

# 14

## All About Eve

### ***Feminism and the Meaning of Equality***

“Though we adore men individually,

We agree that as a group they’re rather stupid.

So cast off the shackles of yesterday;

Shoulder to shoulder into the fray. . . .

From Kensington to Billingsgate one hears the restless cry

From every corner of the land: ‘Womankind, arise!’

Political equality and equal rights with men. . . .

No more the meek and mild subservients, we;

We’re fighting for our rights, militantly. . . .”

— Winifred Banks (Glynis Johns), “Sister Suffragettes,” in *Mary Poppins* (1964)

If pressed to identify the most influential cultural development in Western civilization of the twentieth century, we believe a good case could be made for choosing feminism. The woman's suffrage movement of the early part of the century changed the political system by giving women, both married and unmarried, the vote. The suffragettes and feminists of the early twentieth century were culturally conservative by today's standards. They were at the forefront of the temperance movement that outlawed the sale of alcoholic beverages for a time. Prohibition and its repeal contributed to major changes in the structure of crime in America and led to widespread skepticism about the possibility of "legislating morality." The early feminists were generally opposed to abortion, though they led the effort to develop and legitimize contraception.

Forced into the workforce in record numbers during World War II, the rise of women in the workplace has continued to alter the economy of the Western world. Associated issues and controversies have included such difficult matters as sexual harassment, the rise of the day care and "latch-key kids," welfare for single mothers, and gender-based affirmative action.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was in part inspired by the suffrage and early feminist movements. In turn the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s pushed for political representation of women in government, fueled the sexual revolution, brought about the legalization of abortion, and sparked debates in every denomination about women's ordination and the relationship of husband and wife in the home. Inspired by both the civil rights and women's liberation movements, the homosexual

rights movement began building momentum in the 1970s and by the 1990s was dramatically altering the cultural landscape.

In the 1980s and 1990s women have turned in increasing numbers to goddess worship, Wicca, and other “New Age” types of religious and spiritual expression. Meanwhile, in mainline Protestant churches feminism has successfully pushed for the publication of new Bible translations and liturgies that remove references to God as “Father” or Jesus as “Son.”

Regardless of what one thinks of these developments, there can be little doubt that feminism has dramatically changed the way we all think about men and women. Nor is it only men who have had to change how they think about women. Over the decades, women have learned to think of themselves in new ways. Some of this changed thinking is surely for the better. For example, Prestonia Mann Martin, a leading opponent of the woman’s suffrage movement, in a book co-authored with her husband in 1916 expressed her belief that women were not merely the weaker sex, but that they were relatively “disabled” as a sex in comparison with men. Even disabled men, she argued, have a chance to recover, “but womanhood is an infirmity from which women rarely, if ever, recover.” Martin went on to warn women against getting involved in the legislative process, on the grounds that women “lack the aptitude either to make laws or to obey them.” Women should give up the attempt to change man’s world “because it is *his* world.”<sup>1</sup>

Prestonia Mann Martin’s viewpoint was neither coerced nor mindless. Ironically, she was a thoughtful, informed, outspoken person who was concerned about the world at large. Her point of view had tradition and the political status quo on its side. Yet a mere

eighty years later her perspective has all but disappeared, and most of us, both men and women, can hardly believe that any woman would so belittle her own half of the human race. Almost all of us now realize that it was wrong to deny women the right to participate directly in the democratic process by voting.<sup>2</sup>

Even those who would be critical of feminism, then, must take into account the fact that all of us should agree that feminism has made legitimate and valuable contributions to our society's view of women. It is also important to keep in mind that feminism is not monolithic. There are evangelical feminists, Catholic feminists, liberal feminists, ecofeminists (a New Age type), atheistic feminists, and lesbian feminists, just to name a few of the varieties. While women are far more likely than men to call themselves feminists, a growing number of men affirm the validity of feminism, and both male and female scholars, philosophers, and even theologians can be found in growing abundance who work from a feminist perspective.

Defining feminism, then, is a somewhat perilous venture. A useful definition offered by feminist theologians Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty is that feminism is “a belief in and commitment to the full equality of men and women in home, church, and society.”<sup>3</sup> Basic to feminism is the claim that women must not only be regarded as “equal” in dignity and worth, but also must be “equal” in opportunity to participate in every institution of human society at every level.

While it is arguably not the most important issue in feminism, probably the simplest indicator of a feminist position in relation to Christianity is the question of women's ordination. Those who favor ordaining women as priests or pastors nearly always endorse a

full-orbed feminist position, while those who do not support women's ordination dissent from feminist thinking at least in part.

## **The Feminist Challenge to Biblical Values**

While feminism is well represented within Christianity, historically feminists have raised troubling questions not only about the view of women promoted by Christian men throughout the centuries, but also about the teaching of the Bible about women. It would not be overstating the matter to assert that one of the most common objections to an evangelical view of the Bible as God's unerring word, both from outside the church and from many inside the church, is that it relegates women to second-class status. This should not be surprising, since the issue affects slightly more than half of all people! A representative expression of this objection comes from Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong:

There is no doubt about the fact that the Bible is biased against women. . . . Both the religious and ethical directives of the Bible were formulated out of a patriarchal understanding of life, with the interests of men being primary. Are we willing to return to these destructive definitions of both men and women?<sup>4</sup>

So, if we are to commend the biblical Christian faith to the world as we enter the third millennium of the church's history, we must be prepared to answer the feminists' questions about the Bible's view of women. Here we must work hard to face honestly what the Bible says, whether our own perspective tends toward feminism or a more traditionalist view. Critics of the biblical teaching will see through any attempt to paper over what the

Bible says about women and rightly conclude that we are actually embarrassed by those aspects of the biblical view that don't fit our modern "enlightened" perspective. Nor, on the other hand, is it honest to refuse to rethink some of our traditional understandings of the Bible's teaching on women.

While we do not claim that our own assessment of the question is the last word, we do believe that there are some things about which we can be certain. We hope to show that the biblical teaching on women is not only defensible, but that it is based on absolute truth. Far from viewing it as a stumbling block or an embarrassment to the Christian faith, we believe that, properly understood, the biblical view of women is one of Christianity's greatest assets.

Before turning to the Bible to see just what it does teach about women, we should point out that there are several views on the matter. For our purposes the most important of these views are the following.

1. *Inferiority*. On this view the Bible teaches that women are inferior to men and assigned a subservient role in life. While there may be some encouragement here and there in the Bible to take a nobler view of women, overall the Bible's view of women is demeaning and cannot be accepted. This is the view espoused by such liberals as Bishop Spong, for whom the Bible is not divinely inspired or authoritative and who are therefore prepared to jettison the Bible's teaching on women.

2. *Developing egalitarianism*. The word "egalitarian" refers to views that emphasize full equality between people (here, men and women). We are using the term "developing egalitarianism" to refer to what Scanzoni and Hardesty, among others, call

biblical feminism. On this view the Bible is the product of a patriarchal world and to some extent incorporates that world's view of women as inferior, yet the Bible also points toward a higher view of women as equal to men which is developed more fully in the New Testament. The conclusion is that Christians today should adopt an egalitarian view that eliminates all vocational and authoritarian distinctions between men and women.

3. *Consistent egalitarianism.* Some believe that the Bible consistently teaches an egalitarian view of women. Specific passages thought to be inconsistent with that view are said to have been misinterpreted. This position is gaining ground in evangelical circles, and has been defended in respectable fashion by some evangelical biblical scholars. While we disagree with some of the claims made by egalitarians, their approach to Scripture is honorable, and they make some valuable correctives to traditional stereotypes of the biblical view of women.

4. *Complementarianism.* This view understands the Bible to teach that women are equal to men in human dignity and worth, though intended by God to submit to male authority in the home and in the church. On this view the roles of women are complementary and different, not inferior. We are in basic agreement with this view, though we do not always agree with some of the leading complementarians in the way they articulate and defend this position.

Some comparisons are in order here. The first three views all hold to an egalitarian view of women, although the first says such a view is not really taught in the Bible. All three of these views regard any subordination of women to men as inconsistent with the essential equality of women and men, and for this reason reject complementarianism as a

contradictory and incoherent position. The consistent egalitarian and the complementarian views both accept the Bible as the unerring word of God, although they differ in their interpretations of the Bible's teaching on this subject. The developing egalitarian view typically holds what is called the neo-evangelical view of Scripture, according to which the teaching of the Bible taken as a whole is true, but individual statements may not be completely right. As others have pointed out, one of the reasons for concern about the neo-evangelical egalitarian position is that it undermines the authority of Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

## **Is God Male?**

Perhaps the most basic question that can be asked about any religion is what it thinks about God. How one views God has the most profound ramifications for the whole of one's outlook on life. For example, those who view God as a harsh, arbitrary deity looking for opportunities to spoil their day will obviously live differently from those who view God as a spiritual power from which they can draw strength for whatever purpose suits them. These examples are extreme, but they illustrate the point. Likewise, many people think that the Bible presents God as a male deity, an idea that implies that women are inherently inferior to men. According to Spong, for example, the Bible insists "on the totally masculine nature of God and the corresponding assignment of divine (i.e., male) prerogatives to men, who alone, the myth argues, are created in the image of this God."<sup>6</sup> While Spong is criticizing this view of God as a myth, there are those who actually affirm the essential masculinity of God. The easiest example is Mormonism, according to which God is a literal, though immortal and exalted, man. The traditional Mormon view understands God to be living

somewhere in the heavens with a celestial wife, a kind of heavenly Mother. But the belief that God is “masculine” can also be found a little closer to home. John R. Rice, a fundamentalist writer popular in some independent Baptist circles, wrote in 1941 that “God is a masculine God. . . . God is not effeminate. God is not feminine, but masculine.”<sup>7</sup> Even though Rice did not mean that God is a literal man with male anatomy, his affirmation that God is masculine implies a kinship between God and men that women cannot share.

In actual fact the Bible does not teach that God is male, but rather views God as an incorporeal spirit who transcends all created distinctions and who is neither male nor female. As if to underscore this point, the Old Testament explicitly denies that God is either male or human: “God is not a man [Hebrew *ish*, a male adult], that He should lie, nor a son of man [*ish*], that He should repent” (Num. 23:19). Nor is God human at all: “For He is not a man [Hebrew *'adam*, human being], that he should relent” (1 Sam. 15:29). The Bible clearly reveals God to be an infinite Spirit whom the universe itself cannot contain (1 Kings 8:27; John 4:24; Acts 7:49; 17:24).

It is true, of course, that God is given masculine titles in the Bible such as King and Father, and is referred to using masculine pronouns (he, him, his). But some choice of language had to be made. Four possibilities were open to the biblical writers.

(1) *Refer to God using feminine titles and pronouns.* In ancient religious contexts, this choice would have unavoidably evoked strong sexual associations. Goddesses were not merely gods with feminine names, but were portrayed and thought of in a sexual and even erotic way. Worse still, portraying the one God as female would have suggested that the relationship between God and creation was like that between a mother and her child — and

this in turn would have encouraged the deification of nature. The Bible views God as the creator, maker, and designer of creation, and this relationship was better safeguarded by avoiding referring to God using feminine names.

(2) *Refer to God using neuter, impersonal language* (“Source” instead of “Father,” “it” instead of “he”). The problem with this solution is more obvious: It would tend to encourage the view that God is impersonal, a force or power latent in the world, rather than the personal, loving Being he is.

(3) *Refer to God using both masculine and feminine language*. In a limited respect this is actually what we find in the Bible, but we must be careful not to overstate the case (as is often done by egalitarians). For example, while the Bible avoids picturing God as the mother of nature, Isaiah in particular pictures God as the Mother of the people of Israel, carrying them in the womb, nursing and comforting Israel as a child (e.g., Is. 46:3; 49:15; 66:13). That the analogy is not to be pressed is made clear by the fact that Isaiah can also liken God to a husband and Israel to a wife (e.g., Is. 54:5; 62:4-5). Jesus compared God’s delight in saving sinners to a woman’s delight in finding a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). Such imagery can be found scattered throughout the Bible, and it shows that the Bible does not regard God as male.<sup>8</sup> Still, the Bible never uses feminine titles for God (such as Mother or Queen) and never uses feminine pronouns for God. Nor is the Holy Spirit the “feminine member” of the Trinity; at least, no biblical language supports such an idea.

(4) *Refer to God using primarily masculine language*. This is what the Bible actually does. Again, the main reason for this choice seems to have been to avoid the serious theological errors of viewing God as a sexual being or as an impersonal force.

Beyond this point it should also be realized that the biblical language is more overtly masculine in English translation than in the original Hebrew and Greek. Masculine pronouns in Hebrew and Greek were used not because the objects to which they referred were necessarily male or female, but because grammar required that the pronoun agree in gender with the antecedent noun. For example, in Matthew 2:13 the angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because “Herod will seek the young child [*paidion*, neuter] to destroy it [*auto*, neuter]” (literal translation). Here a neuter pronoun is used to agree grammatically with the neuter noun for “child.” In languages that assign a gender to all nouns, the masculine gender of a pronoun referring to God does not strike readers as connoting the idea that God is male.

The question of what sort of language the Bible uses for God and why leads, of course, to the question of what language we should use. One might imagine that we no longer need to worry about pagan Goddess concepts, but in fact such notions are widespread now in our culture. Referring to God as “Mother,” and especially referring to God as *she*, is without precedent in Scripture and intentionally evokes feminine associations. The same is not true when referring to God as *he*, since most Christians are accustomed to using such language and understanding it generically. For these reasons we would generally discourage using feminine titles or pronouns to refer to God, although what is most important is that we understand and communicate clearly what God is really like.

## Women and Creation

We quoted Spong earlier as asserting that the Bible affirms men only, to the exclusion of women, as made in God's image. This assertion is based on a misreading of Genesis, where God announces, "Let Us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Taken out of context, this statement in English might seem to exclude women from God's image. However, in the very next verse we are told, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; *male and female* he created *them*" (v. 27). In both of these verses the word translated "man" is '*adam*', a Hebrew word which can mean "Adam" (the first man), "human being," or "humanity." In verse 26 '*adam*' is clearly used to mean "humanity," not Adam alone, since after announcing his intention to create God says, "let *them* have dominion." Verse 27 then makes it explicit that the '*adam*' who was created in God's image includes both male and female (see also Gen. 5:1).

If both men and women are created in God's image, that leads to two important truths. First, it confirms what we have already seen, that God is not male. Nor is God *both* male and female: he is transcendent Spirit, neither masculine nor feminine. To suggest that God is both male and female would lead to the conclusion that the image of God is incomplete in a single human being, whether a man or a woman. That is, it would imply that an individual man, or an individual woman, is not in the image of God. Such an idea has in fact been suggested by some feminists, but it misunderstands Genesis.<sup>9</sup> Surely the example of Jesus, a single man, is enough to show that the image of God can be fully realized in a single human being — whether male or female.

Second, men and women are essentially equal. Both were created in God's image, both were authorized to have dominion over the creatures of the earth, and both were spoken to by God and given his blessing (Gen. 1:26-28). Even if their roles are differentiated, their roles must be seen as of equal worth, dignity, and honor. Both men and women are created primarily and ultimately for relationship with God, and both are entrusted by God with awesome responsibility as stewards of the creation.

## **The Creation of the Woman**

Chapter 2 of Genesis elaborates on the creation of the man and the woman, revealing that the man was created first, followed by the woman, who was created from his rib. The account of the creation of woman is prefaced by God's statement, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen. 2:18). There is considerable debate over the significance of the word "helper" (*'ezer*). The traditional view is that woman was created to help man procreate children, since man could not do that alone. Augustine, for example, said that he could see no way that "it could be said that woman was made a help for man if the work of childbearing is excluded."<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas argued that the woman was created "not indeed to help him in any other work, as some have maintained, because where most work is concerned man can get help more conveniently from another man than from a woman; but to help him in the work of procreation."<sup>11</sup> Such explanations, as Susan Foh (a critic of the egalitarian position) put it, "brings out the feminist in all of us women,"<sup>12</sup> and not a few of us men as well.

The egalitarian interpretation is based on the observation that the word *'ezer* is almost always used in the Old Testament with reference to God (Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps. 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9-11; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5; Hos. 13:9). In a couple of other texts the word refers to other human beings as “helpers” who really cannot help (Is. 30:5; Ezek. 12:4).<sup>13</sup> Egalitarians conclude that the word “helper” cannot mean an inferior or even a subordinate helper; admitting (usually) that woman is not being described as a superior helper, they conclude that Genesis 2:18 means that women are equal partners with men.<sup>14</sup>

This argument, while helpful, is typically overstated. It is going too far to say that the word “helper” could not be used to refer to a subordinate or supporting role. The related verb *'azar* (“to help”) is used several times of a supplementary or subordinate help (2 Sam. 21:17; 1 Kings 1:7; 1 Chron. 12:1, 17, 18, 22; 12:21; 22:17; 2 Chron. 26:13; 32:3).<sup>15</sup> It is context, not the word itself, which must determine whether the helper takes an equal, subordinate, or superior role.

Now, in the context there are three clues that may help (!) us understand what is meant by the term “helper.” The first is that immediately preceding this statement we are told that the man was placed by God “in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it” (v. 15). The implication is that the woman was created at least in part to help the man fulfill the charge to serve as stewards or custodians of the earth and its creatures. While it is true that one vital way in which she would help with that task was to bear children who would populate the earth (1:28), there is nothing in the passage to suggest that her role was limited to bearing and raising children. The egalitarians are therefore surely right to reject the claim that

Genesis 2:18 is speaking only of the woman's reproductive function. On the other hand, the bearing and raising of children is an essential and most honorable part of what women do in fulfilling their "creation mandate."

The second clue comes from Genesis 2:18 itself, specifically from God's statement that "it is not good that man should be alone." Does this mean simply that the man needed help with the work given to him, or that there were certain personal needs that could only be met by the woman? The rest of the passage gives some encouragement to the latter reading. After the woman was created, the man's response was to rejoice over the woman because she was "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23), and the passage concludes by noting that the two became "one flesh" and "were both naked . . . and were not ashamed" (vv. 24, 25). The implication is that what was wrong with the man's being "alone" was not merely that he needed help with the work, but that he also needed a companion who complemented him.

The third clue to the meaning of woman's role as "helper" is the fact that the same word is used in verse 20, which says that out of all of the animals brought to the man "there was not found a helper comparable to him." This statement corroborates the view that what the man lacked was a companion, since it is doubtful that the animals were brought to him as candidates for helpers in tending to the Garden! The emphasis here again is on the woman's essential equality and compatibility with the man — her being "fit" for him (vv. 18, 20).

So far the account in Genesis 2 seems to view woman as equal to the man without any subordination or differentiation of roles. There are aspects of the passage, though, that do suggest that woman's relationship to the man is in some respect a subordinate or

supportive one. Some of these were pointed out by the apostle Paul in his epistles: the woman was created *from* and *for* the man, not vice versa. “For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man” (1 Cor. 11:8-9). Elsewhere Paul gives as a reason why a woman should not exercise authority over a man that “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:13).

Paul’s reasoning in these verses has come under fire as invalid and demeaning to women. For example, Paul is understood in 1 Timothy 2:13 to be arguing that Adam had authority over Eve *merely* because he happened to have been created earlier than Eve. Such an argument, as egalitarians rush to point out, would backfire in light of the fact that the animals were created before Adam or Eve (Gen. 1:20-25).<sup>16</sup> Rather, Paul is appealing to the order in which these two creatures *of the same essential nature* were created as evidence of the first creature’s priority in rank. Such an argument is not invalidated by the fact that creatures *of a lower order* were created before Adam.

Similarly, Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 has been construed to be basing Adam’s authority over Eve *merely* on the fact that Eve was made from the substance of Adam. Again, as egalitarians point out, such an argument would appear to be invalid, since Adam was created from the dust of the ground yet was not subordinated to the earth (Gen. 2:7).<sup>17</sup> This objection confuses Paul’s argument, since Eve was created from Adam and shared his nature (Gen. 2:23), whereas the dust from which Adam was formed was not of the same nature as Adam! Rather, Paul is reasoning from the fact that Eve, a creature of the same nature as Adam, was taken from Adam specifically *for the purpose of being his complement* to the conclusion that Adam had a natural, created priority in relation to Eve.

## The Fall of the Woman

Paul also relates his teaching on women in the church to the Fall of Adam and Eve: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression” (1 Tim. 2:14). Paul’s statement here raises two questions. Does he mean to imply some sort of inherent inferiority of women as compared to men? And in what way, if any, did the Fall change the relationship between men and women?

First of all, if anything Paul held Adam, not Eve, primarily responsible for the entrance of sin into the world. It was “through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin” (Rom. 5:14). Although it is true that the Greek word translated here as “man” (*anthropos*) can be used generically to mean “human being” or even “humanity” (like the Hebrew *‘adam*). However, in Romans 5 the “one man” is not a reference to male and female together,<sup>18</sup> but to Adam alone. This is absolutely clear, since Paul goes on to identify the one man who sinned as “Adam” (v. 14) and to contrast his sin with the gift of righteousness which came by “the one Man, Jesus Christ” (v. 15; cf. vv. 17-19). Paul draws the same contrast between the man Adam and the man Jesus Christ in another epistle (1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45).

Paul’s view of Adam as originating sin in the human race stands in stark contrast to the Jewish apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, which stated, “Woman is the origin of sin, and it is through her that we all die” (Ecclus. 25:24 NEB).<sup>19</sup> Regrettably, many Christians have also blamed the troubles of the world on Eve (perhaps influenced by Ecclesiasticus). For example, around AD 200 the Latin theologian Tertullian told women that they were to blame for sin and death:

*You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die.<sup>20</sup>

Such an interpretation of the Fall is a grotesque misreading of the Genesis account, as Paul's teaching confirms.

Now, if Paul held Adam primarily responsible for sin, that implies that he thought that Adam's responsibility for the actions of himself and his wife Eve was in some way greater than Eve's. This does not mean that Eve was not responsible for her own actions, but that Adam bore a greater responsibility for both of them. This greater responsibility would be consistent with his having a leadership role in the relationship.

But is Paul saying that because Eve was deceived and Adam was not, women in general are more easily deceived? Although this is often how Paul has been understood, there are some good reasons to think otherwise. In another passage where Paul comments on Eve's having been deceived, he expresses concern that the entire church might be similarly deceived: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Since Paul is addressing the Corinthians as a whole, he is clearly issuing this warning to men as well as women; there is no hint that the Corinthian women were especially susceptible to the danger.

Another difficulty with the view that Paul regarded women as more susceptible to deception is that if this was Paul's view, it is odd that he allowed women to teach other

women (Titus 2:3-4).<sup>21</sup> Surely if women were more prone to deception, having women teaching other women would be a prescription for deception! Paul's concern, then, must be something else.

In 1 Timothy 2:14 it is more likely that Paul is pointing out that Eve was the one who had spoken directly with the serpent and listened to his deception, whereas Adam had been encouraged to eat by Eve and not directly by the serpent (Gen. 3:1-6). His point in bringing this up is not to characterize all women as more easily deceived, but to warn that deception is likely when the man's responsibility is abdicated or circumvented. That is, Eve was deceived, not because she was a woman and therefore more gullible, less intelligent, or less spiritually discerning, but because she chose to make such a radical decision without bringing the matter to her husband.

If this interpretation is correct, Paul forbids women to exercise authority over a man, not because women are less capable in any sense, but because such violation of the created order between men and women is precisely how spiritual deception got a foothold in the human race in the first place. "Men and women are both more vulnerable to error and sin when they forsake the order that God has intended."<sup>22</sup>

So far it appears that the leadership role of the man, particularly in the marriage relationship, is based on creation, not on the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. However, some interpreters have thought that male authority in marriage was specified as a result of the Fall. Eugene Merrill, for example, denies that there was any subordination of woman to man before the Fall, using several of the arguments examined earlier in this chapter, but then explains that such subordination was the result of the Fall:

That woman was taken from man no more implies the inferiority of woman to man than the taking of man from the ground ('*adam* from '*adamah*) implies the inferiority of man to the ground. Nor does the term “helper” connote subordination. . . . the Hebrew word for “helper,” '*ezer*, is frequently used of the Lord Himself as man’s Helper. . . . Sin, however, radically altered the man-woman relationship just as it did that between God and His creation.<sup>23</sup>

According to Merrill, this change was that woman was subjected to man by God himself, when he told the woman after she and Adam had sinned, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). “That this is not merely predictive of what the future would hold but prescriptive of the man-woman functional relationship from that time forward is clear from apostolic teaching on the matter.”<sup>24</sup> But while the apostles do teach that women ought to be submissive to their husbands, they do not teach that this requirement is the result of the Fall.

The one text which Merrill cites from the apostles that might be construed to support his conclusion is Paul’s directive that women “are to be submissive, as the law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34). It is often assumed that the passage in “the law” (i.e., the Old Testament) to which Paul is referring must be Genesis 3:16. Admittedly no other Old Testament text comes as close as Genesis 3:16 to saying that women are to be submissive (though the idea is not put that way even there). But earlier *in the same epistle*, Paul indicates that he finds the idea of the husband’s authority over his wife to be taught in the account of woman’s creation in *Genesis 2* (1 Cor. 11:7-9; see also 1 Tim. 2:13). Since he has already made that argument in chapter 11, when he makes basically the same point in

chapter 14 and adds “as the law says,” we should probably understand Paul to be referring to the same passage in the Old Testament Law as previously.

If Genesis 3:16 is not saying that women were to be submissive to their husbands on account of the Fall, what is it saying? The words translated “desire” and “rule” in Genesis 3:16 are found together just a few paragraphs later in Genesis 4:7, where God warns Cain about sin: “And its *desire* is for you, but you should *rule* over it.” It is likely that in both of these texts the terms “desire” and “rule” are being used in pejorative senses: “desire” means lusting, wanton desire, or desire out of control, and “rule” means to dominate, subjugate, or conquer. Thus in Genesis 4:7, God is warning Cain that sin wants to get him, but he needs to overcome and conquer it. Likewise, on this view Genesis 3:16 means that because of the Fall women will tend to be obsessed with their men, and men will tend to be domineering over their women.

On this reading Genesis 3:16 is not a *prescription* for marriage, but a *description* of one of the unfortunate effects of the Fall. This interpretation, furthermore, is required by the fact that the rest of the words spoken by God in this passage are descriptive and prophetic, not prescriptive. To the serpent God says he is cursed to crawl and eat dust (v. 14), and will be crushed by the seed of the woman (v. 15). To the woman God says that she will experience great pain in childbirth and will feel desire toward her husband (v. 16). To the man God says that the ground is cursed because of him and will require toil all his life (v. 17), produce thorns and thistles (v. 18), and that he will sweat to produce food until he dies (v. 19). All of these curses are descriptions of what will happen whether the serpent, woman, or man like it or not, or cooperate or not. It is therefore certain that the curse of

the husband's "rule" is not a command or prescription given to the woman or the man, but a description of the oppressive rule, the domineering and authoritarian fashion in which men have typically exercised their leadership role.

Again, the fact that Genesis 3:16 is descriptive rather than prescriptive does not mean that there are no functional or relational differences between men and women. We have seen that the creation account teaches that men and women are essentially equal and that the woman was created to play a subordinate role in relation to her husband. Thus, the curse of a domineering husband is not an entirely new change in the order of things, but a distortion and corruption of the original good relationship between men and women. Thus, on this view women's functional subordination is a creational ordinance that has been characteristically abused by men as a result of the Fall.

One other point ought to be made. The fact that God pronounced this curse on the woman does not mean that it is all right for men to be domineering. Men and women are permitted to do all in their power to ameliorate the cursed conditions of the Fall. For example, God did not expect the man to put up with the thorns and thistles and not try to eliminate them from his fields or gardens. God does not disapprove of women taking advantage of medical technologies or medicines or breathing methods to ease the pain of childbirth. Likewise, God does not expect women to accept abuse from their husbands. Indeed, Christians in whom the blessings of God's grace and love have been realized should seek to overcome the sinful effects of the Fall in their relationships.

From the teaching of Genesis 1-3 about man and woman, Paul draws certain conclusions about the relationship between husbands and wives and about the role of women

in the church. These conclusions are without a doubt the most “politically incorrect” aspects of the Bible’s teaching about women. Before we look at Paul’s teaching on these matters, though, we should consider the approach to women taken by Jesus himself.

## **Women and Jesus**

Scanzoni and Hardesty call Jesus “woman’s best friend,”<sup>25</sup> and in this sentiment they are surely right. Jesus treated women with a respect and dignity that sometimes shocked the cultural sensibilities of his Jewish brothers. This fact is evident in all four of the Gospels, but is especially emphasized in Luke.

### **Equality: Jesus and His Women Disciples**

The first person whom Luke reports Jesus to have healed of a sickness was Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (4:38-39). Jesus allowed a woman who was a “sinner” (an immoral woman, possibly a prostitute) to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, after which he forgave her sins (Luke 7:36-50). Various women followed Jesus and supported his ministry financially (8:1-3). Jesus healed a woman suffering from a hemorrhage when she touched him (8:41-48) and raised a little girl from the dead (8:49-56). Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath who had been crippled for eighteen years; his kindness to her stands in sharp contrast to the uncaring synagogue ruler who objected to Jesus “working” on the Sabbath. Jesus responds to this objection in part by pointing out that the woman is “a daughter of Abraham” — suggesting that Abraham’s daughters, no less than his sons, are offered the blessings of the kingdom of God (13:10-17). Jesus commended

the poor widow who gave “two mites” because she gave everything while the rich gave only what they did not need (21:1-4). When he was being led to Calvary to be crucified, Jesus stopped to express concern for the women of Jerusalem (23:26-31). The first persons to learn of Jesus’ resurrection were women (24:1-12).

Probably the most telling such incident in Luke — and the least understood — is the account of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha. Mary “sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word,” while Martha, who “was distracted with much serving,” asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her (10:39-40). Jesus’ response was that “one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (v. 42). The lesson that is often drawn from this passage is that we should be more concerned to “spend time with Jesus,” to worship and commune with Jesus, than with being constantly busy with religious activities and good works. But this way of looking at the passage (while it expresses a valid concern) completely misses the point.

In first-century Judaism rabbis often gathered groups of students, or disciples, who would sit at his feet to learn Torah (the Old Testament Law and its interpretation). This privilege of studying Torah under the tutelage of a rabbi was strictly for men only — and remained so until only quite recently. Men studied Torah, women did the housework — that was the way things were. Mary, by sitting at Jesus’ feet to listen to his “word,” was assuming the role of a rabbinical student, a role reserved in Judaism exclusively for men. Martha’s objection was not merely that she needed Mary’s help but that Mary had no business taking the man’s role and neglecting the woman’s role. That is why Jesus says that

the thing Mary has chosen “will not be taken away from her”: Jesus is saying that Jewish restrictions on the roles of women will not be allowed to keep Mary from learning.

## **Distinctions: Jesus and His Male Apostles**

Jesus, then, dramatically elevated women’s status and showed them kindness and respect uncharacteristic of Jewish men at that time. He welcomed women as his disciples, a revolutionary practice, and honored women by making them the first witnesses to his resurrection. All of these things are true, and ought to be emphasized. But we must not conclude too hastily that Jesus leveled all role distinctions between men and women. There is significant evidence to the contrary.

The most important such evidence is the fact that although Jesus had many women disciples, he chose twelve men to be apostles (Luke 6:13-16). That Jesus appointed only men to the office of apostle is striking, and implies that he saw a differentiation of roles between men and women. Two objections to this inference have commonly been made by egalitarians: that Jesus appointed only men as a concession to first-century chauvinistic culture, which would not have tolerated women in authority; and that no inference about women in authority can be derived from Jesus’ choice of all men, since Jesus also chose only Jews but no one would infer from that fact that Gentiles are excluded from positions of authority.<sup>26</sup>

Neither of these objections is very credible. Jesus was quite willing to violate Jewish customs in so many other areas, including in his dealings with women. Moreover, all of his apostles were to face intense opposition, persecution, and martyrdom. In light of

these two facts, it is unlikely that Jesus did not appoint women as apostles because they would not be accepted. As for the second objection, the fact that Jesus appointed no Gentiles as apostles is irrelevant, because throughout his earthly life Jesus had no Gentile disciples at all, whereas he did have women disciples. That is, the twelve apostles were chosen from a larger pool of disciples which included Jewish men and women, but no Gentiles. Evidently the office of apostle was deliberately limited to male disciples.

This is apparently how Peter understood the matter as well. Luke reports that when it came time to appoint a new apostle to replace Judas Iscariot, Peter stated that the choice was to be made from “these men [*andron*, adult males] who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (Acts 1:21). This gender-specific language can only mean that Peter intended the office of apostle to be limited to men.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, although several other individuals in the New Testament outside the circle of the Twelve are also designated apostles, none of them appear to have been women. It is just barely possible that “Junias” in Romans 16:7 is an exception, since that name may have been a woman’s name. Still, the evidence in support of the claim that Junias was a woman is at best inconclusive. Moreover, Paul’s language is ambiguous enough that it is a little unclear if he meant to identify Junias as an apostle. This doubly ambiguous reference to Junias, then, cannot overturn the positive evidence from the rest of the New Testament that all of the apostles of Christ were men.<sup>28</sup>

Unless one is driven by ideological concerns to think otherwise, it seems most reasonable to infer that women were not intended by Jesus to be apostles. That in turn suggests that Jesus was not overturning or challenging all role distinctions between men and

women. Since Jesus nowhere in the Gospels challenges the concept of a husband's authority over his wife, and since he himself named twelve men to be his authoritative representatives, it is difficult to evade the conclusion that Jesus accepted the principle of male authority. Again, his acceptance of that principle did not mean he accepted the way the principle was abused in Judaism to bar women from learning and participating in the life and work of the kingdom of God.

## **Women and Paul**

We have already had occasion to refer to several passages in Paul's epistles relating to the subject of women. But now we need to consider Paul's view of women more directly. Paul has been viewed both as the great oppressor and as the great liberator of women. There can be no denying that some of the things he wrote have been *used* to oppress women, but we must consider the possibility that Paul's teaching has been *abused*.

### **Women in the Home**

In three different epistles Paul teaches that wives are to submit to their husbands as the "head" of their marriage union:

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

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord (Col. 3:18).

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church . . . Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything (Eph. 5:22-24).

Although a great deal of effort has been expended to show that Paul was not teaching in any of these passages that wives are to submit to the authority of their husbands, such efforts must be judged more ingenious than valid. We can only give a few examples of the lines of reasoning used to defend an egalitarian reading of these texts and indicate where we believe they fall short.

Two of these texts speak of the husband as the “head” of the wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). The debate over the meaning of the word “head” (Greek *kephale*) seems to be endless, with complementarians holding to the traditional view that it means an authority figure in these texts,<sup>29</sup> while egalitarians generally insist that *kephale* rarely or never has that meaning and instead means something like “source.”<sup>30</sup> While in our judgment the complementarians are right, the egalitarian view of the word’s meaning does not eliminate the complementarian interpretation of the texts.

In both 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:22-24 the husband’s status as “head” in relation to the wife is compared to Christ’s status as “head” in comparison to the church. Egalitarians who make note of this analogy are unable to eliminate the lack of parity between the husband and wife that this analogy implies. Scanzoni and Hardesty, for example, say that the point of the metaphor of head and body with reference to Christ and the church is “united head and body, we live; severed head from body, we die. It is a variation of an image Christ used, that of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-17).”<sup>31</sup> What

this interpretation overlooks is that while we need to be united to Christ to live, Christ does not need us to live. Obviously, interpreting Paul to mean that women cannot live or flourish apart from their husbands will not serve an egalitarian view! Thus Scanzoni and Hardesty quickly shift the analogy and write, “As husband and wife become ‘one flesh’ and live in unity, the marital relationship lives and flourishes.”<sup>32</sup> The wording here is slippery, since the point of Paul’s analogy is not about a “relationship” living, but (if we accept “source” as the meaning of *kephale*) about *the church* living through its union with Christ. Again, though, this would imply that Paul thought wives could not survive apart from their husbands, a chauvinistic notion indeed.

Scanzoni and Hardesty go on to argue that the relationship between Christ and the church, and therefore also between husband and wife, is one of “mutual submission.”<sup>33</sup> But Paul’s description of the church as Christ’s body has nothing to do with mutual submission, and everything to do with submission by the church to Christ. “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head [*kephale*] over all things to the church, which is His body. . .” (Eph. 1:22-23). “And He is the head [*kephale*] of the body, the church . . . that in all things He may have preeminence” (Col. 1:18). How anyone could miss the fact that Christ’s “headship” involves or entails authority over the church in these texts is puzzling.

In Ephesians 5:22-24 Paul explicitly infers from this analogy between Christ’s relationship with his church and the husband’s relationship with his wife that wives should submit to their husbands “just as the church is subject to Christ.” Again, the comparison here makes it clear that the submission or subjection spoken of is not mutual. Christ is not subject to or in submission to his church. It is true that Christ “serves” his church, but he

does so on his own terms, without giving up his authority as the Lord. Analogously (though not in the same precise way), husbands are to serve their wives without giving up their responsibility to take the lead in their marriage relationship. The fatal assumption of the egalitarian view is that loving sacrificial service is incompatible with the exercise of authority.

Thus, the claim that the sentence preceding this passage teaches mutual submission between husband and wife needs to be reconsidered: “. . . submitting to one another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21). Paul does not mean here that everyone is to “submit” to everyone else in a kind of anarchic, egalitarian society with no one in positions of responsible oversight or authority. Indeed, he is probably not talking about “mutual submission” at all, though even some complementarians have allowed that this is what Paul means.<sup>34</sup> Rather, he probably means that everyone is to submit to those in authority over them: wives to husbands (5:22-33), children to parents (6:1-4), and servants to masters (6:5-9). Thus 5:21 serves as a kind of lead-in or heading for the rest of this section of the epistle. In each case Paul also emphasizes that those in authority are to exercise that authority in caring, sacrificial love, but he does *not* say or imply that parents are to submit to their children or that masters are to submit to their slaves.

It should be noted that although the submission of wives to their husbands is discussed alongside that of children to parents and servants to masters, Paul does not teach that this submission operates according to the same rules in all three cases. In particular, it is striking that Paul tells children to “obey” their parents, and servants to “obey” their masters (6:1, 5), but does not tell wives to “obey” their husbands. The same pattern appears

in the parallel passage in Colossians (Col. 3:18, 20, 22). The Greek word here (*hupakouo* and related forms) is different from the term translated “submit” or “be subject” (*hupotasso*), and is never used by Paul of the wife’s submission to her husband (although Peter uses it once of Sarah’s submission to Abraham, 1 Pet. 3:6). It seems reasonable to conclude that Paul expected husbands and wives to function more like equals than parents and children, though wives were to defer to their husbands’ decision when consensus could not be reached.

One other very important point should be made. Husbands do not in Paul’s view have the authority to make their wives do anything contrary to Christian teaching, or to abuse or mistreat them. Indeed, parents and masters do not have such rights, either. Whatever authorities on earth or anywhere else there may be, Christ outranks them all (Eph. 1:21; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:16). If any human authority attempts to command or force a Christian, whether man, woman, or child, to disobey God, Paul’s counsel would be the same as Peter’s principle: “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

## **Women in the Ministry**

We have considered Paul’s teaching on wives at length, but Paul related to women as more than simply extensions of their husbands. Women are associated with Paul in ministry both in the Book of Acts and scattered throughout his epistles. One of the most impressive such women was Priscilla, a woman who with her husband Aquila helped to instruct a new convert and promising evangelist named Apollos in accurate doctrine (Acts 18:24-26). That Priscilla was actively engaged in teaching Apollos, and perhaps even the

more vocal of the couple, is implied by the order in which the two are named here and elsewhere in both Acts and Paul's epistles: "Priscilla and Aquila" (18:18, 26; Rom. 16:2; 2 Tim. 4:19; Aquila is named first in 1 Cor. 16:19). The fact that both Luke and Paul usually place Priscilla's name first undermines the objection from some complementarians that "Luke may simply have wanted to give greater honor to the woman by putting her name first (1 Peter 3:7), or may have had another reason unknown to us."<sup>35</sup> Rather, it is clear that Priscilla generally made the stronger impression on the church, probably because she was the more gifted in speaking and teaching.

In fact, a less reliable family of manuscripts of Acts known as the Western text reverses the order in Acts 18:26 to "Aquila and Priscilla" — a reading regrettably followed by the King James Version and the New King James Version — to avoid the implication that Priscilla was actively teaching Apollos.<sup>36</sup> While there is no evidence that Priscilla held an office of teaching authority in the church, she was clearly gifted to teach, and Luke seems to have had no qualms about presenting Priscilla as instructing a man.

Another woman in Paul's orbit of ministry of note was Phoebe, described by Paul as "a servant of the church in Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1). The word translated "servant" here is *diakonos*, from which our word "deacon" is derived, and which is used elsewhere in Paul's writings to refer to an office in the church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). As Stanley Grenz points out, the use of the *masculine* form of this noun with reference to Phoebe (when the noun would normally be given a feminine ending) strongly suggests the word is being used in its technical sense of the church office of deacon.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 it appears that the office of deacon did not entail teaching, as did the office of

“bishop” (*episkopos*, “overseer”) or “elder” (*presbuteros*), both of whom Paul says had to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17).<sup>38</sup>

In general we may say that women enjoyed far greater opportunities for ministry in Paul’s circles than they have typically been granted in churches of a traditional sort. Still, the evidence from the New Testament fails to provide any clear examples of women in Paul’s churches who served in authoritative teaching and leading positions. Does that mean that women were barred from such positions? This is the question to which we now turn.

## **Women in the Church**

The question of the ordination of women in the church has caused great division in many denominations during the second half of the twentieth century. Numerous books have been published on the subject, and just bringing up the question generates heated emotions in many people. We recognize that there are evangelical Christians on both sides of this question.

Before considering the apostle Paul’s teaching on this subject, it will be helpful to discuss what is at stake here. In Catholicism ordination has an element of authority attached to it, but the most important function of ordained priests in the Catholic Church is to administer the sacraments. Priests perform baptisms, hear confessions, celebrate the Eucharist, marry couples, and perform last rites. Catholic women are not permitted to do any of these things.

In Protestantism, on the other hand, especially in predominantly evangelical denominations, ordination is associated primarily with pastoral authority. In those

Protestant churches that do not ordain women, the most important activities which are closed to them are preaching to and teaching the congregation at large and exercising leadership functions in the church. Pastors usually also perform all baptisms and officiate at Communion, but these are secondary functions in many Protestant churches.

This somewhat simplified overview of ordination in Catholic and Protestant churches brings an important point to the surface: ordination means different things to different churches and even to different people. This will be as true for women as for men. Some people want to be ordained because they believe God has called them to preach the gospel and bring people to faith in Christ. (Any Christian can do this, but ordination enables a Christian to evangelize with the support of a church body.) Some people want to be ordained because they want to serve Christ by visiting the sick and prisoners. (Access to the sick and prisoners is sometimes denied except to family members and ordained ministers, making ordination a vital matter for persons interested in this ministry.) Some people want to be ordained because they are devoted to the sacraments and wish to administer them to others. Unless one maintains that *all* of these activities are restricted to men only, a simple “no” to the question of women’s ordination is misleading. It might be better to frame the question differently: not, may women be ordained, but, to what ministries may women be ordained?

If we look at Paul’s teaching about women in church ministries with this question in mind, it is apparent that there are many ministries which are open to women. Paul speaks about women praying and prophesying in church (1 Cor. 11:4-5, 13). He encourages the Corinthians generally to seek spiritual gifts (12:31; 14:1, 5, 31), all of which are intended

to be used in the public worship of the church (14:3-4, 26), and evidently is directing such encouragement to women as well as men. Elsewhere Paul encourages Christians generally to speak to one another and to sing together, teaching and encouraging each other (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). There is no hint that such activities may not include women. Nor is there anything in Paul's epistles suggests that he would forbid women to baptize, to administer Communion, to counsel or encourage others, or to visit the sick and imprisoned.

To the shame of Christian men, for most of church history these vital ministries have been closed to women. Women were not even allowed to sing in church. Before contemporary evangelicals dismiss this prohibition as a medieval Catholic mistake, we note with dismay that, for example, it was only in 1969 that the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod allowed women to sing in church.<sup>39</sup>

The absolute prohibition of women speaking or singing in church has historically been based on Paul's statement, "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Whatever the significance of this passage, nearly all modern interpreters, both egalitarian and complementarian, recognize that it cannot be an absolute prohibition of women speaking in church, since earlier in this same epistle Paul writes about women praying (aloud) and prophesying in the church (11:5, 16). Most interpreters therefore favor understanding Paul to be forbidding certain types of speech by women in the church.

While certainty about the precise problem that Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 seems elusive, evidently Paul is forbidding public speech in the church meetings by women that brought dishonor to their husbands (as verse 35 emphasizes) and disorder in the church (cf. vv. 33, 40). Some interpreters have suggested that the women were guilty of noisy speech or distracting questions.<sup>40</sup> Others have argued that the women were making remarks challenging the charismatic utterances of the men (and thereby assuming a public teaching role) or of their own husbands (and thereby undermining their authority).<sup>41</sup> All of these explanations have strengths and weaknesses. What is generally agreed is that Paul's directives were not intended to squelch the exercise of spiritual gifts by women or their participation in the worship of the church.

While we wish to emphasize that women in Paul's teaching were called to participate in the church's worship and ministry, we must be candid and point out that Paul did set some limits on the roles women could occupy in the church. In particular, Paul stated, "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet" (1 Tim. 2:12, NASB). Before discussing Paul's limitation, we should note that the word translated "quiet" (*hesuchia*) here describes an attitude of peaceable acceptance, and is different from the word translated "silent" in 1 Corinthians 14:34 (*sigato*). Thus in verse 2 of this same chapter Paul tells Timothy that the church is to pray that they will be able to live a "quiet life," by which he certainly does not mean a silent one!<sup>42</sup>

Even with this important qualification, though, Paul appears to be stating categorically that women should not teach men or exercise authority over men. Moreover, he grounds this prohibition in the created difference between men and women (vv. 13-14),

making it difficult to contend that it has no application beyond Paul's immediate concern. Admittedly some creative and sophisticated arguments have been advanced for regarding Paul's statement here as inapplicable outside the situation in Timothy's church in Ephesus, but these all seem strained.<sup>43</sup>

This text would be somewhat less controversial were it not for the fact that traditionally theologians have inferred from it that women are inherently inferior to men in intelligence, spiritual discernment, or both. But such an inference makes no sense. Paul does not forbid women to teach other women, or to teach children — but he should if women are supposedly doctrinally inept. Paul forbids women to teach or rule men for one reason only: women were created to fulfill a responsive, submissive role to the responsible leadership of men, and in particular their husbands. Within the context of a respectful acceptance of their husbands' authority, women are free to ask questions, to express disagreements, and even to correct men when they misunderstand some aspect of Christian truth (cf. Acts 18:26). What they are not permitted to do is to assume an authoritative teaching or pastoral role in the church which places them in a position of responsible leadership over men.

Churches that accept this understanding of Paul's teaching on women in the ministry could go a long way toward bringing reconciliation to the fractious debate by ordaining women as, for example, ministers of children's education (a position which most evangelical churches fill with men), or pastors to women. They could ordain women to serve in visitation ministries. Both men and women who serve as itinerant evangelists and missionaries should be ordained for those tasks. We should do everything we can to honor

the gifts and callings which God has given to women for the building up of the church. In this way we will show that we take seriously Paul's teaching that in Christ "there is neither male nor female; for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

## **You've Come a Long Way . . .**

The view of women defended here attempts to keep two aspects of the biblical teaching in balance. The first and far more important truth to be recognized is that women and men are equal partners in the kingdom of God, both created in God's image and called to know, love, and serve God in the home, in the church, and in the world. If we have not made this clear, we have failed to do justice to the biblical teaching — and are contributing to the perpetuation of injustice to women.

The second and far more controversial truth to be recognized is that God created men and women to serve in complementary and overlapping roles. That is, many of the ways in which God calls us to serve him are open to both men and women, but there are certain roles that are reserved for men and other roles that are reserved for women. The sole basis for excluding woman from any role is her created purpose as a complementary, supportive partner for man. Specifically, Scripture assigns the husband the responsibility of serving as the "head" or authority in the marriage relationship, and limits participation of women in the Christian church to roles that do not place them in authority over men. Women are not excluded from any roles or functions in life because of any supposed biological, intellectual, psychological, social, or spiritual inferiority. There may be

*differences* between men and women in these areas, but these differences, if they exist, are complementary.

Once the biblical view of women has been defined in this fashion, most of the common objections to it from a feminist perspective have been answered. Indeed, on a truly complementarian view most of the social and political claims made by feminists are completely justified. *Of course* women can do just about any job that men can do. *Of course* women should receive comparable pay for the same work that men do. *Of course* the widespread physical and sexual abuse of women by husbands, boyfriends, soldiers, and even ministers is an evil that is all too often covered up or ignored or even maliciously blamed on the female victims. *Of course* advertisers, television, and films often perpetuate stereotypes of women and exploit them for profit.

If women — and men — accustomed to dealing with church institutions that treat women as inferiors (whatever their theological position in theory may be) react by adopting an egalitarian view, we understand and are sympathetic to their concerns, even though we would regard their position as an overreaction. On the other hand, if men defend the complementarian view not in the interests of truth or in a spirit of love, but as an ideological excuse to continue treating women for all practical purposes as inferiors, then we must criticize their hypocrisy even if on paper we agree with them.

We have been critical of the tendency throughout most of church history for Christian men to regard women as inferior. We have also acknowledged that evangelical Christians committed to the authority of Scripture differ on women's roles. This does not mean that there are no absolute truths or moral laws to serve as fixed points of reference in

thinking about these issues. That both men and women are created with the same capacity for relationship with God, that men and women should treat each other with love and respect, that women are uniquely endowed with the capacity for bringing children into the world, that women should be encouraged to use all of their gifts to serve God and others — these principles are unambiguously taught in Scripture, confessed by Christians on all sides of the debate, and proven constantly by experience. We should confidently build our discussions and debates about women's roles on these bedrock truths.

Though we believe that many of the concerns raised by feminism are valid, and respect evangelical Christians who hold to a more egalitarian view than we do, there are some destructive tendencies in feminism that must be recognized and opposed. Specifically, feminism in its most thoroughgoing forms challenges the biblical distinction between male and female in a way that opens the door to the endorsement of homosexuality and other immoral sexual choices, as well as to all kinds of false doctrine.

The logic by which this troubling implication of feminist thought is developed is easy to understand. In its most radical or pure form feminism calls for the leveling of all distinctions between men and women. Feminists do not deny that there are obvious anatomical differences between the sexes, but in general they insist that these differences are irrelevant in human relationships and in societal roles. A natural implication of this belief is that same-sex relationships should be treated no differently than different-sex relationships — which is to say, that homosexual relationships should be regarded as no less valid than heterosexual ones. Furthermore, in the interests of eliminating all

distinctions between the sexes, feminists commonly criticize the making of distinctions in principle and are often driven to deny other distinctions basic to the Christian faith.

This is not a mere theoretical concern or a problem found exclusively outside the church. Even within evangelicalism, the growing feminist influence has evidently resulted in a growing acceptance of homosexuality, though most evangelical egalitarians resist this trend.<sup>44</sup> Some neo-evangelical feminists are pushing their critique of gender-based distinctions in principle to the precipice of heresy. A particularly clear and telling example comes from Scanzoni and Hardesty. Agreeing with feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther that “all duality, all polarity, is evil,” Scanzoni and Hardesty express their conviction that it is not only the duality between male and female that must be set aside in feminist theology:

All distinctions between people — male and female, rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, Western world and Third World, Christian and non-Christian — are attempts to deny our common humanity. Divisions between human and animal, animate and inanimate, allow us to rape the earth and dominate it for our own greedy ends. A truly Christian, truly feminist theology continually seeks to root out all dualism, which at bottom is an outgrowth of original sin, the desire to separate and dominate.<sup>45</sup>

This feminist anti-dualism is not only self-refuting (since it implies a dualism between the dualists and the anti-dualists, between the dominators and the liberators), it is unbiblical. One will search in vain through the pages of the Old or New Testaments for any evidence that the prophets, apostles, or Christ himself saw “dualism” in the sense meant here as pernicious or problematic. Basic to the entire Bible is the “dualism” between

Creator and creature (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 100:3; Rom. 1:25). God has every right to do whatever he wants with his creation (Ps. 115:3; Is. 45:9; Rom. 9:20). Given their distaste for “dualism,” it is not surprising that feminist theologians are increasingly attracted to pantheistic conceptions of God that eliminate the distinction between Creator and creature.

Even within the created realm, it is not duality, or distinction, that is evil, but abuses of such distinctions that violate our created purposes. Distinguishing between male and female roles is not evil; making such distinctions to justify exploiting women is. Identifying homosexual conduct as immoral is not evil; committing acts of violence against gays is. While we should not treat animals cruelly, and while it is true that God cares about the animals, it is nevertheless also true that God cares *more* about human beings (e.g., Matt. 6:26). Since both Christians and non-Christians are created in God’s image and are the recipients of God’s gracious provisions for life (Gen. 1:26-27; Matt. 5:45), those of us who are Christians should love non-Christians even if they actively oppose us (Matt. 5:44). But there is a distinction between those who believe and those who disbelieve, between the righteous and the wicked, and we are responsible to draw a clear distinction between what is acceptable within the Christian church and what is not (Ps. 1; John 3:18; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 John 4:1).

When feminists argue that women should be treated with respect, that women are just as intelligent as men, that women should not be excluded from the political process or from church ministry, they are on solid ground and their agenda has great potential for success. But when feminists argue that there are no differences between men and women besides trivial anatomical differences, that marriage is an institution of oppression, that

equality of the sexes requires acceptance of gays and lesbians in the church, or that women cannot be free unless they have an unrestricted right to an abortion, they are not only contradicting the clear ethical teaching of the Bible, they are doing their own cause immeasurable harm. The church can and should be the best friend and champion of women seeking dignity, respect, and freedom; but when feminists call for a repudiation of distinctions basic to the Christian faith, they cannot expect the church to support them.

Christians can afford to disagree agreeably about women's ordination and related questions about women's roles. But underlying much of feminism are assumptions and attitudes that are hostile to the Christian faith. To work for better relations between men and women — or between blacks and whites, or rich and poor — is a good and honorable thing. But to reorient all Christian theology to the goal of eliminating all perceived inequities between men and women is proving to be destructive to Christian theology and ultimately to the cause of women. If we aim at learning the truth about men and women and serving Christ faithfully together, we will find that equality will take care of itself. If we aim at equality as our overriding goal, we will find it all too easy to distort the truth about men and women and will end up serving ourselves instead of Christ — and we will lose equality in the bargain.

Christ does not call men to dominance over women or women to liberation from men. He calls both men and women to freedom — not freedom from each other, but freedom to serve one another in love (cf. Gal. 5:13). This freedom is available equally to men and women; and those who know this freedom in Christ will treat each other as equals without regard to whether the other person is male or female.



## Notes to Chapter 14: All About Eve

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<sup>1</sup>Prestonia Mann Martin, “Women Should Not Have the Right to Vote,” in *Feminism: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. Carol Wekesser (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995), 25, 26; the selection is excerpted from Mr. and Mrs. John Martin, *Feminism: Its Fallacies and Follies*, Book 2 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1916).

<sup>2</sup>Apparently not quite all of us: one of the authors (Robert Bowman) was told in 1994 by a male caller on a Christian radio talk show in Atlanta that America’s social problems all began when women were given the vote!

<sup>3</sup>Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1.

<sup>4</sup>John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (New York: HarperCollins — Harper San Francisco, 1990), 117, 133.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 5-49.

<sup>6</sup>Spong, *Living in Sin*, 125.

<sup>7</sup>John R. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives and Women Preachers* (Wheaton, IL: Sword of the Lord, 1941), 65, cited in Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 59.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, 19.

<sup>9</sup>See the critique in Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 98-99.

<sup>10</sup>Augustine, *De Genesis ad Litteram* 9.5, quoted in Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women's Roles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 143 n. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 13: *Man Made to God's Image (1a.90-102)*, trans. and ed. Edmund Hill (London: Blackfriars, 1964), 35, 37 (1a.92).

<sup>12</sup>Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, 60.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel 11:34 is the one text that does not clearly fall into either of these two uses. The related nouns 'ezrah and 'ezrat ("help") also refer almost entirely to God's help or the ineffectual help of human allies.

<sup>14</sup>E.g., Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 26-27; Gilbert Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 28, 217 n. 9. Some writers have argued that the text literally says that the woman is superior, but they then conclude that we should understand the text to mean that men and women are equal, e.g., Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 23-26. If the text literally says women are superior, why back away from that conclusion? But in fact Spencer's interpretation of the word "comparable" ("meet" in the KJV) is flawed; cf. Ortlund, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," 103-4.

<sup>15</sup>For a complete list of all the OT uses of these related words, see George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 917-918.

<sup>16</sup>E.g., Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 29. Others deny that Paul is arguing for male authority at all, cf. Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, 30-31, 219-20; Evans, *Woman in the Bible*, 14-15.

<sup>17</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 29-30.

<sup>18</sup>As is claimed by Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, 41.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 44. Ecclesiasticus was a collection of wisdom sayings similar to Proverbs but written about 180 BC by Greek-speaking Jews. It is not to be confused with Ecclesiastes, a book traditionally ascribed to Solomon about eight centuries earlier. Ecclesiasticus is accepted as part of the Old Testament by Roman Catholics, but not by Protestants. The fact that Ecclesiasticus blames sin and death on the woman would seem to be evidence that the book is not consistent with Paul and is therefore not inspired.

<sup>20</sup>Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1.1, trans. S. Thelwell, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1979), 4:14.

<sup>21</sup>This is pointed out by Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11-15,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Piper and Grudem, 190.

<sup>22</sup>John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Piper and Grudem, 73.

<sup>23</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>25</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, 71.

<sup>26</sup>The second objection is more common, e.g., Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 213.

<sup>27</sup>A point overlooked by egalitarians who cite Acts 1:22 on the qualifications to be an apostle; e.g., Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, 90; Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 100.

<sup>28</sup>On whether Junias was a woman apostle, see Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers,” 79-81 (no); Grenz with Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, 92-96 (yes).

<sup>29</sup>See especially Wayne Grudem, “Does *Kephale* (‘Head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* 6 NS (1985):38-59, and his follow-up answer to his critics, “The Meaning of *Kephale* (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Piper and Grudem, 425-68.

<sup>30</sup>Especially Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 501-505, answered by Grudem, “The Meaning of *Kephale* (‘Head’),” 465-66; cf. the more recent discussion in Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 32-35.

<sup>31</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, 35.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>34</sup>E.g., Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 62-63.

<sup>35</sup>Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 69.

<sup>36</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 491. Longenecker points out that the Western text makes similar changes in Acts 17:12, 34.

<sup>37</sup>Grenz, *Women in the Church*, 88.

<sup>38</sup>Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 68. For our purposes it does not matter whether “bishops” and “elders” were different terms for the same office or two distinct offices.

<sup>39</sup>Grenz, *Women in the Church*, 249 n. 116.

<sup>40</sup>E.g., Grenz, *Women in the Church*, 123-25.

<sup>41</sup>E.g., D. A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Piper and Grudem, 151-52.

<sup>42</sup>Thus the NKJV rendering “in silence” is almost certainly incorrect.

<sup>43</sup>The most important effort along these lines is Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). A good overview of the interpretive issues from a complementarian perspective is Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11-15,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Piper and Grudem, 179-93.

<sup>44</sup>Helpful examples are given in Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” 82-84.

<sup>45</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be*, 14.