

Women's Role in the Church Considering "The Whole Counsel of God"¹

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A Persistent Problem

The debate rages among evangelical churches. What would it take to settle once and for all the issue of women's ministry and leadership roles in the church? Let's try an approach that I have witnessed many times:

In 1 Tim. 2:12, the Apostle Paul, speaking by the Holy Spirit, says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (ESV). There. God said it. I believe it. That settles it.

Or does it? That answer becomes less straightforward when we consider additional passages from the Bible. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul says that the women should be silent in church – and not only this, that it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Just a few chapters earlier, however, in 11:4-5, women as well as men are praying and prophesying in the church. In both of these passages Paul is speaking by the Holy Spirit as well, isn't he?

So, we have two passages stating that women should not teach or exercise authority over a man, and that women should be silent in church. What places these two passages in a position to minimize or suppress the implications of the third passage, which states that women were praying and prophesying in church? Why wouldn't the third passage, which shows women praying and prophesying, be received as a normal and universal activity, which would tell us that the first two passages restricting women are somehow reflecting a local and limited situation?

Well, we do believe that all of these passages were inspired by God's Spirit. But how do we get to the place where we are able to hear everything that God has to say on this important subject?

A Better Approach

Perhaps the sense of tension or even an apparent contradiction in verses such as these is not with the Bible itself, but with us and our approach to the Bible. Perhaps we have something we might call the "underlining effect:" Do we tend to underline the verses we like and overlook others that do not fit our preferences? Our churches and our sisters – as well as our brothers – deserve a better approach. And our Lord, I think, expects it!

It should be obvious in the case of the 1 Corinthians passages that, when we consider only one of them, we see only part of the picture. We need the entire picture, not just in these passages but in all relevant passages in the New Testament.²

This important concept is expressed by the Apostle Paul as he describes his former ministry in Ephesus to the elders of that church.

Acts 20:27 (ESV)

. . . I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

This expression, “the whole counsel of God” (or the entire purpose or will of God in some translations), expresses a significant principle that all relevant biblical texts on a subject must be heard, not just one’s favorite few passages. Any understanding of “biblical authority” that falls short of this cannot in any way be considered valid.

In our study of the Bible on this topic we need a commitment to seek a fullness of understanding that leaves nothing out.³ Only then can we claim to have biblical authority for our position.

I propose an approach that truly considers the “whole counsel of God” from the New Testament and enables us to hear all that Scripture has to say on the subject.

So how do we put this into practice?

A Proposed/Working Framework

We are going to explore the process undertaken by New Testament historian and cultural specialist, S. Scott Bartchy. Prior to his retirement he was the Professor of Christian Origins and the History of Religion in the Department of History at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he had taught since 1981.⁴

To fully search the Scriptures on the position of women in the church, he wrote the text of each New Testament passage that addressed women (in particular) or gender-related issues (in general) in the life of the church on a separate note card. He then sorted and resorted those note cards, looking for patterns that would give insight into this important issue.⁵

So here we see our criterion: The “whole counsel of God” is applied as all relevant Scripture texts from the New Testament are included, and then carefully reviewed, as each text is considered in its original context, and allowed to speak.

Preliminary Results

As Bartchy performed this study, the most striking thing he discovered is that many texts simply *describe* women in ministry or leadership activities, as supporters of Jesus and the apostles, and as co-workers of the apostle Paul. These passages appear with no explanation or defense whatsoever, indicating that these activities were both common and accepted. When these texts are all separated from the rest of the stack, they comprised over one-half of the cards. This is quite amazing – and significant enough that Bartchy made it his primary criterion for further sorting.

Professor Bartchy called this category of New Testament texts “Descriptive.” They simply describe the things that women were doing in the early church.

The obvious question that occurs at this point is this: How did these activities come about? So the next step was to look for texts that would have encouraged women to function in the ways that are found in the Descriptive texts – and that encouraged men to accept and even welcome such activities. This, surprisingly, is the next largest stack of cards. This category Bartchy labeled “Instructive” – they “instruct” Christians regarding the way things should be in the church (Bartchy 1996, 20).⁶

The final step in his process was to look for texts that discouraged women from engaging in ministry and leadership activities. There were only two of these. He labeled them “Corrective” for several reasons.

1. The context of each passage indicated that they appeared to be correcting specific problems.
2. These two texts sharply contrast with what emerged in the Descriptive and Instructive texts. If these “Corrective Texts” actually express the attitude of Jesus Christ and the Apostles toward women in ministry, they cannot explain the behavior and activities that are found in the Descriptive texts and supported by the Instructive texts.
3. Finally, Bartchy found that employing the Descriptive and Instructive texts actually explains the Corrective ones. With the new freedom and encouragement in Christ that women experienced, it is not surprising that there were problems that needed to be corrected. In fact, Bartchy explains, given the culture of the day, it is surprising that there were not more problems reflected in the New Testament (Bartchy 1993)!

When we search for “the whole counsel of God,” we find about one dozen texts from the book of Acts on the issue of gender and about two dozen each from the gospels and the letters of Paul. Any approach to the issue of women’s role in the church that wants to be considered “biblical” must wrestle with this entire range of passages. Having sought to do this, here again are the three categories that have been identified through this process:

1. **Descriptive:** Women in ministry or leadership activities - often in counter-cultural ways - are simply described, and that with no explanation or defense – indicating that these activities were both common and accepted. Note that these were over one-half of the cards!
2. **Instructive:** These texts “instruct” Christians regarding “the way things should be in the church” in a way that would encourage women to act in these ways and encourage men to support and welcome these ministry activities by women.
3. **Corrective:** There are only two texts remaining that would have discouraged women from the kind of activities that are addressed in the previous two categories. These passages are clearly seeking to correct particular situations.

Now we will examine these New Testament texts in detail.

The Gospels – The Impact of Jesus Christ on Gender Roles

First, we will examine the texts that occur in the Gospels – the actions and words of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels the categories of Descriptive and Instructive overlap one another enough that we will consider them together. There are no texts restricting the activities of women found in the Gospels, further confirming that the corrective verses were in response to problems that emerged in the early church. Later, when we review the texts in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, we will consider the three categories separately.

We also find it helpful to look separately at the impact of Jesus Christ first on women, then on men, and finally on their relationships with each other.

The Impact of Jesus on Women

When we ask men in our Empower seminars what they are buying when they pay dowry price for their wives, the answers are consistent: children, food, and sex. In the gospels, however, Jesus did not treat women on this basis! In fact, his teachings show clearly that roles and restrictions do not define women and their value in the kingdom of God.

For example, in Luke 11:27-28, when a woman calls out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed” (ESV), Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” Jesus does not allow women to be reduced to their biological function, but redefines their blessedness – not from the usual praise for women only for bearing sons, but in terms of their own relationship with and obedience to God. As Bartchy explains, “Motherhood is *not* the core definition of a ‘real woman’” (Bartchy 1993).

In Luke 8:1-3 we see women traveling with Jesus and his male disciples, even supporting them financially.

In John 4 Jesus holds a sustained theological discussion with a Samaritan woman, who then becomes the witness through whom her entire village comes to Jesus. The terminology that John uses in 4:39, “Many Samaritans . . . believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” is very similar to John 17:20, where Jesus prays for those who believe in him through the word (or testimony) of the apostles.

In Luke 10:38-42, Mary left her traditional kitchen duties and joined the men in the sitting room at the feet of Jesus. When criticized by her sister Martha, Jesus defends her: “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Craig Keener tells us, “Mary’s posture and eagerness to absorb Jesus’s teaching at the expense of a more traditional womanly role would have shocked most Jewish men.” He further explains, “This passage challenges the role designations for women in the first century; the role of disciple and future agent of Jesus’s message is more critical than that of homemaker and hostess, valuable as the latter may remain” (Keener 2014, 208).

The most significant reflection of this impact on women by Jesus is what we see in each gospel: All four of them unanimously report that women were the first witnesses to the resurrected Lord – and that the Lord then sent them to bear witness to the apostles! Mark Husbands comments, “This alone ought to leave an indelible mark on our understanding of ministry: God first appointed women to proclaim the gospel to the apostles” (Husbands 2007, 132).

Not only this, but John’s gospel tells us that it was not incidental or accidental that women were the first witnesses to the risen Lord, but intentional on his part. According to John 20, Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, then ran to tell Peter and John, who themselves then raced to the tomb. Mary arrived after them (this was her third trip, after all), and only after Peter and John had left the scene did Jesus appear – and sent a message to the men only through her!

It is noteworthy that, while some traditionalists consider it appropriate for a woman to have authority over men only in a way that is impersonal and indirect, the risen Lord gave Mary Magdalene a message to deliver to the apostles in way that would have been both personal and direct.

Bartchy summarizes the impact of Jesus Christ on women as “the rejection of female gender roles” as defining women’s identity and value and the “creation of new, public roles for women” (Bartchy 1993).

The Impact of Jesus on Men

While we usually think that improving how men view women is important to bring change, we have found in Empower International Ministries – consistent with the results of Bartchy’s note card research – that changing how men view themselves is equally important. We see this issue raised again and again in the gospels, and it is given a prominent place in each of them.

The impact of Jesus on men was significant, as explained in the following summary by Carrie Miles, Director of Empower International Ministries:

Because traditional gender norms so obviously restrict women’s freedom, the extent to which norms of masculinity limit men is often overlooked. Jesus’ teachings free men as well as women. Jesus’ statement that men should not treat women as sexual objects (Matt. 5:27-28), addresses concerns about sexuality that play a dominant, and unpleasant, part in men’s lives.

“Aggressiveness, virility [and] sexual prowess” were important parts of a man’s claim to honor in the Greco-Roman world (Osiek and Balch 1997⁷). Placing sexuality back into its Creation context as a tool of relationship, not as a contest in which “manhood” is judged, Jesus began to redefine what it means to be a man.

Similarly, Jesus redeemed men from a system that pressured men to: measure their worth in terms of material wealth (Matt. 6:19–20; Matt. 4:8–10; Matt. 19:16–26); subordinate themselves to the absolute power wielded by powerful patriarchs (Luke 9:59–62); participate in the endless cycles of strife, competition, and vengeance typical of honor/shame cultures (Matt. 5:38–41); or struggle to dominate, control, and be honored by other men (Mark 10:35–45; Mark 8:27–33).⁸

It is this last impact – building on the others – that would have been the most significant in how men used their position and power with respect to women.

In Mark 10:35-37, while traveling toward Jerusalem, James and John make a bold request of Jesus: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (vs. 37, ESV). (In Matt. 20:20-21 it is their mother who brings the request on behalf of James and John.) They are certainly thinking of the Son of Man as described in Daniel 7:13-14, who appears before “the Ancient of Days” and is “... given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (NRSV). This is the Messiah, the judge of the earth! For James and John, holding positions analogous to chief of state and prime minister would certainly be coveted roles with honor and power! But Jesus reverses their expectation, telling them in Mark 10:42-45 (ESV),

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever

would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Bartchy paraphrases Jesus's reply in this passage as follows: "I who do accept the role of being the judge of the world am judging the world and the way in which the world uses power and saying that I will use my power for the sake of others" (Bartchy 1993). This is the picture of the cross: The Son of Man, as described in Dan. 7:14, but with an unexpected twist: instead of being served by others, he gave his life to serve them.

Later, in Luke 22:25, during the Last Supper, Jesus's response to his disciples and their dispute about which of them was the greatest is expressed differently: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors." The Norwegian New Testament scholar Halvor Moxnes explains that this description reflects what are called "patron-client" relations, which are "based on a very strong element of *inequality* and *difference in power*." The "patron," or what Jesus here calls the "benefactor," has resources such as land, money or influence which the client needs (Moxnes 1991, 248, emphasis his). This is the kind of greatness to which the disciples aspired.

Jesus, however, points his disciples – and us – to a different model of greatness:

But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:26-27)

Moxnes tells us how this transforms the traditional concept of the patron or benefactor. "[Jesus] identifies greatness with the act of *servicing* rather than *being served*." "The word 'to serve' was linked to food; it was the task of nurturing, associated with women and servants" (Moxnes 1991, 259, emphasis his).

In our Empower seminars we ask, "What does it mean to be Lord?" (Miles 2008, Study 7). Or, to put it another way, "What would you do if you were the one in the room with the most power?" In John 13, Jesus shows us. He takes up a basin and a towel and washes the disciples' feet and afterwards adds, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (vs. 15). As you may remember, Peter resists – even objects (vss. 6-8). Bartchy explains that Peter already understands the implications; if Jesus washes his feet, he will be expected to wash the feet of others. Peter is not ready to become this kind of man (Bartchy 1993). The question for us is, Are we?

There are important lessons here in at least four areas, all revolving around the central theme of service to others:

1. Honor and status (or, we might say, the male ego): Jesus challenges this drive for honor and status and says that leadership in his kingdom is about humility and service. Any view of manhood or masculinity that revolves around ego and desire for position and status must be rejected.
2. Dominance: This male drive for dominance and position is a significant part of what is called patriarchy. Bartchy tells us that it is incomplete to call patriarchy the rule of men over women, as it is actually the rule of a few men over everyone else, men and women (Bartchy 1993). What men do is then imitate this pattern in their own spheres of influence, such as their homes, in which case women are subordinated. This structure – the one Jesus referred to in his words about the Gentiles – was the one that appealed to his disciples. Jesus, on the other hand, challenges this entire way of thinking and acting.
3. Authority: We must never forget that Jesus regarded the possession and use of authority as a danger and a temptation, due to the way in which it is used by the world all around us. Even when we create hierarchical relationships in order to establish areas of responsibility and lines of accountability, we must not forget that true authority is rooted in God’s work in our lives and our resulting character and relationships of service to others. It must always be used for building others up.⁹
4. Power: Jesus challenges us to change our perspective and practice from power *over* others to power *alongside* others:

“If the Lord is Jesus, legitimate power seeks not to control others and things but to empower the powerless, to lift up the fallen, to reconcile, to create healing opportunities, to encourage maturity and responsibility, and to restore community” (Bartchy 1993).¹⁰

We have looked at the impact of the teachings of Jesus on women and on men; now we look more specifically at his impact on how men and women relate to one another.

The Impact of Jesus on the Relationships between Men and Women

Jesus’s instructions on gender frees both women and men from the burdens imposed on them by culture. More teachings of Jesus further define the intended relationship between them, particularly regarding how men view and treat women.

Consider the sexual double-standard, the insistence that, as the sexual property of their husbands, wives remain faithful. Husbands, on the other hand, are themselves free to have as many women as they want.¹¹ Jesus challenges this sexual double-standard in John 8:1-12, when the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus for judgment. The absence of the man whom she had been with is quite obvious, although apparently not to the men who brought her. Jesus replies, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” and the men, convicted, slink away in shame.

This challenge is reinforced in Matt. 19:3-9/Mark 10:2-12 where Jesus makes it clear that fidelity in marriage is required of husbands as well as wives. Miles explains, “Jesus’s definition of marriage as a ‘one flesh’ relationship . . . implicitly recast adultery not as a property crime against men but as a shattering of an essential union created by God” (Miles 2006, 59).

In Matt. 5:28 Jesus states that “. . . everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (ESV). And if this is not radical enough, he follows with, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away” (vs. 29). Two important things follow from these verses:

1. Men are clearly responsible for their own thought life, and consequently for what they do with their eyes and hands. This is not talking about simple sexual attraction, but the desire to use someone as an object for one’s own gratification. As Sarah Sumner says, “. . . Lust is not an innate male reflex; it is a condition of the heart.” She also points out the similarity between greed and lust: The greedy person “uses people to make money for himself,” while the lustful man “uses women to make himself feel powerful and manly” (Sumner 2003, 304, 305).
2. Women are not sex objects for men, nor are they responsible for the thought life of men.¹²

An additional example of Jesus’s challenge to the sexual double standard can be found in Luke 7:36-50, where Jesus is anointed by a “sinful woman” while dining in the home of Simon the Pharisee. He senses Simon’s judgment of the woman – and even more significantly of him, since he is letting her touch him – and so he says to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” He then calls attention to the ways in which she is demonstrating her love for Jesus because of the forgiveness of her sins.

The sexual double standard in the shame-honor culture of Jesus’s world is described by New Testament cultural experts Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh. A woman’s honor is like virginity: “While male honor is flexible and can sometimes be regained, female honor is absolute and once lost is gone forever” (Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003, 372).

In the case of the woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus explicitly challenges this sexual double standard by calling attention to the woman’s behavior in a way that ascribes honor to her, and asks Simon the Pharisee to see her through that lens, rather than through the lens of her sin.¹³

There is an important point here: Men are to “see” women as Jesus sees them. In contrast to the severe warning in Matt. 5 about not looking at a woman with lustful intent, now Jesus urges Simon to see this woman for who she is as a person, a person who responds to God’s love and who loves, serves, and has value before God as a human being.

When men look at women as sexual objects, they fail to see them as persons. Jesus asks men to see women for who they are and how they are valued in Jesus Christ.

Acts and the Letters of the Apostle Paul – the Early Church

Now we move on to the book of Acts and the letters of the Apostle Paul, where we see how Jesus' treatment of gender appears in the early church. We will look at these New Testament texts within the framework we have already identified, that of Descriptive, Instructive, and Corrective.

Descriptive Texts

We begin with the "Descriptive" passages. These passages of Scripture simply describe what women in the Christian community recorded in the Book of Acts and Paul's letters were doing.

- Acts 18:26. Priscilla, together with her husband, Aquila, teach the learned Apollos "the way of God more adequately."
- Acts 21:9. Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied.

Romans 16 is full of references to women in ministry, all of whom Paul mentions with praise, affirmation and recommendation:

- Rom. 16:1-2. Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea and a benefactor of Paul and others. Paul commends her and asks that they receive her and give her any help she may need.

Bartchy points out that both deacon and benefactor involve "leadership and initiative" (Bartchy 1978, 64). When Paul uses this word for himself, it is typically translated "minister." When he uses it in 1 Timothy of an office for which he gives the qualifications, it is translated "deacon." So the insistence of some translators to render the word as "servant" *only* in Phoebe's case is quite perplexing, other than a reflection of bias.

- Rom. 16:3-4. Priscilla and her husband Aquila are Paul's co-workers in Christ Jesus, who had risked their lives for Paul.

Interestingly, in most places where Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned, Priscilla's name is placed first. Priscilla played a significant role in the teaching of Apollos, and in fact, was a significant if not the most prominent partner in a ministry team with her husband.

- Rom. 16:7 – Junia is named along with Andronicus as "outstanding among the apostles."

Both Scott Bartchy and Lynn Cohick remind us that Junia was both clearly a woman's name in in New Testament era Greek, and was understood by the church fathers in the first several centuries as both a woman and an apostle (Bartchy 1993; Cohick 2009, 215, 216). In the thirteenth century, however, a translator apparently did not believe a woman apostle was possible, so – going against the evidence – he converted her name into a masculine form. This miraculous “sex change” was further reinforced by Martin Luther, “whose influential translation of the Bible into German included the reference to two men, Andronicus and Junias” (Cohick 2009, 215).

Although some fairly recent scholars argue that the text of Rom. 16:7 should state that Junia was “well known to the apostles” (ESV), rather than “outstanding among the apostles” (NIV), New Testament scholar Cynthia Long Westfall reminds us that “Junia was recognized as a woman apostle in the virtually unanimous understanding of the church until the late Middle Ages” (Westfall, 271).¹⁴

- Rom. 16:6, 12, 13 & 15. A number of women are mentioned: Mary, who worked very hard for them; three women who “work hard in the Lord” are named: Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis; the mother of Rufus has, in some sense, been a mother to Paul as well, and in verse 15 several women are greeted, including Julia and the sister of Nereus.
- 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 – Paul refers here to both men and women praying and prophesying, apparently in the assembly. The only question is to whether women should cover their heads while speaking, but Paul clearly accepts the part they are playing in the meetings.
- Philippians 4:2-3 – Paul appeals to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, whom he describes as having striven together with him for the gospel – using coworker language.

What is interesting about these “Descriptive” texts is what is *missing*: Bartchy notes that there is no effort to justify or explain these activities of women. This indicates that “. . . such activities had become sufficiently common that no special comment was needed in these contexts” (Bartchy 1978, 62).

In addition, New Testament scholar Cynthia Westfall explains the countercultural implications of Paul's commendations of women. “In the Greco-Roman culture, though there were exceptions, it was not considered proper to give women public recognition,” she states, except for performing stereotypical women's functions related to their roles as wife and mother. On the other hand, “Paul is countercultural because he commends women in the same way as men and for the same things for which he commends men” (Westfall, 223). Paul's actions are entirely consistent with what we saw in the teaching and actions of Jesus Christ himself.

Instructive Texts

What is it that encouraged women to function in this way in the early church? This is what we look for next: These are the “Instructive” texts – those that instruct the church in the way things should be.

- Acts 2:17-18. The apostle Peter, as part of his sermon at the founding of the church on the day of Pentecost, quotes from the prophet Joel. As a mark of the new age, sons and daughters, both men and women, will prophesy.
- Spiritual gifts are described in Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-11 and 28-31; Eph. 4:11-13; and 1 Pet. 4:10-11. There is no indication at all in any of these passages that there are any gender restrictions in the way the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts for ministry.
- 1 Cor. 7:4-5. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (ESV).

Note that here, the only place where authority is explicitly mentioned in the marriage relationship, it is reciprocal (that is, shared), and decision-making is mutual. The idea that a woman had authority over her husband’s body would have been as shocking in the Greco-Roman world to whom Paul wrote as it is in Africa today. Although this text is addressing marriage and not roles in the church, the change that Christ has wrought permeates all aspect of the Christian life, including giving authority to women in their relationships with their husbands.

- 1 Cor. 7:7. “I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.” In this case Paul is discussing his singleness as a gift from God. He is saying that “neither men nor women *have* to marry . . . in order to be fully human and acceptable to God” (Bartchy 1978, 60 [emphasis his]).
- 1 Cor. 11:11-12. “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”
- Gal. 3:28. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Given Paul’s appeal to this very concept in the previous chapter as the basis for his rebuke of Peter, his counter-cultural advice to Philemon regarding his slave Onesimus (to receive him back, “. . . no longer as a slave, but . . . as a dear brother” [Phile. 16]), and the presence of all the “Descriptive” texts already discussed, Paul was definitely talking about equality in this life, not the next!

- Eph. 5:21-6:9. The husband no longer rules his wife but loves her as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her; the father brings his children up not for his own benefit but in the training and instruction of the Lord; and the master's power over his slave is relativized by the reminder that he and his slave have the same master in heaven, who will not favor the master.
- The strength of this approach can be seen when we apply it to understand Paul's designation of the husband as the "head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" in Eph. 5:23. The thousands of pages of debate over the meaning of "head" can be resolved by simply observing that Paul himself, in Ephesians, defines his own use of the term as he employs the metaphor. In 4:15, Christ as the head of the church provides for its maturity and growth; in 5:23, Christ's "headship" is associated with his function as savior (one who provides a benefit) – not as lord; in 1:9-10, God "unites" (Greek: "heads up") all things in Christ; and in 1:22-23, God subjects all things to Christ and places them under his feet, not under his head, reflecting that, rather than subjecting his body, the church, Christ raises it, his "fullness," to reign together with him (Miles 2006, 96-97 and Miles 2008, study 12).

When we help men in our Empower seminars to understand this (along with what Jesus said to men about authority, power and service) they – who previously might have told their wives, "You speak once, I speak twice" – now begin to share decision-making with them.

- Consider also what some call Paul's "pursuit of radical self-humiliation," expressed throughout his letters (Bartchy 2003, 144). For example, while the false apostles lord it over the Corinthians, Paul calls attention to his suffering and weakness (for example, 1 Cor. 4:8-13; 2 Cor. 11:22-12:10). His authority from the Lord is to "build up" the Corinthians and not "tear them down" (2 Cor. 10:8 & 13:10), in contrast to the false apostles who, by their dominance, were benefiting themselves at the expense of the Corinthians.

Corrective Texts

We now are left with only the two passages that Bartchy calls "Corrective." As we have noted before, these texts are those in which Paul is clearly addressing a problem situation in order to correct it.

Unfortunately, both of these texts have been used extensively as "proof-texts" – texts taken out of context to prop up otherwise unsupportable arguments – in clear violation of the "whole counsel of God" admonition.

As we approach these texts, remember that we have only one-half of a two-way conversation. Paul is addressing issues raised by those to whom the letters are addressed, whose letters to

Paul were lost. We need to look at the context carefully and ask what is going on in the other half of the conversation which we are otherwise unable to hear.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (ESV)

. . . The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

The first thing to notice about the context of this passage, according to Bartchy, is that the women are the *third* group Paul asks to be silent, in a context in which Paul is addressing disruptions in the church service (Bartchy 1978, 68). Both tongue-speakers and prophets have already been asked to be silent under certain conditions (vss. 26-28 and 29-33, respectively).

This text, and its classification as “Corrective,” is further elaborated by quickly examining the multiple ways in which it can be understood. Each of these options identifies significant problems with simply taking this text at its face value as a universal restriction on women.

- A. Philip Payne, in *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, reports both internal and external evidence that these verses are an insertion by later manuscript copyists. In this case, they are not the words of the Apostle Paul at all (Payne 2009, 225-267).
- B. Kenneth Bailey, in *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, explains that this refers to chatting by the women. They start chatting among themselves in an effort to understand what is going on. He explains that, in a city as diverse as Corinth, “Multiple factors must be considered. Attention-span problems, limited knowledge of Greek, accent issues, . . . lack of amplification for the speakers, along with chatting as a methodology for learning are all involved” (Bailey 2011, 414, 416).
- C. James S. Jeffers sees evidence in the culture that this is referring to “. . . the inappropriate interruption of speakers. . . . In some contexts, including the Jewish religious context, it was considered inappropriate for women to interrupt a speaker with questions” (Jeffers, 1999, 252).
- D. The view of my own pastor, Ralph Kieneker of West Side Church in Richland, Washington State, is that the wives, by arguing with their husbands in the process of evaluating the prophecies that have been shared (discussed in the immediately preceding verses), are shaming their husbands in a culture very sensitive to honor and shame, so Paul simply asks them to wait and discuss it with their husbands when they get home.
- E. Carrie A. Miles, Director of Empower International Ministries, sees evidence that Paul is quoting the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul often responds to questions asked by the Corinthian church. For example, in 1:11 he refers to information he has received from some

in Chloe's household. In 7:1 he refers to a letter they wrote to him, "Now for the matters you wrote about:" Sometimes he tells us when he is referring to their letter, as in 8:1, "Now about food sacrificed to idols. . . ." Sometimes we have to discern his reference to information he has about them by the context, such as in 6:12, "All things are lawful for me," which is a slogan among the Corinthians, to which Paul replies, ". . . but not everything is helpful" (ESV).

Miles argues that the Corinthians have written to Paul about problems they were having with disorderly gatherings, especially regarding speaking in tongues (the immediate context that the passage about women seems to interrupt). The Corinthians proposed solving the problem by suggesting they tell the women to be quiet. Paul quotes their statement back to them, then protests it, "What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?" (vs. 36, RSV) (Miles 2016, 73-77). This is comparable to what we often do in American English today: A statement can be dismissed as not even worth considering with the words, "Are you serious?"

So – study the options and take your pick! But the key thing is that this text cannot in any way be viewed as instructive. (There are too many significant indications that this is dealing with a local and culturally-specific problem.) It cannot be used to negate the positive statement about women praying and prophesying in the assembly that occurs just a few chapters earlier. It does not represent Paul's instructions to all women in all churches. As Bartchy puts it, "Is it plausible that Paul would have exhorted such potent and fruitful leaders as Phoebe, Prisca and Junia to keep quiet in the Christian assemblies? I don't think so" (Bartchy 1992, 12).

Next, we turn to the second New Testament text identified as belonging in the "Corrective" category.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 (ESV)

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

This is the text that is usually appealed to as a restriction on women holding positions of leadership and authority within the church, often, in my experience, the only one. Yet we are classifying it as "Corrective" for two reasons: (1) it is contrary to so much of the rest of the teaching of the New Testament as seen in the Descriptive and Instructive texts – as well as in the actions and teaching of Jesus; and (2) the immediate context of this passage is a long one in which Paul addressed the specific and unusual situation of the Ephesian church, thus making it difficult to apply his teaching in this passage as a universal directive to all churches everywhere.

Here are some of the indications that Paul¹⁵, in writing this passage, was attempting to correct problems in the church Timothy was serving, rather than giving universal directions.

First, the usual word for “authority” in the Greek New Testament is *exousia*. In this one instance, however, Paul uses *authentēin* – a word that is used nowhere else in Scripture – which accounts for much of the confusion over just what Paul is denying women in 1 Tim 2. There is ample evidence, however, that its meaning carries the sense of “domineer,” or even, “hold oneself to be the author or origin of something else” (Kroeger and Kroeger), which is consistent with elements of the context noted above. This is seen in the lexicons of both Thayer (Thayer, 84) and Bauer (Bauer 1979, 121), as well as Louw and Nida’s lexicon.¹⁶ *Authentein* cannot be translated as “authority” in the usual sense.

Second, the broader context of 1 Timothy tells us about some of the problems that the church in Ephesus was experiencing. Right at the beginning of the letter, in 1 Tim. 1:3-4, Paul reminds Timothy of why he left him in Ephesus: “so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines . . . or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.” Throughout the letter he continues to provide specifics on teachings and practices to correct. These false teachings included, at a minimum:

- A. The continuing influence of the worship of the goddess Artemis, which we learn in Acts 19:23-40 was very important in Ephesus. Ephesus held her temple and was a major location for the worship of this goddess. As in Africa, it may have been difficult to keep even believers from making offerings to the local gods during pregnancy and childbirth (Miles 2016, 71). This would help to explain Paul’s brief (and otherwise inexplicable from a Christian context) comment in v. 15 (“But women will be saved through childbearing . . .”).
- B. There is also some indication that the church in Ephesus was being influenced by an early form of an ancient Christian heresy called Gnosticism. For example, in 1 Tim. 4:3 Paul states that “. . . some will forbid people to marry.” Why would anyone forbid marriage? Because in gnostic thinking sexual activity (even in marriage) becomes a hindrance to spiritual perfection, which may be an important key to understanding verse 15, regarding a woman being saved through (i.e., passing safely through) childbirth with their salvation intact (Kroeger and Kroeger 1992, 161-177; Bartchy 1978, 74).

Paul’s statement, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” may have related to either Artemis worship or Gnosticism – or both. This false teaching was probably an argument that woman should dominate man because she was created first or was involved in the creation of man. The goddess Artemis, for example, was not only born before her twin brother, Apollos, she helped her mother deliver him. We also learn from Richard and Catherine Kroeger that the form of proto-Gnosticism in Ephesus may have included the belief that not only was Eve created before Adam, she created him and brought him enlightenment. Paul refuted both arguments by pointing out that in Hebrew scripture, Adam was created before Eve and Eve, rather than bringing enlightenment, was deceived (Kroeger and Kroeger 1992, 103-104, 113). Neither statement was intended to reinforce gender hierarchy.¹⁷

In the verses immediately preceding 2:12, we learn that men have been expressing anger and disputing with one another (2:8), and that women have been trying to outdo one another in elaborate hairstyles, jewels and expensive clothes (2:9). Both of these are expressions of efforts to create or maintain a status hierarchy, which would be consistent with the understanding of “authentein” as meaning to domineer. Both men and women are attempting to dominate members of their own sex. Paul may have been trying to keep women from using false teachings as a tool to dominate the men as well. (Miles 2016, 70-71).

By telling women they should not dominate men, however, Paul is not thereby telling men they should dominate women! A problem with taking 1 Tim 2:11-15 as Instructive reinforces the cultural belief that while women can't hold authority, men are *supposed* to dominate, especially women. This misinterpretation completely negates Jesus's many teachings to the contrary, including his sacrifice of his own life as an example of a different way of leadership (see Mark 10:35-45).

These all point to the text addressing and correcting a problem specific to the situation where Timothy was serving as the Apostle Paul's troubleshooter.

The Value of the “Whole Counsel of God” Approach

One would think that the value of the “Whole Counsel of God” approach would be obvious, but, given that so many focus primarily – if not exclusively – on what we have identified as the two “Corrective Texts,” we need to make this explicitly clear.

In our “whole-council-of-God”-honoring framework we find unambiguous, uncontested meaning in the Descriptive and Instructive texts. The Descriptive texts typically are found in contexts where there is no problem that is being addressed, so it is natural and appropriate to take them at face value.

Furthermore, when we look at the texts in the Descriptive and Instructive categories, we find substantial agreement in passages from the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the letters of the Apostle Paul.

On the other hand, we have already identified significant issues with the interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:12 and 1 Cor. 14:34-35 that make them very difficult to interpret with confidence. Obscure texts thus form the center of the traditionalists' framework of understanding, raising serious concerns regarding their claim to biblical authority in the confident application of these verses.

The framework we have described, however, allows all Scripture texts to be heard, each in a way that is consistent with its context, and each category in a way that supports and explains the others.

- The Descriptive texts are key: They show the Instructive texts were taken seriously and literally, and reflected in the life of the early church.
- The Instructive texts help us to understand the values held by both Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul that influenced the behavior of women – and men – in the early church.
- The Corrective texts actually reinforce the Descriptive ones, in that the Descriptive texts tell us why problems arose in specific situations where local cultural issues caused an inappropriate distortion of women’s activities – resulting in the Corrective texts.

The distinction between these categories is very important. When the Corrective texts are viewed as Instructive, only a few passages are allowed to speak. Other important passages of Scripture – including most of Jesus’s teachings on the proper treatment of both women and men – are silenced. When taken as Instructive, these two texts minimize or even negate the plain meaning of and the positive attitude toward women and their ministry expressed by the other texts listed under Instructive and Descriptive.

With 1 Tim. 2:11-15 and 1 Cor. 14:34-35 at the core, however, there is no meaningful framework that allows the entire body of Scripture to be heard in a historical and cultural context. Indeed, the problem is not that women are required to be silent but that so many other biblical passages that we need to hear are silenced.

Indeed, the problem goes much deeper. Cynthia Long Westfall speaks eloquently of a core problem of the traditional interpretation of texts dealing with women in the church and home:

. . . Traditional readings of the texts have been used and are being used overtly in a social construction of a theology of power and control that privileges one group over another (males over females), and those readings are controlled by the privileged group (males). Many representatives of the traditional readings are transparently invested in maintaining the power and control of men over the church, academy, and home. . . . Using power language and justifying it in the history of interpretation typically has gone beyond the Pauline texts while claiming that the traditional interpretation is what the text says, and anyone who rejects that interpretation is accused of rejecting Paul’s teaching. However, the traditional interpretation of Paul’s gender passages flies directly in the face of Paul’s and Jesus’s teachings on power and authority within the Christian community [Westfall 2016 p. 4].

The concept of a “social construction” of something was a vague concept to me until a university faculty member in Africa brought it down to earth – speaking of the traditional/patriarchal interpretation – with this forceful exclamation: “*Society* has built this; God did *not* build this!”¹⁸

God did not “build” the traditional interpretation that has burdened the church and distorted its ministry all these years!

Perhaps a practical illustration will help bring this issue home to our hearts. A woman today could have the best of a Christian upbringing, a Christian college and even seminary education, demonstrate godly character and serve as a powerful example of the women Jesus encouraged in ministry and the women Paul named as his coworkers, but she can never fully escape the restrictions on women that result from the misinterpretation of Paul's words in 1 Tim. 2:11-15 – nor, we might add, the suspicion toward women that often results from some of the misunderstandings of this passage. Further, in some settings she will be berated for doing as the descriptive and instructive verses encourage.

On the other hand, giving priority to the Descriptive and Instructive texts encourages and empowers such a woman to take her rightful place alongside the Marys, Phoebes, Priscillas and Junias of the New Testament in providing effective and strategic leadership to the church of today – a leadership that is so desperately needed!

Westfall points out that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 has “provided a lens or exegetical grid through which all other Scripture is applied to women” (Westfall p. 279). Egalitarians often counter by using Galatians 3:28 (“there is no male and female”) in the same way.

However, it is not a choice between reading Gal. 3:28 through the lens of 1 Tim. 2:12, or of reading 1 Tim. 2:12 through the lens of Gal. 3:28, as the contrast between Patriarchalism and Egalitarianism is often portrayed.¹⁹ It is the issue of setting up a process that allows us to hear all Scripture on the topic, and then developing a framework for all those Scripture passages to be heard with equal voice in their historical and cultural context. In this case, we might select Gal.3:28 as best summarizing our result, but it is not our lens.

Our “lens”, the “full counsel of God” – considering all relevant Scripture – yields a compassionate understanding of the full purpose of women and men in God's sight – one of balance, mutual respect, and mutual service.

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Endnotes

¹ Earlier editions of this paper were presented at conferences sponsored by Ekklesia Foundation for Gender Education (an African organization located in Bondo, Kenya) in Bondo, Kenya (2014) and Kampala, Uganda (2018).

² Due to space limitations this paper will be limited to the New Testament. Many good works are available for studying the relevant Old Testament passages; Miles 2006 and Miles 2008 are good starting points to examine the creation and fall narratives, which are critical.

³ The concept of a “fullness that leaves nothing out” (in contrast to a “balance”) was first suggested by Christian ethicist John Howard Yoder during a lecture in the late 1970’s.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S._Scott_Bartchy. Accessed 30 April 2018. (Prior to UCLA Dr. Bartchy taught at Emmanuel School of Religion [now Emmanuel Christian Seminary] in Johnson City, TN, USA, where I had the opportunity to study under him.)

⁵ In preparation for the first edition of this paper (2014) I repeated the process, scanning through the New Testament and recording any text that mentioned women or broader gender-related issues on note cards. I finished this process with about one dozen from the book of Acts and about two dozen each from the gospels and the letters of Paul. My findings confirm Bartchy’s approach and conclusions.

⁶ These findings were originally published in Bartchy 1978, where the three categories were identified as Descriptive, Normative and Problematic. He explains in Bartchy 1996 how feedback from readers convinced him of the need for less confusing titles for the latter two categories, resulting in those presented here.

⁷ Carolyn A. Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

⁸ From the Empower International Ministries website: <http://www.empowerinternational.org/jesus-and-men/>; accessed 19 August 2014.

⁹ See 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10.

¹⁰ For further study of this concept of power, see Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL USA, 2013), MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL USA, 2008), and Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women’s Stories of Survival and Resistance*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY USA and London, England 2001), particularly chapter 5, “Resistance Transforming Power.”

¹¹ The qualification for elder/overseer in 1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6 as literally, “a man of one woman” should be seen in this cultural context as intended to exclude men with multiple sexual partners, not to exclude women.

¹² Jesus does not address the issue of women’s lust for men; as we often point out in our Empower seminars, “Women are almost never in a position where they can use men as sexual objects against their will” (Miles 2016, 46 [Debriefing Study 9, “Women are not Sex Objects”]).

¹³ This, along with the expansion of women’s value beyond what they do for their husbands, has important implications for cultures where “honor killings” of women and girls is practiced.

¹⁴ The issue of whether a woman could be an apostle should be conclusively resolved by the interaction of the risen Christ with Mary Magdalene – and her with the male apostles, as recorded in John 20 (see the earlier section on “The Impact of Jesus on Women”).

¹⁵ We acknowledge the issues regarding the authorship of 1 Timothy. For purposes of this paper, however, we are assuming Pauline authorship; the letter is considered authoritative as part of the New Testament canon.

¹⁶ Referenced by Belleville, Linda, “Teaching & Usurping Authority: 1 Tim.2:11-15,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Ronald Pierce & Rebecca Groothuis, eds., InterVarsity Press, 2005, pp. 205-223.

¹⁷ An important consideration is what understanding of 1 Timothy 2:12 Genesis itself supports. Eve was created because of Adam’s need for a “helper fit for him” (ESV), where “helper” is also used for God himself elsewhere in the Old Testament – never for a subordinate. Consider e.g., Cain, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Ephraim; none of them were born first. For that matter, not even Moses – through whom God gave the law – was born first! The clear meaning of Genesis should guide our interpretation of 1 Timothy – not the other way around.

¹⁸ This was several years ago during a flight from Nairobi to Kisumu, Kenya, and I have been unable to locate her name in my notes.

¹⁹ For example, Sarah Sumner takes this approach in Sumner 2003, 128, where she calls this a “guiding hermeneutic.”