



# From Prejudice to Biblical Principles

by Bruce Lowe

A 91-year-old CBE member offers insight based on his life-long conviction about biblical equality

## Early memories of equality

I can't remember a time when I did not think women were equal to men. My parents' upbringing must have indoctrinated me before I was old enough to know that some people disagreed with them. What did my parents tell me? My guess is, it was never mentioned. But I clearly remember being impressed when I was very young with my father's utter devotion to my mother and my thinking that girls and women were about as close to angels as you could get on earth. (My understanding has since expanded, but I still think some of them are.)

My father's sister influenced me. For forty years she was a missionary to Korea. When she came home with us on furlough, I remember her beautiful spirit, her dedication to the Lord and to the Koreans, and my thinking she must be the most wonderful Christian in the world. Without doubt, women could never be inferior to men.

Some of my early concepts of equality may have come from my parent's frequent reminders that prejudice is wrong. They were thinking of black people at the time. One Sunday when I was about ten years old, I remember

Mother was downcast after teaching her Sunday School class. Her class of seven-year-old girls sang "Jesus loves the little children...red or yellow, black or white..." When she asked the girls if it would be wonderful if they could have a little Indian girl, or a little Chinese girl in the class, they were all smiles and answered "yes." But when she asked about having a little black girl in their class — no smiles, heads down, silence. Through tears Mother said to us, "They are only seven years old!" I feel certain my parents' abhorrence of prejudice also applied to sexism.

## The problem with never questioning equality

Forty years ago we joined a church with a woman associate pastor. In those forty years, the church has ordained ten women to the ministry, and I have been blessed to be on several of the ordaining councils.

Thank God, I've never had much of a chance to be sexist.

But always believing in equality had a negative side. I had never reasoned my way to that belief. I had no clear concept of why I believed it.

One day I learned about a group that reached the conclusion that their church should be egalitarian after studying the issue. I realized that sexists were sexist because they had never studied the matter. They had pre-judged it; by definition, anyone who has judged without enlightenment is prejudiced. Prejudice is so ugly.

Then I realized...that definition fit me! My judgment, however positive, was made without study. I had pre-judged it, too, even if it was in the other direction. Could I defend being egalitarian? I needed to study. So I did and was greatly rewarded. I am so glad something awakened me.

## The transcultural principle of biblical equality

As I studied, the sun suddenly burst through the clouds as I came to realize something so simple yet so profoundly true: the equality of women and men is one of God's great, eternal, unchangeable principles on which all generations are to shape their lives. A Bible principle! Scholars make a distinction between the Bible's temporary, cultural rules and its eternal, transcultural principles. Many of the Bible's cultural rules were for the time and circumstances when they were given. As the culture changed, these rules no longer applied.

This distinction settled all questions for me. If the equality of men and women is a biblical principle, nothing can contradict it. Nothing. Any verse that seems to contradict a transcultural principle is necessarily a rule that only applied in a particular time and culture.

If the scripture says the husband is the head of his wife, whatever it means, it can't mean that they are not equal. The argument about whether the Greek New Testament word *kephale* should be translated "head" or "source" becomes irrelevant: if it meant CEO, it would violate the eternal principle; so it has to mean "source"—the husband is to be the source of his wife's strength and joy.

And likewise with every other verse sexists use to keep women from doing anything, just because they are women, that men are permitted to do. The sexists' interpretations violate the principle of biblical equality and must be discarded.

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## Biblical evidence for the equality of men and women

Readers of this magazine already know the biblical evidence that supports the truth of this principle, but I'll repeat a little of it because we love to read it again.

### Old Testament

Genesis 1 and 2 introduce the principle of biblical equality, beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve in God's image. If they were unequal, one of them would not be in God's image. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, women serve in positions of leadership and responsibility with complete acceptance by the people. For example: Deborah, the judge-prophet stood in authority over the entire nation of Israel (Judges 4); Esther, in courage and wisdom ordered the Jews to fast and issued decrees for Israel to obey (Esther 9:32).

Women were visited by heavenly beings and spoken to by God just as men were (Gen. 16:7-14; 21:14-19; Judges 13:3-5, 9). Women were judges (Judges 4:4), prophetesses (Exod. 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22; Neh. 6:14; Isa. 8:3) and counselors to a king and to an army general (1 Sam. 25:32,33; 2 Sam. 14:1-21; 20:14-22). Genesis 21:8-14 tells of Sarah overruling Abraham. The ideal woman of Proverbs 31 is an astute business woman who manages the household and is honored for her wisdom and teaching skills.

### New Testament

In the New Testament, the principle of biblical equality continues in the life of Jesus who, to the amazement of his disciples and fury of the scribes and Pharisees, treated women as equals in every recorded encounter with them.

Paul's writing also supports the principle of biblical equality in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," in his extended statements of equality in 1 Corinthians 7:2-34, 11:4-12, and in his often-repeated principle of reciprocity among believers—their submitting to, or being subject to, one another (see Rom. 12:10, 14:7, 15:1; 1 Cor. 7:3-6, 11:11-12, 13:5b, 16:15,16; Gal. 6:2, Eph. 4:16, 5:21; Phil. 2:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:5; cf. Matt. 20:25-28).

Other scriptures imply it as well. Christians are to yield personal rights, as 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10 teach (see also 2 Cor. 8:9, 9:4-6, 10:24, and 12:18). No wonder it has been said that "aside from Jesus, women have never had a more ardent advocate for full equality in home and church than [Paul]" (C. S. Cowles, *A Woman's Place*, p. 98).

There is also evidence in the New Testament that women held the same leadership positions as men. For example, women prayed and prophesied (1 Cor. 11:4, 5). The New Testament defines prophesying as preaching; in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul teaches that prophesying is for "upbuilding, encouragement and consolation" and "edifies the church" (vs. 3, 5); and that "you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (v. 31); and that an unsaved person may become a believer by hearing prophecy (vs. 24, 25). This is not

foretelling the future; it is proclaiming the gospel. Women preached in the New Testament church.

If women are to preach, do we not defy God by not permitting them to do so? And if women's status keeps them from preaching, doesn't that mean there are two classes of members in the church?

Would Christ have a superior class and an inferior class in his church?



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## Historical evidence for the equality of men and women

There is much more evidence for the principle of biblical equality, not only from the New Testament but also from first and second century history. Evidence from the early church includes references to women serving as ministers and being ordained by the laying on of hands. The catacombs have pictures of women presiding at the Lord's Supper.

But the equality sustained in the first and early second centuries was gradually lost. Elisabeth Meier Tetlow explains that:

As long as servant remained the primary model for Christian ministry, women were able to minister on the same basis as men. When, at the close of the New Testament period, the Christian model of servant was replaced by Jewish models of presbyter and bishop, and in the second century the Old Testament model of Levitical priesthood was applied to ecclesiastical office, women came to be excluded from the official ministry of the Church. (*Women and Ministry in the New Testament*, p. 78f)

Women have proven themselves over and over to be capable of doing anything that men can do of the mind, heart, and spirit. Did some of you hear Jimmy Carter telling a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Assembly about the little Methodist church near his home? It had continued a decline even though a succession of (male) pastors were sent to revive it. So finally a (mere) woman was sent with instructions to close the church as gently as possible. She went. A year later the church was thriving, and she was preaching to a full sanctuary every Sunday.

## Conclusion

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women in ministry, and even leadership, was not contested biblically. My experience had led me to the knowledge that women can be fully called by God to serve in any capacity. I focused on responding through argument. This approach is important, but it's not exhaustive. I failed to invite my complementarian friends to experience the powerful way God was using women's leadership in the church. Maybe they would have written off such experiences the same way they dismissed the so-called "bias" of a brilliant — and female — professor....

After Ehud off-ed King Eglon, he snuck away without the servants noticing. When they finally decided to enter, they found their king slain. Ehud returned to Israel and blew his trumpet to prepare the army. "Could Ehud have been a "deliverer" for Israel if he were right-handed?" many wonder. Most of the left-handed supporters argue that the Bible clearly shows the full potential and calling of those born left-handed. The guards would have frisked the left leg, where right-handers would have hidden weapons. So only a left-hander could have fulfilled God's will. Right-handed supporters are quick to respond that God only used a left-hander in that particular situation because no right-hander was available. "The left-handers are always God's second choice," they claim. Doesn't such a debate forget that God used Ehud, regardless of whether he was the first or second choice?

Entering seminary at Princeton, I encountered less resistance to women in ministry. Considering that just under half of my peers are women, I would hope that everyone can see the potential of these women. They are called and capable, and perhaps even over-qualified for many ministry positions. However, even if many seminaries, like Princeton, educate nearly equal numbers of men and women, the struggle in the church remains. Due to the theological restrictions of women in many denominations, people are not given the opportunity to experience the leadership of these seminary-educated women.

Israel experienced 80 years of peace after their victory over Moab (v. 30). But as most biblical stories demonstrate, the Israelites soon forgot their deliverance. Canaan became the new oppressors after the death of Ehud; Israel cried out again to God and God brought a deliverer: the prophet Deborah. She commanded Barak to assemble ten thousand men and led them

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of capable workers that are so greatly needed, not to mention robbing women of their call from God? Does Satan laugh, knowing he doesn't have to do a thing to bring this about; he can let God's people do it for him?

Prejudice means judging without study, without facts, without enlightenment. Pre-judging. Obviously the cure is enlightening the unenlightened. But this is disheartening; the prejudiced see no need for study.

What can we do besides pray and weep? Could denominations do more to teach the truth about biblical equality? Could pastors preach more about the evils of prejudice and sexism? Could church leaders have the same expectation that young women will be called to preach, just as they expect young men to be? Would a series of small

into battle against Sisera, the commander of the army of Canaan. He replied that he would only go if Deborah would go also. Upon consenting, Deborah also prophesied something else: "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

In many ways, Israel's experience with women leaders is similar to my own. The narrative does not find Barak questioning Deborah on grounds of gender. Rather, he knows she is one who brings the Word of God. His obedience does not make him weak or submissive to women, but to God. It is God who provided the orders and the deliverance. The glory being given to a woman serves to teach both Barak and Deborah that the glory of victory is not their own, but God's. Whether it is women or men in leadership, all are servants of God. A leader is only capable in the ministry of the church as long as they are willing to submit themselves to God's Word. And as the Bible teaches us, both women and men have shared in that very capacity.



God uses people who are right-handed and left-handed. God uses men and women. God doesn't use women as a second choice any more than God doesn't use left-handers as a second choice. Admittedly, there are no such groups as the left-handers and the right-handers, because it is a little silly to think that being left-handed could ever discredit someone's ministry. Being left-handed is circumstantial, like being a woman, and that alone will not dictate the extent to which God is able to work in and through someone. What our academic arguments might lose sight of is the simple and empirical evidence: we have women pastors, and women serving in all other areas of ministry. While we can argue back and forth about what is biblical, we could also allow ourselves to experience the powerful ways in which God is already using women in the church today.



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group Bible studies on prejudice and sexism help some people and churches? Could church libraries add books about biblical equality to encourage people to study the subject? If a discussion board were added to the church's website, could members participate in on-line discussions about biblical equality, perhaps with a resource person or panel to moderate? Do women need to be added to deacon and elder boards? Is a special effort needed to add a woman to the church staff—and don't most churches need one anyway to minister to the church's women since men sometimes can't?

I wish all of you could have a church like the one where I am a member. On a recent Sunday, ten deacons served the Lord's Supper and half of them were women. I fear my church is one in a thousand Baptist churches. Ten thousand? Dear God, how long? How long?