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Priscilla Papers is an interdisciplinary journal. And rightly so, for both CBE and Priscilla Papers advocate for an interdisciplinary cause. More precisely, CBE and Priscilla Papers advocate in an interdisciplinary way for a biblical cause, a Christian cause, a kingdom cause.

While the journal is understandably heavy on biblical and theological investigation, evangelical egalitarianism also gains insight and momentum from other disciplines—including, but certainly not limited to, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. And, of course, each of these disciplines includes more specific modes of inquiry and expression, such as anthropology, ethics, hermeneutics, homiletics, logic, and pastoral theology.

Priscilla Papers is both academic and applicable, both scholarly and accessible. Each discipline has a certain amount of technical vocabulary. The most obvious example is our frequent use of ancient languages. Though many of our readers have studied Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, many others rely on transliteration to navigate articles whose argumentation depends on details of these languages. Similarly, each discipline comes with a set of methodologies of interest to practitioners, but not necessarily to non-specialists. In this issue, for example, Susan Howell and Cameron Schatt have contributed an article based on a social scientific methodology that includes frequent reference to statistics. Unlike a journal written specifically for an audience of social science experts, Priscilla Papers has moved these statistics to the endnotes. (No need to thank me!)

The contents of this particular issue of Priscilla Papers prompt me to write about the interdisciplinary nature of our task—or “interdisciplinarity,” as the cover theme states. Here you will first encounter a moving piece by Doug Groothuis. Though Doug is Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary, this article does not arise primarily from the discipline of philosophy. Rather, it is a personal reflection on Rebecca Merrill Groothuis’s contribution to biblical equality. Second is the above-mentioned article by Susan Howell and Cameron Schatt, which was conceived in a psychology course on gender at Campbellsville University in Kentucky. Third is a theological consideration of Mary’s Magnificat in light of its status as inspired and canonized text, written by Nijay Gupta, who teaches New Testament at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. Following is an intriguing and enlightening article by historian Jason Eden, who teaches at St. Cloud University in Minnesota. We then move to an article that stands at the intersection of biblical and literary studies, written by Francine Allen of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. The issue ends with homiletical flourish as Jennifer Morrow makes personal the question “Why Not Women?” with a sermon titled, “Why Not You?”

With interdisciplinarity comes uniqueness, and I trust you will agree that, as these several authors blur the lines of discipline-specific writing, they bring to light new ideas, new connections, new examples of integrative thinking. I thank them for their contributions, and I encourage you to do the same if you have the opportunity.

...greet you in the Lord.
Rebecca Merrill Groothuis’s Contribution to Biblical Equality: A Personal Testimony and Lament

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS

Biblical feminism is an oxymoron—or so I thought when I met Becky Merrill in 1983. She had leanings in this direction, but I did not let that stop me from being interested in her. But time makes fools of us all, especially when God undermines our convictions and replaces them with new insights into old issues. That year Becky joined the staff of The McKenzie Study Center, a campus ministry in Eugene, Oregon, which served The University of Oregon through teaching, writing, and discipleship. Fresh after receiving my bachelor’s degree in philosophy in 1979, I joined this ambitious ministry, modeled on the vision of Francis Schaeffer. As a small team of under-funded but earnest evangelicals, we desired to defend and apply the Christian worldview at a secular university. Becky joined us to work as a graphic designer, editor, and writer—all before computers were used for this.

Becky and I began a friendship based on our common ideals and passions. I quickly found that she was a deep well of Christian commitment and insight. When I confessed that I had been researching for several years a book on the New Age Movement (as this hodgepodge spirituality was then called), she finally convinced me to start writing it, since, she said, I probably knew more about it than anyone else.1 I had not thought of that. Becky also volunteered to edit the book before I sent chapters to InterVarsity Press. At first, I proudly resisted many of her changes; but we soon became a writing-editing duo of great sympathy and productivity. She edited all my books, including the voluminous textbook, Christian Apologetics.2 Sadly, it will be the last book of mine to be clarified, enriched, and strengthened through her many hand-written comments. This is because Becky has a rare form of dementia which has stolen these abilities. There is no cure. She will only decline.

But this essay is not about Becky’s editing of my writings, even though I dedicated Christian Apologetics to her. It is, rather, about her writing and ministry pertaining to biblical equality. When we married in 1984, neither of us had an inkling that she would become a leading writer defending what is now called egalitarianism or simply biblical equality. Nor could I imagine that biblical feminist (to use the old term) was not an oxymoron, but rather what the Bible teaches.

Our journey to biblical equality began in earnest in the late 1980s. Becky began to notice a bothersome pattern in sermons preached in various churches: Pastors often deprecated, snubbed, or made light of their wives. These creatures—so blessed to have the pastors as husbands—were not as rational as males. Females were more emotionally-guided than males and needed the protection, provision, and guidance that only a husband could give. Worse yet, these ascriptions of inferiority were extended to all (or nearly all) females simply because they were females.

This began to concern Becky, and me also, although I might not have noticed if not for Becky’s comments, ruminations, and wise cracks. (She often saw things that I did not see.) Being a thinker with a strong sense of justice, Becky began to record her thoughts in notes, as she did her entire adult life—until recently. Unbeknownst to us, these stirrings would lead us to embrace and defend biblical egalitarianism.

Before explaining the nature and extent of Becky’s contribution to biblical equality, I invite you to consider her work ethic. Studiousness and diligence are foundational virtues in the academic life.3 Without them, scholarship sinks into the ruinous rut of recycling, posturing, oversimplification, obfuscation, and mediocrity. Having recently looked over the extensive documentation that lay behind the scenes of her writing—notes, drafts, articles—I remembered with vividness (and not a little pain) the studiousness of this Phi Beta Kappa and Mensa mind. Becky believed in objective truth and the virtues necessary to gain knowledge.4 One cannot fully understand Becky’s writing on equality without knowing that she was committed to three principles that guided all of her authorship and editing.

First, Becky was unflagging in her belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. She never countenanced any form of feminism or egalitarianism that brought into question or denied the utter truthfulness of holy scripture. As a life-long Christian and evangelical, Becky demanded the Amen of the Bible in order to form, hold, and defend strong beliefs. We were the Carl F. H. Henry and Francis A. Schaeffer kind of evangelicals when it came to biblical inerrancy. We still are. That means that the Bible, in the original autographs, is inspired in every word and is, therefore, infallible and inerrant in all that it teaches.5 Becky could sniff out theologies and interpretations that failed to hold a high view of scripture—however much the authors or speakers may have nominally affirmed it. Yes, she was a stickler—but never a pedant.

Second, knowing that egalitarians were often accused—rightly or wrongly—of twisting the scripture to support their position, Becky eschewed any hermeneutic untethered from authorial intent as the key to unlocking the meaning of the sacred text (see 2 Pet 3:16). NT scholar Gordon Fee6 and OT scholar Walter Kaiser7 were her guiding lights in this. She further took pains to establish that her interpretations were free from any postmodern hermeneutics.8 Becky was never driven by a pre-established agenda to find something in the text that was not intrinsically there to begin with.

Theological consistency was the third star by which Becky navigated the deep and dangerous waters of the egalitarian-traditionalist controversy. She was determined that the Bible
spoke with one voice, the voice of truth. Since truth is one, and because it is impossible for God to lie, every affirmation of scripture must logically agree with every other affirmation of scripture. This is known as the analogy of faith. While Becky holds no theological degrees, she is self-taught, an autodidact, gifted with great intelligence and spiritual discernment (see 1 Thess 5:21–23). For her, unless the entire Bible supported egalitarianism, she would not affirm it. We heartily agreed on this, which made our journey to biblical equality an unhurried one, full of questions, debate, and re-thinking.

When Becky became more confident of the egalitarian position, she envisioned a book carefully explaining what it was and what it was not. Logic would guide the quest, and history would put to rest the charge that secular feminism was the fire behind the quest for equality. She would also marshal the biblical case.

Baker Books gave Becky a contract for Women Caught in the Conflict, which was published in 1994. However, studiousness forbade her from making the biblical case in only one volume. The exegetical and theological apologetics awaited her next book. Becky traced the history of the gender debate in the church, clarified the issues at hand, and worked through all the basic logical and theological issues with great precision. She took pains to make clear that a biblically-grounded stance on gender equality did not lead to the endorsement of abortion or homosexuality.

Women Caught in the Conflict was endorsed by evangelical luminaries such as Richard Mouw, then a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and Kenneth Kantzer, who had been dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Kantzer also wrote the foreword. Reviews were, of course, mixed, but this book placed Becky in a small circle of articulate and conservative egalitarians. She began to write for the publications of Christians for Biblical Equality, was cited in many other works, and did numerous radio interviews—and some public speaking—on the topic. Her mellifluous voice and ready wit made her an ideal conversationalist (despite her shyness). When I once failed to be home for a radio interview of my own, Becky said to the radio station, “Well, I just came out with a book. Would you like to interview me?” They did. After I returned from a bicycle ride, Becky told me about this and we both laughed heartily, which is good medicine for the soul (Prov 17:22).

To promote Women Caught in the Conflict, Baker Books asked Becky to write a booklet, called The Feminist Bogeywoman. Becky deftly considered all the standard caricatures of egalitarianism (which was then often called “biblical feminism”) and refuted them. She did so without rancor or polemics. Rational arguments were the source of her concern and the secret of her success.

Good News for Women, published by Baker in 1997, offered the developed exegetical theological apologetic that could not be included in Women Caught in the Conflict. Becky scrupulously considered every major evangelical objection to biblical equality. She sifted through the case for equality, discarding what she took to be illogical or unbiblical or both, and constructing a position she thought would appeal to all evangelicals. Her case was strong, but her hope for a fair hearing of her views was often dashed by angry reviews, caricatures of her arguments, and the contempt of some biblical scholars who would not countenance the arguments of one outside of the academic guild—especially a woman. Becky and I thought that the window was open for a frank, careful, and civil discussion of this issue among theologically conservative Christians. We did not expect the harsh disagreements and even vitriol often dished out against “the feminists.” It was painful to this stalwart evangelical to be told that she denied the full authority of the Bible, simply because her exegetical and theological conclusions differed from those of the traditionalists.

Since the arguments leveled against her views did not expose any foundational weaknesses, she soldiered on, co-editing a book that may be her literary legacy for the movement: Discovering Biblical Equality.

Ronald Pierce, professor of OT at Biola University, contacted Becky in 2000 about a possible book project. Since he was in Denver for a meeting, he came to our home to discuss the project, which would be a major work defending and advocating biblical equality. We were all heartened by the vision, and Becky soon agreed. InterVarsity, the intrepid defender of evangelicalism, gave them a contract for this daunting project. As an alternative to the hierarchical book, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, this book would approach biblical equality from every angle: exegetical, theological, historical, and practical. This promise was fulfilled in 2005 when Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy was released. A result of five long years of writing and editing, rewriting and re-editing, this volume featured chapters by scholars such as Gordon Fee (the contributing editor), Craig Keener, I. Howard Marshall, Richard Hess, Aída Besançon Spencer, Linda Belleville, and others.

A work of this breadth and depth demanded much from Becky. We often joked of “the vast secondary literature” generated by this challenging project. This included various drafts of chapters, Becky’s edits and re-edits, email exchanges, and more. The rigor, diplomacy, patience, and dedication she invested in this work were remarkable and admirable.

Becky’s chapter, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role: Exploring the Logic of Women’s Subordination,” showcased what is likely Becky’s signature logical contribution to the gender debate: the traditionalist claim that hierarchicalism does not demean women because they are women is false. Becky worked on this argument (which is deeply philosophical) for several years, first presenting it in Good News for Women. I was impressed by her ardor in refining, sharpening, and strengthening this argument over several years. I urge my readers to study this thirty-page treatise, since no summary is sufficient. But perhaps the following captures the essential ideas:

1. Traditionalists claim that men and women are equal in their essential being before God and
humans. Women are not ontologically inferior as was taught in much of church history.

2. Traditionalists restrict all women from certain positions in the church, such as senior pastor, as well as being equal partners in marriage.

3. Given (2), traditionalists must restrict women’s service not based on their lesser abilities, but because of their essential being as females.

4. Therefore (a), traditionalists cannot affirm (1) as well as (2).

5. Therefore (b), traditionalism entails a contradiction and is, therefore, false.

How I yearn for Becky to evaluate my little summary of her elaborate and eloquent argument to see if it works. I hope it does.

I can say as a professional philosopher trained in the analytic tradition (tight definitions, structured arguments, careful reasoning) that Becky’s treatment of this topic sparkles with analytical gold. The merits of her argument were debated in a high-ranking philosophy of religion journal, *Philosophia Christi.* Adam Omelianchuk, a graduate student in philosophy and now a member of the *Priscilla Papers* Peer Review Team, defended and developed Becky’s ideas against the challenge of the philosopher, Steven Cowan, who, in turn, responded to Omelianchuk. As her husband and as a philosopher, this did my heart good.

As meager mortals, careers are never completely within our control. As Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, put it in “To a Mouse: On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough” (1785):

But, mouse, thou art not alone,
In proving foresight may be in vain,
The best laid schemes of mice and men,
Go oft astray,
And leave us nought but grief and pain,
To rend our day.

Becky’s calling as a writer and editor is now over. As the Preacher wrote:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Eccl 9:11–12 NRSV)

In her early thirties, my wife found a passion based on reason and revelation. This was the logical outflow of her life as a thinker, editor, and dedicated follower of Christ. Her conviction was that women and men are equally gifted for all manner of ministry in the church and co-leadership in marriage and child-rearing. Becky never aspired to be a pastor and did not seek fame. She never preached a sermon. The truth is what compelled her. The power she sought issued from the logic of arguments and the salience of ideas that should be neither ignored nor resisted. Along the way, she wrote two significant books, co-edited a major work, and wrote for a variety of publications, including *Christianity Today, Regeneration Quarterly, Eternity, Priscilla Papers, Mutuality, Christian Scholar’s Review,* and *The Rocky Mountain News.* Most of her writing concerned gender issues, but she also published on the right to life, culture, ethics, and worship. She is a published poet and has edified many souls with her singing of worship songs.

This is my lament and testimony. I lament her losses and the loss to an evangelical world that will no longer benefit from new contributions from her careful thinking and her cogent and lucid writing. But lamentation is the proper response of the soul to the loss of a true good, the recognition of sadness and anger before the face of God. Perhaps sixty of the Psalms are Psalms of lament and one entire book of scripture bears its name. Jesus lamented on the Cross. Lament is that element of life under the sun that allows us to hurt before God and even with God. We look up as the tears fall down. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and I mourn over her suffering and over what is to come as dementia takes its cruel toll. And yet I am grateful to the Giver of every good and perfect gift for my wife’s accomplishments, her passion, and her courage. I testify to that. Through it all, we try to remember the words of the Apostle Paul:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Cor 4:16–18 NIV; cf. Rom 8:14–18)

We lament now. We rejoice later. Yet we are thankful for all of God’s gifts, the true significance of which awaits its time. Besides much else, I am grateful for Rebecca Merrill Groothuis’s contributions to the cause of biblical equality, which is an integral part of Christ’s mission to “set the captives free” (Luke 4:18).

Notes

1. See *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986); *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988); *Revealing the New Age Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990).


4. Knowledge, I take it, is justified true belief, not merely true belief. This understanding goes back to Plato.

5. See *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* at http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/o/PTID157086_CHID75004_CIID2094584.00.html. This was signed by evangelical leaders such as Carl F. H. Henry, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul and many others. It was released in 1978.


8. Becky and I worked together to critique postmodernism. The result was *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity from the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). Although I am credited as the author, we considered listing Becky as the co-author, because her contributions were so substantial. This was true for all my books.


13. Becky did not cotton to the term “complementarian,” since both egalitarians and the other side hold that men and women are complementary to each other. The issue is equality in leadership. In her later writings, she referred to those denying biblical equality as hierarchicalists. This is an accurate description, since they place men above women in the hierarchy of value.


17. See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “Where do we go from Here? A Pro-life call to Arms,” in Douglas Groothuis, *Christianity That Counts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). She also covered this in *Women Caught in the Conflict*.


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Will Gender Equality Be Achieved?  
A Survey of Young Adult Perspectives  
SUSAN H. HOWELL AND CAMERON D. SCHATT

Over the past several decades, women have made strides toward equality in the secular world as well as the church. While some claim these changes have happened too quickly and mourn what they see as the loss of tradition, others believe they have been too long in coming and lament that we still have so far to go. While studying certain aspects of the debate, we—this article’s authors—began to craft a research project: Cameron posed a question while a student in Susan’s Gender Studies course, a question which has focused our attention on a related but unexplored aspect of the gender equality struggle. Here is what happened.

Susan had asked students to submit two questions for the opposite sex—anything they had always wanted to know but had never asked—which they would like answered by their peers in class. Susan read each question aloud (without the questioner’s name) and had the men answer the women’s questions and the women answer the men’s, as they felt comfortable doing so. The usual questions and answers Susan had seen in past semesters emerged:

**Women:** Do you guys ever cry?
**Men:** Sometimes, but hardly ever in public.
**Men:** Do you want guys to hold the door open for you?
**Women:** Yeah, but I don’t get mad if he doesn’t.

However, the question Cameron submitted was one she had not seen before: “Do you believe women will ever reach equality with men?” Without any encouragement each woman in unison shook her head and said “no.” While most of the women in class said they wanted equality, none of them could see it happening, at least not in their lifetime.

Over the next several months, we kept returning to this question and the unanimous response it elicited. We also thought of follow-up questions that, if asked, might have provided a more complete understanding of the students’ positions on this topic. For instance, Why did they not consider equality attainable? Did they foresee it happening in any areas of life? What did they mean by the term “equality”?

Therefore, in an attempt to explore the unasked and unanswered questions from this experience, we designed and implemented the present study. In this article, we explore what young adults in general believe about the realization of gender equality, including where they believe it exists and what they see as obstacles to its realization. In exploring the perspective of college students, we get a glimpse of the mindset of this primarily Christian sample as they begin their adult lives as men and women in today’s world.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were current and former students of Campbellsville University (a small university with a Baptist heritage, located in rural Kentucky) who volunteered at the request of the two researchers. Students from General Psychology classes (45%), current Gender Studies students (25%), and those who had taken Gender Studies at some point within the past twenty years (30%) made up the sample of seventy-three participants. Ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-five with the majority (86%) being traditional college age and in their first or second year of study (52%). The sample was comprised of more females (69%) than males (31%) and was predominantly Caucasian (84%). While a variety of academic disciplines were represented, students majoring in one of the social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology) comprised 49% of this sample with a sizeable number coming from the natural sciences (22%). Most students (77%) claimed being at least somewhat active in their religious group, while 48% identified themselves as Baptist.

**Instrument and Procedure**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which was created for the present study. After eliciting demographic information, the questionnaire asked, “Do you believe that gender equality will be achieved?” Depending on answers to this question (Yes, No, or I believe we have gender equality now), participants were given one of three different question sets to help them elaborate on their position. (See Table 1 for the three sets of questions.) In addition, several students were asked for interviews to elaborate on their responses.

**Results**

Each secondary questionnaire began with the prompt: “What do you mean by the term gender equality?” This open-ended question allowed participants to provide as many definitions of the term as they wished. Participants primarily defined it as equality in treatment (47%), opportunities (26%), expectations (21%), equality in the work place (16%), and being valued and respected equally (10%). Only women responded that equality meant to have equal value and respect. Those who had taken a Gender Studies course more often expressed equal expectations for each gender as a component of their definition.1 No differences in definitions were found between those who did or did not expect equality to be achieved.

To determine whether participants understood the meaning of “feminism” and “egalitarianism,” they were asked for descriptions of the terms which we then categorized as
Gender Studies at some point were more hopeful that education primarily majoring in the natural sciences. Those who had taken all of whom were first year students, 18–20 years of age, and identified sports as an area in which it had not yet happened, 7 would happen spontaneously. (28%). A sizeable minority (19%), however, seemed to believe it in work and pay (53%), politics and government (31%), sports prevalent responses. While they did not see equality thus far already been made (38%) and education (19%) were the most next 5–10 years; 33%, over the next several decades. In answer did indeed expect for gender equality to be achieved. Of those 34 participants reported the following obstacles: gendered expectations (44%), the lack of education or awareness (26%), the need to think differently (26%), attitude (24%), and the belief some have of male superiority (21%). Those majoring in one of the social sciences or the humanities were more likely to identify the need to think differently as an obstacle.10 Those who had or were currently taking Gender Studies were more likely to report gendered expectations as an obstacle11 but less likely to identify the belief some have in male superiority as a hindrance.12

A few participants (7 total; 10% of the total sample) responded that equality has already been achieved. Due to the small number, meaningful correlations were not found for this subsample.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore college students’ beliefs about gender equality. Specifically, we wanted to know how they define gender equality, if they believe it would ever be achieved, where they see it already happening, and what they see as obstacles to its achievement.

Definitions for equality centered on men and women being treated equally, enjoying the same opportunities, and being held to the same expectations. The fact that Gender Studies students and former students were more inclined to identify equal expectations in their definitions was likely due to the course's extensive coverage of the many subtle expectations we hold of which we are often unaware. The fact that only women mentioned equal value and respect in their definitions might indicate that women are sensing an underlying attitude in society that is going unnoticed among men. Regardless of the overt expectations, treatment, and opportunities, a basic lack of valuing and respect contributes to feelings of inequality.

The terms “feminism” and “egalitarianism” were misunderstood among the first year participants in this sample. Upper-division students and those who had graduated had more accurate and positive feelings about these terms, many of whom had taken Gender Studies. In fact, one of the first Gender Studies class sessions is devoted to correcting student assumptions regarding these terms. Feminism as “man-hating” or “the belief in women ruling men” is a common misperception prior to students reading an assigned article and participating in a class discussion on the topic. After reading and discussion, even the more traditional students comment on having held an inaccurate understanding of the term “feminism.” They often go on to agree that feminism at its core is reasonable and can be embraced by Christians without the “man-hating” baggage often associated with the term. Similarly, the term egalitarian is generally not in the vocabulary of these students until they take Gender Studies and read the assigned CBE literature, which presents it in an accurate and positive light.

Overall this sample was evenly divided on whether they saw gender equality as a future reality. The fact that those expecting equality to happen within the next 5–10 years were first year students majoring in the natural sciences who had not taken Gender Studies suggests that very young adults who have yet to become educated on issues of gender hold great optimism regarding the ease with which it will happen. Education on gender issues increases awareness of the pervasiveness and complicated nature of gender injustice and the difficulty in finding solutions.
Even with hope that equality would happen, participants in this subsample were not blind to several areas of inequality which still exist. They readily cited the workforce, government and military, sports, and religion as arenas still perpetuating gender inequality. The fact that only first year students identified sports as a continuing area of inequality might indicate that this is one area where they themselves have experienced discrimination, as opposed to, for instance, the workforce or parenting. If so, this highlights the power of personal experience in increasing our awareness of social problems.

Yet these participants cited progress that has already taken place (e.g., decrease in racial injustice, women running for office) as one reason for their hope that equality will eventually come to pass. They also identified education as important in effecting the change needed. Those who had taken Gender Studies were especially inclined to cite education as one component of the solution, likely because education had effectively prompted a change in their own beliefs. Beyond education, students saw other efforts as important contributors: raising children with healthier gender norms, the involvement of strong minded people and prominent female role models, the enactment of laws, and the promotion of healthier media representation. The fact that women were more likely than men to identify the effort required is understandable given the more personal nature of the struggle for women.

While many looked toward education and effort as solutions, a sizeable minority seemed to expect change to happen without anything in particular being done. Responses such as “society will just change over time” or “sexist people will have to change their ways” indicate that some of these students are expecting...
change to come about almost magically without realizing the struggle and sacrifices required for change to occur.

Among those not expecting equality to become a reality, obstacles cited were gendered expectations, a lack of education or awareness, the need to think differently, attitude, and the belief by some in male superiority. Social science majors more often identified the need to think differently as an obstacle, which is likely due to the emphasis in these disciplines on social interaction, the value of diversity, and the importance of critical thinking in correcting social injustice. The fact that those from a Gender Studies background were more likely to see gendered expectations as posing an obstacle likely stems from the course’s emphasis on rethinking expectations we hold for men and women and the pervasive and insidious nature of those expectations. Likewise, the fact that they were less likely to identify the belief of some in male superiority as an obstacle might stem from the emphasis in Gender Studies on moving beyond a simplistic idea of men oppressing women toward a broader conceptualization of inequality as a product of society.

While this study provides a solid first step in exploring the views of these students, several limitations exist. In an effort not to unduly influence participant responses, questions on the survey were open-ended. While this elicited their most immediate thoughts, a more structured questionnaire would provide a more thorough assessment of student opinions. For instance, a listing of factors (e.g., media, religion) which they do or do not consider obstacles to equality might draw out opinions that would not come to mind otherwise. Therefore, future research might benefit from the use of a more thorough questionnaire. A larger more diverse sample would be of value as well. While participants in this study represented a variety of racial and religious backgrounds, the homogeneity found in a small Baptist university limits the degree to which these results can be generalized.

Conclusion

For those of us who are working toward gender equality, findings from this study offer several points of encouragement.

First, education matters. The fact that those who had taken a Gender Studies course were less optimistic regarding equality happening in the near future, yet were hopeful that education would make a difference, attests to the value of education. I (Susan) am gratified that my students are aware of the magnitude of the task before us and that they see education as key to changing the mindset of our society. However, in addition to having taken a course, they also have been exposed to a substantial amount of CBE material such as *Mutuality*, *Priscilla Papers*, and *Arise*, CBE’s weekly e-newsletter, which seems to have opened their eyes to injustice and the need for change. Education made a difference in their perspective.

Second, the effect of education is occurring within a relatively short amount of time. This cross-sectional study of students at different points in the academic career indicates that between their first and last years of study, they are learning a more accurate perspective from which to enter the workforce, family life, and churches as informed adults. While it takes a tremendous amount of time to change society as a whole, change can be effected in a few eager-to-learn students more quickly. A course of study and insightful reading material is evidently working in powerful ways.

And finally, personal experience is important. From the first year students who saw inequality in sports to the women who saw the effort required to make change, we see that personal experience is an effective teacher for injustice and the need for change. Finding ways to help others connect injustice to their own experience can make our efforts more effective with the students we teach, the congregations in which we lead, or the readers for whom we write.

Notes

1. Cramer’s V (2, n=32) = .486, p < .023. Frequency distributions were conducted for responses to each question with chi-square tests conducted to explore the possibility of relationships existing between students’ perceptions of equality and demographic variables. The more conservative Contingency Coefficient and Cramer’s V were computed for several analyses when the small sample size resulted in an expected count of less than five in one or more categories.


3. Pearson X^2 (2, N=73) p < .000.


Several years ago, when my family had moved to a new city, we contacted a nearby church that had been recommended to us and we inquired about their stance on women in leadership. The pastor wrote this in reply:

As far as our position on women is concerned we take the view of Genesis 2 that man and woman are equal in status but different in role. Our own position is that it is inappropriate for women to preach to a mixed congregation since in 1 Timothy 2 Paul expressly forbids that. That having been said we have a very high view of women’s ministry, so women are involved in a whole range of different ministry opportunities including teaching children, teaching in the youth group ministries, helping in student ministries, and helping in many other ways. We have a number of women on the staff team who are engaged in these various ministries, though none of them are asked to preach, since we feel it is biblically inappropriate for a woman to address and teach adult men.

This is a relatively standard stance among many hierarchical churches and it is clear that congregations such as these promote women in leadership, but stop short when it comes to the area of preaching and authoritative teaching over adult men. The pastor above noted 1 Tim 2, and it merits citing the relevant paragraph here: “A women should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (1 Tim 2:11–15 NIV).

To many Christians, the implications of this text seem self-evident, as they apparently were to this pastor.3 Most hierarchicalists point to the importance of an argument from creation, especially the priority of Adam, but few are willing to go as far as to say that women are, according to nature, more deceivable or gullible than men.5 Rather, many scholars note that the problem is one of neglecting the home and duties regarding the care of children.4 Thus, the majority of hierarchicalists make their case, not primarily on the basis of capability (is a woman capable of teaching men?), but on the basis of so called God-given roles and the natural man-woman relationship of male headship and female submission.5

Nevertheless, it is difficult for hierarchicalists to avoid making gender-difference generalizations, though many are appropriately sensitive to the problem of misogyny. Daniel Doriani urges that men and women have different “interests.”6 Thomas Schreiner speaks of “inclinations,” including the possibility that “Women are less likely to perceive the need to take a stand on doctrinal non-negotiables since they prize harmonious relationships more than men do.” More idiosyncratic is the view of John Piper that women can write biblical scholarship for men but cannot preach in the church, because the former is indirect and impersonal.9 When a man sees a woman face-to-face, he might become distracted by her femininity, so Piper argues.9 Perhaps his most important argument is that a woman can teach a man, but she ought not to be in a position of authority over him to teach in the areas of doctrine and faith.

A main tenet, then, of how hierarchicalists think about women teachers is that women must not serve as an authoritative theological teaching voice over men in the church. In this article, I wish to challenge this perspective, but not by re-hashing the possible interpretations of 1 Tim 2:11–15. There are already a number of exegetical interpretations of this passage that do not lead to the barring of authoritative women teachers in the church.10 Rather, I wish to explore a different approach: what do we do with the instructional teaching voices of women in scripture, but also specifically as scripture?11 I am not here interested, for example, in looking at someone like Priscilla as a teacher of a man. Rather, I am concerned here with the very fact that female words are inscripturated and, thus, become authoritative teaching voices by virtue of the canon itself. The test-case I want to consider is Mary’s famous Magnificat in Luke 1:46b–55 (NRSV):

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
And holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones.
And lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy,
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,
To Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Let us begin with the premise that scripture is the ultimate authority for the people of God.12 Would it not be true that the female Mary becomes an authoritative teacher by virtue of her testimony being canonized, proclaimed as inspired truth in the Third Gospel? Would not this phenomenon, all by itself, justify...
female preaching in the church? No doubt detractors would have immediate objections, a few of which we will now consider.

**Objection #1:** Luke is the canonical author, not Mary, so the “voice” is Luke’s.

One objection to my appeal to Mary is that the Magnificat is part of Luke’s gospel and, thus, it is the voice of Luke, not Mary, which is authoritative. This matter can become complicated, especially when it comes to tracing the nature of the authority of a narrative, but certainly in the case of the gospels particular characters themselves are especially important. In the case of Mary, Luke famously highlights the faithfulness of Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna the Prophetess in his opening chapters; these characters are treated as noble figures for his narrative concerns.

The implications of Mary’s role in the gospel of Luke are striking when this narrative is carefully considered. Note the interpretation of F. Scott Spencer:

> From her own experience and reflection, Mary reaches a stunning theological conclusion: through the “Son of the Most High” she will bear, the Savior God will “lift up,” not merely “look upon,” all who are lowly like her and, indeed, topple the whole high/low hierarchy. The new era of God’s “uplifting” reign is dawning with Mary arising as its first exemplar, prophet, and theologian. In full voice, there is no keeping Mary down; the lowly slave girl has busted through the ceiling and opened the way for other lowly ones, female and male, to rise with her to positions of robust health and honor in God’s just and merciful realm. Of course, all these lifted ones will continue to serve as God’s subjects, but they will do so in freedom and gratitude as servant partners of the “Most High” deity and not as slaves to any earthly masters.

Spencer makes a number of bold, though I think appropriate, claims about how Mary functions in this gospel: “Mary’s Magnificat functions as a paradigmatic agenda of Jesus’ messianic ministry throughout Luke’s Gospel. As such, this young virgin and village girl of twelve, let us say, demonstrates remarkable vision, insight, boldness—and yes, agency—to proclaim the reordering of society under God’s rule.”

Furthermore, undoubtedly in the early church, discussions of particular texts in the gospels tended to treat the words of characters as the words of the actual historical figures, and it was never explicitly stated in patristic material that the Magnificat is prosopopoeia (speech in character), or something to that effect. Rather, Ephrem the Syrian, Origen, Bede, Cyril of Alexandria, and others presume that Mary was responsible for this hymn of praise. Furthermore, even if this were an example of prosopopoeia, we would still have to reckon with the fact that the gospel writer, and the early church, put such important words into the mouth of a woman for all to hear and learn. For all intents and purposes, the tradition of the Church has held that the Magnificat is the voice of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

**Objection #2:** The Magnificat is a testimony or hymn; it does not teach doctrine.

The Bible does not sharply define preaching or teaching, so there is some artificiality to the limits of our modern definitions. Secondly and more importantly, given how Luke shapes his narrative, many Lukan scholars agree that this happens to be one of the most important passages in the Third Gospel since it prefigures what the good news will do in the world through the ministry of Jesus, the work of the apostles (in Acts), and beyond. Mary serves, in this first chapter, as a “narrator unaware” as she foreshadows events that will unfold in the gospel, interpreting the work of God through Jesus for readers with ears to hear (while so many other characters in the story are left in the dark). John Carroll captures the nature and significance of Mary’s Song:

> In a song of praise that begins with Mary’s personal circumstance and then broadens to encompass the whole people, she gives voice to the hopes of Israel. Soon Zechariah and a devout man named Simeon will join the chorus (1:68-79; 2:29-32). Drawing language from Jewish Scripture, Mary celebrates the power and faithfulness of God, who has brought help to Israel, fulfilling ancient promises. With her own experience as inspiration, and employing bold images reminiscent of Hannah’s prayer at the presentation of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10), Mary pictures divine deliverance as a dramatic reversal of power and fortune. It is a hymn of praise to God, whose ways challenge and subvert the way things are in the world. It is about God, who keeps promises and cares for the lowly and powerless. Singing her faith in God, Mary models authentic response to divine initiative: joyful praise and bold proclamation.

The objection could be raised that Mary teaches nothing unique or special, and thus there is little at stake if she, as a woman, is in error. Such an objection, though, would underestimate the significance of what Mary says in this speech. Mary neither gives mere personal testimony (about what God has done for her), nor does she simply state obvious facts. She serves in the role of joyful and masterful interpreter of God’s actions past, present, and future. Notice, she does not say “I think” or “I believe.” While she is obviously not standing in front of a congregation with a lectern, she is certainly making bold claims about what is true about God and how God interacts with the world.

**Objection #3:** This is an incidental and occasional example and has no bearing on the women teaching-in-leadership issue; women (like Mary) can sing for the edification of the body, but that is different from authoritative teaching.

In the well-known volume entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem address the question regarding the allowance of women to write hymns. In accordance with Eph 5:18-19, Piper and Grudem state that women ought to build up, encourage, and even instruct other members of the community, including men, through testimony and song. Their
wider concern is about permanency and authority: “The issue for us is whether she should function as part of the primary teaching leadership (=eldership) in a fellowship of women and men.” They also allow for “occasional” and “periodic” lectures from women (which would be distinct from official, ecclesial teaching of scripture). The importance for them is that the teaching is ad hoc and non-authoritative; it is not the teaching of a shepherd, but more of the counsel of a consultant, though this too may come from the workings of God in their view.

It is true that Mary was not one of the Twelve, but my concern is the canonization of her words, and what that means for the permanency and authority of her canonical voice. One way we can reflect on the canonical meaningfulness of the Magnificat is to consider what happens when Luke 1:46b–55 is used in the advent readings of the lectionary (e.g., Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Fourth Sunday of Advent). In a hierarchical church where no women preachers are allowed, what happens on such a Sunday? How is it possible that the male pastor who says, God has simply not seen fit to allow women to exercise teaching authority over men in the church, must sit down in his pastoral study on this particular week and spend hours upon hours poring over the words of young Mary that also happen to be the life-changing, world-shattering, church-guiding Word of God? What happens when, at that same church, the people of God stand to hear the reading of scripture, to hear the Spirit of God move among the people as Mary’s soul, once again, magnifies the Lord with an echo that rings through millions of chapels and sanctuaries each year? How could the supposed non-authoritative female-genderization of this text not be deconstructed as the Word of Christ dwells richly among the people of God? One wonders if anyone has ever walked out on the reading of scripture on the Fourth Sunday of Advent!

Conclusion
In the study of female authority and church leadership in scripture, much attention has been paid to the arguments in scripture, but much less has been made of the voices in scripture. Though women are rarely noted as narrators, letter-authors, or speaking characters in scripture, the very fact of such a singular, pronounced, profound text like the Magnificat stirs the imagination to consider how she speaks eternally “the Word of God for the people of God.” Luke 1:46b–55 cannot either be “occasional” or “periodic,” to borrow language from Piper and Grudem, for those who love and meditate on God’s Holy Word. So I, as one who is committed to recognize the ultimate authority of scripture, am faithful enough to say “Teach us, Mary,” we are listening.

Notes
1. This essay is dedicated to the memory of CBE founder Catherine Clark Kroeger who passed away on Feb 14, 2011. I had the honor of serving as her research assistant at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and I am appreciative of how she modeled love for the triune God, love for neighbor, and commitment to scripture.
2. E.g., The Köstenbergers note how this passage is clear, but has become controversial largely because of shifts in culture; “Let’s remember that a study on a topic such as ours can hardly be neutral. It takes place in a cultural environment that has a profound impact on discussions in the church. This may explain why a passage that seems fairly innocuous at the outset has become the bone of considerable contention in recent years.” Andreas Köstenberger and Margaret Köstenberger, God’s Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 196.
3. Consider the comment of Mark Driscoll: “Without blushing, Paul is simply stating that when it comes to leading in the church, women are unfit because they are more gullible and easier to deceive than men.” On Church Leadership (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 43.
4. Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin are quite clear, for example, that women should not teach men, but they are adamant that this has nothing to do with incompetence; see T. D. Lea and H. P. Griffin Jr., 1–2 Timothy, Titus (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 100. Dorothy Patterson offers her personal interpretation of how a woman should view her circles of responsibilities: “The first priority for me, beyond consistently nurturing my personal relationship with Christ, is the responsibility to help my husband, followed closely by the task of nurturing my children (and now enriching the lives of my grandchildren), then my personal ministries to our extended family, and finally, beyond my home, the challenging ministry to other women that come to me in the course of ministry with my husband on the seminary campus. Along the way, I have had some ‘Priscilla’ ministries even to godly men, who on a personal level have sought my counsel. I am humbly grateful if in those cases the Lord can speak through me. However, whether I have five women or fifty women or a thousand women who want to sit under my teaching, the point is that the biblical mandate is for woman-to-woman teaching.” Dorothy K. Patterson, “What Should a Woman Do in the Church? One Woman’s Personal Reflections,” in Women in the Church (ed. A. Köstenberger, T. R. Schreiner, and H. S. Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 155.
5. Again, note Patterson’s frequent appeal to language related to “boundaries” and “roles”; see “What Should a Woman Do in the Church?” 149–74, passim.
6. Daniel Doriani, Women and Ministry: What the Bible Teaches (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 173; also, “perhaps God has etched traces of his plan of male leadership into human nature so that men tend to seek leadership in the home and the church and women look for godly male leader. God’s decrees rest upon his will, not male superiority. Nonetheless, he can press reflections of his will into the fabric of human nature” (173).
10. See the important discussion by Linda Belleville, Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 175–76; also Aída Besançon Spencer, 1 Timothy (NCCS; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 61–62. Henry Scott Baldwin makes the case for a “positive” meaning of authenteō in 1 Tim 2:12, thus meaning that women ought not to have authority over a man, but Philip B. Payne has written extensively on flaws in the semantico-lexical study of this word by Baldwin and others. Baldwin, “An Important Word: Authorized in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in Women in the Church (ed. A. Köstenberger, T. R. Schreiner, and H. S. Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 39–52; Payne, Man and Woman: One in Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 361–98.
11. The approach I am taking here presumes that the words of scripture themselves are important, even inspired. Stanley Grenz offers a careful
explanation of how one can claim “verbal inspiration” of scripture without it seeming mechanical: “Rather than asserting that God dictated every word, we ought to understand verbal inspiration as only claiming that the Spirit superintended the process of word selection and word order to the extent that they are capable of communicating the intended meaning of the text. Incsofar as words and syntax are the primary carriers of meaning, the concept of verbal inspiration emphasizes divine involvement in the writing of scripture so that the words employed in the documents convey God’s intended message”; see Grenz, Theology for the Community of God (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1994), 398; cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in this Text? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).


14. “While many have debated whether such a young girl, who, unlike her male counterparts, would not have received the benefits of education in the Torah, was capable of such an exquisitely composed hymn, Luke’s Gospel unashamedly attributes it to her”; Derek Tidball and Dianne Tidball, The Message of Women (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 154. As far as Luke’s influences in his writing of this passage, Phyllis Trible notes the remarkable similarities between Mary’s Song and Miriam’s Song; see Trible et al., “Eve and Miriam,” in Feminist Approaches to the Bible (Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeological Society, 1995), 22–23.


17. Prosopopoeia is a literary device where an author provides the words of a speech and places them on the lips of a character. On the subject of prosopopoeia in ancient literature see Hans-Josef Klauck, Ancient Letters and the New Testament (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 178.


19. John T. Carroll, Luke: A Commentary (NLT; Louisville: 2012), 47; cf. J. B. Green, The Gospel of Luke (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 97–102; R. C. Tannehill, “The Magnificat is a remarkable theological statement…. It has a key role in the narrative because it is the initial characterization of that hidden character [God] who is most powerfully shaping the whole series of events. The Lukan audience is to understand these events as the work of this kind of God, one who is mighty, but who uses that might in mercy toward the weak, one who is revolutionary in upsetting human ranks but conservative in keeping ancient promises. This God is not the placid ruler who maintains social order but the overruler of human power and plans. This understanding of God will have a deep effect on the Lukan interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf., e.g., Acts 2:23–24, 36)” (Luke [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], 57). Cf. also John V. Grier Koontz, “Mary’s Magnificat,” BSac 116, no. 464 (1959): 339.

20. In the words of Derek and Dianne Tidball: “The song is . . . noteworthy for its radical teaching . . . [It] . . . has radical intensity about it which is shocking, but totally consistent with the portrait of the God of righteousness who was at the heart of the covenant with Israel. The song has a spiritual intensity about it which is awesome, but one whose social and political implications cannot be sidestepped. This vulnerable girl shows a depth of understanding about God and of faith in him that is astonishing”; The Message of Women, 154.


22. They give the example of permitting women to teach at Urbana Missions Conferences; Manhood and Womanhood, 77.

23. In respect to the power of singing and hymnody in the first century, though, note Clinton Arnold’s comment in the ESV Study Bible notes on Col 3:16, “Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is one means of teaching and admonishing. Corporate worship has a teaching function through the lyrics of its song. This was particularly important in the oral culture of Paul’s day” (2299).

24. Interestingly, though, on the subject of the reception of Luke-Acts and the role of Mary, art historians and biblical scholars have noted the attention artists throughout time have given to placing Mary, not only at Pentecost, but even at the center of the events. So, “El Greco correctly interpreted the mind of Luke, his fellow artist, when he painted Mary in the center of his Pentecost canvas. Mary is at the head of that band of female and male believers (Acts 1:14), who wait for the promised Holy Spirit”; Paul Achtemeier et al., Invitation to the Gospels (Mahwah: Paulist, 2002), 225–26; see also H. J. Hornik and M. C. Parsons, “Phililological and Performative Perspectives on Pentecost,” in Reading Acts Today (ed. Steve Walton et al.; London: T & T Clark, 2011), 137–53.

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Are Women Passive? What History Says about Gender, Sexuality, and Christian Ministry

JASON EDEN

Within both mainstream and Christian media outlets in the United States, the dominant message about sexual desire is that men want sex more than women do. Within marriage literature, in particular, Christian writers often urge wives to respond favorably to their husbands’ advances. Embedded within this advice is the assumption that women do not often want to engage in intimate acts. Authors suggest that it is normal and natural for men to desire lots of sex while women purportedly agree to sex on an infrequent and often reluctant basis. In terms of sexual relationships, men are supposedly suited for active pursuit while women are inclined toward being passive and responsive. These assumptions have profound implications, since they set up relationship dynamics that are often unhealthy. Such beliefs can also lead women who have strong sexual desires or assertive personalities to feel excluded or abnormal.

In addition to affecting intimate relationships, unfounded assumptions regarding sexuality have profoundly, if subtly, shaped assumptions regarding who is fit for Christian ministry and leadership. Christian literature, both past and present, has often suggested that, because of their passive and accommodating nature, women are unfit for leadership roles. In terms of sexuality, simplistic analyses of biological copulation imply that women are reluctant and passive receivers while men are eager and active contributors. Authors have used this type of simplistic portrayal of the sexual act as evidence of consistency in the natures of men and women. Supposedly, the “fact” that men are biologically suited for being active leaders in the bedroom is consistent with the “fact” that they are suited for leadership activities elsewhere. Likewise, the “fact” that women are passive responders in the bedroom supposedly aligns with their passive and receptive role in other spheres of life, including Christian ministry.

Contemporary authors, including theologians, have often emphasized the supposedly passive nature of women and the supposedly assertive nature of men. John Piper, for example, has identified initiation as a masculine trait and responsiveness as a feminine trait. In terms of both marriage relationships and Christian ministry, Piper argues, men are suited for taking an assertive role while God designed women to be submissive and passive. Stu Weber has explicitly argued that because men are the initiators and penetrators in sexual relationships, they are naturally suited for leadership roles. Thomas Schreiner has argued that, although God has allowed women to serve as prophets, he does not allow them to hold pastoral offices or official leadership positions within churches. When explaining this discrepancy, he has argued that God allowed women to serve as prophets in the Bible because prophecy is a passive activity in which women receive and merely transmit God’s messages to others. This “passive” role was different from that of preaching or teaching, according to Schreiner.

Likewise, Christian marriage literature often portrays men as naturally assertive and women as naturally passive. Boy Meets Girl, by Josh Harris, argues that it is normal for men to initiate and women to respond. Indeed, the phrasing of the book’s title is illustrative: males initiate romantic pursuit while women respond to male initiative. His Needs, Her Needs, by Willard Harley Jr., is a perennial best-seller that lists sex as the top need of men but does not include it in the list of women’s needs. The book goes on to argue that wives need to respond favorably to their husbands’ sexual advances, again suggesting that it is “normal” for men to pursue and women to respond. Numerous other Christian books on marriage repeat the message that it is natural for men to be sexual pursuers and initiators and for women to be passive responders. It is no accident that in two genres of contemporary Christian literature—works dealing with marriage and texts dealing with Christian leadership—authors often portray women as naturally passive and men as naturally assertive. In a few cases, authors such as Weber and Piper are bold enough to explicitly make logical connections between assertive male sexuality, passive female sexuality, and which gender group is best suited for leadership roles.

The assumptions about female passivity found in contemporary writing have their roots in ancient philosophy and medieval theology. Numerous historical authors and philosophers propounded the notion that sexually assertive male initiators would make better leaders than supposedly passive female responders. The ancient Greeks were among the first to differentiate between active and passive sexual roles. Aristotle viewed men as the primary cause in procreation. They introduced the life-creating seed while women merely provided a suitable environment for new offspring. The Romans, likewise, placed great emphasis upon the “active,” or penetrating, component of male sexuality. The “wisdom” of the ancients greatly informed medieval Christian thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas. In the Summa Theologica, he wrote that “woman is by nature of lower capacity and quality than man; for the active cause is always more honourable than the passive, as Augustine says.” He also associated the “active power in the seed of the male” with the successful production of male babies. He then attributed femaleness to defects in the reproductive process, including changes in environmental conditions. Aquinas, like other medieval theologians, saw the active male seed as a sign of superiority and women’s receptive and passive nature as a sign of inferiority. Not surprisingly, Aquinas and other such thinkers argued that it was necessary to ban women from holding leadership positions within churches.

There are multiple ways of critiquing the biological determinism of Aquinas and other thinkers. As Gilbert Bilezikian has noted, true biblical notions of leadership, which emphasize
servanthood and humility, are vastly different from worldly notions of leadership that value aggression and physical power. That is, even if we accept the notion that men are somehow naturally more assertive and aggressive than women, this does not mean that men are somehow better suited for Christian leadership. Another way, however, to critique the notion that sexually assertive men make better leaders than passive women is to question the supposed “facts” that undergird this type of thinking. Are men naturally more assertive and active in the bedroom? Is it biologically “normal” for women to be passive and less desirous? Both history and scripture suggest that the answer to both of these questions is “no.” Abundant evidence suggests that variations in human sexuality are more the product of culture than of biology. What might seem true in contemporary American culture and society has not always been true for people living in other places and other eras. This includes, for example, people living both in ancient biblical cultures and in colonial North America. Historical evidence, found in both the scriptures and colonial North American records, offers egalitarians new ways of viewing human sexuality that contradict the myth of female sexual passivity. As such, this evidence helps undermine misconceptions about the nature of men and women and their respective fitness for Christian leadership.

**Male and female sexuality in scripture**

Several passages from both the OT and NT indicate that women in ancient, biblical societies were sexually assertive. In Gen 39, we read that Potiphar’s wife approached Joseph and expressed her desire for sexual relations. The passage suggests that her attraction to him was based, at least in part, upon his physical features. While contemporary Christian literature suggests that men are visually stimulated, this passage indicates that women also have experienced feelings of attraction for physically appealing men. Likewise, Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea, actively pursued extramarital relationships with other men. These passages, even as they implicitly condemn extramarital intercourse, recognize the historical reality of female sexual desire. In these cases, the male characters in the stories, Joseph and Hosea, properly acted with restraint while the women pursued sexual activity vigorously. Perhaps more important than accounts of wayward, assertive women in the OT is the more normative description of healthy sexuality found in the Song of Songs. As commentators have noted, the relationship described in this book of the Bible is one of mutual pursuit and shared desire. While there are many possible ways to read this poetic section of scripture, one straightforward interpretation of Song of Songs would be that it is normal, appropriate, and healthy for a man and woman to pursue each other sexually. Both partners in the account are visually stimulated by one another and, as ch. 3 suggests, at times, the woman actively pursues her mate. Like the Song of Songs, the book of Ruth also positively describes women who acted assertively regarding a romantic encounter. In ch. 3, Naomi and Ruth act boldly in preparation for and during an interaction with Boaz, and he responds affirmatively to their initiative.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that scripture affirms female sexual assertiveness is found in the NT. One of the clearest passages on marriage in the epistles, 1 Cor 7, indicates that God created marriage as a healthy avenue for both men and women to express their sexuality. Verse 5 begins, “Do not deprive each other,” which indicates that women, as well as men, can feel deprived of sex in the marital relationship. The mutuality described in the passage makes it clear that it is normal for both husbands and wives to desire sex and each partner should consider the other’s needs in this area. There is no evidence to suggest that it is normal for men to be the active pursuers or women to be passive responders. Neither is there an assumption in 1 Cor 7 that men will desire sex more often or that women will typically be reluctant partners. This passage strongly indicates that the notion that women desire sex less than men is cultural, not biblical, in origin.

**Male and female sexuality in colonial North America**

While many who live in the early twenty-first century often assume that men are biologically inclined toward desiring sex and women are often reluctant participants, in earlier eras, the opposite was often true. During the 1600s and early 1700s, for example, early European Americans typically believed that women needed and desired copulation more fervently than men. Women’s passionate natures and empty uteruses supposedly cried out to be satisfied, while the supposedly more rational and subdued husbands often viewed sexual activity as a marital duty. According to one historian, Europeans of the 1600s and 1700s saw a woman’s libido as so strong that a husband who neglected to fulfill his wife’s desires “was virtually asking her to commit adultery.”

Available sources suggest that early Americans saw women as eager pursuers of sexual activity. Published sources, including medical books and almanacs, often argued that women were lustful and passionate creatures. Almanacs published during the early 1700s often portrayed women as bold, aggressive, adulterous, and manipulative. Newspapers, likewise, included sensational accounts of prostitutes in London and other stories that depicted women as lusty creatures. Historians note that these same published sources, particularly the newspapers, began to portray women differently by the late 1700s. Instead of portraying women as eager participants in sexual liaisons, stories began to portray them as innocent victims of male sexual aggression. This was part of a larger transformation in European and American sexual mores that eventually culminated in Victorian beliefs about female passivity. Nevertheless, during the early 1700s, the belief that women were often sexually assertive persisted.

William Byrd II, a wealthy planter who lived in colonial Virginia during the early 1700s, commented frequently in his private writings about the lustful nature of women. In his writings, he related numerous tales about sexually assertive wives who were able to maneuver their reluctant husbands into copulation. In some of his stories, he suggested that women were extremely voracious consumers of sexual pleasure. While historians believe these stories were fictional, the stories reflect Byrd’s beliefs about women and likely incorporate elements of popular literary
accounts he read during times of leisure. One of Byrd's stories was about a woman who pursued her partner so continuously that he despaired of keeping her happy. He cut off one of his legs so that his blood would flow to more necessary “limbs” in an attempt to keep up with her vigorous libido. In these and other private writings, Byrd made it clear that he viewed women as salacious, lustful, and demanding. Byrd's diary suggests that his actual experiences with Lucy, his wife, involved mutual assertiveness. While he often framed himself as the pursuer and aggressor, he also admitted in his diary that his wife, Lucy, often persuaded him to remain with her in bed in the morning, so they could be intimate.

While William Byrd saw marital sex as a source of enjoyment, husbands in Puritan New England often saw sex as a duty. Apparently, some of them were reluctant participants in conjugal union, so much so that officials and leaders had to intervene. Ministers often described the husband's sexual role in marriage as a “responsibility” or “duty.” This duty was so important that husbands could and did face prosecution for failing to provide sexual pleasure to their wives. For example, in 1665, Plymouth Colony officials brought John Williams to court for “refusing to perform marriage duty towards her [his wife] according to the law of God and man.” In other, similar cases in New England during the 1600s, churches and courts sanctioned men for failing to meet the sexual needs of their wives. For example, in 1657, Connecticut, Hannah Foote secured a divorce from her husband, John, in 1657 because of his impotence. Men felt shame and embarrassment if rumors circulated that they were unable to meet the sexual needs of their wives. All of this evidence, when taken together, suggests that husbands in colonial society often saw sex as a duty they had to perform, sometimes reluctantly, while wives saw it as a desirable and pleasurable experience. Women in colonial North America actively pursued sex, even taking husbands to court if they failed to fulfill their marital duty satisfactorily. The New England Puritans, Bible believing Christians who lived in a time and place far removed from us, collectively agreed that it was normal and appropriate for married women to enjoy and pursue sex.

European women were not the only females in colonial American society to actively pursue sexual relations. On occasion, European traders and travelers noted in their journals that Native American women could be sexually assertive. Nicholas Cresswell, an English traveler who visited numerous Indian communities during the 1770s, reported that several Indian women made sexual advances toward him. He indicated that he was at first reluctant to join himself with them, but that eventually he realized that, from an Indian perspective, sexual relations were an essential component of trade and diplomacy. Native American groups living in New England saw being sexually assertive as a normal and healthy condition for both men and women. In colonial North Carolina, English observers indicated that Native American women in the region felt free to pursue sexual relations, while Indian men purportedly acted with restraint and passivity. Overall, these Native Americans' approach to sex suggests that culture, not biology, plays a leading role in determining whether or not it is “normal” for women to desire and pursue sex.

Early Americans expected sexual activity to be physically pleasurable for women. Byrd, for example, wrote glowingly in his diary about his wife's enjoyment of sex, on one occasion saying that she experienced “great ecstasy and refreshment.” On another occasion, he wrote that he gave Lucy “a flourish in which she had a great deal of pleasure.” According to his diary, Lucy's strong sexual desire made it easier for him to resolve disagreements and maintain peace in his household. In many cases, Byrd recorded in his diary that when he and Lucy were experiencing conflict, sex became part of the journey to conflict resolution. Her need and enjoyment of sex were perfectly normal in his eyes, and he viewed his wife's libido as a way of maintaining peaceful relations in his household.

Ministers feared that sexual pleasure would tempt unmarried members of both gender groups, especially youths. In a sermon, Cotton Mather warned "all people, and especially young people, against the sin of uncleanness in particular..." In the rest of the document, he made it clear that he wanted both men and women to avoid masturbation, fornication, and adultery. Similarly, a tract, titled Onania; Or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Consider'd, talked...
Onania in self-stimulation, according to the author of a loss of sexual vigor awaited both men and women who engaged in self-gratification. Anemia, barrenness or sterility, and at a remedy. . . . “22 The author then goes on to say that training if this great power of fashions and instruction does not point modest than men, is a mistake; all the difference between them, culture, not biology: “to imagine that women are naturally more terms of sexual inclinations and proclivities was the result of identified “self-pollution” as a sin to which both men and women could succumb. In startlingly clear language, it even went so far as to state that any difference between men and women in cycles in both Europe and North America. This religious tract anonymous work, and it went through multiple publication specifically addressed to both sexes.) Buyers in both Old and New England purchased tens of thousands of copies of this anonymous work, vizually illustrating that the book was read in the colonies, required mutual enjoyment of both husband and woman needed to experience an orgasm to become pregnant. The advice manuals, indicates that English colonists believed that a woman's sexual pleasure with the physical pleasures of sex in ways deemed inappropriate. That such a tract existed at all suggests that people perceived masturbation to be a problem among both men and women. Specifically, it reveals that religious authorities saw women as capable of succumbing to the desires of the flesh.

Overall, the evidence indicates that English ministers perceived that both men and women pursued illicit sex because of the pleasure it provided. Ministers did not assume that young, single women would pursue sex because of emotional need or because they lacked love from within their own families. They instead indicated that physical pleasure was the main temptation for men and women. New England ministers believed that every Christian man and every Christian woman battled against lust and the pleasures of illicit sex. It was not a gender-specific battle rooted in supposed biological differences but a universal one faced by all human beings.23 In addition to viewing women as potentially eager partners, early Americans closely connected a woman's sexual pleasure with recreation. The available evidence, including court records and advice manuals, indicates that English colonists believed that a woman needed to experience an orgasm to become pregnant. The production and union of seed, according to many advice manuals read in the colonies, required mutual enjoyment of both husband and wife. It seems unlikely that such a belief would have lasted long in a society where women typically gave birth to multiple children over the course of their lives, unless women were, in fact, experiencing enjoyment during copulation. Precisely how such a belief affected marital relationships is largely a matter of guesswork, but the available evidence does suggest that couples sought, and in many cases found, mutual sexual fulfillment on a regular basis. One horrific result of this belief was that many Europeans of this era, including those who arrived in North America, believed that women who became pregnant must have enjoyed the sexual act. Rape victims found their complaints falling on deaf ears if pregnancy resulted from the act.24

Early Americans not only believed that women sought positive pleasure from sex, but they further argued that women who suffered sexual passivity faced negative consequences. Several medical commentators argued that a woman's uterus needed to be filled with a man's seed, or it would become withered and sick.35 Undersexed women, according to some commentators, could develop wombs that were so hungry that only pints of male fluid could quench the intense fire that developed. Women who endured long stretches of singleness could acquire "greensickness," a malady affecting the nervous system. European physicians of this era, who authored works that were widely read in the American colonies, advised moderate amounts of sex for women so they could avoid such illnesses. Women who actively sought sexual union in colonial North America were pursuing a normal and healthy part of the human experience. Indeed, for women not to do so was to invite illness. The early American view of active female sexuality stands in stark contrast to the passivity and modesty associated with "normal" femininity in Victorian writings or contemporary Christian literature.26

Medieval authors, such as Aquinas, specifically linked the supposed sexual passivity of women to their unfitness for Christian leadership. Collectively, much current Christian literature echoes this sentiment. Books on marriage and sexuality often emphasize the supposedly passive and responsive nature of women. Books on Christian leadership emphasize how the passive and responsive nature of women purportedly makes them unfit for ministerial posts. Taken together, the current literature perpetuates the myth of female passivity and advances the argument that, biologically speaking, men are better suited for leadership roles than women.

Deconstructing the myth that women's passive nature disqualifies them for Christian leadership requires a multi-pronged approach. One avenue of criticism open to egalitarians is to question the notion that it is normal for men to have stronger sex drives than women. That is, whatever potential discrepancy in sexual urges between men and women that exists in contemporary society is more the product of nurture than nature. Men are not biologically inclined toward being more sexually assertive than women, and women are not naturally inclined toward being passive or reluctant. Instead, people learn at early ages that it is normal to have certain expectations and desires, and this shapes their behavior and belief systems. Historical documents, including
the Bible and records from seventeenth and eighteenth-century North America, suggest that beliefs about male and female sexuality have varied over the course of time. While it would be wrong to characterize early North America as a sexual utopia for either sex, it is clear that beliefs about human sexuality during that time period were quite different from the beliefs of many in the twenty-first century. Both history and scripture show that women have an equal capacity for actively pursuing sex. They are not inherently "passive" at all.

Of course, as already mentioned, the notion that Christian leaders need to have an assertive and commanding personality is itself problematic. This is another avenue of criticism open to egalitarians as they question the notion that female passivity disqualifies women from leadership roles. As numerous scholars have pointed out, Jesus commanded his disciples to be servants, and he explicitly told them to avoid the trappings of worldly power. Being "strong" or "commanding" in a worldly sense is antithetical to basic principles of Christian leadership. Indeed, many of the attributes associated with American masculinity—such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and lustfulness—do not align with a biblical understanding of Christian leadership. It is important to point out, however, that both men and women can be domineering and overly aggressive in their relationships. Both sexes can also be gentle, kind, and servant-like, especially with the help of the Holy Spirit. Christian maturity and individual giftedness best determine a person's fitness for ministry, rather than untrue assumptions and generalizations rooted in biological determinism.27

Overall, deconstructing and critiquing the untruths surrounding gender relations is a complex and difficult task. There are many ideological barriers to accepting the notion of women as ministry leaders. One of the strands of deception has been the assumption—as supposedly revealed by biological design—that God created women to be passive and submissive. This strand of deception, like the others, does not stand up to the truth of history or of God's word. And, like all untruth, the damaging effects of believing this stereotype extend into many areas. Assertive women and gentle men are left to wonder about their value and identity within the body of Christ. Wives and husbands struggle to be "normal" instead of blossoming into the unique spouses and individuals God created them to be. In terms of Christian ministry, women feel uneasy about exercising their gifts and abilities to the fullest while men perceive women as a possible threat to their position, instead of allies and fellow servants in Christ. Egalitarians need to be relentless in challenging and disproving harmful stereotypes about men and women, including those related to human sexuality, if the doors to gift-based ministry opportunities are to be fully opened.

Notes


2. There is some debate among social scientists regarding the extent to which historical context shapes human sexuality versus the extent to which biology shapes sexuality. The idea that biology is solely determinant, however, has been soundly rejected: Roy Porter and Leslie Hall, The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1–12; Richard Godbeer, Sexual Revolution in Early America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 10–12; Katherine Crawford, European Sexualities, 1400–1800 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–10. Even studies that argue that men are biologically inclined to desire sex more than women recognize that culture also plays some role in a person's choices: Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Catanese, and Kathleen Vohs, "Is There a Gender Difference in Strength of Sex Drive? Theoretical Views, Conceptual Distinctions, and a Review of Relevant Evidence," Personality and Social Psychology Review 5 (2001): 242–73. Other studies have argued that culture is more important than biology in shaping sex drive and that women and men tend to have equal biological capacity for pursuing copulation: See Terri Conley and others, "Women, Men, and the Bedroom: Methodological and Conceptual Insights that Narrow, Reframe, and Eliminate Gender Differences in Sexuality," Current Directions in Psychological Science 20 (2011): 296–300.


10. It is important to recognize that the Bible portrays sexual assertiveness as positive or negative based upon context. Samson and David are examples of men who violated God's laws regarding sex by pursuing illicit relationships. Ruth and the woman in Song of Songs are examples of women who fulfilled God's intention, in part by pursuing a sexual relationship honorably.


13. Crawford, European Sexualities, 41–42.


21. Cotton Mather, Warnings from the Dead (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1693), 71.

22. Onania: Or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Consider’d (Boston, 1724), 12.


27. In Matt 20:25, Mark 10:42, and Luke 22:25, Jesus makes it clear that his followers are not to be aggressive in their pursuit of leadership status. Similarly, Gal 6:1, 1 Thess 2:6–8, John 13, and numerous other passages encourage all Christians, especially leaders, to demonstrate humility, gentleness, and a willingness to serve others. See Bilezikian, “Church Leadership that Kills Community,” for a deeper analysis of this issue.

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Sacred and Undesirable: Examining the Theological Import of Hiding Places in Exodus and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Francine L. Allen

For enslaved members of the African diaspora in America, the biblical story of Exodus provided a way of understanding and framing discussions about slavery. Enslaved people would eventually use the Exodus story to shape their arguments for the abolition of slavery. If enslaved people found comparisons between their situation and that of the children of Israel, might not contemporary literary scholarship turn to the Moses narrative to understand and frame discussions, especially theological ones, about the enslaved experience as recounted in slave narratives, whether narratives of the African diaspora in America, of modern-day sex trafficking, or other instances of slavery?

Answering this question affirmatively requires identifying points of connection between the Moses story and slave narratives. One prominent connection emerges between the Exodus text and Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In both Exodus and *Incidents*, there exists what might be called the hiding place, that place or collection of places between slavery and full freedom where enslaved individuals hide away until they are able to acquire, if not complete freedom or civil liberties, at least a measure of freedom. Long before Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he spent time hidden from those intent on killing him, in part because he represented a marginalized, oppressed group. Harriet Jacobs spent seven years hidden in an attic crawlspace in order to escape the sexual harassment of a plantation owner and eventually acquire freedom in the North for herself and her children. For Moses in Exodus and Jacobs in *Incidents*, their hiding places become necessary but temporary habituations that strengthen their sense of personal identity and that allow them, even as they live in hiddenness, to experience God’s protection and comforting presence. These divine encounters reveal the complexity of hiding places, both their sacredness and their undesirability, and point to a richer understanding of the omnipresence of God.

**Ancient Hebrews and the enslaved in early America**

Enslaved people of the African diaspora in early America saw the figures and events of biblical narratives not as historically distant, but as immediately present. They connected scriptural narratives to their experiences as slaves. As Virgil Wood says, for the enslaved, “the Bible came to represent a body of literature that contained stories of enslavement and liberation.” Of particular importance to them in the Bible was the story of Exodus with its focus on the Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites and their eventual liberation through the leadership of Moses. According to Wood, “As slaves became increasingly familiar with the Bible, they interpreted their experiences as parallel to the sufferings of the Israelites while they were in bondage in Egypt.” In comparing their experience to that of the Hebrews, the enslaved hoped for freedom and gained, according to Albert Raboteau, a greater sense of themselves as a collective:

Slaves prayed for the future day of deliverance to come, and they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of their mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery. The appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people. That identity was also based, of course, upon their common heritage of enslavement. The Christian slaves applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended. In identifying with the Exodus story, they created meaning and purpose out of the chaotic and senseless experience of slavery. Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves. The sacred history of God’s liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American south.

African American preachers and abolitionists were on the forefront of highlighting the parallels between their people and the enslaved Hebrews. They used Exodus to frame their discussions about slavery, oppression, and freedom, and they often equated cultural heroes known for freedom fighting to Exodus’s key figure, Moses. In the early 1800s, African American preachers, some who had been slaves, were pointing to the similarities between black slaves and the children of Israel. Absalom Jones, the first African American to be ordained as an Episcopal priest, delivered an 1808 sermon in which he described the US Congress’s prohibition against slave importation as God’s divine deliverance, a deliverance similar to that of the Hebrews. Another Episcopal minister, Alexander Crummell, who had been born to free parents and went on to teach at Howard University, argued in an 1877 sermon that, just as God allowed the Hebrews to endure slavery in order to purify them and make of them a great nation, God was allowing slavery, no matter how vile an institution, to shape qualities in blacks that would shape them into a great people.

**Moses and America’s enslaved**

For many of the enslaved Moses was an ideal man and Christ was a second Moses. As an ideal, Moses became one whose life was a pattern, a pattern for understanding the unique circumstances of the oppressed, especially those risking their lives to free the enslaved. Interestingly, in identifying with the Exodus story, enslaved members of the African diaspora equated the story’s key figure, Moses, not with men primarily, but with a woman. The African American cultural hero Harriet Tubman was referred to as “Moses” because of her life-risking travels carrying slaves to freedom at the Canadian border. By 1855, after she had helped over forty slaves escape, her reputation for these adventures had grown. She began referring to herself as Moses, and she was called by that name when she was asked to speak at events. This title
grew not only out of her successful travels but also because of the spiritual "Go Down Moses" that she often sang as she walked near slave cabins announcing her arrival. In calling her Moses, slaves believed Tubman was blessed, meaning, as Beverly Lowry says, that she had "the charm and the God-given anointment to be the deliverer they [had] been waiting for in their particular corner of the hellish world of slavery. . .".

The hiding places of the enslaved

Considering the moniker “Moses” given to Tubman and considering the enslaved community’s general paralleling of the black experience with that of the ancient Israelites, Raboteau’s argument that Exodus functioned as an "archetypal event for slaves” appears valid. As such, this ancient biblical story can be viewed as an appropriate tool for understanding slave narratives, not only when discussing slavery and freedom in general, but also when examining unique aspects of the slave experience. One such aspect or place is “the hiding place,” the place between slavery and freedom inhabited by an enslaved person in defiance of and usually unbeknownst to their oppressors. This place emerges in the Exodus story with Moses. Moses himself avoids slavery only through the clandestine activities of his biological mother and his adoptive mother; the former hides him in a basket and the latter hides him in full view within the Egyptian palace. Given this experience and his eventual identification with his people, Moses can be thought of as an ancient model of the enslaved person, the enslaved person who spends time in hiding places. In the early African American literary tradition, one enslaved individual who stands out in terms of her hidden experience is Harriet Jacobs. As recounted in her narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Jacobs spends an extraordinary seven years in hiding. These years follow several shorter periods in which Jacobs had remained hidden—all experiences of her ancient predecessor, Moses, that reveal the way in which time spent in solitude can strengthen the personal identity of enslaved individuals and can allow them to connect intimately with God in places with less-than-ideal conditions.

The five hiding places of Moses

As recorded in Exod 2–20, Moses inhabits a series of five hiding places. He is born under an edict issued by Pharaoh calling for the murder of all Hebrew male babies by throwing them into the Nile River. However, his mother ignores the edict and hides him within her own household—the first hiding place. After a few months, Moses's mother places him in a basket and among the reeds on the banks of the Nile in hopes that someone in Pharaoh's court will have compassion on Moses, refusing to heed Pharaoh's edict—the second hiding place. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the baby in the basket, Moses's sister, Miriam, who had witnessed the discovery, runs to her and volunteers to “find” a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her, knowing that this Hebrew woman will be Moses's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter agrees and offers payment for this service. Thus Moses is sent into hiding, this third hiding place being the same as the first—the home of his Hebrew family. After being weaned there, Moses is taken to his fourth hiding place. He enters the Egyptian palace and becomes the son of Pharaoh's daughter. This palace functions for Moses as yet another hiding place, for there, Moses, as a Hebrew, is spared possible death of body and mind under Egyptian slavery. Yet, despite this advantage, Moses still grows up to identify with his people the Hebrews. When he steps away from the Egyptian palace one day, he sees the hard labor of his people and becomes so upset after noticing an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew that he murders the Egyptian. Later, when Moses realizes that Pharaoh is seeking to kill him because of the murder, Moses flees the grand, urban center of Egypt and enters his fifth and final hiding place, rural Midian. He lives there many years, getting married, having children, laboring as a shepherd, and eventually having an encounter with God.

The hiding places of Harriet Jacobs

Each hiding place that Moses enters spares him from physical death, revealing the nature of hiding places in general. At the very least, they provide physical protection for oppressed individuals whose death at the hands of their oppressors could be justified easily. This protective quality is revealed in Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. As outlined in the narrative, Jacobs goes into several short-term hiding places before entering a long-term one. Her tenure within these hiding places begins when she escapes from her plantation, for on that plantation her children would suffer the worst abuses of slavery and be used to keep her from trying to run away. She hides in the home of several friends and then at the home of a slave trader's wife who is sympathetic to her situation. Fearing that she may be caught, her friends help her hide in an area known as Snaky Swamp, so named because of its abundance of large snakes and mosquitoes. When these rough conditions eventually sicken Jacobs, she is taken to her grandmother's home and placed in a crawlspace. Jacobs does not know that this room will be her hiding place for seven years before she finally escapes to the North. These hiding places enable Jacobs to escape what likely would have been her death had she been found and had she resisted being returned to slavery.

Personal identity and Moses

For both Jacobs and Moses, the period in which they, as members of an oppressed group, inhabit their respective hiding places serves not only as an oasis of safety but also as a place to develop a greater sense of identity.

The fact that Moses defends a Hebrew against Egyptian abuse and then seeks to help two fighting Hebrews reconcile suggests that, in his first hiding place among his Hebrew family, Moses learned identification with the Hebrews despite not later growing up among them. Evidence of this identification is revealed first in his willingness to leave the Egyptian palace and notice the oppression of the Hebrews by the Egyptians.

Some critics, such as Ernest Neufeld, argue that Moses did not identify with the Hebrews. However, Neufeld overlooks the significance of the narrative’s details: Moses steps away from the Egyptian palace, witnesses the labor of the Hebrews, kills an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew, and then later tries to bring peace between two Hebrews who are fighting. These details alone reveal Moses’s compassion for the Hebrews. He could have hidden himself within the luxurious Egyptian palace, isolating himself from the oppression of the Hebrews. He might have witnessed the
beating of the Hebrews and felt some pity, but still walked away. Rather, he gets involved.

Neufeld and other critics also suggest that Moses's actions on behalf of the Hebrews reflect his naturally compassionate nature, not his identification with the Hebrews. According to Neufeld, Moses, soon after arriving in Midian from his flight from Pharaoh's death threat, fights off shepherds who are attempting to drive away the daughters of Jethro, the man into whose family Moses eventually marries. According to Neufeld, "Here is an instance in which all the participants were non-Hebrews, but Moses needed no self-identification with them in order to help the defenseless, convincingly demonstrating that he well might have acted similarly in the case of the Hebrews in Egypt, out of feelings of common humanity." Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper make a similar assertion, proposing that Moses's identification with the Hebrews is not revealed in his willingness to kill an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew, for Moses "saves the Midianite women although he has no knowledge of any kinship ties with them at the time."15

However, the argument that Moses's concern for the Israelites in Egypt reflects general compassion rather than identification actually supports the notion that Moses identifies with the Hebrews. Where did Moses learn this compassion, especially considering that he grew up in a palace whose government was rooted in oppressive practices? Were compassion merely inherent to humanity, perhaps the actual practice of Hebrew slavery would never have existed. The fact that it did exist, though, points to compassion, at least in part, being learned. In the case of Moses, his tendency toward compassion seems rooted in his upbringing, in the feelings of outsidership that he must have experienced.

While no evidence exists that Moses knew he was a Hebrew until God revealed it to him at the burning bush, Neufeld suggests that Pharaoh did know:

Pharaoh knew from the beginning that Moses was a Hebrew child whom his daughter had saved despite Pharaoh's decree of extermination, and he could hardly have considered him a true Egyptian. Thus, he knew what Moses may well not have. He knew that Moses, by slaying the Egyptian, had committed himself, whether he knew it or not, to the cause of the Israelites.16

Patricia Berlyn suggests that Moses's identity as a Hebrew was known, not only to Pharaoh, but throughout Pharaoh's court: "it was not merely Pharaoh who knew that Moses came from the Israelites, but so did many in the Egyptian palace. Moses's origins must have been known at court, since so many attendants had seen their royal mistress draw him from the water, so [Moses] himself must have known from an early age that he was an Israelite."17

If Pharaoh knew from the beginning that Moses was a Hebrew, it seems highly probable that Pharaoh, in subtle ways, made Moses feel his difference, his outsidership. Thus, it seems likely that the compassion Moses exhibited for the oppressed, for the marginalized, probably grew out of his time in the Egyptian palace where he did not feel fully accepted. Living with Pharaoh as a grandfather, Moses knew what it felt like to be despised. Moses's position as Pharaoh's grandson kept Pharaoh from killing Moses earlier. However, after Moses kills an overseer, Pharaoh's simmering dislike for Moses bursts forth. As Berlyn says, "Perhaps to Pharaoh and his inner circle the heinous offense was not the killing of a mere overseer, but the ingratitude of a young man who was given a high place in the palace, raised and educated as an upper-class Egyptian, and yet chose to align himself to the despised but still-feared children of Israel."18 This display of hatred for Moses was probably not the first time Pharaoh exhibited hostility toward Moses, therein reminding Moses of his outsidership. However, it was probably the first time that Pharaoh had an excuse finally to seek the death of this Hebrew boy who he felt should have been killed at birth. Had Pharaoh fully embraced Moses, Moses could have identified easily with the oppressors, therein remaining distant from or oblivious to the pains of the Israelites. Instead, as one rejected, he learns compassion.

**Personal identity and Harriet Jacobs**

Moses's hiding-place experience in the palace as well as his hidden experiences before then, as a weaned child within the Israelite household, allow him to grow up with a solid sense of his identity and to develop compassion for his people. For Moses's counterpart Jacobs, having to go into hiding also enables her to deal with identity concerns. While Moses's hiding places enable him to deal with ethnic identity issues, Jacobs's hiding places enable her to confront concerns that are of a moral nature, allowing her to reclaim and maintain what she deems to be her moral identity.

Outside of hiding, in the everyday life of slavery, Jacobs struggles to live according to the moral values that she believes most affirming. As a slave, her dignity is ever under assault because of the constant sexual advances of her owner, Dr. Flint. He refuses to allow her to marry. Instead, he offers to establish her and her child in a home, an offer Jacobs knows is an attempt to push her into concubinage. Yet, in order to escape from Flint's harassment and to acquire some measure of what she considers a respectable life, she enters into a semi-committed relationship with slave owner Samuel Tredwell, with whom she eventually has two children. Though Jacobs feels that this relationship allows her some measure of respectability, she still feels ashamed of this choice. After her first child with Tredwell, Jacobs says, "I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! Slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable. There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life."19

Jacobs's feelings of shame come from two sources. She lived during the Victorian era, a period in which women were judged according to a set of ideals known as the cult of true womanhood. As Laurie Kaiser says, "According to the cult of true womanhood, the ideal woman was a moral wife, mother, and daughter. Her place was in the home. She was religious, submissive, and pure. A great issue was made of purity. Women were expected to maintain virtue at all costs."20 Black women were not seen as virtuous. Instead, they were thought to have an "animal sexuality"21 and were viewed as "temptresses with insatiable sexual appetites."22 Jacobs expresses her shame and sadness at having entered into a relationship with Tredwell, a relationship she chose because...
slavery prevented her from living what was considered the virtuous, pure life of a wife. In her narrative, addressed primarily to a white northern female audience, Jacobs relates her sadness over her choice:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection . . . do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice.... I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.23

Despite feeling some shame at her choice, she makes the choice, as Kaiser says, in hopes of maintaining some dignity.24 Her feelings of shame and sadness arise not only from being unable to live up to the ideals of the cult of true womanhood, but also from her being unable to live according to what she considers Christian values. Jacobs's views about sex are in line with those views common to Christians at the time. Yet she does not embrace Christianity as practiced by the slave holders around her; rather, as Ann Taves suggests, Jacobs's Christian practice and views are those that allow her to align herself with individuals who are Christian and who support and love her: “The connection which Jacobs makes between sexual purity and spirituality, a connection which lies at the heart of her narrative and indeed was prevalent among Christians of her era, was grounded in her relationships with her mother, her grandmother, and her first mistress.”25 Because of her relationship with these three women, she comes to believe that marriage and childbirth within marriage are the most appropriate and excellent practices. Her mother was a free woman who had the privilege of getting married. Thus, the shame that Jacobs feels after entering concubinage, a state in which sex outside of marriage was permitted in violation of social and Christian standards. Her hiding place allows Jacobs to live according to her closely held social and religious values about sex and marriage. Thus, while slavery may have prevented her from assuming the identity of a virtuous wife, the crawlspace enables her to identify herself as a virtuous woman. Thus she is able to follow the path of a handful of black women during her time who sought, as Beth Doriani notes, to be “shapers of their own identities and destinies and . . . individuals who need not meet the standards of whites and males to achieve their own personhood.”26

The sacredness of the hiding place

The hiding place appears to be, then, a space which impacts personal identity, enabling Moses to possess a clearer sense of ethnic identity and enabling Jacobs to live out an identity grounded in the moral standards that she most values. All of this counters what might seem an inevitable conclusion—that the hiding place is void of any redeeming qualities given the fact that the oppressed individual usually comes to inhabit it under the threat of death. Yet the hiding place is actually redemptive, helping individuals such as Moses and Jacobs to grapple with their unique identities. The redemptive ability of the hiding place, despite the distressing circumstances that lead to it, arises from the divine activity that occurs within it, activity that transforms it from being merely a location where one escapes capture and possible death to a place of sacred growth. As a sacred space, it is, as Donald McKim defines the term “sacred,” that “which is regarded and revered as holy or able to induce an experience of the divine.”27 Thus the hiding places of Moses and Jacobs become locations wherein the experience of the divine is induced, places wherein God's presence manifests itself in various forms, including motherly love, the love of family and friends, and, in the case of Moses, a burning bush.

The sacred in Moses's hiding places

For Moses, the burning bush experience in Midian is obviously a moment of divine encounter. Yet, long before this encounter, Moses had experienced God's presence in his other hiding places. While living in Egypt, both the Hebrew home where he is hidden as an infant and the palace where he resides as an adopted son become sacred places wherein divine activity manifests itself in the love of both his biological mother and his adoptive mother. Their love proves to be redemptive, rescuing Moses from an unjust death, enabling him to grow up, allowing him to become educated in, as Berlyn says, “palace schools, among sons and nephews of pharaohs and sons of Canaanite vassal-kings.”

Both Testaments speak of this ability and willingness of God to manifest herself in motherly nurture and care. In Isa 66:13, the writer gives voice to God as a mother who desires to comfort her children, her children being, in one sense, Jerusalem, and, in another sense, the larger faith community: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (NRSV). In Luke 13:34, Christ, the manifestation of God in human flesh, speaks of wanting to love and protect his people like a mother even though his people have rejected him: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your
children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (NRSV). According to Paul Smith, the image of a mother is among the various metaphors, similes, analogies, and symbols used to describe God in scripture: “In the Bible, God is referred to in human analogies such as shepherd, father, mother, redeemer, judge, deliverer, friend, lover, and helper, as well as in animal analogies such as mother bear, eagle, and mother hen.”32 Thus, simply because God is described in scripture as being like a father, does not mean also, as Smith says, that God should be viewed as male or having masculine traits or having gender. The metaphors in scripture describing God as father draw upon attributes of fathers during biblical times in order to point to certain truths about God.33 This is true also of the metaphors describing God as a mother. Yet, as McKim says, “God is not gendered, so a range of biblical images can be used to describe God.”34 The motherhood of God as presented in Isaiah and Luke points to God as one who lavishes upon her children protection and comfort, particularly in difficult situations. This is exactly what Moses receives in each of his hiding places. In both his Hebrew home and his palace home, his mothers protect him from Pharaoh’s death decree and provide him with necessary comforts such as food to sustain his physical life and education to enrich his intellectual life. Thus these hiding places, the Hebrew home and the Egyptian palace, become sacred places where God’s divine presence resides.

When Moses flees Egypt, he arrives at yet another hiding place. This place, Midian, becomes sacred just as his previous hiding places do. Not only does Moses find protection there from Pharaoh’s threat to kill him, he also receives comfort, especially the comfort of family and community. Instead of having to live the life of a fugitive, always isolated from community, he marries into the family of Jethro. Jethro becomes his father-in-law; Zipporah, his wife. Here, God mediates through a father-in-law and a wife, rather than through a mother. Later in Midian, Moses has his first direct encounter with God. Instead of relating to Moses indirectly through human sources such as his mothers or his father-in-law or his wife, God speaks directly to him. This God calls himself in Exod 3:14, Yahweh, “I AM THAT I AM,” a name which points to a constant, loving presence. According to Oliver Davies, the “Rabbinic understandings of this [name] focus on the idea within it: ‘I shall be with you always,’ or ‘I shall always come to your aid.’”35 These understandings of the name Yahweh again point to God as providing protection and comfort. Thus, not only is Midian in general a sacred place for Moses, but this particular place is also where God speaks to Moses through the burning bush. This is reinforced by Exod 3:5, where God tells Moses as he approaches the burning bush, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (NRSV). This place of the burning bush is sacred because God is there.

The sacred in Jacobs’s hiding places

Just as Moses’s initial divine encounter is through the protective and comforting love of his mothers, so too does Jacobs experience parental love from both her grandmother and aunt. In addition to maternal love, Jacobs experiences God’s protection and comforting presence in her various hiding places through the protective support of family and friends who help her as she seeks freedom.

Jacobs’s first divine encounter occurs when her grandmother hides her in order to keep her from being captured and returned to slavery. Jacobs continues to experience God’s comfort through her Aunt Marthy who, while Jacobs is in the crawlspace, takes on the Christ-like role of bringing food to her, this feeding becoming divine manifestation. For Jacobs, divine activity becomes associated with the willingness to feed others, both literally and metaphorically.36 This association is due, at least in part, to the way in which she, while still in slavery, notices the Flints, churchgoing slaveholders, abusing slaves by not giving them sufficient food or by punishing slave cooks when the food they serve is viewed as unsatisfactory. Jacobs contrasts these sinful behaviors with the figure of Christ who calls himself the bread of life and asks that the hungry come to him.37 As the bread of life, Christ dies so that others may live eternally. To be bread, to feed others, whether physically or spiritually, is to give them life, to sustain life. The life that Jacobs receives comes not only through the food that Aunt Marthy feeds her but also through the food that she serves others. At one point, when officials come searching for Jacobs in the very house wherein she is hiding, Aunt Marthy feeds them in the hopes of distracting them from searching for Jacobs.38 By nourishing and sustaining their lives she also sustains Jacobs’s life. These officials eventually leave, never knowing how close Jacobs was to them.

What is more, as Aunt Marty sustains her, Jacobs too becomes one who not only encounters, but also grants, the divine blessing of sustenance. As Linda Naranjo-Huebl suggests, Jacobs herself takes on the Christ-like role of sustainer:

Harriet Jacobs, in her own attempt to facilitate her children’s freedom, hides for seven years in the tiny attic space in which she has barely enough room to turn over, and where she suffers the debilitating effects of extreme cold and heat . . . . Appropriately, Jacobs’ hiding place lies above the storeroom; she becomes the food store that nourishes her children’s freedom.39

Even before Jacobs settles into her grandmother’s crawlspace, she receives support from the community. Once she escapes from the plantation, the wife of a sympathetic slave owner allows her to hide in her house. Later, after she is forced to leave this place, her uncle hides her in a swamp. All of this comforting and protective support given to Jacobs as she seeks her freedom may be described as divine activity, activity that comforts and protects, connecting her to the comforting and protective Mother God of Isa 66:13. However, it is not only the motherly nature of this activity that makes it divine. It is also the way in which this activity seeks to honor the authority of God within social conditions that do not.
Stephen Marshall notes, in his discussion of St. Augustine's Book XV in *The City of God*, that sin is rooted in the desire of human beings to assume mastery, supplanting the divine authority of God, throwing off what was originally designed to be human subjection to God's rule. This desire produces practices and ways of communicating that glorify the pursuit of human sovereignty, making this sinful pursuit appear honorable, encouraging even society's marginalized to aspire to it. To resist this temptation toward mastery, St. Augustine promoted exilic virtue; that is, living in subjection to human masters. This sort of living enables an individual to avoid the corruption that comes both in pursuing mastery and in engaging in practices and in communicative acts that endorse mastery. The individual who submits to human masters avoids corruption and develops, instead, a heroic, great soul.

However, achieving a heroic soul in a world bent on mastery might be viewed differently. According to Marshall, enslaved individuals can and have achieved greatness of soul through resistance, not submission, to human masters. When they have resisted slave masters, they have opposed an institution built upon the sinful desire to reject sovereign authority. Those who have helped them in this resistance have also sought to usher in the divine, have also worked in such a way that the will of God has been done in heaven as well as on earth.

God's will points to human beings submitting to him, not to those, like Dr. Flint in *Incidents*, who have sought to dethrone God. Dr. Flint, in opposition to Jacob's own moral sensibilities, seeks to play a god-like role in Jacob's life when he prevents her marrying in order to force her into concubinage. However, when she resists his persistent attempts at mastery, as best she can, according to Christian principles of morality, she achieves greatness of soul. In other words, in resisting, she draws nearer to the divine, not only morally but in terms of a life lived in subjection to God, not in subjection to Dr. Flint, the false god, the nineteenth-century Baal. This is true also for the family and friends who support her. In helping her, they too resist the human drive toward mastery and thereby affirm God's ultimate authority and rule, ushering in the divine despite the base circumstances of slavery.

**The undesirability of sacred places**

While the hiding places of Moses and Jacobs are filled with divine activity, they are also undesirable places, places of material lack, of separation, and of discomfort. This undesirability is due to Moses and Jacobs being members of oppressed, marginalized groups. Philip Sheldrake speaks to the issues of place and marginalization:

> Human places themselves can be read as landscapes of exclusion. So, the way people describe particular places as central or peripheral tends to accord with whether they are associated with high or low culture. Power is expressed in the monopolization of central places by socially strong groups and the recognition of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments.

For Moses and Jacobs, every undesirable aspect of their hiding place is connected to their being part of a disenfranchised group, making their hiding places a mix of sacred protection and undesirability. For Moses, his biological family's home in the slave quarters is obviously less desirable materially in comparison to the opulence of the Egyptian palace in which he eventually comes to live. Yet even this palace stands as an undesirable place, for by living there, Moses must remain separated from his people—a separation that he obviously dislikes, for he eventually leaves the palace to connect with them. When he enters Midian, he experiences deeper separation, for not only is he separated from his biological family, but he is also separated from his adoptive mother. While he has a newly formed family to assuage some of this loss, the fact remains that he must live apart from the only people and the only home place that he has known—Egypt. This issue of loss is also relevant in Jacobs's situation. While her time in the crawlspace does spare her children from being sent to a plantation and enables her to watch their development from her view through the crawlspace, she is still prevented from interacting with them and the rest of her family normally, openly. In addition to the pain of separation, Jacobs must face the discomfort of living in a cramped space that leaves her with physical ailments that linger long after she escapes. Thus, for Jacobs and Moses, this condition of undesirability within their hidden, sacred places clarifies, in part, what the Apostle Paul says in Rom 8:38–39, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (NRSV). The love of God can and does dwell in the hiding places of the disenfranchised, despite the undesirable conditions of these places and despite the circumstances that have led the marginalized to inhabit them. To say that God is omnipresent is to recognize this very fact—that God also dwells, moves, and acts in undesirable places.

**Conclusions**

The connection that enslaved members of the African diaspora in America recognized between their condition and the ancient Hebrews points contemporary scholars to a more nuanced theological view of what it means to describe a place as sacred. One slave narrative in particular, when understood through the framework of Exodus, reveals the presence of a unique, sacred area that can be described as “the hiding place,” an area that serves as more than a temporary harbor for those seeking to escape slavery. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, like Exodus, highlights various hiding places, those areas where enslaved individuals flee, usually under the threat of death. For Moses and Jacobs, their hiding places become areas wherein their sense of personal identity is strengthened and where they encounter the divine as manifested through the protection and comfort of mothers, of other family members, and of friends who support them in their resistance against slavery, an institution that sought to institutionalize the usurpation of God. This manifestation of the divine endows their hiding places with sacredness. However, this sacredness does not ignore the fact that these places are also undesirable dwelling areas because of the poverty, separation, and discomfort always associated with oppression and marginalization. This co-existence of God's protection and undesirability in the hiding places of the oppressed...
reinforces the fact that God is, indeed, omnipresent, dwelling and moving even in those places where there is pain and discomfort of all kinds. In those sacred, undesirable places, God does not forsake an individual. For Moses, God provides a floating basket to replace what could have been a watery grave had Pharaoh's killing order been followed. For Jacobs, God provides a cramped crawlspace with a measure of freedom to replace what could have been plantation slave quarters or a house set aside for forced concubinage. Despite this, one could ask why God chose not to end Pharaoh's killing, rending the floating basket unnecessary, or why God chose to allow the continuation of slavery, making the crawlspace a necessary refuge for Jacobs. To approach the examination of hidden places with those questions first, no matter how important, is to allow human sin to occlude one's view of God's omnipotence and omnipresence.

Notes
7. Alexander Crummell, “The Destined Superiority of the Negro,” in *Preaching with Fire*, 124–34. Unlike Jones and Crummell, Richard Allen made a less glorious connection between the Exodus and the African diaspora in America. In an 1820 sermon aimed at slaveholders and other supporters of slavery, Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, argued that slavery inhibited slaves from developing moral and intellectual excellence. This agenesis caused by slavery, he said, was found among the ancient Hebrews, for even though God delivered them from Egyptian slavery, they eventually complained, wanting to return to Egypt and preferring to worship idol gods. Allen said that this fear of freedom was the consequence of them having been forced to live in an institution wherein they could not develop their hearts and souls. In America, he said, slaves would also experience the stunting of hearts and souls because of their enslavement. See Richard Allen, “An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve of the Practice,” in *Preaching with Fire*, 107.
8. Preacher and abolitionist Frederick Douglass turned to the Exodus to frame his abolitionist concerns. In his famous 1852 speech, “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?,” Douglass said that for many white Americans the Fourth of July was like the great day of deliverance experienced by the children of Israel. However, for him and other African Americans, the holiday was anything but a day of celebration: “I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us…. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.” See Frederick Douglass, Martha Simmons, Frank Thomas, and Gardner Taylor, “What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?” in *Preaching with Fire*, 145.

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Why not women? This is the question we are asking this weekend. I would like to suggest a follow-up question: Why are we still asking this question?

Early in my college experience, when I was trying on churches like jeans or shoes, I attended a college-age class at an area church. There I was asked another series of questions, the same ones you hear in college-age Sunday school classes every fall: “What’s your name, where are you from, and what do you want to be?” I said, “Jenny Patterson, Jacksonville, Florida, youth minister.” The teacher, the associate minister at that church, said to me, “You want to be a youth minister, in this denomination?” And laughed. That was years ago, and if we are still asking this question, then it is still a laughing matter. Which, in my opinion, is no laughing matter.

Think of the litany of reasons you have been told that women should not be ministers: personal reasons, social reasons, family reasons, so-called biblical reasons, ad nauseam. It is tempting, when on the receiving end of this arsenal of reasons, to respond in a similarly systematic way: to line up all the difficult and affirming biblical texts with which we have wrestled, and then using our careful study and intellect, construct them into an impressive, watertight answer to the question, “Why not women?” How satisfying it would be to answer back, tit for tat, why Joe Opponent-of-women-in-ministry is wrong. After all, we have scholarship, historical criticism, and contextual factors on our side.

Invigorating as the inevitable argument might be, I am convinced this is not always the way to respond. And I am convinced of this for two reasons. One was impressed upon me in a conference elective I attended several years ago entitled, “Biblical Answers for Every Question.” The cynic in me relishes the chance to debate such claims, so I went to the workshop to raise a little Cain. While there, our very question was asked, “Why not women?” Already working as a minister at this point, and aware that my profession was unknown to those around me, I settled in for the show. About ten minutes in, not long after a fellow participant cited something he called “creation law” as “God’s reason” women must not assume positions of authority, I spoke up, way up. And I pulled out the big guns, reinterpreting passages my opponents had cited, using as many multisyllabic words as possible. The discussion became quite heated, and the poor guy leading the class seemed desperate to get things back under control. To that end and in that moment he said the single most helpful and honest thing I have ever heard from someone who is opposed to women in ministry. Exasperated and resigned, he finally said, “I guess I just don’t want a woman telling me what to do.”

This answer is the first reason I think systematizing may not be our most appropriate response. To argue our point, however artfully we do it, against a competing view of scripture or history may score a win on paper, and might possibly even change our opponent’s mind about that scripture or history, but scripture and history do not stand alone as means of theological reflection. My Methodist forebear, John Wesley, is helpful in this regard.

“Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” For my friend in the elective, he was relying not only on his understanding of scripture and history (tradition), but also leaning on his own experiential bias and baggage. And it will take more than an argument to change that. Luckily, we have more than an argument, but more on that later.
And speaking of arguments and correct biblical interpretations, I was especially fond of both in high school. I went through a time of particular religious fervor for a few years and took it upon myself to argue for my faith. I railed on at lunch about prayer at graduation, sex before marriage, and my favorite topic, creationism. I was on a mission to argue the hell out of anybody, literally. For someone so impassioned about getting at the truth of scripture, I certainly did not let it get at me. In fact, as I think it through, I cannot remember one biblical account of the gospel being proclaimed via argument. Rather, the good news of Jesus Christ finds its way into the hearts and minds and corners of the world in far more interesting and personal ways, and by “interesting and personal ways” I mean people.

So how do we answer the question, “Why not women?” The answer is as unique as you are. Because what will make your work important, what will be your answer, is you. Now, one mistake that can be made here is to assume that who you are, mostly, is a woman. You are indeed women, and that does matter; it matters so much to some that we have to answer their question. But what I think we really ought to call this retreat is “Why Not You?” because asking the question, “Why Not Women?” puts an unbalanced, albeit important, emphasis on only one aspect of who you are. But you are more.

Besides, “Why not you?” is really God’s question, ringing out like a refrain throughout the biblical narrative. This question came to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. It came as well to Rebekah. To Moses. To Deborah. To Isaiah. And eventually to Mary of Nazareth. An angel named Gabriel unexpectedly addresses her: “Hail, Mary,” the angel speaks, “the Lord is with you.” Mary is perplexed at the very least. The angel continues, “You have found favor with God.” God’s call is gracious: When God calls us, God also gives us the grace to respond. And this is how grace comes to every last one of us. It comes despite us. It comes as an impossibility but for the power of God. Without God, Mary is just a frightened virgin, the angel is just a bad dream, and the baby? Just impossible. Without God, so is grace.

When God calls people to be co-laborers in the relentless work of loving the world, God does not let little things like age (Abraham), past mistakes (Moses), gender (Deborah), “unclean lips” (Isaiah) get in the way. And so it follows that, of course, God would choose a young woman—not unlike you—to bear Love incarnate. When God asks Mary, “Why not you?” the category of “impossible” gets stricken from the record: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:31-32 NRSV). “But I’m a virgin,” the girl protests. “True, but we’re talking about God here. Nothing is impossible.” Shattered expectations. She had gone to bed that night young, engaged, and a little tired. But now, she was, seated at the edge of the same bed: young, engaged, wide awake, and pregnant. And what does Mary do? She proclaims. She takes her (cosmically) unique set of experiences, and as herself, in her voice, she proclaims the word of the Lord in a song, “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:50-53 NRSV).

If you have ever listened to Handel’s Messiah—indeed another proclamation of the word of the Lord in a song—you might recall one of the shorter choruses in Part II (it happens to be among my favorites in the entire piece). With a resounding organ blast it begins, “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers!” It is a powerful musical moment, and a powerful call. As the voices soar, it is not hard to imagine how great indeed is that company. The text of the song is, of course, a text from scripture, from Ps 68:11 to be precise. Where Handel penned, “preachers,” the original text is not so vocationally specific. In fact, the New American Standard Bible reads, “The Lord gives the command; The women who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.” Imagine: all those choirs, in all those cathedrals and concert halls, for all these centuries may just have been singing about you!

You, dear women, are a part of that “great host.” Maybe standing right next to Mary of Nazareth in the alto section. Called by God to proclaim the word of the Lord. To proclaim that word amidst your own unique set of experiences. God has been present to you in specific ways. God has seemed to be absent from you in others. Your work as a minister is to communicate that. Frederick Buechner has said of the minister (using masculine language as was common in 1977):

But let him take heart. He is called not to be an actor, a magician, in the pulpit. He is called to be himself. He is called to tell the truth as he has experienced it. He is called to be human ... and that is calling enough for any man.4

And ultimately, who you are, fundamentally and before all else, says Paul, is not male or female, slave or free, Jew or gentile, but you in Christ Jesus. And “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1 NRSV). So first, you are loved. Ridiculously so! That love, not your gender, is the one...
thing that nothing can separate you from: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39 NRSV).

If you are going to be a minister, or even alive, the thing that you cannot miss, that you must get, that everyone must get, that you must make it your business that everyone gets, is that you are loved by God. God loved you into being. The prayer of confession that we say together each week at my home church contains this line, “You know us as we are, and yet you love us.” You are women. Yes. Be ministers. You should. You can. You must. But what God is really calling you to is to know you are loved. If you want to be loud about something, be loud about that: as loud as the sixteen-year-old me was about creationism, as loud as the guy in the seminar was about women, you be louder about being loved by God. And better yet, do it from behind a pulpit, in any church that will have you. Your work will matter. Because the truth of it all is that you matter. You matter enough to God to risk everything. And by risk everything I am not necessarily suggesting that you must, I am suggesting that God did. And a God who works in such boundless, measureless ways is not interested in binding you by your gender, measuring you by your stature.

Theotokos, God-bearer, is what Eastern Christians call Mary. You are God-bearers, no less. It is a beautifully feminine image.

On retreat at a monastery, I once spent some time looking at a lovely statue of Mary in their retreatants’ garden (see image on page 28). What I remember most about it, likely because it is what struck me most about it at the time, is that Mary looked tired. Bearing is work. It hurts, and not just while you are in labor. I have a daughter whom it hurts to love. It is work, much harder work than those few hours in the hospital. Bearing a child does not end when the epidural wears off; it is a life’s work. Bearing God to the world, it can be your life’s work. You are so well suited for it, for the God whom you bear loves you. So, “Why not you?”

Let your lives answer. The Christian mystic Teresa of Ávila penned these words hundreds of years ago. They are words I spoke at my ordination. Claim them as your own and speak them with your lives that they might echo for years to come: “Let us make our way together, Lord; wherever you go I must go, and through whatever you pass, there too I will pass.”

Notes
1. This sermon was first presented at a conference for female college students considering ministry. The conference was titled, “Why Not Women?” Provided to conference attendees was the book of like title: Loren Cunningham, David J. Hamilton, and Janice Rogers, Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership (Seattle: YWAM, 2000). The sermon has been adapted for Priscilla Papers and could be adapted for various audiences.
3. Gen 24:58, Exod 3–4, Judg 4, Isa 6, respectively.

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• We believe in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons in equal power and glory.
• We believe in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
• We believe that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
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• We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
• We believe that women and men are equally created in God’s image and given equal authority and stewardship of God’s creation.
• We believe that men and women are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
• God’s design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a man and a woman, celibate singleness and mutual submission in Christian community.
• The unrestricted use of women’s gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel in the world.
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• Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from females what God has given them: their dignity, and freedom, their leadership, and often their very lives.
• While the Bible reflects patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy in human relationships.
• Christ’s redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.

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Lindsay Hardin Freeman

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