

Women, the Church, and Bible Translation: Key Passages, Issues, and Interpretive Options

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Public debates continue—and sometimes boil over—concerning approaches to Bible translation. “Literal” is often trumpeted as the divine model, while “interpretive” approaches are seen as invariably sliding away from the ideal. The sacred text’s teaching about women—their role and the language used to describe it—stands at the center of a factious debate in the Western church. This article presents some of the key passages cited to buttress or confound one side or the other, analyzing them to demonstrate what the author believes is scripture’s strong, if not always obvious, egalitarian position on the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church. That teaching has often been obscured by literal renderings devoid of implicit but vital contextual information. This article attempts to explain and supply that missing information in succinct ways. Equivocate as we might about difficult passages and key terms, translators are sometimes forced to make interpretive choices that, one way or the other, are bound to stir debate, affect lives, and support or derail centuries of church practice. We translators are not always free to leave such decisions to the reader. We need to be honest: our theology affects the nature of our work—in this case, the daily life of half the audience and the worldview of the whole.¹

By way of background, note below some key OT selections, some accounts of Jesus’s attitude toward women, and various NT events and teachings.

Old Testament

Exodus 15:20–21: Miriam, a prophet
Judges 4:4ff.: Deborah, a prophet and leader
2 Kings 22:14ff. (2 Chr 34:22ff.): Huldah, a prophet
Proverbs 31:10ff.: The activities of an excellent wife

Jesus and women

Matthew 9:20–22 (Luke 8:43–48): The bleeding woman
Matthew 15:21–28: The Syrophenician woman
Matthew 22:23–33: Marriage and heaven
Matthew 26:6–13 (Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:37–39; John 12:1–8): A woman anoints Jesus.
Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1ff.: Mary and Martha
Luke 23:49–24:11: Women from Galilee
John 4:28–30, 39–42: The woman at the well
John 8:1–11: The woman caught in adultery
John 20:1–18 (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–2):
The resurrection and Mary Magdalene

Additional passages from the New Testament

Luke 2:36–38: Anna, a prophet
Acts 2:17–18: Women prophesy
Acts 13:50; 17:4: Socially influential women
Acts 18:18, 26; Romans 16:3–4: Priscilla, a teacher
Acts 21:9: Four daughters of Philip, prophets
Romans 1:13 etc.: Recipients of epistles

Romans 16:1–15: Key women in the church
1 Corinthians 1:11: Chloe, a leader
1 Corinthians 11:11: Interdependence of the sexes
1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Women in the church
Galatians 3:28: Equality in Christ
Ephesians 5:22–33 (Col 3:18, 19): Relationships on earth
and in heaven
Philippians 4:2–3: Euodia and Syntyche, Paul’s
coworkers
Colossians 4:15: Nympha, church host
1 Timothy 2:9–3:11: Believing women

Some key New Testament terms and passages

The following terms and passages raise major interpretive challenges concerning the place and role of women. Where we Christians stand can affect our psyche, family relations, earthly careers, interaction with other believers, participation in church, witness to the world, relationship with God, and expectations for eternity. Attempting to avoid the sometimes vehement debate about the issues, translators may wish to remain neutral and translate accordingly—but that is not always possible.

“Brothers” or “brothers and sisters”?

Many NT books are letters written to or about people called *adelphoi*, a word historically translated in English as “brothers.”² The meaning and translation of this term is important, a fact supported by public and scholarly discussion about it.

Many people claim that, since the Greek says “brothers,” it should be translated by the same word in English. In fact, the Greek does not say “brothers.” Ancient Greeks did not speak English. The Greek says *adelphoi*. In these passages, the ESV includes an accurate footnote to its rendering “brothers”: “The plural Greek word *adelphoi* . . . refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church.”

The central question for translators is: What does *adelphoi* mean in this or that context? Some translations render the term as “brothers” (ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV 1984, RSV). Others say “brothers and sisters” (GW, NCV, NET, NIV 2011, NLT, NRSV). A few, similar to the latter in terms of gender, read “friends” (CEV, REB, TEV) or “fellow believers” (TFT). Translators cannot skirt the issue. We must determine if the NT documents in view were written equally to male and female believers. If not, then the rendering should be simply “brothers.” But if women were included, then which is more precise in modern English—“brothers” or “brothers and sisters”?

As any dictionary proves, many words have multiple definitions. So the key question is the same with *adelphoi* as with other Greek or Hebrew terms and expressions: Which meaning best fits the context? Put another way, which meaning did the author intend to convey? Whatever choice is made, translators interpret.

Additional gender-related terminology and grammatical constructions

The following limited but pithy examples point to the heart not only of linguistic details, but also to sociolinguistic issues which, rightly or wrongly, have been associated with them.

Some claim that the Greek word *anēr*, often translated as “man,” never means generic “someone” or “person.” See, for example, a televised debate between Wayne Grudem and myself where he noted James 1:12 as a case in point.³ However, at least four Greek lexicons—Arndt, Bauer, and Gingrich; Louw and Nida; Newman; and Thayer—take tacit issue with Grudem by claiming that *anēr* in some contexts means “person” or something similar. (The NET Bible notes on Luke 11:31, 32 and James 1:12, 20 concur.) Those who take time to listen will find it hard to dismiss this quartet as out of tune with reality.

Concerning pronouns, note the following quotation. It reflects a trend toward decreased usage of so-called “generic he” in modern English: “Shaking a baby can cause brain damage that will affect them the rest of their lives.” The words *them* and *their* obviously refer here to a single baby of either gender. Some people might phrase the above another way: “Shaking . . . will affect *him* the rest of *his* life.” Either usage has a single baby in view. The grammar employed in the “baby . . . them” form may not be everyone’s English, but it is certainly many people’s English, including that of James Dobson, the one who made the statement.⁴ More to the point, it parallels the rendering of Rev 3:20 in the TNIV NT (2001) criticized by Dobson and others for this very thing.⁵

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.

Either approach entails a tradeoff. The first, “a baby . . . them,” corresponds to “anyone . . . them” in the TNIV’s Rev 3:20. Grammatical number in these examples is inconsistent, but, in context, “them” becomes a semantic singular, and gender properly exits the stage as irrelevant. (Nothing about the anatomy of baby boys makes them more vulnerable to damage by shaking than baby girls, and the Greek of Rev 3:20 implies that gender has nothing to do with a person hearing Christ’s voice.) In the second approach, “a baby . . . him . . . his” corresponds to the rendering of Rev 3:20 as “anyone . . . him . . . he . . .” There, grammatical number is consistent, but, to avoid wrong meaning, readers must dismiss the gender of English “him/he” as extraneous.

Some, attempting to keep their cake and eat it too, apparently believe in a mystical male core at the heart of reality. We all agree that Rev 3:20’s linguistically masculine Greek pronoun *autos* is, at a deeper level, often generic for either gender. But, in the keep-and-eat world, beneath those two layers beats a masculine heart, supposedly reflecting male headship over creation. Only God knows if this supposed core is real. It certainly cannot be deduced from linguistics, and Jesus never taught about Greek grammar.

As for English, apart from noting the limitations of each approach above, any claim that one form is somehow better than the other is mere illusion. The choice for translators is not a matter of right or wrong, but of natural Greek versus natural English.

So-called literal translations adopting a singular-singular form (“anyone . . . he”) reflect Greek pronominal convention. More meaning-based translations with the singular-plural form (“anyone . . . they”) employ common English, especially important in more complicated passages. Neither approach is better or worse. They serve different functions, and ongoing “quarrels about words” (1 Tim 6:4) at this point are more likely to damage the church than enlighten it.

Note that even the most literal translations do not always translate the original languages literally. A revealing case in point involves the Holy Spirit. The Greek of John 14:17 refers to that person of the Trinity as “it.” Of thirteen English translations consulted which employ pronouns at this point, all read “him/he.” Likewise, English translations do not reveal linguistic gender in Gen 1:2. A literal translation would follow the Hebrew: “the Spirit of God she was hovering.” Turning once again to the NT, we see that, though Jesus is called a “child” in English, the Greek uses a linguistically neuter term, *paidion* (Matt 2:9). Following proper grammatical rules, the Greek then refers to him by the pronoun “it” (Matt 2:11, 13).

Based on the above, we might send out a tongue-in-cheek call for research papers. First up will be the meaning of the Holy Spirit’s intertestamental sex change from feminine Hebrew to neuter Greek, and from there to masculine in our English Bibles. Sequels should explain how the child Jesus was asexual or hermaphroditic until later in life.

Jesting aside, let us be candid: No translation is literal. The reasons are numerous, and two are obvious. First, as we saw above, so-called linguistic or grammatical “gender” is at odds with real life. Second, and more pervasive, words have multiple meanings. “See Spot run” is a sentence from the illustrated *Dick and Jane* children’s reader series popular decades ago. Webster’s dictionary proudly presents more than thirty definitions for English “see,” more than forty for “spot,” and more than 175(!) for “run.” (Thus, the use of pictures as added context in children’s books.) It may be unsettling, but interpretation is vital, and the original languages of scripture are no different. Which words and expressions are used or rejected in a translation is, by necessity, a matter of choice. Translators, therefore, should strive to be scripturally informed and eschew parochial theology. We may imitate Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek phraseology, but we should always remember that only meaning can truly be “translated.”⁶

1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Interpretive choices

This important passage could mean at least two very different things. Some other positions—implausible in my estimation—have been proposed.⁷ The 1995 NASB—an especially literal version and, therefore, often ambiguous or unclear—is presented here in *italics*. My comments follow within parentheses.

A literal position

“The women (i.e., all Christian women everywhere)

are to keep silent in the churches; (“Silence,” without reference to context, is simple to understand. Women should not even sing. No words in church, ever. Of course, few if any people believe such things and at least allow women to sing. In so doing, they quietly reject a literal interpretation of a literal translation.)

for they are not permitted to speak, (in contradiction to Luke 2:36–48; 1 Cor 11:5; 14:3–5)

but are to subject themselves, (to male authority)

just as the Law also says. (i.e., Gen 2:20–24 and/or Gen 3:16, though not part of the Mosaic law as strictly defined. Interpreted here, this can only mean silence in a mixed group of believers. It would hold despite the fact that such silence is unknown elsewhere in the Bible, is contrary to Christ’s “new wine” and Paul’s teaching elsewhere in this epistle, and is clearly contradictory to many NT examples.)

If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; (This, admittedly, contradicts the idea that learning is a major reason for church attendance. With that essential purpose lost, and given that women should not speak a word in church, it might be wisest and safest for all if they stayed at home.)

for it is improper (i.e., not sinful, but breaking some kind of Christian virtue not noted elsewhere.)

for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor 14:34–35 NASB). (i.e., despite Gal 3:28 and many other passages, it is more important that women be silent than that they speak truth in church. Put another way, better that an animal rebuke a wayward prophet like Balaam [Num 22] than that a gifted, Spirit-filled woman share or even sing with a mixed group of assembled Christians.)

A contextualized position

“The women (i.e., Corinthian women from that Greek-oriented society; cf. 1 Cor 5:1–2; 6:15ff.)

are to keep silent (also; i.e., like people in vv. 29 and 30, which set the context for this section, concluded by v. 40)

in the churches; (i.e., not universally, but when someone else is teaching, prophesying, etc.; cf. 1 Cor 11:5; 14:3–5; Luke 2:36–38.)

for they (as is also true of men)

are not permitted to speak, (out of turn/contentiously, per v. 30)

but are to subject themselves, (to the proper rules of order, per 1 Cor 14:27, 29, 30, 33, 40)

just as the Law also says. (i.e., listening respectfully to the law, prophecy, or to witnesses in turn; cf. Gen 49:1–2; Exod 24:3; Deut 4:1; 18:15; 19:15–19; 31:9–13, 28–30; 32:44–47; Josh 8:30–35; Neh 8:1–8; 1 Kgs 3:16ff.)

If they desire to learn anything, (in addition to that presented)

let them ask their own husbands at home; (about those things)

for it is improper for a woman (even as it is for a man)

to speak (when someone else is exercising a declarative gift)

in church.” (Such practices keep church meetings orderly and edifying—the main topic introduced by vv. 26–27 and concluded by v. 40.)⁸

1 Timothy 2:9–15: Interpretive choices

“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, (i.e., in public settings, including church. Paul was not, for example, instructing Greco-Roman women to wear street clothes when sleeping or bathing at home.)

not with (i.e., not with “a focus upon,” consistent with the NASB’s addition of “merely” in 1 Pet 3:3, a similar passage: “Your adornment must not be *merely* external.”)

braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. A woman (i.e., in church, per 3:15, not, for example, in public school classrooms.)

must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. (The main verb and primary focus in the Greek is clearly “receive instruction”; the manner, a secondary focus, is “quietly . . . with submissiveness”—an attitude all believers should maintain.)

But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. (Again, as in the 1 Corinthians passage, what is the context for this silence? Jewish boys became “sons of the Law” at age thirteen. If the context here is universal, meaning “any woman in relation to any man,” then many absurdities arise. For example, thirteen-year-old boys, quoting Paul, could refuse to listen to their mothers’ instructions, contra Jesus’s example in Luke 2:51. For this and other reasons, we rightly restrict the context here, as in vv. 9 and 11, to a church teaching situation. The question then becomes, does v. 12 mean that all women at all times in all church circumstances must never teach a man, or is it further restricted by the context of v. 11, i.e., that women should be quiet and submissive while being instructed? If we go with the thirteen-year-old boy scenario, we must conclude that Paul, and scripture itself, is inconsistent, for in 1 Cor 11:5—clearly a church context—Paul allowed women to prophesy. Furthermore, in 1 Cor 14:1–5 and Eph 4:11, he ranks prophets/prophesy higher than teachers/teaching. Thus, we can conclude that the context in v. 12 is the same as v. 11, as well as 1 Cor 14:34–35—that is, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over⁹ a man [when he is teaching in church], but to remain quiet.”)

For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman

being deceived, fell into transgression. (In addition to the need for public etiquette as noted prior to v. 13, women should maintain respect for the original, albeit fading, created order. That might include a measure of respect for males in general, and especially for one's husband [1 Cor 11:8–10; 1 Pet 3:1–7], but not silence in church. Conversely, “in the Lord” men are to respect women [1 Cor 11:11–12].)

But (i.e., despite the curse and consequences of Eve's sin for women.)

women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint (1 Tim 2:9–15 NASB). (“Self-restraint” is especially noteworthy in church before male teachers. But it need not exclude women from prophesying to men or, necessarily, even teaching them. Indeed, speaking of the fall, we note that Adam played his own part. Though not first like Eve, he willfully sinned against God. If the nature of Eve's deception militates against her daughters teaching men, then why does it not equally limit women teaching women and children [Titus 2:4–5]? And what of Adam's role in relation to his sons teaching anyone? Adam's sin was with eyes wide open, making his the greater wrong.)

1 Timothy 3:1–13: Overseers and deacons

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man (The Greek does not say “man” here. It has an indefinite pronoun meaning “anyone.”)

aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he (There is no “he” here in the Greek.)

desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (Clearly, Paul moves from “anyone” in v. 1 to man [“husband”] in v. 2. The key question is whether vv. 2–7 restricts women from being leaders. If understood that this section outlines requirements applying particularly to men leaders, then v. 11 simply adds further or unique requirements for women leaders. This view makes good sense of the structure and context.)

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond

reproach. Women (The 1984 NIV reads “their wives,” as do the KJV, TEV, NLT, GW, NET, and ESV. But the Greek has only one word, no “their” added by the above translations. The word means either “wives” or “women.” The main text of the 2011 NIV now reads “women,” as do the NASB, CEV, NCV, NRSV, and the RSV, the source of the ESV. So, in this parenthetical sentence, is Paul referring to the wives of deacons, or to women deacons and possibly women elders? In an ironic twist, note that the rendering “women” is not only more inclusive than “their wives,” it is also more literal.)

must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. For those (Who are “those”—men alone, or men and women? The Greek does not say “males.”)

who have served well as deacons (Since this concept of service clearly includes elders too, it is not a stretch to say that Paul's statement here implies v. 11 can be taken likewise, i.e., women who serve as deacons or elders. Women are not elsewhere barred from eldership any more than Deborah, the prophet over Israel [Judg 4:4ff.], was barred from her role. The church is not more restrictive than its predecessor. So, can women be deacons or elders? This passage does not exclude them.)

obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim 3:1–13 NASB).

Summary and conclusions on 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy

Unless we adopt a universal and absolute “keep silent” injunction binding upon all women in every mixed-gender church meeting, we have no choice but to interpret these passages in an early-church context such as Corinth or Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3).

If we see Paul in the 1 Corinthians passage as describing a new, quasi-prophetic spiritual gift designed exclusively for women—women who must restrict themselves to the authority of men with a full-fledged gift—we do injustice not only to the immediate and broader scriptural contexts, but also to the church. It seems far more likely that, instead of setting roadblocks, so to speak, in front of Spirit-gifted and Spirit-filled women, Paul is simply providing them with instructions for navigating in the new covenant community. Given that he ranks prophecy's authority and/or significance ahead of teaching (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11), the instructions would naturally and without mention apply to that gift as well. As we will see later, this realm of gender (male/female) and its role in the church parallels Paul's teaching in Gal 3:28 about two other earthly realms: the ethnoreligious (Jew/Gentile) and the socioeconomic (slave/free).

Either God frees Christian women in church—whether ancient Greco-Roman or modern—to speak in whatever roles a man does, or, when men are present, women in church are to be entirely silent. Which interpretation best fits the immediate

and broader scriptural contexts? Translators are not always free to ignore such questions.

Romans 16:1–15: Women mentioned by Paul

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. (The NASB here translates the word diakonos as “servant.” But, in 1 Tim 3:8 and 3:12 above, and also in Phil 1:1, the NASB translates that word “deacon.” In view of Paul’s application of diakonos to Christ [Rom 15:8], to the government [Rom 13:4], to himself and others called to preach and teach [1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph 3:7; Col 1:23, 25; 1 Tim 4:6, etc.], and finally to “deacons” as noted above, it is difficult to maintain that Paul uses the term here to describe a person who merely practiced hospitality and the like.)

Greet Prisca and Aquila, (That the woman is mentioned first is significant. She had the more important role.)

my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, (Paul, as a “worker” in Christ, was obviously not a silent learner or submissive wife. So, when he calls Priscilla his “fellow worker,” he can only mean she was involved in activities similar to his own.)

who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; (Priscilla taught Apollos, a powerful teacher, evangelist [Acts 18:24–28], and key figure in Corinth [Acts 19:1; 1 Cor passim]. We should not believe that the Gentile churches that Paul notes were thankful simply for Priscilla’s domestic service.)

also greet the church that is in their house. . . . (Was she silent in her own house, never teaching a man anything?)

Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. (How? Only like Rhoda, the servant in Acts 12?)

Greet Andronicus and Junias, (By most accounts this Junias [“Junia” in ESV, KJV, NET, NIV 2011, NLT, etc.] refers to a woman.)

my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, (The word “apostle” is a transliteration of a Greek term occurring more than seventy times in the NT. A noted interlinear only once renders it other than “apostle.” The word means “sent one/emissary,” but sent for what—to hostess church meetings? Some counter that the Greek “outstanding among” [NASB, NIV; cf. KJV, etc.] really means “well known to” the apostles [e.g., ESV, NET, and NET footnote]. Yet, both the latter translations are satisfied to use “among” for the same construction in a similar context [Matt 2:6]. Regardless, this prominent woman was a prisoner like Paul. The Romans could be brutal, but it is doubtful they imprisoned Junia for her cooking. Clearly she advanced the gospel with influence equal to male apostles.)

who also were in Christ before me. . . . Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. . . . (Here are three more women “workers.” Paul cannot be talking about them raising children and keeping house—as admirable as that is. These women, like the others above, worked “in the Lord” as Paul did.)

Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. . . . (Here is another great woman. In calling



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her his “mother,” Paul must have felt a tie that ranks her service to him far beyond that of a mere physical provider.)

Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them” (Rom 16:1–15 NASB). (Three more women, amounting to eleven mentioned in these few verses. All were important to Paul and other believers. Did they really teach nothing in church, except, possibly, when grown males were absent? Paul has been labeled a misogynist. The opposite is true.)

Some theological considerations

Matthew 22:30—Angels and humans in heaven

Some years ago, a well-known theologian, prior to releasing an intentionally controversial book he had written about Bible translation, asked me to review a prepublication draft. We met in a distant city. My overall evaluation was not favorable. Toward the end of the lengthy discussion, I cited Matt 22:30, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (NIV 1984, 2011). Clearly, angels do not marry. If they have gender, the purpose for it is unknown. It seems fair to conclude that gender on earth will have a different, diminished, or nonexistent role in heaven. My theologian friend responded that he believes we will retain our gender in heaven. I concluded with this: “Your beliefs are up to you, but since, at this point, they are not clearly demonstrable from scripture, they shouldn’t be used to stir up factions in God’s church.” The listener might have wanted to respond again, but he said nothing. A few minutes later, we departed. Maybe my deductions—or worse, my demeanor—were flawed. But I have yet to see a reasoned explanation of Matt 22:30 that points in an obviously different direction.

Furthermore, by way of caution or rebuttal, it has been noted that Adam—a word first used for humanity in Gen 1:26 but not used as a proper name until after both the creation of Eve and the fall—was a male before the creation of Eve. On the other hand, his gender did not mean much prior to Eve, something tacitly supported by God’s assessment that Adam’s single state was not “good.” He needed a “helper.” If angels have no such “helpers,” what might gender be to them? We simply do not know.

Imagine ourselves in heaven looking back upon our previous existence. Many of our concerns for earthly comforts will appear weak and ignoble. Attempts to establish ourselves in society or a profession will seem fleeting, empty, or even selfish. Desires to vindicate ego and create self-worth—faithless. Hierarchies based upon perceived human worth—empty imaginings. And any conscious turning from truth—craven or pagan. No matter how we view this thing we call gender,¹⁰ we should acknowledge it as mysterious and our present perspective as entirely earthbound. Let us approach it with care. The Pharisee Gamaliel, when considering how to deal with early followers of Jesus, gave wise counsel to his fellow Jewish leaders (Acts 5:33–39). Adapted below for those who reject or remain skeptical of the role of Christian women, it deserves consideration.

In the present case I advise you: Leave [Christian women] alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or

activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop [them]; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.

Gender in relation to faith in Christ

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28 NIV 2011)

While, in this life, obvious differences exist—ethnic, social, and physical—Paul’s point here clearly goes beyond a mere affirmation of our value and equality before God. God’s view of others should affect our own relations with them. The church should not focus on distinctions that are not central to God. Though he created ethnicities (Jew/Greek), allows for social distinctions (slave/free), and humanity comes in both male and female, none of it obstructs the freedom of God’s Spirit in the human heart or the gifts God gives each Christian for service and leadership.

In relation to exegesis and theology, the result is a hierarchy of principles. F. F. Bruce rightly states the following in his commentary on this verse:

How Paul allowed the principle of “no ‘male or female’” to operate in practice may be seen, for example, in his appreciation of the Philippian women who “laboured side by side” with him in the gospel (Phil 4:3) or his recognition of the right of women to pray and prophesy in the church.... Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on [this] are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in 1 Cor 14:34f. ... or 1 Tim 2:11f., they are to be understood in relation to Gal 3:28, and not *vice versa*.¹¹

In the light of Gal 3:28, note carefully the following passages: Acts 15:1–31; Rom 13:1–7; 1 Cor 8:1–10:33; 2 Cor 5:13–6:11; Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–22; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Titus 2:3–5; and 1 Pet 2:12–3:17. The details are diverse, but the outline is clear. In social settings—especially among unbelievers—slaves, Gentiles, and all Christians were instructed to observe rules of propriety. For the sake of the gospel, Paul even restricted his own freedom, sometimes severely. But the constraints of such earthbound relations did not exclude slaves or Gentiles from exercising their spiritual gifts in church. Likewise, neither do they exclude women.¹²

Even if women are free to teach and lead, that does not imply that they are all adequately gifted and equipped. The same, of course, applies to men. On the other hand, lack of acceptance and opportunity for women undoubtedly impedes their path to competence. A similar situation in the United States social order has been obvious among African Americans, particularly in the past. And lack of social equality remains a major problem among low-caste peoples of India. The moral of the story for women might be this: When gifted by God to minister to his church, they may need to become better equipped than men equally gifted. *C’est la vie*.

From all the above, it is clear that women may speak in church. But what about teaching or leading men? As if prophesying to them is not proof enough, or that Deborah was wrong to lead Israel and Barak (Judg 4:4ff.), someone might demand, “Prove

that women may lead or teach.” To that might come the response, “Prove that they may not.”

But some raise a red flag. They maintain that:

error and confusion over sexual identity leads to: (1) marriage patterns that do not portray the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31–32); (2) parenting practices that do not train boys to be masculine or girls to be feminine; (3) homosexual tendencies and increasing attempts to justify homosexual alliances . . . (4) patterns of unbiblical female leadership in the church. . . .¹³

The sky may indeed be falling on Western, post-Christian civilization. But it is hard to see how godly women leaders such as Deborah, Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are in any way responsible. The four points above are more easily turned on their heads than defended. (1) Regarding “marriage patterns,” any number may damage the image of Christ and the church, and biblical examples of poor husbands far outstrip those of poor wives. (2) As for “parenting practices,” the NT twice warns fathers against a domineering approach (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21). No such warning is given to mothers. (3) In the clearest reference to the source of homosexuality, Paul traces it to rampant and willful idolatry, not to overbearing women (Rom 1:18–27). (4) Finally, and sadly, “patterns” of unbiblical governance indeed bleed red throughout the history of Israel and the NT church. Almost invariably, however, jealous, power-hungry men are to blame, the male religious leaders of Jesus’s day taking first place (Matt 23:29–36). Hitching all these troubles to a runaway fear of bossy women and passive men can raise a dust storm. But those who squint through the debris might be surprised at what they see. Is that Barak, perched without Deborah atop the social rubble, wagging his finger at women?

Concluding remarks

It is quite possible that these issues cannot be solved by the exegesis of a few verses, much less by the definition of a Greek word here or there. The whole context and tenor of scripture is required.

Our personal—and often unacknowledged—attitudes, training, fears, weaknesses, upbringing, tendencies, and experiences can play a key role in determining where we each land on these questions. In other words, as we look at scripture and draw conclusions from it, we must also look at ourselves. In my own case, it took many years to reach this point. Maybe I am stubborn or dull-witted. My opinions come with no guarantee. If you have insights, I need to hear them.

Church history is of dubious help. Consider this: Even after years of living with Jesus, and after all the marvelous happenings described in Acts 1–9, the great Apostle Peter and the vast majority of Jewish believers were either opposed to or ignorant of a great truth. Until the events of Acts 10–15, they did not accept that (1) Gentiles had equal rights to the blessings of the gospel, and (2) Gentiles were free from the Jewish law.

We should be careful as we study God’s plans for men and women, whether now or in the age to come: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. . . . Now I know in part; then I shall know fully. . . .” (1 Cor 13:12 NIV 2011). No one has access

to everything about this topic. As shocking as it might seem to some—despite the trend of the church in this or that era, the number of theologians with these or those qualifications, and the preponderance of pastors from this or that denomination—the majority could be wrong. History shows that the consensus has often been wrong. Theological speculation, monomania, and *a priori* judgment play a central role in the chronicles of religion, but they deserve no place in the interpretation and translation of God’s holy word. The choices we make in translating scripture can have a dramatic impact on people’s lives. In the case of women, it will affect the daily life of half the audience and the world view of the whole.

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day
of the Lord.
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.
(Acts 2:17–21 NIV 2011)*

Notes

1. The personal views expressed here have no official relation to any organization or translation, including the NIV, which is overseen by an independent group of scholars.

2. Examples include Rom 1:13 (and so throughout the epistle); 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 1:8; Gal 1:2, 11; Eph 6:23; Phil 1:12; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 1:3; 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 4:21; Heb 2:11; 3:1; Jas 1:2; 2 Pet 1:10; 1 John 3:13; 3 John 3; and Rev 6:11.

3. Jack Cafferty, “The Big Question: Should the Bible be Politically Correct?” CNN *American Morning with Paula Zahn*, Jan 29, 2002. Transcript available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/020129/ltm.12.html>.

4. James Dobson, “Child Welfare and Parental Rights,” CT284/24848, © Focus on the Family, July 18, 2000.

5. My submission to *Christianity Today* concerning the debate about the TNIV, Dobson’s English, and Rev 3:20 was included in the periodical’s May 21, 2002, edition.

6. For more on this important topic, see my 2014 paper, “Bible, Babel, and Babble: The Foundations of Bible Translation,” available in English and Spanish at <http://www.biblica.com/niv/translation-foundations>.

7. D. A. Carson notes the weaknesses of several options in “Silent in the Churches,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 133–47.

8. Carson also dismisses a position similar to the contextualized approach presented here, for two reasons: (1) It focuses on women to the exclusion of men, and (2) he claims that the word *hypotassō* in v. 34 (NASB’s “subject themselves”) “normally involves subordination of a person or persons to a person or persons, not to an order, procedure, or institution” (“Silent,” 138). Carson’s first objection can be addressed in several ways, some noted elsewhere in this paper. His second objection

is misleading. In Rom 8:7, Paul teaches that “the mind set on the flesh . . . does not subject itself (*hypotassō*) to the law of God” (NASB), and, in Rom 10:3, he grieves that his Jewish kin “did not subject themselves (*hypotassō*) to the righteousness of God” (NASB). Such statements by Paul stand not only as important exceptions to Carson’s claim about what is “normal” they structurally and semantically parallel the use of *hypotassō* in 1 Cor 14:34, the verse in question. Carson calls his own position, “An Interpretation Constrained by the Context.” The label is good, but not the substance. He claims that v. 34 restricts women not from giving prophecies in church, but from evaluating them (pp. 142–44). Carson apparently missed the Orwellian, text-wrenching insertions his interpretation requires of vv. 29 and 32: “Two or three [male or female] prophets should speak, and the others [males only] should weigh carefully what is said. . . . The spirits of [male and female] prophets are subject to the control of [male] prophets.”

9. The terms “teach” and “exercise authority,” if not a hendiadys (expressing one idea through two words connected by “and,” for emphasis or clarification), are closely related. The latter word is a NT *hapax legomenon*—it occurs but once. Much ink has been spilled discussing the meaning of and relationship between these words. Understood in the context here, a woman who corrects a man during his public presentation does so by usurping his right to teach.

10. To gender could be added the concept of sex, but that is for another discussion.

11. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 190.

12. Some people cite Jesus’s appointment of twelve male apostles as support for the subordination of women within the church. The deduction may appear logical, but it is self-destructive. Jesus did not appoint any Gentile apostles either. So, if the example of the twelve excludes women from leadership, then it does the same to Gentile men.

13. Piper and Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 56.



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