

Women in Church Culture

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The Question

It is nearly impossible to develop an understanding and application of gender roles apart from cultural presuppositions within historical moments. The historical oppression of women outside the church throughout the millennia has profoundly affected the treatment of women inside the church, leading to significant confusion concerning which views about gender roles are based in Scripture and which are based in culture, with some proof-texts from Scripture used as support.¹ As a result, it has led many people inside the church and outside of it to come to a similar conclusion about gender roles, Christianity is repressive and oppressive. This paper will offer a brief summary of the question, *why would anyone want to follow such a chauvinistic God?* As well as propose a thoughtful and compelling response.

The modern, western culture believes the Bible makes women out to be lesser in virtue, lesser intelligence, and generally lesser beings than men.² People have come to this conclusion based off two things, the Bible and Christian subculture. There are numerous verses in Scripture where the biblical author tells women they are not allowed to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34-45; 1 Tim. 2:11-12), were created to be the man's servant (Gen. 2:20; Eph. 5:20-24), and are the weaker person (1 Pet. 3:7). These verses are not just read in people spare time, they are preached and taught from the pulpit to congregations. Those who have not read the Bible nor hold it in high regard, also come to the same conclusions, typically founded by watching and interacting with the Christians around them.

My friend is a perfect example. She is nearly thirty years old, single, has a beautiful, lively relationship with Jesus, and has gone to church all her life. Once she graduated college and

¹ Chatraw, Josh, and Karen Prior. *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 100.

² E Randolph Richards and Brandon J. Obrien, *Paul Behaving Badly : Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 98.

started reaching her mid-twenties, she started experiencing a sense of being an “outcast”, like the women at the well in John’s gospel, because she was single and wanted to build a professional career. Through passive comments and conversations, she has picked up a common undertone that says she has not actually found her direction in life because she remains unmarried and without children. She is not alone. Her cousin is similar age and is also single. She, on the other hand, is a stout atheist but feels the same sentiments from Christian subculture, a community she is not even part of. These are just two voices that represent a colossal of stories, from young women in the church unable to conceive to profound atheists who have climbed the ranks of the corporate world.

In my specific cultural context, the deep, Bible belt south, most everyone has an affiliation of some sorts to Christianity, whether they were raised socially and culturally a Christian, or some relative of theirs was a pastor. For those who are openly against Christianity, the Bible still shaped a majority of their formative school years because the vast majority of those around them ascribe to these perceived gender roles and hierarchy. Consequently, there is an underlying notion that women have a specific and “less than” place in society. While most people will never openly reduce a woman’s identity to her ability to run a house (to be sure, there are many that will), there is an unstated sentiment that because of the Bible’s influence, women’s role in society is more reduced than men’s causing many to ask the question, *why would anyone want to follow such a chauvinistic God?*

The Response

Women Must Be Silenced

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

First Corinthians 14:34-35 says that “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.” Although some places still follow this to the exact letter, this text has created a connotation that women must take a backstage role to men. At a first glance it seems that Paul is trying to suppress women by barring them from ever talking in church gatherings. At closer investigation it seems that 1 Corinthians Fourteen fits on the back end of a larger theme that Paul began chapters earlier. Specifically, Paul is reproving the way that the Corinthians are gathering and worshiping.

In chapter eight, nine, and ten, Paul urges the church in Corinth (mainly talking to the men) to stop using their newly found “freedom” in Jesus if it becomes stumbling block to others in regard to food sacrificed to idols, feasting, and idly partaking in the Lord’s Supper. Chapter eleven then focuses on head coverings. Though the action of wearing or not wearing a head covering has to do with gender differences between a married woman and her husband, it seems that whatever the reason for the lack of head coverings on the part of some women, Paul is urging them to curtail what may appear to be a “freedom” or a “right” in a similar way to that which he has described in chapter nine. They should all dress in a way that will “build up” and “benefit” others rather than drawing attention to themselves.³

In chapter fourteen, our discussion text, Paul explains how women will participate in prophesy, tongues, and church gatherings (as opposed to if they can participate). Paul described one of the ways that the Spirit builds up the congregation is through prophecy and tongues. A prophecy always pointed to Christ and would thus have been gospel focused and probably

³ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 487.

expository in nature, as Scripture was applied directly to a current matter in the church's or an individual's life.⁴ With this framework laid, Paul's "silent" rhetoric is merely telling the wives not to judge or question publicly any prophecies from their own husbands. Such action might bring shame upon the marriage. Rather, if they have questions they should raise them at home.⁵ In this context Paul is far removed from those in Judaism who would have forbidden a woman to take part verbally in corporate worship.⁶ Paul is not oppressing women or viewing their gender as a less than. On the contrary, he is creating a new, progressive reality for women to live in.

1 Timothy 2:11-13

Paul makes a similar statement to a personal letter to his protégé Timothy, a pastor to the churches in Ephesus, instructing "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression" (1 Tim. 2:11-14). Paul's reason for having a women learn in quietness is in full accord with the analysis we just saw in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. It is most likely that Paul's present limitation is to be taken with the same proviso and was designed to restrain the tendencies of newly emancipated Christian women to abuse their new-found freedom by indecorously lording it over the men. Such excesses would bring disrepute on the whole community, as had probably happened at Corinth, and called for firm handling.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 486.

⁵ Ibid., 629.

⁶ Ibid., 486.

⁷ Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 14:89.

Paul's prohibition also fits best in the historical and cultural context of Timothy's community, where contemporary women were falling under the influence of imposters. A primary reason Paul was writing to Timothy was to warn him to watch out for false teachers and offer advice for what to do when they came. With the newly found freedom of Christian women in the first century, it seemed the women were a viable avenue for the false teachers to influence and infiltrate the churches that Timothy was shepherding. Paul instructs Timothy to not allow the women, the deceived voices of the false teachers, to teach (what was unbeknown to them, a false message).

Paul adds an illustration from the Torah about Adam and Eve. It makes sense for a devote Israelite like Paul to draw an example from the Torah, the single most influential, life shaping and saturating document for the Jewish people. Paul says Adam was created first, and thus heard the direct edict from God in the garden, but it was Eve who was deceived by the serpent. I believe the reader need not to import more into this illustration, except the point that Paul is clearing making: Just as Eve was deceived in the garden and the results were catastrophic, so too, some of the women in Timothy's churches are being deceived by false teachers (serpents), and if Timothy allow the women to teach heresy, the results, too, will be catastrophic.

Paul must not be accused of being a woman-hater. On the contrary, he is not oppressing women but giving them an opportunity that society had never given them: a chance to learn, grow, and flourish as disciples. In fact, he is a proponent of women in the mission field. He acknowledges women leaders as his own fellow-workers, such as Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Euodias, and Syntyche (Rom. 16; Phil. 4:2–3). Paul is also responsible for encouraging young single followers of Jesus not to get married (1 Cor. 7:9). In the context of ancient near eastern culture, Paul is introducing a counter cultural concept. In a time when society was run by and

passed down to men, telling a women to not marry was a death wish. It seems like Paul truly believed the mission of Jesus and people of Jesus would come alongside women and help them live into a freedom that they never had experienced before.

Women Were Created To Be Man's Servant.

For a post-Christian society that still holds on to Christian ideals, like the United States, Genesis Two has had a pivotal strangle on women through the millennia. In the opening pages of the Bible, God brought order from non-order and commissioned humans to continue ordering as image bearers and vice-regents on His behalf. Specifically, He brought man and women, two gendered individuals (who also serve as an archetype for all humanity) together. Genesis 2:18-25 depicts the women being taken out of the side of the man, an ally, as the two become one flesh in order to accomplish the task of caring for and expanding God's ordered presence beyond the garden into all of creation. The church has treated the role of women as less than or "help meet" to men because of this passage.⁸

A nineteenth century devout Christian and prominent abolitionist once said "I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God designed us to occupy."⁹ Even early church fathers were at fault. Jerome, a fourth century Christian scholar and most known for translating the Bible into Latin, is a great example. He assigned spiritual values to women from one hundred points for virgin, sixty points for widows, and thirty for married women, ranking just above fornication in his categorization, saying "I

⁸ Debi Pearl, *Created to Be His Help Meet : Discover How God Can Make Your Marriage Glorious* (Lobelville, Tn: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2014).

⁹ Grimké, Sarah Moore. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman*. (Boston, MA: I. Knapp, 1838) 10.

praise wedlock, I praise marriage but it's because it produces more virgins.”¹⁰ In modern history, after the sexual revolution, Christian culture (which has a fingerprint on most of the western culture), saw the rise of “purity culture”. Although it had good intentions, this movement too degraded women’s identity and worth on the basis of their sexual expression.¹¹

I do not believe an accurate rendering of Genesis 2 and God’s design for creation, humanity, covenant union, and womanhood would permit people to reduce women’s roles to revolve around man’s toils and sexual fulfillment. To understand this better we must look at God’s charge to humanity, as well as the significance of Eve being taken out of his side (*šēlā*) of Adam and being called his helper (*‘ēzer*). When we read that God commissioned Adam to work (*‘ābād*) and keep (*šāmar*) the garden we should be thinking in terms of priestly tasks (Gen. 2:15). The verbs to *‘ābād* and keep *šāmar* are predominantly used of Levitical priests who were tasked with preserving sacred space, the tabernacle, and temple (Num. 3:7; Neh.13:22). The notion that all of creation is depicted as God’s temple (place of His holy presence) means that Adam and Eve would have a continuing role as God's vice regents to preserve and extend His order.

When forming Eve, Genesis says that she was taken out of Adam’s side (*šēlā*). It is important to note that *šēlā* is not an anatomical term. In almost all of its uses in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to the other side of a building/structure, mainly the tabernacle. The fact biblical author seems to intentionally evoke tabernacle language is significant because it reinforces humanity’s priestly purpose and function from the beginning. Furthermore, Eve being called a helper (*‘ēzer*) does not annotate a subordinate position. Of the twenty-four times *‘ēzer* is used in the Hebrew Bible, almost all of them are in reference to God as the helper of Israel (Ps. 115:11).

¹⁰ Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia University, “A Letter from Jerome (383-384),” *Epistolae*, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/447.html>.

¹¹ Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *She Deserves Better* (Baker Books, 2023).

Surely no one would claim God is lesser than Israel. Instead *‘ezer* more appropriate is used in order to view women as man’s equal, as a humanoid and co-ruler, in contrast to the beasts of the land, air, and sea in which they were not suitable for Adam. Consequently, we cannot conclude that Adam is in need of a reproductive partner (Eve’s role as subject), but rather, God is stating he needs an ally, another half, to help and join him in God’s sacred space.¹²

Ephesians Five gives a very helpful exposition of Genesis 2:18-25. Paul begins by encouraging everyone to be a helper to one another because of their relationship with God (Eph. 5:20). He then addresses each specific role, wife and husband. He calls wives to cultivate oneness with their husband through a servant posture just as the Church carries His presence and oneness into the world by taking on the posture of servants on mission. He then challenges the husbands to love their bride, the same way Christ humbled himself by becoming man and sacrificing His life to bring about oneness with humanity. Verses thirty-one and thirty-two bring this section to its climax. Paul says that the union between man and women, through becoming one flesh, is really about Jesus and His followers oneness. The design of God creating two people to become one is meant to remind us of the true story we belong to; God becoming one with His creation. Isaiah writes, “As a young man marries a young woman, so will your builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5). In other words, Paul is emphasizing that man and woman’s purpose of becoming one serves as a signpost that we belong to God, who created humanity to commune with as they serve as his vice-regents over creation. This appropriate and compelling rendering of Genesis and Paul’s reflection on the roles of Adam and Eve in marriage ascertains the work of women (and men) as counterpart allies and priestly representatives on God’s behalf.

¹² Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Adam and Eve : Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. (Downers: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 81.

Women As The Weaker Sex

It seems that women have been viewed by society as lesser than men. While there has been a major breakthrough in the twentieth century regarding women's rights in the western culture, women still feel the effects of a gender-based disparity. A plain reading of Apostle Peter's first letter would seem to affirm gender inequality. Peter writes "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (1 Pet. 3:8). I believe a deeper, more exegetical reading of Peter's work must take place in order to accurately and authoritatively apply his wisdom and see the true colors he is painting with.

The cultural context is crucial for interpreting 1 Peter. For example, considering a typical role of women in a first century Jewish context, Peter is not disparaging women, but radically closing the gap of the gender divide. When he tells a husband to bestow honor on the woman as the weaker sex, he is affirming a theme found frequently in the New Testament, namely, that God is often pleased to give honor to those who are less honored in the eyes of the world. In fact, Jesus has come and brought the kingdom of God for these people in mind (cf. Matt. 5:3–12; 1 Cor. 1:26–30; 12:22–25; Jas 2:5; 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).¹³ Peter then reminds the husbands that they and their wives are joint heirs in God's grace of new life, signifying their wives as equal to them in spiritual privilege and eternal importance. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, the biblical authors couple their treatment of differences in roles of husband and wife with an implicit or explicit affirmation of their equality in status and importance.¹⁴ Although, not too dense of an

¹³ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17:151.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17:153.

explanation, Peter is affirming that the women who follow the way of Jesus are going to be, look, and work radically counter culture, upside down even, to the ways the world.

Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

As we have seen with a majority of the New Testament letters, everything must be filtered through its appropriate context. If you are like me, then there is probably a huge question that looms in the back of your mind: *how do we know if very specific context is expanding the biblical ethic or if we should follow the exact biblical example no matter what?* In his book, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, Theologian Dr. William Webb provides a compelling hermeneutic to aid in one's exegetical quest. He calls it the redemptive movement hermeneutic. He says that in order for someone to live by a biblical ethic, they must know its trajectory in relation to the entire biblical narrative. It works like this: One must identify how the original culture lived in relation to the ethic; what ethic the Bible presents; how our present culture lives in relation to the ethic; and how the ultimate ethic of new creation is in relation the given ethic. Following this hermeneutic will reveal if the Bible is providing a widening or constricting ethical ideal.¹⁵

Applying this hermeneutic to the biblical view on women, we observe that the original cultures of Timothy's churches in Ephesus and the churches in Corinth were comprised of a diversifying Greco-Roman society. Aphrodite's, the Greek goddess of sex and fertility, as well as Demeter's temples were known for their women only cults that raised sexuality and promiscuity to a new level.¹⁶ It is from this women domineering cultural framework that we see Paul

¹⁵ William J Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals : Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Morales, Michael L. 2014. *Cult and Cosmos : Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology*. Leuven ; Walpole, Ma: Peeters.

restricting the roles that women had in the newly founded church. But in other cultural contexts, mainly in a Jewish centered community, Paul is liberating women to a new level of significance they have not yet experienced. The ultimate ethic of new creation reveals men and women, allies and covenant partners in priestly functions, as a sacramental expression pointing to ultimate union with Jesus. For us today we must understand what culture an individual more closely lives in. If it is the former, then taking cautious measures to raise women (and men) in a Christ like manner may take precedence before the desired roles can be set in place. But if it is latter, then let every person find freedom that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” and can partake as image bearing allies in the hope of new creation (Gal. 3:28).

In conclusion, cultural context within historical moments shape people’s understandings and application of gender roles. Since the United States’ was founded on Judeo Christian values, the Bible has played a significant part in the identification and transformation of gender roles. As a result of a flat reading of the Bible, Christianity has left many inside and outside the church hurt and dismayed. The belief that the Bible silences, oppresses, and puts down women has left many wondering why anyone would want to follow a chauvinistic God? I presented that a deeper and fuller contextual reading of prominent “oppressive” biblical passages actually reveal the biblical authors to be creating an unheard-of reality and wider possibilities for women. The biblical authors do not view women as “less than”, but are affirming that by following the way of Jesus the people of Jesus would come alongside women and help them live into a better, counter cultural freedom that women had never experienced before. Nothing is more clear that the Bible

reflects not a chauvinistic God, but a movement that believes whole heartedly that men and women both have standing in their own right in the covenant community.¹⁷

¹⁷ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 487.

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