Many people who know very little about the Bible still have heard that Paul’s teaching is against women: Women should be subservient to men and should not be in leadership positions over men.

And most Christians seem to know at least three verses from Paul: “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12); “Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22) and “Women should be silent in the churches” (1 Cor 14:34).

If we believe the Bible is God’s Word (which I do), then we should keep the commands that are in the Bible, shouldn’t we? Of course we should—providing we understand what those commands are really trying to say! And here the problem becomes a good deal more complicated.

One of the most serious problems for Christians (and we are all guilty of this) is selective literalism. We choose which passages we want to apply literally, and we ignore all the ones we don’t like. Wouldn’t it be better if we just applied all passages literally? But that is impossible.

Probably every person reading this article is right now disobeying at least one biblical command: “You shall not put on a garment made of two kinds of materials” (Lev 19:19). If you are wearing a cotton polyester blend or any other kind of blend, you are in violation of a commandment!

Well, you may be thinking, that’s an obscure Old Testament command. So let’s look at the New Testament instead. Five times, Paul and Peter tell Christians to “Greet one another with a holy kiss,” but I’ve never seen that practiced in the churches I attend. I could give you quite a list of other New Testament commands that we do not follow.

Why don’t we? You know the answer. Those commands arise from cultural customs, and different cultures have different customs. In fact, almost everything in the Bible is culturally conditioned—just as almost everything we do is culturally conditioned.

The clothes we wear, hair styles, the kind of houses we live in, the books we read: Everything in our lives is deeply affected by the culture in which we live. The same was of course true in Bible times.

Then what good does it do us to study the Bible? The main purpose, of course, is that we meet God there. We see what God is like primarily because we see Jesus Christ—God revealed in human form as Savior and Lord. We also find life principles that God has revealed.

Like us, people in Bible times worked for a living, they loved and hated, they had governments and leaders that were sometimes much worse than ours! They had husbands and wives, children and parents. They had important relationships just as we do. And as with us, their major problem was how to get along in their relationships: with God, and in families, churches, communities. So we study the Bible to see what it can teach us about these crucial relationships.

FROM PHARISEE TO APOSTLE

Before we look at some of the oft-quoted teachings of Paul, let’s look at Paul himself. He was undoubtedly the greatest evangelist in New Testament times. Without his passion for the Gospel, the New Testament church might not have flourished.

Paul met Christ miraculously on the road to Damascus, where he was going to persecute Christians and put them in jail. After his conversion, he met some of Jesus’ disciples who no doubt told him about Jesus’ life, teachings, death and resurrection.

Remember that for the first twenty years or so after the ascension of Christ, there was no written Gospel; the words and acts of Jesus were passed on orally. Therefore, according to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Paul himself spent years in the Arabian desert, working through all he had learned about Jesus, and all that he knew about the Old Testament through his training as a Pharisee. Paul had to distinguish between what the Old Testament said and the extra-biblical traditions that had been passed down in Judaism. Paul needed time to pray and study before he became the great emissary of Christ to the world.

Paul’s traditionalist training as a Pharisee had taught him to have little or nothing to do with women. But then he had heard about Jesus and Jesus’ treatment of women. He had learned that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave or free—we are all one in Christ (Gal 3:26-28). Following the truly miraculous conversion experience that transformed this Pharisee into an apostle of the Risen Lord, Paul surely would never have done anything contrary to what Jesus did and taught. So let’s look at some of the things Paul did.

LYDIA

In Acts 16, we have the story of the beginning of the church in Philippi. Paul had been directed there by a vision from God. Paul usually began his evangelizing in the synagogue where he could reach the Jews, but there was no

---

Former CBE Board Chair, Alvera Mickelsen, was a founding member of CBE and co-author with her husband Berkeley of Family Bible Encyclopedia and Understanding Scripture.
synagogue in Philippi. (To have a synagogue you had to have 10 Jewish men—women and children did not count.) Paul had heard that on the Sabbath there was a prayer meeting along the river. He went and found a group of women praying. He began telling them about Jesus, and one woman, Lydia, opened her heart to God, as did other members of her household. A wealthy woman with a large house, Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. The result: Her home apparently became the first “house church” in Europe. She was no doubt the leader of this young church.

I have been struck by the fact that in our “enlightened” day, we probably would not dream of starting a church with a bunch of women! We would say, “You must have some men to start a church.” Apparently Paul did not think so. Actually, this Philippian church begun with women became Paul’s very favorite church! His letter to the Philippians shows his great joy in this congregation, the only church that regularly supported him, and the only church from which he accepted monetary gifts. Then in the fourth chapter of Philippians, Paul names two women of the church as co-workers who “struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel.” Does this sound as though he told them always to be silent in church? Or that they weren’t allowed to proclaim or teach the Gospel to men as well as women? If Paul really believed women must be silent and subordinate, he surely would have included such a “universal principle” in his letter to this church—a church that had begun with women!

Significantly, however, Paul was not the only one who recognized women as leaders of house churches. The little letter of 2 John is addressed to “the elect lady and her children whom I love in the truth.” It closes with “the children of your elect sister send you their greetings.” Some commentaries have tried to say that the “elect lady” and the “elect sister” were churches, not individuals. But a common-sense reading of this letter points to churches led by women.

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

Now let’s look at Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple who were great evangelists and church planters (Acts 18). Paul first met them in Corinth and stayed with them because they, like Paul, were tent-makers. (Paul, like every good Jewish rabbi, had a trade by which to support himself.) When opposition to Paul’s teaching became too strong in Corinth (he was arrested for preaching the Gospel), he left for Ephesus and asked Priscilla and Aquila to go with him. Paul stayed in Ephesus a while and then went on to Caesara, leaving Priscilla and Aquila in charge of the new believers in Ephesus.

Then there came to Ephesus a devout Jewish Christian man named Apollos from Alexandria, Egypt. He was a gifted and enthusiastic speaker, but there were parts of the Gospel that he did not really understand, so Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and taught him the way of God more accurately. Apollos went on to become a great power for God.

Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned and commended by Paul eight times in his letters—more often than anyone else except Timothy, and in all but two instances Priscilla’s name is mentioned first, although that was contrary to the custom of that day (and ours!). This usage probably indicates that when Paul thought of them he thought of Priscilla first, which may indicate that she was the stronger leader of the two, but at very least she was Aquila’s equal. In Romans 16, the names of Priscilla and Aquila lead the list of greetings as Paul writes: “They worked with me in Christ Jesus, and risked their necks for my life, to whom, not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.” Priscilla and Aquila were then back in Rome, and continuing as a ministry couple. They could hardly have served as they did if Priscilla was to be silent and not teach all who came.

PHOEBE

Next there is Phoebe, mentioned in Romans 16:1 as a deacon in the church of Cenchrea. Many scholars assume that she was the one who carried Paul’s letter to the Romans from Greece—a hazardous, difficult journey across the stormy Mediterranean Sea, and then up 100 miles from Puteoli to Rome by caravan and foot. Phoebe must have been a strong woman (both physically and spiritually) for Paul to trust her to make this journey and carry this important letter. Except in a few recent translations, the word “deacon” (diakonos), in reference to Phoebe, is translated some other way (“servant” in KJV, “deaconess” in others). However, diaconos is the same word that Paul uses to describe himself, Apollos, Tychicus, Epaphras and Timothy—where it is always translated “deacon.” Whatever she did in Cenchrea, it must have been important, for Paul also says she was a benefactor (prostatis) of many, including himself. The wording doesn’t sound as if she was a silent woman who never took leadership!

OTHER GIFTED WOMEN

There are others. Lois and Eunice are listed in 1 Timothy as the Christian grandmother and mother of Timothy—Paul’s very favorite disciple. When there was a tough situation, Paul sent Timothy to handle it—even though Timothy was younger than most of the other early church leaders. Paul sent Timothy to the very difficult church of Ephesus when, near the end of Paul’s life, that church was combatting heresy. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “Continue in what you have learned and firmly believe, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you through faith in Christ Jesus” (emphasis added).
Who had taught this strong young man in the faith "from childhood"? Obviously his Christian mother and grandmother. (Acts tells us that his father was a Greek and apparently not a believer; he is never mentioned again.)

Ten other women are mentioned in Paul's greetings to the Christians in Romans 16. Although Paul had not yet been to Rome, nevertheless he had heard about these people and their work for God. Notably, Paul describes the women with the same terms of greeting as the nineteen men.

Let me remind you also that in the three letters where Paul talks about the "gifts" that God has given to the church for its edification, there is never any distinction between the gifts God gives women and those God gives men (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12, Eph 4). If Paul thought that some gifts were strictly for men and not women, would he not have somehow arranged those lists so such gender-restrictions were obvious?

So if Paul was not sexist in his activities, (and I think it is obvious from all accounts that he was not), why did he write those few references that make him sound like a male chauvinist?

WOMEN IN CORINTH

Paul was a very wise man whose passion was to see the Gospel go forward in all the known world. Paul could travel freely because he was a Jew and a Roman citizen.

In the Roman empire all persons (with the exception of Jews who got a special dispensation) were expected to acknowledge the emperor as a god. Paul knew the church would prosper better if it kept a relatively low profile—not drawing unnecessary attention to the customs that Christians did not observe.

Furthermore, most of Paul's letters in the New Testament are originally written to help churches that faced some particular problem. 1 Corinthians was clearly a letter written by Paul to a church that had suffered from divided loyalties (some said they followed Paul, some Peter, some Apollos, some Christ), sexual immorality among its members, people taking each other to court, eating meat offered to idols, and disorderly worship services.

Every culture has its own ideas of proper decorum in worship, but in the early church Paul had the added problem of trying to make it possible for Jewish and Gentile Christians to worship together—something like our contemporary problems in some multi-ethnic churches.

Like us, some of those Christians had strong ideas regarding proper dress and hairstyle. Add to that varying cultural attitudes about how men and women should act in worship.

So in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul states that when praying and prophesying in church, men should have their heads uncovered and women should have their heads covered. Very possibly these injunctions reflected Paul's cultural sensitivities. However, please note that women were to pray and prophesy in church services, so long as they demonstrated good manners. (Corinthians 11 has other references to cultural customs we do not understand.)

Remember, Paul was trying to keep the early church from getting in trouble with the Roman government and needlessly upsetting the rest of the Gentiles and Jews he was trying to reach. Paul wanted nothing to hinder the message of the Gospel.

It is in this same letter that the phrase "women should be silent in the church" appears. There are many possible explanations, but it is sufficient for me to know that Paul could not possibly have meant these words as a blanket prohibition since he had just explained how women could and should pray and prophesy in public gatherings. In the same fourteenth chapter, Paul explains how important the gift of prophecy is in evangelism and in teaching. We need to read this recognizing that Paul is speaking to a particular situation in a particular city.

WOMEN IN EPHESUS

The text most often given to "prove" that women are not to be leaders (especially pastors) in a church is 1 Timothy 2:11-12: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man."

Here we need to be reminded that before we try to interpret a passage we must first read that passage in its own literary, cultural and historical context. The old maxim is true: "A text without its context is pretext."

Remember that Paul wrote his epistle as a personal letter to Timothy, his loyal disciple who was trying to bring order to the difficult church in Ephesus. Paul's words are not written to the church at large (as the letter to Ephesians is). 1 Timothy is an intimate letter in which Paul tries to help Timothy with some of the problems Paul knows Timothy faces. The basic thrust of the letter is confronting the false teaching rampant in the area. The first chapter talks at length about wrong doctrine, myths, endless genealogies, and those who have shipwrecked the faith.

Ephesus was a very difficult city to work and preach in. It was the center of worship of the goddess Artemis—the fertility goddess of all Asia. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Worship of Artemis was very popular among the women of Ephesus, who were not permitted education and who lived very limited lives. There seems to also have been incipient gnosticism, a complex religion that eventually filtered throughout all of the Mediterranean area. Many wild stories became associated with gnosticism; one myth said Eve was created before Adam and "enlightened him about the true nature of God and the serpent." It is hard to identify the exact dating of these myths, but when Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, we can be sure Timothy knew exactly what and whom Paul was talking about. When you write to a good friend, you don't have to explain everything; you have
a common background, and you know your friend will understand you. So with Paul in this letter. We wish he had explained more!

Actually, the emphasis in this passage seems to be on the importance of women learning, and learning in the typical posture of the student, quietly submitting to the teacher. (In that culture, women did not have the same educational opportunities as men. Realistically, it has only been in the last hundred years that women in the United States have had opportunities for higher education. So Paul's statement that women should learn is very forward-looking for his time.) Since Paul's command that women learn is followed immediately by the statement, "I am not permitting a woman to teach or have authority over a man," it is probable that uneducated women were taking a teaching role for which they were not prepared.

Very possibly, in reference to Adam being formed before Eve, Paul was refuting one of the wild myths circulating in Ephesus—maybe through these very women who, Paul said, should learn before they teach.

Would Timothy think Paul was talking about all women for all time? No doubt Timothy knew about Priscilla and Aquila and the part they had played in teaching Apollos right in Ephesus! In Paul's last letter to Timothy before his death, Paul told Timothy to greet Priscilla and Aquila, who were apparently back in Ephesus to give whatever help they could to Timothy.

RADICAL TEACHING: MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Another oft-quoted passage, Ephesians 5:22, states "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord." Fair exegesis demands that this verse not be isolated but be read with the preceding verse: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." You see, mutual submission is a part of the life of every believer—male and female alike.

Again, this passage was written to believers in first-century Ephesus where law and culture were clearly patriarchal. In his letter, Paul overturns their cultural values by telling them that all believers must be mutually submissive for the sake of Christ. It is in this overall context of mutual submission that Paul writes, "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord." And then he says that husbands were to be totally self-giving to their wives—to love them as Christ loved the church when he gave himself up for us all! Paul gives each partner a lesson in mutual submission.

Further note that Paul said he was speaking allegorically of Christ and the church, using marriage as an example of the oneness that believers should have with each other and Christ.

Actually, the only place where Paul talks exclusively about marriage is 1 Corinthians 7—yet we rarely hear that passage discussed. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives instructions to husbands and wives regarding sex, about keeping the marriage together, and about winning unsaved spouses to the Lord. Significantly, Paul gives exactly the same instructions to husbands and wives. Both wife and husband are equally authoritative and equally responsible in these areas. This important chapter says nothing about husbands being in charge and wives being subordinate.

So did Paul practice what he preached? He surely did. But what we have been told he preached is often a misunderstanding caused by selective literalism and failure to read those few carefully selected verses both in the light of the historical cultural situation of Paul's time, and in the light of what Paul himself practiced. Paul was a champion of all believers, and his teaching freed all to serve God. He was a true follower of Jesus, just as we all long to be.

We can rejoice that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female, bond or free. We are all one in Christ. Let's all try to live what we say we believe.

THEOLOGICAL RESOURCE

CBE members Drs. Aida and William Spencer are editors of a new book, The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God (Baker Books, 1998). Contributors include two other CBE members, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull and Grace May. This book is subtitled "Listening to God and Learning from Culture," and the authors of the various essays explore how God's attributes are either reflected or ignored in North American, Caribbean, South American, African, and Asian cultures. The authors' insights reflect their own very diverse cultural backgrounds, and help readers identify the subtle manner in which culture may shape theology. The overall positive message is that God's transforming Word offers hope and renewal as that Word breaks through all cultural barriers.