I met an extraordinary teenager who had come to faith in a small town in Latvia. He was passionate about Jesus and wanted to live his life fully for Christ. When I asked how he wished to serve Christ, he made a comment that continues to inspire me. He said, “I want to give words their true meaning.”

As a gifted linguist, this young man recognized that words should always be used to clarify truth, rather than to obscure it. This is especially true when discussing the important questions concerning faith, gender, and authority. Consider the following example.

Many of us have heard the claim that though women and men are equal, they are said to have “different roles.” How are men and women equal but different? Perhaps you imagine the most obvious issue, that women rather than men, conceive children, carry them to term, give birth, and breastfeed them. But if you press further, you discover that the claim “equal but different” turns on one matter alone — authority. The sole difference between men and women, some suggest, is that men hold authority over women. The confusing element here is the word “equal.” How can women be equal to men when men hold authority — an authority withheld from women? Women and men cannot share equality while men alone hold all authority. To do so renders the word “equal” meaningless!

The argument “separate but equal” was used years ago in America to segregate schools, restaurants, restrooms, hotels, and even churches according to skin color. “Separate but equal” was pressed on the poorest in our nation and furthered educational and economic inequities. Ultimately a cry for justice went to the highest level — to the Supreme Court, where it was determined that separate was never equal. In a world of sin, power, greed, and domination, separate is inherently unequal.

Does Scripture teach that women, because they are embodied as females, must always submit to the authority of men? No, because there are too many examples to the contrary in Scripture. In fact, Dr. Roger Nicole, a former president and founding member of the Evangelical Theological Society, once said that the main stream of the Scripture supports, rather than excludes, women in positions of leadership beside men. Nicole said:

I believe that most, if not all of the restrictions on women in society have no basis in Scripture; and that those maintained in the church are based on an inadequate interpretation of a few restrictive passages which put them in contradiction with the manifest special concern and love of God for women articulated from Genesis to Revelation. I do believe that in the eschaton all the redeemed will endorse biblical equality, since all of them will together constitute the bride of Christ.

There are numerous scholars who share Dr. Nicole’s egalitarian perspective. Why? Scripture never suggests that gender is the basis upon which authority in marriage or access to Christian service is determined. Remember, Paul tells all Christians to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21). Wives have authority over their husbands’ bodies, just as husbands have authority over their wives’ bodies (1 Cor. 7:4). Paul celebrates the spiritual leadership of female apostles (Rom. 16:7); prophets (1 Cor. 11:3-5; 1 Cor. 14:31; Acts 2:17; 21:9); house church leaders (Rom. 16:13-15, 40; 1 Cor. 1:11; 1 Cor. 16:19; Philem. 1:2; and 2 John 1:1); deacons (Rom. 16:1); teachers of the gospel (Acts 18:26); evangelists (Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:3); and those who do the very heaviest of gospel-labor (Rom. 16:12). Paul asks Christians in Corinth to submit to Stephanas’ entire household—a household that included women and slaves (1 Cor. 16:15-16). Slaves, free, Greeks, Jews, men, women, the educated, and the illiterate together shared spiritual authority — as they shared in the risen life of Christ (Gal. 3:27-29). And their oneness in Christ would one day overturn slavery and the subjugation of women.

Let’s give words back their true meaning. Being equal must always and everywhere include shared authority. If that is not what is intended, then a word other than “equal” will have to be found. If men and women are equal, then they will share authority as joint-heirs of Christ’s kingdom. To be Christ’s heir is to share in Christ’s authority and power which, unlike the power of secular rulers, is the authority to serve, submit, and love one another as Christ loved us. Jesus said “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25–27).