

Hermeneutics in Pink and Blue

*An open letter to a pastor asks:
Are two versions of biblical truth required in the church?*

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Dear Pastor Smith:

The debate within the body of Christ on the topic of women's identity and role has often been cast as a battle between traditionalists ardently defending biblical truth and their critics who would, either by design or by ignorance, loosen the church from its biblical moorings in order to promote a foreign agenda. In truth, for many of us, our unease with the traditional position has nothing to do with being swayed by modern liberation movements; rather, our unease is a response to the weaknesses within the traditional position itself.

In the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:15, I hope the critical comments I offer can become part of a conversation to examine whether, on this topic, our church has correctly handled the Word of Truth.

Female subordinationism

There are many excellent books that wrestle in detail with the specific texts that have formed the case against women's full participation in authoritative offices in the church. I won't repeat or even summarize their good work. Instead, I hope to raise the broad question of whether Scripture attaches such an absolute value to gender that femaleness, by itself, must become an automatic disqualifier from authoritative offices—either all offices or only some.

By "female subordinationism" I mean that teaching which holds that women's authority to teach and lead is necessarily limited by one thing only: women's God-ordained subordination to the authority of men.

For some believers, female subordinationism is grounded in a theology that regards all women in all times and in all places as having little or no intrinsic God-given authority. As an example of this position, in John Piper and Wayne Grudem's book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and*

Womanhood,¹ women are cautioned that even when giving directions to a male stranger lost in their neighborhood, their demeanor must not compromise the stranger's masculinity (*Recovering*, p. 50). Thus, for some, even the hint of a woman having authority over a man in any context is an offense to be fastidiously avoided. They believe that the exercise of creation-wide authority is a constitutive element of manhood alone.

For other believers, the traditional "limiting texts"² of Scripture lead to different conclusions. Some will not allow women to hold any leadership within the body of Christ, including in parachurch ministries, but accept that women may teach and lead whenever they are exercising a purely "secular" authority (e.g., at school).

Others believe women may provide leadership to children and other women in any venue, including the church, but not to men. For still others, the line where women lose their leadership authority is drawn exclusively around the pulpit. Another group makes distinctions based on whether the woman is married or single. There are abundant variations on the theme of exactly how limited God intended women's authority to be.³

Regardless of whether the area where women

are allowed to lead and teach is defined widely or narrowly, the idea prevails that God has granted an authority to men *because they are males* that God has not granted to women *because they are females*. At its root, therefore, all teaching and practice of female subordination is based on the conviction that God has authorized times and places where gender must trump every other fact about a woman.

Equality of being but difference in function

Advocates of female subordinationism assert that their position cannot be characterized as biblically sanctioned discrimination against women. Functional or role differences, they argue, do not entail an inequality of “being.” Just because a general in the army has authority over a private, the argument goes, before the face of God the general and private are equal in being. In the same manner, the argument continues, God in his sovereignty has assigned certain leadership roles to males that he has denied to females. Nevertheless, before the face of God, men and women still remain equal despite these functional distinctions.

But the manner in which a general and a private are distinct in function though equal in being is not at all the same as the manner in which authority differences are claimed to be fixed between male and female.⁴ There is nothing in the general’s “being” that has necessarily placed him, rather than the private, in the office of general. If there has been no corruption in the process of his promotion, the general will have won his office based on his education, qualifications, years of distinguished service, and so on. By the same token, there is nothing inherent in the “being” of the private that will prevent him from possibly attaining the office of general. In short, between general and private, “being” does not determine their authority differences.

Indeed, one could imagine a scenario in which the same general and the same private belong to a local church in which the general is simply a member, whereas the private is an elder. Within the setting of the local church, the private would be the one with greater authority despite his subordinate military status. In these examples, at no time does “being” determine “authority.”

The situation is completely opposite when it comes to how the church traditionally practices and defends the division of authority between male and female. For a faithful, transformed, Christlike, educated, qualified woman, the fact of her being female is, ultimately, the only thing that disqualifies her from exercising offices—all offices or only some. Being is everything. Being is the only thing. Gender triumphs over every other fact.

Hermeneutics in pink and blue

The bedrock of human identity, the source of all human authority, and the evidence of God’s original intentions for human life on planet Earth are found in Genesis 1:27–28, which declares,

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in

number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (NIV)

In Genesis 1, God unambiguously blesses both the male and the female with a common identity and a common calling: to represent him as his image-bearers. However, in the course of history, Genesis 1 has come to retain very little of that image-bearing identity and task for women.

Traditionalists typically begin chipping away at a woman’s Genesis 1 identity in their interpretation of Genesis 2. By their reasoning, while we may entirely understand a male’s identity and calling from Genesis 1, we only begin to discover a woman’s identity and calling once we have the further evidence of Genesis 2.

According to Piper and Grudem, humans uniquely find their “identity upward in God and not downward in the animals” (*Recovering*, 96). But in developing their argument that male rulership over the female is rooted in Creation they draw the following from the fact that God first brought all the animals to Adam before creating the woman in Genesis 2: “Yet in passing through ‘helpful’ animals to woman, God teaches us that the woman is a man’s ‘helper’ in the sense of a loyal and suitable assistant in the life of the garden” (*Recovering*, 87).

Despite the fact that the word for helper, *Ezer*, is most often used in the Bible to describe God as our helper (and never used to describe animals as our helpers), when Piper and Grudem read Genesis 2 and find the word *helper* applied to the woman, they toss out the sweeping human identity statement of Genesis 1 where woman, just like man, fully bears God’s image and is fully called to fruitfulness and rulership. Instead, they banish woman from the man’s side and place her alongside the animals. She loses her place among the rulers and must join the ruled. They create two distinct readings of what it means to be an image-bearer: one image-bearer, the male, has authority under God, and one image-bearer, the female, is—just like the animals—under the authority of the male image-bearer.

If Piper and Grudem and other traditionalists used a consistent hermeneutic they would be compelled to take seriously not only the new information provided in Genesis 2 about the woman, but also the new information provided about the man: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (NIV). Thus, even as they have adjusted the woman’s identity, they would have to adjust the man’s identity to fit this revelation of his inadequacy as the “not-good-one,” indeed, as the “help-less” one.

They aren’t, however, consistent. And this illustrates that a fundamental error of traditional interpretation is to transform texts that mention women into texts that define women. Or, more accurately, as texts that redefine women as creatures under authority rather than as image-bearers who have authority alongside the man.

Consider another example, this one from Genesis 3, and how the teaching of the “painful toil” that both the man

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and the woman would experience following their fall into sin has been worked out historically. Woman's full identity as image-bearer quickly became narrowed to that of "child-bearer," and the notion prevailed that suffering in child-bearing was a command to be obeyed instead of a distortion to be alleviated. As a consequence, not only did the church resist providing relief for the pains of labor, but today we are still arguing about what contributions, beyond childbearing and homemaking, women are allowed to make to the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1.

In contrast, the prediction of man's painful toil in wresting his bread from the earth never led to restricting him in a parallel way. His full identity as image-bearer never became reduced to the vocation of "farmer," nor was there resistance to alleviation of his toil in food production. Despite Genesis 3, it has apparently never occurred to traditionalists to debate whether men have a God-given right to be anything besides farmers. Nor have there been sermons on Genesis 4:22 attempting to argue that when Tubal-Cain forged tools out of bronze and iron to ease man's painful toil, he was opposing God's direct command to the male in Genesis 3.

Same Bible. Same chapter. Same language of toil and sorrow. Opposite application of its teaching to women and men: hermeneutics in pink and blue.

Consider a final example, from 1 Timothy 2. In this chapter, Paul provides various instructions, including telling "men everywhere" to lift up holy hands in prayer. It is here that Paul also says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

The text addressed to men about what to do with their hands has never been enforced in any church I have ever attended. It certainly has not been used to define a universal "male identity" as "those-whose-hands-are-always-lifted-in prayer." In contrast, the text limiting women's teaching and authority over men has become a central, defining text for the very meaning of womanhood as "those-who-may-not-teach-or-have-authority-over-men."

With our "blue hermeneutic" at work, we blithely regard these instructions to "men everywhere" as applicable to *no man anywhere*, whereas with our "pink hermeneutic" at work, we are utterly confident that 1 Timothy 2 denies leadership authority—whether in a broad or a narrow scope—to *all women everywhere*.⁵

How might this passage speak to the church today if we refused to apply the pink hermeneutic? Perhaps we would find in it nothing more than the necessity to restrict the leadership of deceived women who, like the deceived women of Ephesus, threaten to reprise the deception of Eve and lead men of the church astray with bad theology.⁶

Other texts that are used to define and limit women's identity are those that speak of women's homemaking, their care for children or the elderly in their family. These important texts show us with what serious regard God holds kingdom-building work that might otherwise be dismissed as irrelevant "women's work." Yet, instead of being

understood as revealing an important part of what godly women are called to do in the household of faith, the texts are read as showing us *all* of what godly women may ever aspire to do. Again, the "pink hermeneutic" treats such texts as if they constitute the substance of a woman's identity, instead of interpreting such texts in light of Genesis 1 where the woman, just like the man, images God in the fulfillment of her creation-wide fruitfulness and rulership.

Based on these examples from Genesis and 1 Timothy, one can see how the traditional position is built on an insupportable double standard of biblical interpretation. Those texts that refer to women are deemed to apply to all women and used to limit God's calling of women in accordance with the rich Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1. In the case of men, by contrast, the wide scope of Genesis 1 always trumps any similar texts that might otherwise be used to limit male authority or to establish misguided, gender-wide restrictions.

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Truths in pink and blue

How believers define God's intentions for male and female inevitably shapes how we understand the rest of biblical teaching. So the question is this: Does female subordinationism leave Scripture with a unified message, or are two versions of Truth required, one pink and one blue?⁷

As a simple experiment, I would challenge any man committed to the traditional view to read the Bible as if he were subject to the restrictions he believes God has placed upon all women. When read through the filter of gender, teachings that seem very plain when applied to men require significant editing to apply to females.

Following are some examples of how Truth becomes split into two versions.

Example 1: Re-created in Jesus Christ. What happens to the salvation message when understood from the standpoint of female subordinationism? That we are all "equal at the foot of the cross" is a statement frequently made by traditionalists. But what does that mean beyond the fact that male and female are equal in their sin and need for grace? Scripture declares that as saved persons Christ is in us and the Holy Spirit will teach us all things and guide us into all truth. It declares that our minds will be renewed and we will become new creatures, transformed into Christlikeness. It declares that, as believers, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead comes alive in us.

The promise of salvation is not simply that we escape from the wrath of God, but that we receive empowerment and transformation for the present life. We are restored to our calling as Genesis 1 image-bearers. Hence, 1 Peter 2:9 defines the renewed identity of believers as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."

The Bible speaks of all this transformation and empowerment as offered to believers without any qualification by gender. Yet, for traditionalists, while a male's renewal in Christ leads, at least potentially, to offices of authority within the church, renewal for females does not.⁸ Again, the issue is not the quantity or type of restriction placed

upon the leadership of the re-created woman, but the fact of its being placed upon her because she is a woman and despite her re-creation. This leads to two varieties of salvation: blue for boys, with renewal, empowerment, and authority all hanging together; and pink for girls, with renewal and empowerment severed from authority.

Example 2: Reigning with Christ. Scripture promises that in Christ we receive salvation from our sins and reconciliation with God; it promises empowerment for a transformed life, and a kingdom in which those who follow Jesus will eventually rule with him. What happens to this truth under the doctrine of female subordinationism? Is it safe to say that at the end of history, when Christ returns to establish his kingdom, women will be granted a place of authority with Christ on his throne as promised in Revelation 3:21? Or must we expect that, even in glory, only males may attain to that position? Are there also two heavens, one pink and one blue?⁹

Example 3: Gifts and calling. (1) The parable of the talents (Luke 19:11ff.). This parable teaches that God is pleased when his people employ the talents he has given to them. Under female subordinationism, the parable requires an implied footnote reminding women that under certain circumstances God would be offended by females who exercise their teaching and leadership talents. Only for a male audience can the parable stand as written.

(2) Gifts in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4ff.). This text teaches that every believer's talents are gifts of grace given for the upbuilding of the church. Included among the gifts are teaching and leadership. Under a subordinationist reading, women must either assume that teaching and leadership are not granted to their gender, or, as in the above example, that under some circumstances to exercise these gifts is an offense to God. Only for a male audience can the text stand as written.

The bottom line

In the final analysis, the same church that insists upon the equality of male and female "before the face of God" insists that "before the face of man" inequality must be enshrined. Whether female subordinationism is given its narrowest or its broadest definition, a point is eventually reached where gender triumphs and the church tells a woman *she may not lead or teach*. Gender overrides the authority inherent in the woman bearing the image of God. *She may not lead or teach*. Gender overrides the authority inherent in the Cultural Mandate to be fruitful and have dominion. *She may not lead or teach*. Gender overrides her authority as re-created in Jesus Christ. *She may not lead or teach*. Gender overrides the authority of the indwelling Holy Spirit. *She may not lead or teach*. Gender overrides her transformation into Christlikeness. *She may not lead or teach*.

Is this what God had in mind when the oneness of Adam became the oneness of male and female? Is this what Paul had in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 2:12? Are we truly not a single human race in two sexes, but rather two distinct human races?

God surely intended distinctive contributions from his sons and from his daughters. But to draw that distinction, as female subordinationism does, as being between those (male) human beings whose gender grants them authority, under God, throughout God's creation and those (female) human beings whose gender limits their authority either everywhere or only in specific limited places within God's creation, cannot be sustained biblically.

The bedrock of our human identity is given to both males and females in Genesis 1. Nothing that follows in Scripture—neither specific behavioral directives such as 1 Timothy 2, nor regulations concerning existing social orders and structures such as slavery, polygamy, or patriarchy—redefines our original, God-given, human identity. What we received as God's gracious gift at Creation has been mercifully restored to us in Jesus Christ, our second Adam. Fundamental to Genesis 1 is that humanity together as male and female rule under God and over the earth, but neither rules over the other.

While the full humanity of Genesis 1 has been allowed to define maleness, tragically, it has been stripped away—systematically and relentlessly—from females. Under some theologies we are left with barely enough humanity to make a single rib.

Our generation is in special trouble on the issues of male and female and on matters of how to conduct our life together on this planet. On the one hand, we have the corruption of sexuality, marriage, and family under the influence of individualism, sexual licentiousness, the quest for human autonomy, and so many other "isms" that rule the day.

Adding to the confusion, we have a wing of the church that goes along with culture without any desire or ability to redirect it. And then, not helping, but deepening the confusion, there is the conservative church that claims to be holding to the teachings of Scripture but that is, in truth, only behaving in a reactionary way, unable to bring from its storeroom "new treasures as well as old" (Matt. 13:52) on how to live fully human lives as men and women.

To reject female subordinationism is not the equivalent of embracing contemporary feminism, nor is it a renunciation of the very idea of hierarchical authority structures of any kind. By the same token, to embrace the oneness of man and woman is not to reject our male/female differences. On the contrary, questions about how to reform social structures in church, family, and society so they reflect a truly biblical understanding of human identity, gifts, and calling, cry out for fresh answers. But within our traditionalist-oriented church, new answers can't be given if those questions are never asked. And right now, for us, the most important question remains this: Have we rightly divided the Truth? ■

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Notes

1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

2. 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2, 1 Peter 3.

3. The marriage relationship itself is not under scrutiny in this discussion.

4. A complete and original critique of this position was developed by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis in her excellent book *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997).

5. Critics of the traditionalist position have noted that another error is committed here by grounding a supposed universal principle of male leadership in the Fall, rather than in Creation. While Scripture teaches that in Christ God remembers our sins no more, this reading of the text requires that our authority structures forever memorialize Eve's deception.

6. See the superb treatment of this text in "Leading Him Up The Garden Path" by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis in *PRISCILLA PAPERS*, vol. 16, no. 2, Spring 2002, 10.

7. For a fuller treatment of how a traditionalist perspective has distorted our reading of the Bible, refer to "God's Order vs. the World's Order: Oneness vs. Hierarchy," tape of a workshop presented by Patti Ricotta at the 2001 international conference of Christians for Biblical Equality.

8. Nothing in this essay is meant to imply that males automatically receive offices of authority just because they are males. However, unlike females, males are never automatically disqualified because of their gender.

9. Some traditionalists do argue for women's eternal subordination. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 940; and Robert Letham, "The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 74. I am grateful to R. M. Groothuis for bringing this to my attention.

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The Subordination Challenge: No. 5

Proponents of female subordination are herein asked to prove their case from the Bible.

GILBERT BILEZIKIAN

Challenge #5

Cite a New Testament text according to which men are given unilateral authority over women or are permitted to act as their leaders.

The facts

ONCE THE FALL SHATTERED THE God-given oneness between man and woman, they both faced a dysfunctional relationship. The woman was warned that, because of the disruption of the Fall, the husband would rule over her (Gen. 3:16). Oneness would turn into abuse. But no mandate was ever given to the man to claim this rulership over the woman.

There is no allowance made in the New Testament or license given for any one believer to wield authority over another adult believer. The pledge exacted from brides in an older wedding ceremony, "Wilt thou obey him . . . ?" had no biblical warrant.

There is no text in Scripture that enjoins wives to obey their husbands. The call is for mutual subjection (Eph. 5:21). Both wives and husbands must relate to each other "in the same way" as slaves submit to their masters (1 Peter 2:18; 3:1, 7; NIV) in order to follow in the steps of Christ, their supreme example (2:21).

The New Testament singularly cites the case of Sarah who obeyed her husband, Abraham (1 Peter 3:7). Sarah's case was cited in full knowledge of the fact that Abraham pointedly obeyed his wife as often as she obeyed him, once even under God's specific command (Gen. 16:2, 6; 21:11-12).

Christians are solemnly forbidden by their Lord to establish among themselves structures of authority similar to the hierarchical systems that

prevail in secular society. Those who aspire to attain such positions of leadership must, instead, become servants and slaves of those over whom they wish to wield authority (Matt. 20:25-28).

Leadership is always defined in the New Testament as shared leadership. In church life, leadership is a team function entrusted to a plurality of persons such as elders. These persons act as servants who have recourse to the exercise of authority only exceptionally when required to do so because of disciplinary or crisis situations, and then, only corporately.

In marriage, husbands and wives are bonded in a relationship of non-hierarchical complementarity within which each partner brings to the union his or her leadership gifts in a structure of shared leadership. (For resolving biblically related situations of decisional impasses, see Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, pp. 212-14).



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101.

Written responses to this and the other nine challenges will be evaluated by a panel of three professors emeriti of the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College. Send responses to Christians for Biblical Equality (122 West Franklin Ave., Suite 218, Minneapolis, MN 55404-2451; e-mail: CBE@cbeinternational.org).

For a fuller treatment of the themes presented in these challenges, consult the CBE catalog for many available resources.