 2.24).

Jose ben Johanan, a rabbi of that era, is quoted as saying,

“Talk not much with womankind. They said this of a man’s own wife, how much more his neighbor’s wife” (Mishnah, Aboth 1.5).

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It would appear that Paul's reference to what "*the law says*" may reflect the fact that prospective Jewish converts, who were accustomed to the way the law was interpreted in synagogues, found the way wives in the Corinthian church were questioning their husbands particularly disgraceful.

"It is shameful..."

The second reason given was an appeal to common sensibility: It was shameful (*aischron*) for a woman/wife to be talking in an assembly. The terminology that Paul used here is the same as he used in 1 Corinthians 11:6: "*If it is shameful (aischron) for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.*" The shame that Paul described was not some absolute sense of shame before God that would reach across cultural conditions. If it were, we would have to argue that for a woman to have her hair cut in modern society must bring her shame before God. Rather, Paul was saying that the actions of the Corinthian women were shameful because in their context it was considered fundamentally improper for a woman to talk in an assembly (church), especially in a way that challenged or questioned her husband.

The fact that shame was attached to a woman speaking in public in that society meant that the community had to be very careful how women spoke – even when they were using the gifts of the Spirit – since outsiders could be scandalized by such actions. It was important for them to use the gifts of the Spirit, but when they began speaking **not** by the Spirit but in a disruptive way that seemed to dishonor their husbands, then their actions could have a major negative impact.

That sense of shame at a woman talking in public was widely shared. As we saw earlier, Plutarch, the first century Greek philosopher and biographer, said that a virtuous woman's speech

"ought to be not for the public, and she ought to be modest and guarded about saying anything in the hearing of outsiders, since it is an undressing (apogymnosis) of herself" (Moralia, 142).

Conclusion

On the basis of these observations it is possible to understand both 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14 in such a way that does not force them

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into contradiction to each other. Paul was keenly aware that certain elements of the Corinthians' worship could be detrimental to the edification of the church and disturbing to outsiders. Speaking in tongues, as they practiced it, could cause an unbeliever to think they were all mad. The fact that their women spoke in the assembly was considered shameful and contrary to the common understanding of the Jewish law.

In both cases Paul allowed for continuing these practice insofar as they genuinely contributed to building up the community, but he drastically limited them otherwise. The Corinthians continued to speak in tongues, but in the assembly only a few were allowed and only with an interpreter; otherwise they must be quiet.

Women and men continued to pray and prophesy but only with appropriate head-covering (covered for women, uncovered for men) to express a sense of propriety and proper place in society and creation. But the Corinthians had gone far beyond praying and prophesying. Wives were repeatedly talking in the assembly, questioning their husbands in a way that appeared to dishonor them. Their actions were causing shame on the community and could not be justified since they neither built up the community nor expressed the gifts of the Spirit as praying a prophesying did. Paul applied to them the same standard that he had applied to excessive speaking in tongues or competitive prophesying. Paul told the wives to be quiet and to ask their questions at home.

Following Paul's Instructions

Here, as elsewhere, Paul judged the actions of the community not by a rigid standard of required conduct that was eternal and unchanging. Rather, what mattered to Paul (because it matters to God) was the souls and salvation of people. When actions were destructive to the church or alienated outsiders by the shame that they caused, they must be stopped. Whether eating meat sacrificed to idols or wearing head-coverings or asking questions in the assembly, it was not the external practice itself that was so important, but rather the meaning that the practice carried and the impact that the practice had on the salvation of people and the health of the community of believers.

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Exactly the same standard of evaluation should be applied by churches today as we seek to follow the teaching of the scriptures. Whether women (or men) speak in the assemblies of the church should be judged on the basis of whether what they say builds up the community of believers and whether it alienates outsiders or attracts them to the Gospel. God is first and foremost interested in people hearing the message of Jesus. If the Spirit of God, by his own sovereign choice, gives to women or men gifts for public teaching or testimony or Bible reading or encouragement or prayer, the church should seek to allow all the gifts of the Spirit to be used for building up the community. *“Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil”* (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

In our day and in our context, the kind of shame and disgrace that Paul wanted the church to avoid is more likely to come upon the church by silencing women (and thereby indicating that they are somehow inferior to men) than by allowing women to use all the gifts that the Spirit has given them. Ironically, in our context, silencing women’s voices completely in public worship goes directly against what Paul was trying to accomplish among the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. We need to see once again that such instructions are not arbitrary and irrational regulations, but are guidance and direction for the church in order to implement the fundamental values of the Gospel. Speech in assembly that dishonors others, unnecessarily offends outsiders, disrupts the worship’s ability to build up the community, etc., should always be excluded from assemblies. But, to use Paul’s instructions to silence the gifts of the Spirit given to women in all forms for all time is to quench the Spirit of God and is fundamentally in opposition to the values of the Gospel.

Section 4

Women in the Writings of Paul Observations on Galatians 3:25-29

Galatians 3:25-29

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 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. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

How does one relate this and similar passages to our common practices relating to women in the church? How has it come about that in the first century, the church was an island of greater freedom for women and slaves in the midst of a sea of general repression, while in modern times the writings of the early church have sometimes been used for the defense of the practice of slavery against the growing moral sensibility among people that recognized how wrong slavery is? And similarly, the New Testament is cited to maintain the silence and subordination of women in the midst of a society that makes it possible to recognize and realize the equality of women?

The Situation in Galatia

In his letter Paul was writing to groups of Christians that evidently met in house-churches in various cities and towns of Galatia, an ethnic region in the interior of modern-day Turkey. The communities were almost entirely made up of Gentile believers. They had received the Gospel of Jesus enthusiastically, even from a Jew such as Paul. But after Paul left for other areas, other Christian teachers had come to them. These teachers were also Jewish, but unlike Paul, they believed that if any non-Jews were to become Christians, they must become part of the Jewish people by keeping the laws of circumcision and other commandments. They said Paul was just trying to please people and make it easy on them by not imposing these laws from the scriptures (Galatians 1:10).

Paul had nothing against these laws – quite the contrary. In his letter to the Romans, he declared them “*holy and just and good*” (Romans 7:12). But he knew that to impose such laws on the Gentiles as part of the way of salvation so changed the Gospel of Jesus Christ that it was no longer the Gospel (Galatians 1:6-7).

Because of these teachers who had come to Galatia, the Galatian believers had felt a barrier rise between themselves and Jesus Christ. They were taught that their faith in Jesus was not sufficient; their baptism was not sufficient; their experience of the Spirit in their lives transforming their lives by the fruit of the Spirit was not sufficient. Rather, they must climb over the barrier of the law, because only those inside the barrier were saved.

In order to overcome this false barrier, Paul did not just tell them, “Now you Gentiles are just as good as the Jews; you can do practically everything they can do.” Nor did he say that Gentiles could be saved as well as Jews. He described the new situation of Jews and Gentiles much more emphatically, because it embodied the meaning of the Gospel and was brought home to them by their baptism into Christ. Paul said, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek!*” Paul was expressing here the new ideal of the Gospel, that Christ in his death and resurrection was creating a new humanity that overcame the walls that sin had created among people: “*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace*” (Ephesians 2:14-15).

Slave and Free; Male and Female

It is surprising in this passage that Paul also added the paired contrasts “slave/free” and “male/female.” Within the message of Galatians, it was the Jew/Greek (or Jew/Gentile) split that was central to Paul’s argument. The problem in Galatia was that Gentile Christians were being taught that they needed to keep the Law of Moses and thus become part of the Jewish people in order to be saved.

The inclusion of the dichotomies slave/free and male/female points to the fact that Paul in this passage did not limit his thinking to the needs of the argument in Galatians alone but desired to state a more fundamental and general meaning of Christian baptism and of the way of life that it initiates.

When Paul thought of the meaning of putting on Christ, he saw significance beyond solving the specific problem between Jews and Gentiles in Galatia.

Paul was very aware of the differences between slave and free and male and female and assumed that his readers knew and understood the difference. In his illustration to show that believers inherit the promise of Abraham, he reflected the common practices of inheritance. Slaves inherited nothing, daughters inherited little if anything, sons were the almost universal heirs of their family property with first-born sons having the greatest rights. His point of illustration was that believers are not slaves but that all believer (male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile) become “sons of God” and thus full heirs.

Flying in the Face of Reality

In spite of that common knowledge, still Paul pointed to three of the most obvious and deeply felt splits in that society and stated that all three have ceased to exist in Christ. He expressed the change in the most clear-cut and emphatic way possible.

The particular manner in which these splits have ceased to exist is very specific to the Christian faith. The change centers on the meaning of baptism. In baptism the believers “*put on Christ*” (*christon enedysasthe*). The basic image is that of putting on a garment, but Paul shifted the image somewhat. In Galatians 3:26 he said, “*in Christ Jesus you **are** all sons of God, through faith.*” The transformation in Christ is in taking on a new persona, a new identity, a new reality. When one puts on Christ, one is not just slipping on an outer garment that can be thrown off. He or she is putting on the person of Christ. The new existence that I have and you have is because we participate in the person of Jesus Christ. We are in Christ. We are the body of Christ. We are one.

It is out of this fundamental spiritual reality that the realization arises that the deep-seated splits of society have no meaning for such a new people who have been brought together through sharing the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Ideal of the Gospel and the Reality of Life in the World

But! Doesn't the continued existence of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women with all the perennial conflicts among these groups concretely disprove the truth of what Paul says?

No it does not. Paul was very aware that all three of these dichotomies were not outwardly overcome in the church. The entire letter to the Galatians dealt with the Jew/Gentile split. Even though there were no Roman laws that particularly enforced the split between Jews and Greeks, and removing the barrier was "only" a matter of overcoming "religious law," custom, and sensibility, the matter was very difficult and threatened to overwhelm the very character of the Gospel.

The splits between slave and free and between male and female were supported not only by religious sensibility, propriety, custom, tradition since time immemorial, and general beliefs about the inherent inequality of the two classes, they also were enforced by both imperial and local law throughout the Roman empire.

In the legal and political structure of the Roman Empire, no Christian could even attempt to overturn the slavery laws of Roman society. Therefore, when the New Testament writers dealt with slavery in concrete life, they made no attempt to do what was impossible at that time. Rather, they helped slaves and even masters learn how to transform that given structure from the inside by the values of the Gospel. Peter even drew a close analogy between the suffering of slaves and the suffering of Jesus in his death (1 Peter 2:18; cf. Ephesians 6:5). He thereby changed for Christians their entire vision of how slaves and their experiences were to be valued. Had Christian slaves as a group rebelled against the laws and their masters, the entire Christian community could have been destroyed.

But it is important for us to realize the difference between accommodating the reality of a hostile empire on the one hand and actively approving the structures of that empire on the other hand. The fact that slaves were told to obey their masters and masters to treat their slaves with kindness, does not mean that God has any interest whatsoever in maintaining the institution of slavery as a requirement for obedience to him.

In later centuries, in our own country, when these scriptures were used by slave-owners to impose slavery and obedience, they were

fundamentally misusing and indeed making a mockery of the scriptures. The slave owners in America were no longer subjects of a hostile empire in which they had no power and to whose laws they must submit. Rather, they were in charge of a self-serving power structure that bought, sold, exploited, and destroyed human beings and that justified those actions in part by misusing scripture.

The aim of the Gospel has never been slavery but freedom for all – freedom for all no matter how long it took to bring that reality to fulfillment. *In Christ there is no slave and free!* But only in relatively modern times has that truth come even close to realization. The tragic fact is that many churches used their Bible to justify slavery until forces within the society at large outlawed slavery and forced some Christians to look again at the meaning of the Gospel and recognize their own distortion of its truth.

An Ideal for Women in the Church

The situation has been similar with regard to the roles of women. When Paul chose to include the dichotomy between men and women in this passage, he did not simply say that women can be saved just as men can. So far as we know, no one in the early church ever doubted that women could be saved. He said, *“There is no male and female.”* This was a truth to be brought to realization in spite of the massive walls of power and control that divided men and women in that society.

The roots of Paul’s bold assertion go back to the very beginning of the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection, God marked the beginning of a new era by sending the sound of a mighty wind and tongues like fire among the assembled followers of Jesus. These waiting and praying followers were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak. The Jews who had come from nations scattered all across the Roman empire and beyond could understand their speech miraculously in their local native language. The patchwork veil of languages that had divided humanity into competing groups was for that moment torn in two so that all could understand the good news in the language that was closest to their own heart.

But there were some who heckled and made fun of what was happening. It was then that Peter intervened to defend this sign of the Holy Spirit and to explain the message that was behind this miraculous reuniting of

people across the barriers of culture. What was happening was even more than what the skeptics had imagined or feared, he said. And he uncovered this truth by citing a passage from the prophet Joel, carefully chosen because of how it described exactly what was beginning at that moment. Peter said,

“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel,

‘In the last days,’ God says,

*I will pour out **my Spirit** on **all people**.*

*Your **sons** and **daughters** will prophesy,*

*your **young** men will see visions,*

*your **old** men will dream dreams.*

*Even on my **servants**, both **men** and **women**,*

*I will pour out **my Spirit** in those days,*

*and **they will prophesy**.*

I will show wonders in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

(Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32).

Peter asserted that what was happening was an intervention from God. This was the beginning of an outpouring of God’s Spirit on all his people. In earlier times, real prophets who could teach the will of God to the people had been few and far between. For long periods no prophets had been known, but now God’s Spirit would be available to all his people. The message of Jesus was that important. The Gospel of what the God of the universe had done in Jesus Christ was so astonishing and stupendous; the reach of this Gospel was so universal and its effects so transforming, that God intended for every person, male and female, young and old, free and slave to be enrolled as a prophet to proclaim and teach this good news.

God would make no distinctions. He would empower sons and daughters alike, young and old alike; even servants, both men and women, all would receive an outpouring of the Spirit of God. God had not said that he would give his Spirit to young men and would allow the women and the servants and the old to support them. God himself had revealed his own values, quite different from the typical power structures of society. He would

give his Spirit, his own presence, to all alike. The freedom and power that only the presence of God could bring would be available for women as well as men, for old and young, for servant and master.

This divine intervention was so revolutionary that it was like one world coming to an end and another beginning: *“blood and fire and billows of smoke, the sun ... turned to darkness and the moon to blood ...this ...great and glorious day of the Lord.”*

The promise to break down barriers between male and female, between slave and free was there from the very beginning. That is how the Gospel burst forth into the world. Paul’s bold assertion simply restated the promise of Pentecost. But Paul also knew that such a bold promise had to be implemented within a faulty society, filled with prejudice, where people needed first and foremost to hear the message of the Gospel itself.

The inclusion of women with men and of slave and free was an important manifestation of the Gospel. But such inclusion was always a very touchy issue in that ancient Roman society where women (and slaves) were granted no rights or standing. The prejudices of that society made it very easy for actions by women that implemented their freedom in Christ to cause scandal, arouse a strong sense of shame, stimulate prejudice, and otherwise become a stumbling block that kept people from hearing the Gospel. Women’s freedom in Christ and their spiritual gifts were important and needed to be implemented as fully as possible. But it was even more important for lost people to be confronted by the saving message of the cross. What we observe in Paul’s instructions about women is his guidance for balancing those important goals of the Gospel in a society whose prejudices caused these otherwise perfectly complementary goals to come into conflict.

When the actions of women or men caused scandal that blocked the message of Jesus, the need for the truth and power of the Gospel had to be valued above their freedom. But the central value of the Gospel in giving freedom for all was not permanently surrendered. God’s purposes remained, expressed in the first scripture cited in the first sermon on the first day of the proclamation of the Gospel, challenging societies and churches to overcome their prejudices and implement full equality in Christ.

The relationship between husband and wife in marriage was affected by the patterns of society at large no less than the expected roles of

men and women in public assemblies. When Paul, for example, wrote concerning relationships between husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33, he was writing to people for whom the husband was in fact the ruler of his wife – that was the concrete reality of the time. The laws commonly followed in Greco-Roman society, with few exceptions, gave practically all power and authority in the marriage to the husband. In practical terms, Christians of that time did not have to deal with the question, “Does the husband have authority over his wife?” That authority was already well established by Roman and Jewish law and other local laws. The question for Christians concerned practice within that given structure. How was the husband going to conceive of his legal authority and how was he going to implement it? Was it going to be dictatorial and self-serving or would it be loving and self-sacrificial. How should wives respond to their husbands. Paul challenged husbands and wives to make their relationship mutual, submitting “*to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Ephesians 5:21). He urged husbands to exercise their authority with love and self-sacrifice – “*as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Ephesians 5:25).

The small Christian communities could not change or even affect the laws of marriage or slavery in the Roman empire. What they could do – and did – was to strive to change the inner motivation and self-definition of husbands and wives, slaves and slave owners so that these authoritarian structures were transformed from the inside out.

Living the Ideal within the Limits of Society

Paul was always intensely aware of the limitations on Christian life set by the patterns of society around it. These limitations could take many forms, but they were suffered or accepted for the sake of the overall wellbeing of the communities that Paul was struggling to create by God’s grace in a hostile environment. They were part of what it meant to live by the Cross of Christ in the midst of the world. The church was not a utopian community in which all ideals were practiced in an enclave cut off from the world. Rather, the believers’ responsibility to communicate the message of the Cross to an indifferent or hostile world meant that the church must be vulnerable to the needs of that society so that the message could get through. One can see this way of thinking repeatedly in the way Paul dealt with the numerous problems he encountered in the churches.

We Christians cannot pretend that we have escaped human history and society and can live on some ideal plane where we need have no concern for the practical impact of our actions. The primary values of love and the upbuilding of the community must determine the implementation of the ideals of Christianity in overcoming society's problems and our prejudices.

At the same time, this cautious and loving approach to the implementation of the radical ideals of Christianity certainly does not envision that the church should become the enforcer of a greater degree of inequality than the society around it. The church should not be an island of injustice (racial prejudice or gender prejudice) in a society that is moving the opposite direction.

In our day we still struggle with the kinds of divisions in human society represented by Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female. Our churches struggle to overcome ethnic barriers and racial prejudice. We struggle to overcome barriers of socio-economic standing and the effects of poverty and powerlessness that many experience. It is still difficult to bring the wealthy and the poor together in a united community. In spite of the difficulties, however, we recognize that we must value the work of God in all people of all racial and ethnic groups and all social standings and must not exclude any from full participation in the Christian community.

Paul included the barriers between women and men among those that we must overcome in Christ. The church should be leading our society – not dragging our feet – in affirming the equality and full inclusion of women because of the Gospel. In Christ *there is no male and female!* The church of Jesus Christ today should follow the example of the church in the first century by pushing the envelope of what is acceptable in society as far as possible in the direction of the ideals of the Gospel – freedom, equality, and the full exercise of the gifts of God in the life of the church. In the first century, in spite of stringent restrictions on women in society, our fellow believers found ways for women to pray and prophesy in the community. In our day when societal restrictions no longer form a barrier, the church should not put itself in the position of the pagan Roman Empire and rebuild and enforce barriers that express inequality and inferiority to the world around us and are contrary to the Gospel of Christ.

Section 5

Women in the Writings of Paul Observations on 1 Timothy 2:8-15

1 and 2 Timothy were written in a substantially later period and a very different situation from 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Both letters, along with Titus, were written more than a decade after 1 Corinthians, after Paul had been imprisoned in Rome (Acts 28), was released, had traveled back to the area of Greece and Asia Minor, and had observed that severe problems were plaguing some of the churches.

False Teaching in Ephesus

Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to his younger colleague Timothy in Ephesus after Paul had sent him there in order to deal with false teachers who were infiltrating the church with heresy: *“I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations”* (1 Timothy 1:3). Paul described aspects of this heresy throughout 1 and 2 Timothy (1 Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20; 4:1-8; 5:5-7, 11-15, 20-22; 6:2-5, 20-21. 2 Timothy 1:13-15; 2:8-18, 23-25; 3:1-7; 4:3-4, 14-15). At no point did Paul set out to summarize the heresy, since Timothy already knew its content. Nevertheless, through Paul’s comments we learn a number of details about it: It involved myths and speculations related in some way to the Law of Moses. The false teachers were **forbidding people to marry** and demanding **abstinence from certain foods** (1 Timothy 4:3). They were involved in controversies and disputes around what Paul calls the *“contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (gnosis)”* (1 Timothy 6:4, 20). They evidently spiritualized the resurrection and said that it had already taken place (2 Timothy 2:18) They were evidently finding their best prospects among certain women in the congregations: They *“make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth”* (2 Timothy 3:6-7). They were evidently effective among young widows, who were wanting to be supported by the church and were going from house to house *“saying what they should not say”* with the result that *“some have already*

turned away to follow Satan” (1 Timothy 5:13, 15). Thus Paul desired unattached women in these congregations to marry: *“I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and **give the enemy no occasion to revile us**”* (1 Timothy 5:14). Such a pattern of action would show a clear repudiation of those who *“forbid marriage,”* etc.

The Need for Marriage

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul had urged Christians to remain unmarried if possible so as to be able to devote themselves more fully to God. Now the situation had changed to the extent that he urged all widows under the age of 60 to marry and required that the overseers of the churches be married. Two factors seem to be involved in this change. **First**, marriage was respected as a sign of stability and propriety by the society at large. Being married helped one to be *“above reproach”* and *“well spoken of by outsiders”* and to *“give the enemy no occasion to revile us”* (1 Timothy 3:2, 7; 5:14). **Second**, being married showed opposition to the false teaching that wanted to *“forbid marriage”* (1 Timothy 4:3).

1 Timothy 2:8-15 in Context

These two factors were deep concerns for Paul: (1) the danger of heresy that would corrupt the faith and (2) a sense of propriety in midst of a dangerous society *“so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us”* (Titus 2:8). In the section immediately before 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Paul warned about heretics who *“have suffered shipwreck in the faith; among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme”* (1 Timothy 1:19-20). He then urged prayers for kings and rulers, *“that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way”* (1 Timothy 2:2).

It is in this kind of context that Paul gave corrective instruction to men and women in the church in Ephesus. The RSV translation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is as follows:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire ¹⁰ but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with all

submissiveness. ¹² *I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; 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 woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

Often verses 11-12 have been extracted from this passage and treated as a universal law concerning women. I believe that it is important to read the passage as Paul wrote it, in the context of the corrections that he wanted Timothy to bring about in Ephesus. The passage raises numerous problems for the reader, and it is only by studying the passage in context that we can have any hope of resolving our questions.

Questions of Translation

For example, there are several problems simply of translation and the meaning of words. The relationship between verses 8 and 9 is such a case. Does v. 8 speak of only men praying while the women do not. The way Paul structured the sentence in Greek seems to raise the topic of prayer first and then gives corrective instructions first to men and then to women. One major commentary translates verses 8-9 as follows:

“As far as prayer is concerned, I wish that men everywhere would raise holy hands, without a thought of anger and strife. And the women should do likewise, in modest deportment with chastity and prudence ...” (Dibelius-Conzelmann, p.44)

Such a translation would reflect a practice similar to that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 11:5 in which both men and women are praying and prophesying but the demeanor and dress of the women is important for propriety's sake.

Another translation difficulty has to do with the terms “man” and “woman.” 1 Timothy 2:8-15 uses the term *aner*, which, as we have seen, means either “man” or “husband,” and the term *gyne* meaning either “woman” or “wife.” Though in some parts of the passage the terms seem to be used generically for men and women in general, the references to Adam and Eve and to childbearing would indicate that the husband/wife relationship is primary in most of the passage.

Again, the phrases translated by the RSV “*learn in silence*” and “*keep silent*” both use the Greek noun *hesychia* which means “quietness” rather than “silence.” The adjective form of the word (*hesychios*) is used in 1 Timothy 2:2: “...that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life” (not a silent life). Similarly in 2 Thess. 3:12 Paul commanded Christians “to do their work in quietness (*hesychia*) and to earn their own living.” Quietness is not silence.

Another dispute about translation deals with 1 Timothy 2:12 where the RSV translates, “*I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men.*” The verb Paul usually uses to express the idea of having authority is *exousiazein*. Here, however, Paul uses a verb that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is a very strong verb (*authenthein*) that means “to domineer” or “to overthrow, usurp authority.” The noun to which the verb is related (*authentēs*), means in classical Greek either a “murderer” or an “absolute ruler.” Several students of this passage, including Dr. Carroll Osburn (*Women in the Church*, pp. 246-252), have made a very strong case that this verb in the Greek serves to modify and specify what Paul means when he speaks of teaching. Thus Paul says “*I permit no woman to teach domineeringly over a man.*” Or perhaps, “*I permit no wife to teach domineeringly over a husband.*” This translation reflects the problem in Ephesus in which some wives/women had followed the teaching of rejecting marriage and were proclaiming their independence of their husbands or of men in general. They may have claimed the right to such a style of teaching because of the special “*knowledge*” that they have been given by the false teachers.

Salvation by Bearing Children

Easily the most puzzling statement of all is v. 15 “*Yet she will be saved through childbearing if she continues in faith and love and holiness with modesty.*” Remarkably, this statement serves as a sort of climax to the whole passage about women. After the numerous more negative statements, this passage offers hope for the women addressed in this passage. Throughout Paul’s letters, the verb “save” (*sozein*) always refers to divine salvation, and thus this passage seems to offer salvation to women through bearing children, on the condition that the woman (or her children) continue in faith, love, holiness, and modesty.

The idea of salvation by childbearing is so strange that almost every interpreter tries to see some other meaning behind the words. On the surface the passage seems downright heretical, since it would say that women must not only have faith in Christ to be saved but must bear children. Paul knew of many women who were unmarried and did not have children (1 Corinthians 7), and therefore it seems impossible that he could have meant what the passage seems to say. Some interpreters have suggested the following meanings for the passage: “She will be saved by the birth of the child (Jesus)” or “she will be preserved through the dangers of childbirth.” But neither of these suggestions makes sense of the Greek or would be expressed in this way in Greek. The passage is genuinely puzzling.

Often it is precisely such a strange statement in a text – such an anomaly – that points us to see how deeply a text is enmeshed in the concrete situation to which it was written. There was some circumstance that is not immediately obvious to us as we read the letter that made sense of this statement and that was known to Paul, Timothy, and the church in Ephesus.

I believe that the best suggestion is that this statement about bearing children is a kind of shorthand that would have been understandable to the people in Ephesus against the false teaching that forbade marriage. In the semi-Gnostic belief of the false teachers, bearing children was seen an evil that kept the divine element in human beings trapped in fleshly bodies. Marriage was forbidden for a specific reason, so that children would not be born and thus the cycle of flesh and death would not continue. These women, Paul asserts, could be “saved” and restored to Christ by giving up their false teaching with its rejection of marriage and childbirth and returning to an understanding of human life as a gift of God, that is, by returning to the truth of the Gospel.

Many interpreters who wish to make Paul’s commands in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 universal, simply ignore or minimize verse 15 as part of Paul’s teaching. Paul, however, places this statement at the climax of the passage as offering the solution to the problem of the salvation of the women he has been describing. Unless one is willing to argue seriously that Paul believes that all women receive salvation by bearing children, Paul’s statement here is a powerful indication that these commands are intended to remedy a specific problem in Ephesus. They apply when the same kind of problem arises

anywhere, but they were not intended to silence women for all time in all public situations.

The Deception of Eve

Then there is Paul's analogy of the Ephesian situation to the Garden of Eden. In the preparation of these studies I have read a number of interpretations of this passage, including several that argue that Paul showed that his restrictions on women were eternal law by arguing from the creation story in Genesis. Since Eve was deceived in the Garden, it is argued, women clearly have a basic weakness in their character that makes them easily deceivable and thus disqualifies any woman from ever teaching any men in a public setting. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived but knew full well what he was doing when he openly and purposely rebelled against God. His rebellious action without being deceived shows that men are better spiritual leaders and teachers than women. I hope that it is apparent that such reasoning is way off base!

The simple process of relating an argument to the creation story does not make it automatically universal. In 1 Corinthians 11, as we have seen, Paul argued for veils and specific hairstyles based on the creation narrative. Here in 1 Timothy 2:13-14, Paul was simply drawing an analogy between the role of Eve, who was deceived and led Adam astray, and the role of the Ephesian women, who were leading in teaching the false doctrine that forbade marriage and led to a wholesale distortion of the Gospel. The analogy served to show that women in Ephesus far from becoming the dominant teachers they wanted to be had allowed themselves to be deceived by false teaching and had forfeited their right to teach.

Conclusion

The references to women/wives and men/husbands in 1 Timothy 2, no less than those in 1 Corinthians 11 or 1 Corinthians 14, envision a specific dangerous problem within the church and a specific solution to that problem. In the time of 1 Timothy, the church faced ever-increasing dangers from persecution from the Roman state. It was important not only that its leadership be "*well thought of by outsiders*" but that everything be done so as to "*give the enemy no cause to revile us.*" (1 Timothy 3:7; 5:14). One of the greatest dangers came from teachers who were winning a following for their ascetic anti-marriage teaching and were undermining families, finding

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acceptance especially among the women. The instructions in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 were aimed at guiding the church toward a manner of life that would wholly reject the false teaching and that would encourage families that reflected certain ideals of family in Greco-Roman society, but would shape those ideals in the light of the scriptures.

Paul's instructions should be taken very literally within their context as they confronted an enemy that threatened to overwhelm the church. They should not, however, be extracted from their context and applied in a universal and generic manner to silence women in the worship of the church in all situations and periods. They were never intended to silence the Spirit's gifts to women, when those gifts can be used to build up the community of believers.

Section 6

Dealing with Differences within a Community: Examples from Paul's Letters

As we read Paul's letters to the numerous churches he established, it is very clear that he desired very much for them to be unified and at peace in their faith in Jesus Christ and in their Christian life together. It is equally apparent, however, that every one of his letters dealt to a greater or lesser extent with differences and disagreements within the Christian communities. Paul had to deal with misunderstandings of the Gospel, with missionaries who directly opposed the way Paul preached the message of Jesus, with various distortions and contortions of the message, and even with substantial disagreements with his apostolic compatriots such as Barnabas or Peter.

In the process of working through these many situations, Paul had numerous occasions to treat the question of how differences of belief and practice within the community should be handled. In order to help us to think about these issues, I want to highlight three different examples of Paul's thought and practice as seen in his letters. These three do not cover all possible contingencies – for example, the situations described in 1 Corinthians 5 (blatant immorality) or 2 Corinthians 10-12 (false apostles) or Acts 15 (apostolic council) – but they illustrate some of the issues that arose when believers had differing understandings of how their freedom in Christ and their concern for each other should be applied in various situations.

In all of these situations, Paul worked from a single set of values that was centered in the Gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul phrased his point of view very pointedly in 1 Corinthians 9:12, *"We endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."* For Paul, the most important thing in any situation was for the message of God's saving work in Christ to get through to people and to have its effect in their lives. The Gospel's saving power was important both for those who were already Christians and for those who were not yet Christians. In focusing on those who were already Christians, Paul stressed that nothing should be done that thwarts or counteracts the powerful work of the Gospel in the life of a brother or sister. In focusing on non-Christians, Paul emphasized that no obstacle should be allowed to get in the way of the message of the cross. That

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message of a crucified Messiah was itself obstacle enough. Paul could not tolerate thinking of himself adding further obstacles that would make the already difficult task of accepting the Gospel even more difficult.

Three Approaches to Differences Within the Community

In the letters we observe Paul applying these values in a variety of situations that called for differing responses. In some situations he urged Christians simply to recognize that they differed from each other and to practice mutual respect. In some situations Paul urged Christians of strong faith to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of a person of weaker faith. On other occasions Paul stood firm against any compromise so that the freedom of a large group of believers might be preserved.

1. Mutual Respect and Accepted Difference

In Romans 14:1-12, Paul urged the Christians in Rome to accept the person who was “*weak in faith ... but not for disputes over opinions*” (Romans 14:1). He then described a situation in which some Christians had faith that allowed them to eat any food (clean / unclean; vegetables/meat; sacrificed to idols/ not sacrificed). Others ate only vegetables because their faith caused them to believe that some foods (meats) were unclean. He also described another situation in which some believed that one day should be honored above another while others treated every day alike. Though at least in the matter of food, Paul certainly asserted that one side was right (“*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself*” Romans 14:14), he nevertheless insisted that each side should refrain from judging the other because each believer stands before God alone as master. No one has the right to take God’s place in passing judgment on God’s servant.

Paul also recognized that the two sides might act from the same reason – namely, to please God – but end up with opposite practices (Romans 14:6). Paul believed that God valued their motivation more than the correctness of the particular practice. “*Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind,*” he urged (Romans 14:6). Both sides were expressing the lordship of Christ in their lives by the things that they were doing, even though they were opposite of each other (Romans 14:7-9). Since each one

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would give his or her own account before God, other believers had no right to preempt that accounting by passing judgment on each other or despising each other (Romans 14:10-12).

The scenario that Paul described envisions a mature response to differences on both sides, a response that understands the significance of the fact that each of our lives belongs individually to God because of Jesus' crucifixion. His cross and resurrection create a particular relationship between him and the individual believer that is untouched by the judgment of any human being and cannot be destroyed by any human judgment: *"For this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living"* (Romans 12:9). Those who follow this first pattern that Paul prescribed, can live with considerable diversity of practice within a community without division and without individuals losing respect and love for each other. This option requires a maturity on the part of Christians that allows them to look beyond the surface practices and arguments to a deeper motivation of devotion to God that can be the driving force behind quite diverse outward forms.

The reality was, however, that often such maturity of insight was (and is) missing when Christians get into disputes with each other.

2. The Strong yielding personal freedom for the sake of the salvation of the Weak.

In both 1 Corinthians 8-10 and in Romans 14:13 – 15:3, Paul dealt with situations in which a person of strong faith or strong conscience (built up through knowledge and experience of God), who was thus able to act with considerable freedom, might nevertheless choose not to act on that freedom in order to help a person of weak faith or conscience or a person of no faith. Again the unifying principle – Paul's core value – was that the Gospel of God's grace and salvation in Jesus must get through to people and have its effect in their lives.

a. Limitations for the sake of Weak Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Paul discussed an issue that was very controversial and touchy in the first century church, the question of meat that came from animals that had been slaughtered as part of a sacrifice to a pagan god. Such meat was largely the only meat available in many Greco-Roman

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towns (except where a Jewish community maintained its own procedures of producing kosher meat). In Acts 15:28-29, the letter from the Jerusalem church specifically required Gentiles to “*abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols,*” also referred to as “*the pollutions of idols*” (Acts 15:20, 29).

In 1 Corinthians 8, however, Paul clearly indicated that he had taught the Corinthians that “*an idol has no real existence*” and that “*there is no God but one,*” and thus the pagan idols could not pollute or bless anything or affect it in any way (1 Corinthians 8:4). The knowledge of these truths empowered many of the Corinthians simply to eat any meat available to them, and even to join in social meals held in some of the dining rooms attached to pagan temples in Corinth.

Paul affirmed the truths that he had taught them and the freedom from idols that these truths wanted to express, but he added a major caveat. Though the Corinthians were affirming that “*all of us possess knowledge,*” Paul said that their assertion was simply not true: “*not all possess this knowledge*” (1 Corinthians 8:1, 7). There were people among the Corinthians who were evidently new Christians and had grown up worshiping the pagan gods and thinking of the meat sacrificed to them as specially dedicated food that belonged in a special way to the particular deity (1 Corinthians 8:7). This experience made their “*conscience...weak*” in this regard and especially vulnerable to the question of the meaning of eating such meat. For those with strong conscience built up by knowledge of God, such eating was a statement of freedom from idols and devotion to one God alone. For the person of weak conscience the same action raised the question of continuing to share in the power of the pagan deity that they had known all their lives and of compromising their devotion to God and Christ.

These weak Christians were vulnerable to having their single-hearted devotion to God undermined and destroyed, and thus the work of the Gospel in their lives would be damaged. Paul used strong language to describe the danger: “*their conscience, being weak, is defiled*” (1 Corinthians 8:7). He spoke of becoming “*a stumbling block to the weak,*” or “*wounding their conscience,*” and “*being a cause of my brother’s falling*” (1 Corinthians 8:9, 12, 13). The crucial consideration was the danger of undermining the fundamental purpose of the Gospel: “*this weak person is destroyed (apollytai), the brother for whom Christ died*” (1 Corinthians 8:11).

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In such cases, Paul stressed, the fundamental principle of love for that fellow believer must override all the freedom that knowledge of God grants to the Christian: *“Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall”* (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Again in Romans 14:13 – 15:7, Paul was dealing with a similar issue in a more generic way. When mutual respect and acceptance could not deal with the differences between Christians, those who were stronger in faith must *“bear with the failings of the weak”* and be careful that they not put a *“stumbling block”* (skandalon) *in the way of a brother* so that someone *“is being injured by what you eat”* (Romans 14:13, 15; 15:1). Again, Paul stated the fundamental principle in language very much like that he used in 1 Corinthians 8: *“do not let what you eat destroy (apollye) one for whom Christ died”* (Romans 14:15). Rather, the basic meaning of the message of the cross calls each Christian to put the salvation of a brother or sister before personal freedom. The freedom created by a knowledge of God is important, but never as important as the salvation of one for whom Christ died. Thus, Paul emphasized, *“do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God”* (Romans 14:20).

In these situations Paul challenged those who were “strong” in faith, whom he explicitly considered to be in the right, to go against their correct practices in order to save a fellow Christian of “weak” faith. Here, the danger was not that the weak Christians would disagree with the strong, or that they would object to their practices. The danger was that they would be fundamentally damaged in their faith and their relationship with Christ would be destroyed. Their salvation was at stake, and therefore the strong should choose to sacrifice their freedom to practice a more correct and mature doctrine, important as that was, in order to save the weak.

b. Limitations for the sake of Non-Christians

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul also described his own choices to limit his freedom in Christ for the sake of another category of people – those who do not yet believe in Jesus or know his salvation. The issue evidently arose because of Paul’s refusal to accept financial support from those to whom he was preaching and teaching the Gospel. Paul insisted that he had a right to such support, just as Peter and other Christian leaders did. But he had renounced that right / authority / freedom as part of his own commitment to

reach out to Gentiles and Jews. His desire was that *“in my preaching, I may make the gospel free of charge, not making full use of my right in the gospel”* (1 Corinthians 9:18). Again, he said, *“We endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 9:12).

Indeed, Paul insists that *“though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more”* (1 Corinthians 9:19). Paul described how he went far out of his way to remove any possible obstacle from the path of the non-Christian. He was very aware that the message of the Cross was itself an obstacle – *“a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”* (1 Corinthians 1:23) – but it was God’s obstacle and carried with it unique saving power and wisdom from God. Paul was intensely concerned that he not add any further obstacle to the Gospel so that people were kept from hearing it clearly because of their reaction to the proclaimer or to the Christian community. Paul said that he consciously adapted to the ways of thinking and acting of those he was trying to reach – Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, the weak – *“I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some”* (1 Corinthians 9:22). Again, his fundamental principle was that the purpose of the Cross of Christ must determine his actions. That principle guided Paul in making his decisions.

3. Preserving the Freedom in Christ of a whole class of Christians.

Another situation in which the same principle was applied with apparently quite different results was described by Paul in Galatians 2:11-21. Again, the touchy issue of eating arose. Paul outlined an event that occurred in the church at Antioch, a church that included both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Peter had come to Antioch as a leader of the Jerusalem church which was overwhelmingly Jewish. Because of Peter’s knowledge and experience of God (for example, his experience of God accepting the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10), Peter ate with the Gentiles in Antioch, apparently without raising questions about whether their food was kosher or properly tithed or any such considerations. His actions conformed to the pattern of Jew-Gentile relations that had developed in the church in Antioch under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas.

After some time, however, a delegation of Jewish-Christian men arrived from Jerusalem. Paul described them as *“certain men from James.”*

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James, the brother of Jesus, had become the leader of the Jerusalem church after Peter's departure. These men evidently strongly objected to Jews eating with Gentiles (probably based on the scriptural commands about clean and unclean foods). Peter apparently decided to try not to offend these brothers during their stay in Antioch. Since Peter was a Jew, he stopped eating with the Gentiles (probably in their homes, perhaps including the Lord's Supper) in order not to offend the brothers from Jerusalem. If the Gentiles wished to be included in the fellowship with the brothers from Jerusalem, they evidently had to adhere to the particular food regulation that the Jerusalem brothers followed. The entire body of Jewish Christians in Antioch followed Peter's lead, including Barnabas – but not including Paul. All of them except Paul apparently believed that they should accommodate the scruples of the guests from Jerusalem, who found their patterns of eating with Gentiles or eating non-kosher foods offensive.

At first glance, it might appear that Peter was simply doing what Paul urged in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15, namely, that he was not eating certain foods for the sake of a brother, and that he should be commended for his willingness to sacrifice his freedom for the sake of unity. Paul saw the issue quite differently. Paul stated that he opposed Peter *“to his face, because he stood condemned”* (Galatians 2:11).

Two factors made the situation different from those described in 1 Corinthians and Romans. **First**, the men from Jerusalem were not weak in faith or conscience so that their salvation was endangered by the practice of Jew-Gentile fellowship in Antioch. They objected to it. They considered it wrong, and they certainly would not participate in it. But the practice did not endanger their faith. They were very strong in their faith and indeed considered their practice superior to that of the church in Antioch. Their objection was not from a sense of vulnerability but from a position of judgment in condemning the inclusive practices of the church in Antioch before their arrival.

Second, and most important for Paul, Peter's action was not simply a surrender of his own personal freedom for the sake of the conscience of a brother. It was the surrender of the freedom of a whole class of Christians – all the Gentiles. Peter certainly had the right to surrender his own freedom of action, but he did not have the right to compromise the meaning of the Gospel for others. Therefore, Paul strenuously objected that Peter and

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Barnabas were compromising “*the truth of the Gospel*” (Galatians 2:14, cf. 2:5). In spite of his respect for Peter and his long and close relationship with Barnabas, Paul knew that something fundamental was at stake. He was willing to stand alone against their combined judgment in order to preserve the freedom of a whole group of believers.

For Paul, the truth of freedom given in Christ was very important: “*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*” (Galatians 5:1). Freedom must be limited if it causes an obstacle to the salvation of another. Each person is free to yield his own freedom for the sake of the Gospel. But no one has the right to take away the freedom given by God to all Christians.

The difficulty we have today is like that of the first century. We must determine what is at stake in any given situation. Should personal freedom be surrendered or should the freedom of a large group of Christians be strenuously defended? Experiences today certainly vary from one congregation to another, but I believe that it is clear that the church as a whole should emphatically uphold the freedom that Jesus Christ has given to all his followers, including women, to use the gifts that the Spirit gives to them.

Final Reflections on Reading the New Testament Today

When we in twenty-first century America read passages in the Bible that describe the situation of women in the first century church, we have a natural tendency to view them in comparison with our modern practices. Today very few formal restrictions are placed on women, and often our first reaction to the Biblical examples is to sense the difference from our society and assume that the Bible intends to be restrictive toward women. Since we are people who honor the Bible as God’s word and want to follow its teaching, our inclination is to assume that this restrictive framework reflects God’s will to restrict women to certain limited spheres of activity and expression. We sometimes tend to believe that one of the ways that the church today shows its Christian values and its separation from worldly ways is by keeping women silent and out of all roles of authority.

Often our lack of knowledge of the ancient world makes it difficult to hear the message of the Bible as it was heard by those who first received it.

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But, as we have seen, the more we learn of the societies in which the Bible was written, the more we can see the distinct profile of the Biblical message within the society around it. As that profile comes into view, we come to realize that what is distinctive about the New Testament understanding of women is the way women are valued equally with men. The early Christians saw that women were full recipients of the gifts of God's Holy Spirit just as men are and provided women with increased opportunities for expression compared with the surrounding society.

It is difficult for us in modern America to imagine what seemed normal for women in first century Greco-Roman and Jewish society just as it is difficult to understand the situation of women today in the traditional societies of Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan. As we have seen, the typical expectation for a respectable married woman in the cities Paul visited was that she would live a life as secluded from the public eye as the family could afford. She would likely not be able either to read or write, and thus she could have no personal access to studying the scriptures. She was under her father's authority until she married, and then came completely under her husband's authority. Her life was filled with domestic duties appropriate for her family's socio-economic status. She never expected to participate in any public or political activity, speak in any public forum, or have any say in any aspect of civic life, unless she had great wealth or aristocratic social standing that might grant her a measure of freedom. She dressed modestly in every public setting – completely covered except for face and hands. If she did not fit these general expectations for a married woman, her actions could bring shame both on herself and on her husband and family.

Obviously, not all women fell under the category of “respectable married women,” but similar restrictions applied to all. Such a background understanding of what was normal and expected for women provides part of the context for reading the New Testament. When we take that understanding into account, it can have the effect of practically reversing the way we hear New Testament instructions about women. Heard from within the expectations of modern society, the New Testament instructions about women sound very restrictive. Thus, we are tempted to believe that being faithful to God means enforcing those restrictions. When we understand the context of ancient society, however, it becomes ever more apparent that the restrictions are simply the commonplace practices of the ancient world and

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are in no way distinctively Christian. As we have seen, they became part of the New Testament in situations when it was especially important for Christians to be like their society in order not to bring shame upon their community.

What is striking about Jesus and the early Church, however, is that even within such a restrictive cultural context, they found ways to show that women are the equal of men in God's sight and to show that the high barriers that separated women from men in society were of no importance to God. The distinctive message of Christianity conveyed the freedom and value that belong to every person – man or woman, slave or free – as they receive salvation in Jesus Christ and as the Holy Spirit incorporates them into the body of believers with particular gifts to be used for the common good. The New Testament restrictions on the public roles of women appear more as accommodations to the sensibilities of the times that were made for the sake of a higher good. That good was the need for all people to hear the Gospel in its full, unadulterated form. When women were doing things that created unnecessary offense in that society and that blocked people from hearing the Gospel, the crucial importance of the Gospel required that limitations be placed on their actions so that the message of the Gospel could be heard. Similarly, when women were taking a leading role in spreading a heresy that corrupted or adulterated the Gospel, they were required to stop.

Behind those exceptional cases, however, the New Testament reveals a community life in which women were active in prophecy, prayer, working hard in mission activity, teaching, being “deacons” or “ministers” for churches, correcting false theology, being imprisoned for their faith, being patrons for congregations, rearing children in faith, guiding younger women in developing their ministries, being homemakers, being coworkers with their husbands, etc. In short the whole impetus of Christianity was to give greater freedom to women (as well as to slaves and foreigners) than they had in practically any other public sphere of that society. The restrictions that were placed on women in certain problematic situations only pulled them back toward the normal standards of that society, and certainly not toward a limitation that was distinctively Christian.

That ancient society passed away, but the New Testament writings of the early Church survived. Inevitably, the New Testament is now read in a new environment while the context in which it was written is often forgotten.

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We can be very grateful that our society, even with all its many problems, has a greater sensitivity toward racial equality and gender equality and toward civil rights and education for all people than the ancient Roman Empire did. It is ironic, indeed, if the Christian faith that brought revolutionary freedom into the Roman Empire should in our society be used to create a bastion of repression and injustice based on accommodations that were once made to the typical values of ancient Roman society. The limitations placed on women today are not obedience to the eternal will of God but are the misguided values of the ancient world reaching into the modern world with crippling results.

In that ancient world, Christian teachers like Paul knew that they were striving to reach sinful people and lead them to Christ. They took seriously the need to accommodate as much as possible the preexisting views of those people – to become “*all things to all people*” – in order that people may hear their message and be transformed by the Gospel of Jesus. In our own day we should be following their example. We should take very seriously the views of our society. We should certainly not impose prejudices from the Roman Empire on the society of modern America. Our society is filled with many problems and wrongs that need to be transformed by the Gospel. But on the issues of basic equality among men and women, among all classes, and among all ethnic groups, our society has made great progress over societies of ancient Rome or the ancient Middle East – even over our own prejudices of a century ago. Today, we can be glad for a positive situation in which the call of the Gospel for equality before God is actually encouraged by the values of our society, at least on a very basic level.

If we as Christians today choose not to follow Paul’s example in taking our society seriously, if we align ourselves against the positive steps people have made toward an equality that breaks down racial and gender barriers, if we equate the will of God with the prejudices of ancient societies and fail to hear the call of the Gospel to break down all barriers, if we make our churches bastions of an inequality and exclusion that silences the gifts of women, we will ourselves be a barrier to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our practices will quench the work of the Holy Spirit among many of our members and rob us of God’s blessings that we might have received through their work. Our practices will communicate to outsiders that we believe that women are somehow inferior to men, and people who might have been open

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to the Gospel will more and more turn away from such a view that we all can recognize as both immoral and contrary to reality.

If, on the other hand, we follow the consistent example of Jesus and the teaching of Paul, if we recognize that God is no respecter of persons and wants no barriers dividing his people, if we allow the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to both women and men to be used to the fullest extent possible, if we encourage love, unity, equality, mutual honor, and mutual submission, we will not only be honoring and imitating the example of Jesus and the early Christians, we will also enrich the ministry of the church and enhance its testimony to a world around us that desperately needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

Just as in ancient times, the sovereign Holy Spirit still gives his gifts and “*apportions to each one individually as he wills*” (1 Corinthians 12:11). The gifts he gives to women may often be for quiet, behind-the-scenes ministries of service to the community, just as they often are to men. But also just as with men, those gifts of the Spirit may sometimes be intended to build up the community through public prayer, edification, encouragement, consolation, testimony, and teaching.

It is profoundly important that we as part of the church not be guilty of systematically quenching the Spirit of God and denying the gifts that the Spirit has given to so many women as well as men. We rob ourselves of God’s blessing and hurt our testimony to a world alienated from God.

It is time for us to trust that the Spirit knows what he is doing when he “*apportions to each one individually as he wills.*” Instead of judging people by gross stereotypes or categories – slave, free, male, female – we should ask how the Spirit has given his gifts to each individual, and we should seek to use those gifts to the greatest degree possible for the glory of God and building up the body of Christ.

May God help us all as we seek to follow his will and to be disciples to Jesus Christ.

