

CREATED EQUAL

Women and Men in the Image of God



Mennonite
Central
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Cover art: The vine symbolizes the body of Christ and the fruitfulness that comes from being rooted in God’s love and will. The leaves highlight and affirm the diverse and vital gifts men and women bring to the church.

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Introduction

A persistent question in the church concerns the relationship between women and men. What did God envision? Should women and men work together as equal partners, or have clearly defined roles and responsibilities? And who should take the lead?

Although much of church history has assumed male leadership and distinct gender roles, there are also strong voices in the Bible that support equality and mutuality between men and women. There are also many situations in which individual gifts and abilities determined responsibilities more than gender. How are we to understand what the Bible teaches?

Following are some answers to questions that often come up in these discussions. There are also reflection questions and a list of additional resources, inviting us to further conversation and Bible study.



Didn't God create men first?

In Genesis 1, women and men were both created in God's image and at the same time. The Hebrew word Adam is a play on the word *adamah* which means ground or soil. Therefore, Adam literally means earth creature or humankind.¹ Interestingly, in this passage God created human beings last, yet this did not imply they were inferior to the birds and animals created earlier.

In fact, God created human beings—both male and female—to bear God's image and care for the rest of God's creation. Other creation stories in the ancient world typically focused on a king or supreme ruler who would represent god and bear the divine image.² In the Bible, however, God created an ordinary man and woman to perform these roles. God created them together, blessed them together and gave them the same authority and responsibility to tend and care for the earth. And God was very pleased: "...indeed, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

In Genesis 2, the order of creation is somewhat different, yet the emphasis is still on God's loving, intentional acts of creation. And the conclusion is again a human partnership between man and woman. They are one bone and one flesh: *ish* (man) and *ishah* (woman), distinct individuals but also alike.

Although this chapter assumes the initial human was male, it stresses that it was not good for him to be alone. But no other creature was found to be a fitting companion and God decided to create something new: "...a helper suitable for him" or more literally "corresponding to" him.³ Finally, the man declared with joy and wonder: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." (Genesis 2:23) The focus is on their similarity and compatibility, not their differences.

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Unfortunately, we have misunderstood the word *helper*. In English, this word generally means a secondary person or assistant. However, in Hebrew the word *helper* or *ezer* almost always refers to God, such as “you have been the *helper* of the orphan,” “O God, be my *helper!*” and “But surely, God is my *helper!*”⁴ The word *helper*, therefore, signals a strong, influential person.

For discussion and reflection

- What does it mean to be created in God's image?
- How do women and men both reflect the image of God?
- How do you understand God's role as helper?
- What does it mean to be a suitable helper?

Didn't Eve sin first?

If one looks closely at Genesis 3:1–19, both Adam and Eve were present when sin entered the world. Certainly, Eve played a central role, but verse 6 makes clear that Adam was with her and both ate from the forbidden tree. Also, in Hebrew, the serpent used a plural *you* throughout the conversation, signifying that he was addressing both partners.⁵

Further, both Adam and Eve had to bear the consequences of their sin. Both became aware of their nakedness and exposure. Both hid themselves from God's presence. And both had to live afterward in a world where trust and harmony were broken. Women would suffer in childbirth and be ruled by men. Men would struggle to find food and the necessities of life. God would seem far away, no longer a familiar presence in their lives.

These consequences were not God's original intention or will for life on earth. This was not the way things should be. Rather, these judgments describe what happened because of sin; they are the result of alienation from God, the earth and one another.

Fortunately, sin does not have the last word. Throughout the Bible, God sought to restore relationships and bring wholeness and well-being to all people and the earth. This was especially evident in Jesus' ministry as he brought healing and hope to those suffering from sin, illness and oppression. He also taught us to pray that *God's will* "...be done on earth as it is heaven." (Matthew 6:10) And in his life, death and resurrection, Jesus enables us to be born again as new creatures in God's family.

Over the centuries, people have sought to reduce the hardships related to growing food and earning a living. Many have also worked to lessen the danger and pain associated with childbirth.

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Similarly, it makes sense to encourage men and women to live and work together as mutual partners, rather than continue in relationships of domination and subservience.

For discussion and reflection

- How would you describe the relationship between men and women before sin entered the world? After sin entered?
- How do you understand what happened in the fall?
- What did Jesus model in relating to women and men?
- How should Christians address situations of suffering and oppression?

Weren't all the Hebrew leaders and prophets men?

Certainly, many of the leaders and prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures were men. Nevertheless, numerous women also played significant roles in the life of the Hebrew people. Some are familiar stories, such as those about Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, but others are seldom mentioned in our churches, even though they provide examples of extraordinary courage and faith. Here are a few of these women:

Hagar: Hagar had several amazing encounters with God. She was a poor slave woman, without any rights and abused by both Sarah and Abraham. Yet, Genesis 16 records how an angel found her in the wilderness and promised to multiply her offspring, just as God had promised Abraham. Hagar then gave God a name, *God of seeing*, and expressed her amazement that she was able to see God and live.⁶ In Genesis 21, God again heard Hagar and her son weeping in the wilderness and promised to make her offspring into a great nation. God also opened Hagar's eyes to see a well of water and remained with them as the boy grew up.

Shiphrah and Puah: Exodus 1 recounts that these Hebrew midwives dared to disobey the king of Egypt by refusing to kill the baby boys they delivered. Because of their bold reverence for God, God gave them families and the Hebrew people grew stronger.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah: These women bravely requested a change in the inheritance laws, so that daughters could inherit land when a family had no sons. This request is especially remarkable because it came soon after a

dramatic showdown between Moses and Aaron, and Korah and his followers. As punishment for this rebellion, the earth opened up and swallowed several hundred people, and a plague ravaged the rest of the community.

Despite all this, these sisters found the courage to come to the tabernacle and stand before Moses and the rest of the congregation, asking that they be given a portion of the land being divided among the Israelite clans. Moses took their request to God, who replied, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.”⁷

Hannah: The first two chapters of 1 Samuel share Hannah’s difficult experience as a barren woman. When she finally became the mother of Samuel, she prayed a wonderful hymn of praise to God that Mary used as a model for her song about bearing the Messiah. With great sincerity and gratitude, Hannah claimed faith in God as One who supports and comforts those who are down-trodden, barren, poor and hungry.

Naomi and Ruth: The story of these two women in the book of Ruth is truly extraordinary. Both were widows in a time when widows were among the most vulnerable and overlooked people in society. Not only that, but they were refugees, strangers in both Moab and Bethlehem. Nevertheless, because of their love and commitment to each other, they were able to survive. The women of the town highlight this when they praised Ruth to Naomi as the “...one who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons.” (Ruth 4:15) In the end, Ruth became part of the Hebrew people and a foremother of David.

Abigail: 1 Samuel 25:2–35 tells how Abigail courageously intervened when her husband insulted David’s men and refused to share food with them. Thinking very quickly, Abigail took food and drink to David, thereby preventing his band of men from taking revenge on the whole community.

The Hebrew Scriptures also mention at least five women prophets:

Miriam: Exodus 15:20 notes that the “prophet Miriam” led the women in singing to the Lord after they escaped from Pharaoh’s army. She also played a significant role in saving Moses from death, by watching over him and speaking to Pharaoh’s daughter on his behalf. For these reasons, Micah names her along with Moses and Aaron when he recounts God’s acts in saving Israel: “...and I sent before you Moses and Aaron and Miriam.” (Micah 6:4)

Deborah: Judges 4–5 describe how “Deborah, a prophetess... was judging Israel... under the palm of Deborah” during a time of great oppression. When the people cried out to God for help, Deborah rose up “as a mother in Israel” to help her people and accompany them into battle against the Canaanites. Although a war story, it is clear the battle was not won by military men, for their glory. Rather, the Israelites succeeded because a sudden downpour made it impossible for the Canaanite chariots to move and a woman killed the great general Sisera. The story concludes by noting that “the land had rest forty years.”

Huldah: In 2 Kings 22:11–20, the high priest and the king’s officials consulted “the prophetess Huldah” when they found the book of the law in the temple. Evidently, Huldah was known in the community as someone who knew and could speak for God. She was also quite courageous. In her response to King Josiah, she declared that God would bring judgment on the people, but he would be spared due to his humility and repentance.

Noadiah: In Nehemiah 6:14, Nehemiah prayed to God to remember those who opposed him and wanted to make him afraid. In addition to two prominent men, he mentioned “the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets.” Although she played a negative role, she was clearly an influential leader.

Isaiah's wife: In Isaiah 8:3, Isaiah called his wife a prophetess.

While he mentions only that she bore a son, it is fascinating that he gave her this title, suggesting they both shared a similar vocation.

In addition, in Joel 2:28–29, God promised to pour the Spirit on everyone, so that “...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy Even on the male and female slaves...I will pour out my spirit.” Peter referred to this promise again in his first sermon at the very beginning of the church. (Acts 2:17–19) Luke also noted that Anna, the woman who spent years praying in the temple, was a “prophet” and Philip’s four daughters “had the gift of prophecy.” (Luke 2:36 and Acts 21:8–9)

Finally, the Bible portrays *wisdom* (*Hokmah* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek) as a woman. This is especially evident in Proverbs 1:20–33 where *Hokmah* calls to people on the street corner and in 9:1–6 where she invites everyone to enter her banquet hall and learn from her. She is “more precious than jewels” and “a tree of life to those who lay hold on her.” She was also with God from the beginning, created as the first of God’s acts, “...before the beginning of the earth.”⁸

In the New Testament, this image of *Sophia* continues to surface. For instance, Jesus chided the people for not heeding his message and concluded that “*Sophia* is vindicated by her children.”⁹ He also invited people to come to him for living bread and water, in language very similar to that used in Proverbs 8 and 9.¹⁰

For discussion and reflection

- Which women in the Bible have been important models for you?
What sermons or Sunday School lessons have you heard about them?
- Which woman would you like to get to know better, if that were possible?
Why?
- What role does wisdom play in the Bible?

Didn't Jesus call God *Father*?

Jesus did refer to God as Father. In three cases, the Greek text even kept the Aramaic word, *Abba*, in addition to the Greek word for father.¹¹ Many claim that *Abba* is equivalent to the English word *Papa* or *Daddy*, yet adults could also use *Abba* to address any older man as a way to signal respect and affection.¹² In Mark 14:36, Jesus used *Abba* as he prayed to God in Gethsemane. The other two uses of *Abba* emphasize the fact that God has adopted us as children and heirs. We are no longer slaves but God's very own children, invited to call God *Abba*, One whom we can love and trust.

Surprisingly, this image of God is rarely used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Of more than 12,000 references to God, only 18 refer to God as Father.¹³ Nearly a third of these refer to David and his relationship to God, so perhaps Jesus addressed God as Father in order to link himself to David and his family line.

Jesus may have also used this title as a way to be more inclusive. In the gospels, religious leaders often mentioned Abraham as their father in order to identify themselves as part of God's chosen people. If, however, *God* is our *Father*, then all people can be included in God's family, and not only the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. As the early church reached out to include Gentiles, it certainly made sense for them to highlight this remarkable truth.¹⁴

No doubt, Jesus also wanted to emphasize a close and personal image of God. Although infrequent, this picture of God is present in the Psalms and the prophets. For instance, Psalms 68:5 and 103:13 describe God as the "father of orphans" and a "father who has compassion for his children." Isaiah 63:16 and Jeremiah

31:9 also picture God as a father who redeems the people and leads them back to their homeland.

Nevertheless, many of Jesus' listeners would have been astonished by the way he portrayed God in the parable of the prodigal son. This father had so much compassion that he humiliated himself in order to welcome back a wayward son and shield him from the hostility and shame of the community. Kenneth Bailey, a scholar with extensive experience in the Middle East, points out that no father in that culture would ever run to meet a child, and especially not a son who had disgraced the family. Yet, Jesus portrayed this father as disregarding all that was proper and respectable in order to restore his son to himself and the community.¹⁵ One could even argue that this father acted more like a mother.

In fact, Jesus did use feminine imagery to describe God. For instance, he told Nicodemus we must be “born from above” and “born of water and Spirit.” (John 3:3–5) In other words, we must allow God to give us birth, like a woman gives birth to a child. While this may sound unusual, the Hebrew Scriptures also picture God as giving birth and comforting us like a mother comforts a child. See especially Deuteronomy 32:18, Job 38:29, Psalm 131:2, Isaiah 42:14, 66:13 and Hosea 11:3–4.

Further, Jesus compared himself to a mother hen, eager to gather “her brood under her wings.”¹⁶ The Psalmist also used this image numerous times, to refer to the experience of taking refuge under God's wings.¹⁷ God is also like the woman who mixes yeast with flour in order to make bread, and the woman who searches for a lost coin until she finds it.¹⁸

For discussion and reflection

- What images do you use to describe God?
- Is it possible to think of God as both father and mother? How are these images similar or different?
- How does your congregation use the images of God in Deuteronomy 32:18, Job 38:29, Psalm 131:2, Isaiah 42:14, 66:13 and Hosea 11:3–4?

Didn't Jesus have only male disciples?

It is true that those named as the twelve disciples were all men. Yet it is not certain this was a clearly defined group. In fact, the lists used by Matthew and Mark are not identical to the ones used in Luke and Acts.¹⁹ Matthew and Mark include the name Thaddeus whereas Luke and Acts omit this name and include Judas, son of James. Some scholars assume these are two different names for the same person, while others believe there were differing traditions regarding this group. The number twelve, therefore, may have been more symbolic, meant to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, rather than a group set apart in a definite way.²⁰ In any case, the gospels do record that women followed Jesus as disciples. According to Luke 8, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and several other women traveled with Jesus and supported his ministry from their resources. Matthew 27:55–56 and Mark 15:40–41 also mention women who traveled with Jesus and provided for him, including Mary Magdalene, Salome, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Some of these women followed Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem and remained with him throughout the crucifixion. They were also the first to meet him after the resurrection.

In Mark 14:3–9, Jesus vigorously defended the woman who anointed him. Whereas Mark often portrayed the twelve as not understanding—or even resisting—Jesus' teachings, this woman is portrayed as the model believer who understood what Jesus was saying about his identity and impending death.

Jesus also confirmed he had female disciples in Matthew 12:46–50 when he pointed to his followers and said that whoever does God's will is "my brother and sister and mother." Especially

in a Middle Eastern cultural context, a speaker could not gesture to a crowd of men and say “sister and mother” unless the group before him included both women and men.²¹

Jesus’ friendship with Martha and Mary further reveals how he welcomed and honored women as disciples. Contrary to all expectations, he praised Mary for sitting with the men and learning as a full disciple and urged Martha to do the same.²² Again, given the culture of the time, this was extraordinary.

Fortunately, Martha too came to see herself as a disciple. In the gospel of John, she talked at length with Jesus about life and death and resurrection. Moreover, in that gospel, she is the one (and not Peter) who publicly named Jesus as the “Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (John 11:27)

Finally, Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman at the well, in an amazing conversation that contrasted sharply with his visit with Nicodemus just the chapter before. While everyone would have expected Jesus to talk with Nicodemus, the one who believed was this unnamed and marginalized woman. She also became an evangelist who went to others in her town and invited them to meet and believe in Jesus as the Messiah. (John 4:1–42)

In this and many other instances, Jesus treated women with great respect. He healed them, and touched them even when they were considered unclean.²³ He spoke kindly with them and included them in the family of faith as daughters of Abraham. (Luke 13:10–17) Clearly, they too belonged to his circle of faithful disciples.

For discussion and reflection

- How do you picture the disciples who surrounded Jesus? How many were there and who was included?
- Why have we heard less about the women who followed Jesus?
- What did Jesus model in his relationships with men? with women?

Weren't all the early church leaders men?

We have heard much more about male leaders, yet women were present and active from the very beginning of the church. The book of Acts records that women were among those praying together when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Women and men both heard and believed the good news; women and men were both persecuted and imprisoned.²⁴ Tabitha was known as a disciple “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” Mary’s home was a well-known gathering place for the church and Lydia was the first convert and church leader in Greece. In Thessalonica and Berea, many of the “leading women” believed the message preached by Paul and Silas, and in Athens, Damaris was among those who believed and joined the church. In Caesarea, Philip’s daughters were recognized for their gifts of prophecy.²⁵

Even Paul, who is often viewed as critical of women, had female colleagues and often praised them highly. For instance, Priscilla and Aquilla accompanied Paul on the first leg of his second missionary journey from Corinth to Ephesus and then stayed behind in order to encourage the church there. They gave valuable instruction to the charismatic teacher Apollos, and hosted a church in their home.²⁶

Further, in Romans 16, Paul sent greetings to 10 women, out of a list of 27:

- Phoebe, a “...minister of the church at Cenchreae.”²⁷ Since Paul commended her to them and urged them to welcome and assist her, she was likely the one who carried this letter to Rome.
- Priscilla, who along with Aquila, “work with me...and risked their necks for my life.”

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- Mary, who “...worked very hard among you”²⁸
- Junia, who was imprisoned with Paul and “prominent among the apostles”²⁹
- Tryphaena and Tryphosa, “those workers in the Lord.”
- Persis, who “...has worked hard in the Lord.”
- Julia
- Rufus’ mother
- Nereus’ sister

In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul mentioned that he received reports from those in Chloe’s household, and in Colossians 4:15, he referred to “Nympha and the church in her house.” In Philipians 4:2–3, Paul named Euodia and Syntyche as two women who “struggled beside” him in the work of the gospel. The letter to Philemon is addressed to “Apphia, our sister” as well to Philemon, Archippus and the “church in your house.”

Because we are so far removed from the culture and language of that time, and no longer recognize which are male and female names, it is easy to overlook these women who were active throughout the early church, alongside Paul and other church leaders.

For discussion and reflection

- Which of these women are familiar to you? What sermons have you heard about them?
- Which woman would you like to get to know better if that were possible? Why?
- How might these women and men be role models for us today?

Didn't Paul say that women should be silent and submissive?

In looking at this question, it is helpful to start with this well-known affirmation of equality and unity from Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Scholars believe this verse was an early Christian baptismal formula and therefore a central part of Christian identity. For baptism was the ceremony whereby new members came into the church and symbolized in a dramatic way that following Christ meant dying to sin and being reborn as a member of God's world-wide family.³⁰ Further, by replacing circumcision as the primary rite of initiation, baptism allowed women and Gentiles to be included in the community on an equal footing with Jewish men.³¹

In a very direct way, in fact, this verse responded to and challenged the Jewish prayer:

Blessed be God that he did not make me a Gentile;
blessed be God that he did not make me ignorant [or a slave];
blessed be God that he did not make me a woman.³²

In using this statement, therefore, Paul was emphasizing that in this new family there should be no distinctions between people. Instead, we are all "...Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:29) We are all chosen people, and worthy of inheriting the family's resources.

Despite these affirmations, however, the early church struggled to live out their meaning, in ways not unlike how we struggle to practice our faith today.

1 Corinthians 11:3–16

Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul responded to numerous problems that had emerged among the believers. In this passage, Paul urged women to wear a veil when they pray and prophesy in public, since women who pray without a veil dishonor their husbands.³³ As Bailey notes, in Jewish culture husbands were the only ones who should see their wife’s hair, and “...women could be divorced if they uncovered their heads in public.”³⁴ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains further that loose hair was a sign of adultery or uncleanness.³⁵ These customs may not have been as strong in Greek society, yet most women would have covered their head in public settings. Therefore Paul was urging women not to flaunt their freedom in Christ but remain respectful of the cultures in which they lived.

To bolster his argument, Paul used the idea of headship. The Greek word *kephale* has often been understood to mean authority or domination. But it can also mean source or origin, as in the source of a river or the source of life. As David Hamilton, an evangelical missionary and scholar, points out, this latter makes more sense here, since Paul does not present a linear order of hierarchy, but rather a timeline: Christ (as the agent of creation) is the source of every man, Eve was created out of Adam, and God is the source of Christ.³⁶

This matches well what Cyril of Alexander wrote in the fifth century, “Thus we say that the *kephale* of every man is Christ, because he was made through him and brought forward to birth...and the *kephale* of woman is man, because she was taken from his flesh and has him as her source. Likewise, the *kephale* of Christ is God because he is from him according to nature.”³⁷

Similarly, Bishop Theodore from the same century wrote that “...just as Christ was considered head of all who had been born

anew in Him, so the woman has man as her head ‘since she had taken her being from him.’”³⁸ This understanding also more closely matches Jesus’ example of headship, as one who gives and nurtures life. He is not a lord who dominates and controls, but the One who came to bring abundant life for all. (John 10:10–16)

Bailey argues further that traditional translations of verse 9 contribute to misunderstanding this text. When the Greek word *dia* is translated as *for*, it appears Paul is arguing that “woman was created *for* man.” Bailey claims it would be better to use *because of*, since that is how *dia* is translated in verse 10. The verse would then read “woman was created *because of* the man,” not to serve him but because the man was lonely and needed a companion.³⁹

The phrase about angels is hard to understand and scholars are uncertain what it means. Fiorenza notes that these Christians spoke in tongues of “mortals and of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1) and would have expected angels to be present during worship. Therefore, “...women should not worship as cultically unclean persons by letting their hair down but should pin it up as a sign both of their spiritual power and of control over their heads.”⁴⁰

Interestingly, immediately after this statement Paul again insisted on mutuality and interdependence between men and women: “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.” (Verses 11–12) Thus, Paul seems to soften his harsh words and give voice to the mutuality he actually practiced in working with women. In the end, he concluded his argument by simply appealing to custom, another admission suggesting these traditions could be different in other times and cultures.

1 Corinthians 14:34–36

This passage is often cited as clear instruction that women are to remain silent in the church. This does look obvious if one reads only those verses. Yet, it is helpful to look at this teaching in the context of the larger passage and the time in which it was written.

These verses are part of a lengthy discussion about orderly worship that starts in chapter 11. Bailey outlines Paul's instructions this way:

- A. Disorders in worship (11:2–34)
Improper dress of men and women; improper observance of the Lord's Supper
- B. Spiritual gifts (Chapter 12)
- C. Love (Chapter 13)
- B. Spiritual gifts (14:1–25)
- A. Disorders in worship (14:26–36)
Prophets talking all at once; women talking in disruptive ways

Looking at the larger passage, it is clear that women are not the only ones singled out for correction. Prophets are also to be silent when others are speaking, and those speaking in tongues should be silent if there is no interpreter. (1 Corinthians 14:28,30) All are instructed to worship in appropriate ways, to do things “decently and in order.” (1 Corinthians 14:40)

Overall, one pictures a congregation that is lively and a bit unruly, with people so excited about their new-found faith and so eager to learn and contribute that the services had become chaotic and disorganized, not conducive to sound teaching and worship. Since women had little access to education or freedom to move outside the home, they likely did not know Greek, the common language used at that time, and so may have interrupted with numerous questions. Perhaps they even resorted to chatting among themselves, if they did not understand what was being said.⁴¹

Amazingly, Paul did not chastise the women for wanting to learn but in fact encouraged them to do so. But this should be done at home, where their questions would not disrupt the worship service. Given the culture of that time, this support for women's learning was quite remarkable.

It is also important to remember that throughout these chapters, it is assumed that women and men are both participating in the worship service. Even when women are told to cover their heads, the problem is not that they are praying and prophesying

but the fact that they are doing so without the attire considered appropriate in that culture.

1 Timothy 2:11–15

This text also tells women to learn in silence. However, the Greek word does not mean total silence. In fact, it is another form of the word used in verse two: “that we may lead a *quiet* and peaceable life.”⁴² It is also the word used to urge idle people “...to *settle down* and earn the bread they eat.”⁴³ In ancient times, this word often described a model student, who was willing to learn quietly and without arguing.⁴⁴ Certainly, students would not have been silent at all times, yet it was important that they listen carefully and respectfully to their teachers.

Verse 12 goes on to specify that women should not teach or have authority over men. Here again, the Greek word is important. Bailey explains that *authenteo* appears only once in the New Testament and is a very strong word meaning “to lord over” or “usurp authority.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the meaning was not so much that women cannot teach, but they should not be lording it over others or taking unlawful authority over the community.

The social context is also very significant. Timothy was working in Ephesus, a city renowned for the temple of Artemis. Presided over by powerful women virgins and castrated men, the temple played a major role in the culture and economy of the city.⁴⁶ In this setting, it is not hard to imagine that women were among those teaching false doctrines; and some may have been downright overbearing, especially toward their husbands or other male leaders. If so, Bailey may be right in arguing this verse meant something like: “I do not allow these ignorant women to batter the men. They are to stop shouting and calm down.”⁴⁷

This could also explain why Paul reminded them of Eve’s sin. If some women were indeed “lording it over” men, then this was a stern reminder that women can also be deceived and lead others astray.⁴⁸ Bailey notes that the early church leader Chrysostom connected this passage to Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12–14 about Adam’s sin: “After the example of Adam’s transgression...so here

the female sex transgressed, not the male. As all men died through one (Adam) because that one sinned, so the whole female race transgressed because the woman was in the transgression.”⁴⁹ In a sense, Paul is balancing things here. Having focused on Adam in earlier writings, Paul now needed to remind believers that Eve also sinned.

But why does he finish by saying “...she will be saved through childbearing?” Does this mean that women need to bear children in order to be saved? The more literal New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation is helpful here: “But women will be preserved through the bearing of children.” Pastor Dianne McDonnell explains that people believed the goddess Artemis ruled over conception and birth and offered protection to women as they faced the very real dangers of childbirth.⁵⁰ Perhaps, therefore, Paul wanted to assure women they did not need to worship Artemis in order to be kept safe but only to “...continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:21–33, Colossians 3:12–19 and I Peter 3:1–12

These passages instruct wives to be subject to their husbands and accept their authority. What is often overlooked is that in each case, husbands are also instructed to love their wives. In the Ephesians text, for instance, 13 verses are devoted to discussing the husband/wife relationship, but only three of these address the wife alone. The first verse urges everyone “...to be subject to one another,” the last addresses both, and the other eight verses specifically instruct husbands to love their wives, as Christ loved the church and as they love their own bodies. Paul also referred to baptism, which as noted above, meant becoming new creatures in God’s family. In the Colossians 3 passage, Paul again used the image of baptism by describing the process of dying to sin and putting on the ways of Christ. He urged the believers to: “...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love.” (Verses 12–14)

1 Peter 3:8 also mentions love, instructing everyone to have “...unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart,

and a humble mind.” In addition, verse 7 tells husbands to honor their wives, since women are “also heirs of the gracious gift of life.” This theme of inheritance is important and Paul mentions it in Galatians 3:29 and Colossians 3:24 as well.

In their book, *Colossians Remixed*, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat argue that *inheritance* is a central theme of the biblical story, calling to mind Jewish practices of forgiving debts, freeing slaves and practicing Sabbath rest and Jubilee. All of these laws grew out of Israel’s own experience of slavery and applied equally to women and men.⁵¹ And they pointed to a community in which everyone was an *heir*, a full member of the family and worthy of receiving a portion of the family inheritance. Since women and slaves were not usually included in this way, this was revolutionary.

Indeed, as the early Christians tried to live out these beliefs, they were often considered dangerous and subversive, undermining the stability of the Roman Empire. For empires are built on hierarchy, enforced at all levels of society. In that time, Caesar was at the top of the pyramid, reigning over a small wealthy class, who in turn managed all those who labored under them and were dependent on their charity. This pattern was replicated in the household, with the father of a family ruling over women, children and slaves. The lines of relationship were therefore primarily vertical, with people at the bottom competing among themselves for the attention and favor of those higher up the ladder.

As a result, it was truly radical for people from different communities—Jews and Gentiles, slaves and slave-owners, poor and rich, women and men—to meet together as equals and share common experiences of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, worship and instruction. No doubt, one reason church leaders needed to address these relationships is that some groups got carried away with these new freedoms, and acted in ways which caused tension and backlash in the surrounding community. Fearing the movement would be crushed, church leaders urged caution and restraint.

These leaders also had to be careful what they wrote, in case their letters fell into the wrong hands. When Paul addressed these

issues, therefore, he said some of the expected things about wives, slaves and children. Still, he surrounded these instructions with an emphasis on love, Jesus' example and the themes of baptism and inheritance, so the believers would understand them in the context of their new community. As Walsh and Keesmaat explain,

For those who do not know the story, either of Israel or of Jesus, this advice seems innocent enough. It appears to uphold the status quo while advising tolerance. But for those who know the story, the clues are there, the allusions are made and the hidden meaning is understood. For those with ears to hear, the message is clear: this is a God who proclaims a different kingdom from the ensnaring oppression of the empire, a God who frees slaves and calls for his followers to do likewise.⁵²

Perhaps this seems far-fetched. Yet, Christians have come to reject slavery. Although Paul did not say this directly then, the church now understands that owning slaves is wrong and those who follow Jesus cannot participate in these practices. In a similar way, Jesus' example leads us to see that any pattern of domination is wrong, including men over women. Women and men are equal and should work together as partners.

Paul even gives expression to this type of mutuality in 1 Corinthians 7:2–5. There he states very clearly that both husband and wife have rights and both have “authority” over the other. Further, the marriage relationship should include respect, reciprocity and mutual decision-making. These values and practices still provide a helpful model for couples today.

For discussion and reflection

- How do you understand these New Testament passages?
- What did Jesus teach and model about authority, leadership and power?
- How do you understand mutuality? headship?
- How did the early Christians demonstrate new ways of living with one another? How did they accept the customs of their time and culture?

Concluding thoughts

This subject of relationships between women and men continues to be a difficult one for many in our world. Women and girls continue to suffer high rates of abuse, violence, exploitation and poverty. And we continue to wrestle with the notion that real leadership means being forceful and in control, more than loving and kind. We continue to think that hierarchy is necessary, and that patterns of mutuality and collaboration are unrealistic.

For those who believe in equality for all, and the possibilities of cooperation and teamwork, it is wonderful to recognize there are signposts throughout the Bible, pointing to God's desire that women and men live and work together in mutuality, respect and love. Though marred by sin and violence, this ideal of partnership began in creation and shows up in numerous places along the way.

Most decisively, Jesus came to model what God intended for us, in all our relationships. He was certainly a true leader, yet he resisted hierarchy and instead practiced mutual service. When his disciples argued repeatedly (even during the last supper!) about who among them would be the greatest, he washed their feet. He also repeatedly reminded them:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...⁵³

Jesus also lifted up and encouraged those in his society who were most ignored and disregarded, including women. As Walter Wink summarized, Jesus' band of followers is:

...scandalously mixed, including prostitutes like the one who washed his feet with her tears..., women freed from demons like Mary Magdalene, and aristocratic women like Joanna, wife of Herod's chamberlain.... It was without precedent for women to travel as disciples with a teacher, and some of them, like Joanna, left home, family and husband to do so. When the rich young man asked to follow him, Jesus told him to sell all...and follow him, destitute.... The women, however, he puts in the role of patrons and benefactors.... It is women who view his death, women who visit the tomb and find it empty, and women to whom he first appears.⁵⁴

The early church sought to follow Jesus in this way, but like us, often fell short. Even so, their practice revealed a community in which women and men worked together in new and surprising ways. May we continue to hear Christ's call and follow his example, in demonstrating strong love, deep respect and courageous service for everyone.

Additional resources

Books

- Bilezikian, Gilbert, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, Baker Academic, 3rd ed., 2006.
- Blanekenhor, David, Don Browning and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, eds., *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.
- Coffey, Kathy, *Hidden Women of the Gospels*, Orbis Books, 2005.
- Cunningham, Loren and David Joel Hamilton, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry and Leadership*, YWAM Publishing, 2000.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 10th ed., 1994.
- George, Janet, *Still Side by Side, a concise explanation of biblical equality*, Christians for Biblical Equality (cbeinternational.org), 2009.
- Meyers, Carol, ed., *Women in Scripture*, Houghton, 2000.
- Penner, Carol, ed., *Women & Men, Gender in the Church*, Herald Press, 1998.
- Pierce, Ronald and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, InterVarsity Press; 2nd ed., 2005.
- Polaski, Sandra Hack, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul*, Chalice Press, 2005.
- Swartley, Willard, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*, Herald Press, 1983.

Web resources

- Bailey, Kenneth E., “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View” and “The Women Prophets of Corinth: A study of aspects of I Corinthians 11:2–16.” *Theology Matters*, Jan/Feb 2000, theologymatters.com/JanFeb001.
- Christians for Biblical Equality, cbeinternational.org.
- McDonnell, Dianne, “Let the women keep silent in the churches: What did Paul mean?” and “Paul and Women Teachers: Understanding 1 Timothy, Chapters 1 & 2” at churchofgoddfw.com/women/index.shtml.
- Mennonite Central Committee U.S., resources.mcc.org.
- Mennonite Women Canada, mennowomencanada.blogspot.com.
- Mennonite Women USA, mennonitewomenusa.org.
- Mickelsen, Avlera, ed., *Empowering Women and Men to Use Their Gifts Together in Advancing the Gospel*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 53. From the Forum held in Thailand, 2005, lausanne.org/en/documents/lops/869-lop-53.html.
- Women in Leadership Project, Mennonite Church USA, mennoniteusa.org/executive-board/women-in-leadership-project.

Notes

1. Metzger, Bruce and Roland Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, notes on pages 3–4.
2. Morschauer, Scott N., “Created in the Image of God,” *Theology Matters*, Nov/Dec 1997, 3.
3. Genesis 2:18, New American Standard Bible (NASB).
4. Psalms 10:14, 30:10 and 54:4. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word *ezer* refers to God’s help 16 out of 21 times this word is used.
5. Cunningham, Loren and David Joel Hamilton, *Why Not Women?* Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2000, 98.
6. It is interesting to compare Hagar’s experience with Moses’ desire to see God, as recorded in Exodus 33:18–23.
7. Numbers 27:1–11, 36:1–12. These women are also mentioned in Numbers 26:33, Joshua 17:3 and 1 Chronicles 7:15. For the story of Korah’s rebellion and its aftermath, see Numbers 16–17. Note especially Numbers 17:10–13, where God told Moses to keep Aaron’s staff as a “warning to rebels” and the people respond, “Everyone who approaches the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all to perish?”
8. Proverbs 3:15, 18 and Proverbs 8:23. See also Proverbs 3:13–22, Proverbs 8, Job 28:12–28 and The Wisdom of Solomon 17:21–8:18.
9. Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35.
10. John 4:13–14, 6:35–58, 7:37 and Revelation 22:17.
11. Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6.
12. Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teachings of Jesus*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 70–81.
13. Cunningham and Hamilton, 118. See Deuteronomy 32:6, 2 Samuel 7:14, 1 Chronicles 17:13, 22:10, 28:6, Psalm 68:5, 89:26, 103:13, Proverbs 3:12, Isaiah 9:6, 63:16, 64:8, Jeremiah 3:4, 19, 31:9 and Malachi 2:10. Hamilton also lists 1 Chronicles 29:10 but the NRSV translation does not use the word father in that verse. According to *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged* (John R. Kohlenberger III, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991) the name Yahweh is used nearly 7000 times and translated LORD or Lord GOD (p. 804 and 541); the name God is used more than 4000 times (p.527); and Lord more than 2,000 times (p. 798).

14. Interestingly, Jesus' use of *Father* for God varies considerably in the gospels. Mark was written first and only used this name four times, whereas in John, the gospel written last and during a period of great conflict with the Jewish authorities, Jesus used this term more than 100 times.
15. Bailey, Kenneth E., *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, Combined Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, 181–182.
16. Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34.
17. Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4, 63:7.
18. Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20, 15:8–10.
19. Matthew 10:2–4, Mark 3:16–19, Luke 6:12–16 and Acts 1:12–13.
20. We also need to remember that Jesus did not include any Gentiles among the twelve, yet this has not excluded them from full participation in the church.
21. Bailey, Kenneth E., “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View,” *Theology Matters*, Jan/Feb 2000, theology-matters.com/JanFeb001.
22. Luke 10:38–42. Bailey explains that, “To ‘sit at the feet’ of a rabbi meant to become a disciple of a rabbi.” *Ibid*, 2.
23. Mark 5: 25–43. Since discharges of blood and dead bodies were viewed as unclean, the woman with the issue of blood and the young girl who just died would have been considered unclean, along with anyone who touched them. See Leviticus 15:19–30 and Numbers 19:11–22.
24. See Acts 1:14, 2:1–21, 5:14, 8:3, 9:1–2, 22:4.
25. Acts 9:36, 12:12, 16:11–15, 17:4, 12, 34 and 21:8–9.
26. See Acts 18, Romans 16:3–5, 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19.
27. Many translations use the word deacon but the Greek word *diakonos* is the same as that which is translated minister elsewhere, e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:6, 11:15, Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 1:7, 4:7.
28. Paul used the Greek word for ‘worked hard’ to describe ‘work for the gospel,’ e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:10, 16:15–16, Galatians 4:11, Philippians 2:16, Colossians 1:29, 1 Timothy 4:10, 5:17. See David M. Scholer, “Paul’s Women Co-Workers in the Ministry of the Church,” *The Wisdom of Daughters*, edited by Reta Halteman Finger and Kari Sandhaas, Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press, 2001, 76.
29. Although some translations use the male name Junias, Bailey explains that all of the early manuscripts and church fathers read this name as feminine. Not until late in the 13th century did some manuscripts and translations switch to Junias. This was done without any evidence and

- despite the fact that such a name was unknown in any Latin or Greek text, whereas the female name, Junia, was quite common in classical literature. See Bailey, “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View,” 4.
30. In early Christian practice, believers often stripped off their old clothing, descended into the water, were baptized and then given a new robe as a sign of their new life in Christ. See Alan Krieder, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Trinity Press International, 1999, 25.
 31. Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schussler, *In Memory of Her*, New York: Crossroad, 1983, 208–209.
 32. Kohlenberger, John, “Jesus’ Treatment of Women,” E-Quality, Summer 2008, Vol. 7, Issue 2, at: cbeinternational.org/new/E-Journal/2008/08summer/08summerkohlenberger.html. See also Cunningham and Hamilton, 138–139.
 33. The Greek word for man and husband is the same and only the context indicates which is meant. Similarly, the Greek word for woman can also be translated wife. See *New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 240 NT. Also see McDonnell, Dianne, “Let the women keep silent in the churches: What did Paul mean?” at churchofgoddfw.com/women/silent.html, 3.
 34. Bailey, Kenneth E. “The Women Prophets of Corinth: A study of aspects of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16.” *Theology Matters*, Jan/Feb 2000, theologymatters.com/JanFeb001.
 35. Fiorenza, 228.
 36. Cunningham and Hamilton, 167–169.
 37. Cyril of Alexander, *De Recte Fide ad Arcadium et Marianam*. Quoted in Kroeger, “The Classical Concept of Head as Source,” Hull, Gretchen G., *Equal to Serve*, Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell Co. 1991, 277.
 38. Manfred T. Brauch, F. F. Bruce, Peter H. Davids and Peter H. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, “Head of the Woman is Man?” (1 Corinthians 11:3), electronic edition. Source: Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Migne PG 66.888C).
 39. Bailey, Kenneth E. “The Woman Prophets of Corinth,” 14.
 40. Fiorenza, 228.
 41. Bailey notes that Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city and included people from many places, all speaking their own languages. So Greek functioned in a way similar to how English today is a common language used by diverse people around the world. Bailey, 6.
 42. Cunningham and Hamilton, 218. This translation is reflected in the *American Standard* and *New American Standard* versions which use

the words *quietness*, *quietly* and *quiet* in verses 11–12. The New International Version (NIV), 2011 edition, also uses the word *quiet* in verse 12. See also McDonnell, Dianne, “Paul and Women Teachers: Understanding 1 Timothy,” and the NIV translation of verse 2: “...that we may live *peaceful* and quiet lives.” (churchofgoddfw.com/women/paul-women.shtml, 2).

43. 2 Thessalonians 3:12, NIV or in the NRSV translation: “...to work *quietly* and to earn their own living.”
44. Cunningham and Hamilton, 218.
45. Bailey, 8–9.
46. See 1 Timothy 1:3, Acts 19–20.
47. Bailey, 9.
48. For other examples of Paul using strong language, see Galatians 2:11–14, 3:1–5.
49. Bailey, 9.
50. McDonnell, Dianne, “Paul and Women Teachers: Understanding 1 Timothy,” 1 and Haddad, Mimi, “Paul and Women,” *Empowering Women and Men to Use their Gifts Together in Advancing the Gospel*, Lausanne Occasional Papers No. 53, 34. Ron Leadbetter also writes that Artemis was the patron of women in childbirth; see Encyclopedia Mythica at pantheon.org/articles/a/artemis.html.
51. Walsh, Brian and Sylvia Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, Intervarsity Press, 2004, 205–212.
52. *Ibid*, 209.
53. Matthew 20:25–28. See also Matthew 18:1–5, Matthew 23: 6–12, Mark 9:33–37, 10:35–45, Luke 9:46–48, 14:11, 22:24–27 and John 13:12–17.
54. Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 129–130.



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