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Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

There is a Persian proverb that goes: The wise man sits on the hole in his carpet. Picture this wise man as he brings his guests through the door of his living room and invites them to seat themselves on the carpet, as is customary. Meanwhile, he strategically positions himself on the spot where the carpet has worn away into a hole. It might be beyond the host's capacity to buy a new carpet for the occasion, but it would shame the host if the guest were to notice this shabby spot. And so, the host cleverly solves the problem by seating himself on the hole in his carpet. He stays put till the guests, having enjoyed his hospitality and conducted the business for which they came, rise to depart. It is only if we can picture that scene that the proverb makes sense. We smile at how succinctly it makes its point. Don't throw your money away if you can help it, it exhorts; it's only one little hole in a carpet that is otherwise fine. Simply choose where you sit, and the problem (literally!) disappears. There are, the proverb is saying, ways to solve problems that need not be as intensive, expensive, or complicated as you first think.

Keep that in mind as we think about how we read and apply the Bible. Biblical texts belong to a time long ago, and to places (often) far away. The text needs to be accessed with a bridge, and the building blocks of that bridge are (among other things) an understanding of the culture in which that biblical text came to be. Once the text has been accessed, another bridge needs to be built between the text and our particular culture, so that we can walk the text into where we live. An understanding of culture unlocks the text, both for appreciation and application.

The Summer issue features five articles and a sermon. Juliann Bullock argues that in the cultural context of the Corinthian church, some women were being disallowed the privilege of covering their heads. Paul's instruction was a radical one, giving that privilege to all women irrespective of their social circumstances. But how far did Paul go in his resistance to

cultural practices that were in collision with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Colin Gauld explores these through selected examples to show that Paul pushed socio-cultural boundaries but exercised wisdom in how far he went.

In the direction of working from text into present-day culture(s), Ziv Reuben studies how the gospel was instrumental in bringing caste egalitarianism, and, through it, a measure of gender egalitarianism into an indigenous church movement in India.

Language is a particularly significant component of culture. Jim Reiher's exploration of the thorny 1 Tim 2:8–15 injunction that women should "be quiet" makes its focus the Greek word *sōphrosunē*. He arrives at the conclusion that what Paul was setting out in this passage was a route for women to be trained for future ministry. Joshua Barron considers the gendered language English speakers use for God, perceiving him to be male. Comparing this with an array of African languages, he proposes a non-gendered understanding of God as both a fatherly mother and a motherly father.

Beulah Wood's sermon thinks through women across the biblical canon who acted counter to the modern cultural expectation that the husband should be the one who makes decisions and takes initiative, while the wife simply follows. She lists women who went ahead of their husbands and (yet) received the biblical narrator's applause.

We pray that this issue of *Priscilla Papers* inspires and informs greater insights into Scripture for us all.

Together, side by side, in God's world.

Havilah Dharamraj  
Editor

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**On the Cover:** Church in Goa, India. Photo by Mohammad Aqhib on Unsplash.com.



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# Authority to Cover Her Head: The Liberating Message of 1 Corinthians 11:3–16

Juliann Bullock

So much has been written about 1 Cor 11:3–16 and the topic of head coverings that it may seem there surely could be nothing new to say. Unfortunately, our modern cultural contexts are so far removed from the context of Paul's original audience that our default understanding of this passage is likely quite different from the understanding of the first-century Corinthians. Many interpreters have read this chapter as an argument for male authority. These interpreters understand "the man is the head of a woman" (1 Cor 11:3) to mean that men should have authority over women, or at least over their own wives. They also tend to understand v. 10 as a command for women to cover their heads to show that they are under male authority.

However, to understand what Paul was trying to communicate, we need to understand some of the cultural context that would have been readily available to the Corinthian church. This article examines 1 Cor 11:3–16 within the context of the cultural practice of head covering in first-century Corinth, Paul's teaching in the rest of 1 Corinthians (particularly about male/female relationships), and the meaning of the Greek word *kephalē* ("head"). Read within the context of that information, 1 Cor 11:3–16 becomes a liberating passage for women, giving them authority over their own heads and freedom from the legal control of men within the context of the church body. Rather than placing women in subordination to men, this passage elevates the status of women and grants them a place of honor and privilege within the body of Christ.

## Context for 1 Corinthians 11:3–16

### *Cultural Background on Head Coverings*

It is first necessary to understand the cultural practice of head covering in Corinth at the time Paul was writing.<sup>1</sup> A woman's covered head was a signal that she was under the protection of an upper-class husband or father and was therefore not sexually available.<sup>2</sup> Men were expected to be sexually promiscuous, and head coverings placed limits on their promiscuity. If a man assaulted a woman wearing a head covering, he would face serious consequences from her husband or father, but if a woman had no head covering, there would likely be no consequences. In fact, if a married woman went out in public without her head covering and she was sexually assaulted, the man was not liable for prosecution.<sup>3</sup> Corinth was not a safe place for a woman with an uncovered head.<sup>4</sup>

Covering, therefore, was not a form of oppression imposed on women as much as it was a form of protection, but it was not protection that was available to all women—only to those who

**... to understand what Paul was trying to communicate, we need to understand some of the cultural context that would have been readily available to the Corinthian church.**

were legally protected by an upper-class husband or father. A head covering meant that the woman who wore it had a patron who was able to legally protect her and defend her honor.

Greco-Roman culture was built on the foundation of patron/client relationships, in which both the patron and the client had obligations toward each other.<sup>5</sup> As part of this system, husbands were patrons to their wives. The husband provided food, housing, protection, and the right to wear a head covering. The wife provided honor to her husband by being chaste, which included dressing appropriately and covering her head.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, within Greco-Roman culture, hair was considered one of the most striking, attractive features of a woman's beauty and sexuality, and thus it could be provocative.<sup>7</sup> An honorable woman kept her hair covered in public. Leaving it uncovered would not only put her at risk; it would also shame both her and her husband by lowering the status of them both.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore unlikely that any woman who was allowed the protection of a head covering would not want to wear one.<sup>9</sup>

### *Background on 1 Corinthians*

In order to understand 1 Cor 11:3–16, it is important to read it within the context of the book of 1 Corinthians as a whole. The letter suggests that the Corinthian church was wrestling with divisions around issues such as lawsuits, immorality, marriage, food offered to idols, socioeconomic differences, spiritual gifts, and resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Corinthian believers were selfishly seeking their own interests and claiming superiority at the expense of others, and Paul was writing to urge them to live in unity, to live as one body.<sup>11</sup> A body exists as a single organism, with all of its parts functioning in unity. Each part is different, and it is precisely those unique differences that make the parts dependent on each other. Paul is urging the Corinthians to recognize their mutual dependence on the other parts of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26). He is also urging them to treat each unique part with equal honor. The different members of the body are equal before God and therefore must be equally honored by the rest of the body (1 Cor 12:22–25).

The members of the Corinthian body of believers, however, did not treat each other with equal honor (1 Cor 11:21–22, 29). Believers were disregarding the needs of other parts of the body, shaming other parts of the body, and acting as if they were superior to other members of the body. Throughout his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the church that when they honor or shame others, they honor or shame themselves because they are all part of the same body. Each member needs the other

members as much as they themselves are needed and in order to live in unity each member must recognize their dependence on the other parts of the body.

First Corinthians 11:3–16 should also be read within the context of Paul’s teaching on marriage in the same letter. In 1 Cor 7:3–4, it is revolutionary that the husband and the wife are each given equal authority over the other’s body. There is no hint of hierarchy between the husband and wife; rather, they are instructed to mutually submit themselves to each other’s authority.

### **Background on *kephalē***

Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 11:3–16 is centered around the word *kephalē* (“head”), which is used both literally and figuratively within the passage. To understand this passage, it is vital to understand the way *kephalē* was used in the Greek language. There has been much scholarly debate about whether the underlying meaning behind *kephalē* is “authority” or “source,” but neither of these figurative uses is truly the underlying meaning of the word.<sup>12</sup> When Paul uses it metaphorically, neither “authority” nor “source” is at the root of its metaphorical usage.<sup>13</sup> Richard Cervin has studied the metaphorical use of *kephalē* extensively and concluded that when it is used metaphorically it is primarily about the most prominent or preeminent part of something.<sup>14</sup> The most prominent part, though the most noticeable, is not necessarily the most important. For example, if I have a prominent nose, it is not my most important feature, but it may be my most noticeable.

For vertical objects, the most prominent part is often the top. *Kephalē* is therefore used to refer to the peak of a mountain and the top of a tree. For horizontal objects, the most prominent part is one of the ends. It is in this sense that *kephalē* refers to the source of a river, but the underlying idea is not “source” as much as “prominent end.”<sup>15</sup> It is also used in this way to talk about the head of a family, often the founding father of a family line. In this case the focus is not on that person as the source of the family or the authority over the family, but simply as the prominent one at that first end of the family line. Therefore, while *kephalē* can refer to a source or to an authority figure, these are not primary or even common uses of the word. Its primary, most common meaning is simply “head,” and when it is used metaphorically it does not necessarily mean either “authority” or “source.” It can be used as a metaphor within the context of its primary meaning of “head” as a part of a body.<sup>16</sup>

First Corinthians 11:3–16 displays brilliant use of language with complex word play, and within this passage *kephalē* is used primarily as a metaphor. As such, it does not mean either “source” or “authority.” Paul is using the literal meaning, “head,” in the sense of a physical part of the body to metaphorically describe the unity and inseparable connection between Christ and God, Christ and the church (Eph 1:23), and men and women. Within Paul’s metaphor, a man is a head and a woman is a body. Let us explore some of the implications of this metaphor.

Heads and bodies are not identical, nor are they interchangeable. A whole person requires exactly one head and exactly one body, and

a true marriage requires exactly one man and exactly one woman. Furthermore, neither the head nor the body can exist without the other; each needs the other. Each naturally seeks the interests of the other because their interests are the same. The body instinctively protects the head, and the head instinctively protects the body.

Finally, the head and the body mutually nourish each other. The body nourishes the head by getting food to the head and then processing it into a form that the head can use, but the head nourishes the body by taking the food in and chewing it up. The body’s job is to maintain the health of the head, and the head’s job is to maintain the health of the body.

Paul himself fleshes this metaphor out further in 1 Cor 12. Each member of the body is unique and different from the others, but their interests are inextricably linked. They need each other, and they stand or fall together. As a part of the body, the head is no different. It is just as dependent on the rest of the body as the hands or toes are. For this reason, the head has no special status over the rest of the body. Paul specifically says, in 1 Cor 4:6, that “you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other” (NIV). Within the metaphorical use of *kephalē*, the head is not the most important part, nor is it an authoritative part. It is simply the most noticeable part—the top part. Within first-century Greco-Roman culture the metaphor is fitting because the man was the most visible, public member of the family. Paul’s teaching makes it clear, however, that within the body of Christ this does not give men any special status over the rest of the family.

**Therefore, while *kephalē* can refer to a source or to an authority figure, these are not primary or even common uses of the word.**

Some may argue that, because the brain is in the head, the head is the control center of the body and therefore has authority over the body. However, that would not have been part of the metaphor for Paul or the Corinthians because they did not see the head as the control center of the body. At the time Paul was writing, scientists and philosophers had not reached consensus as to whether the mind was located in the head or the heart. Plato said that it was in the head,<sup>17</sup> but Aristotle said it was in the heart.<sup>18</sup> In the first century AD, Philo wrote that the debate was still undecided and that nobody knew for sure.<sup>19</sup> Paul’s use of the word “heart” in connection with thinking and decision making in Rom 1:21 and 2 Cor 9:7 suggests he leaned toward seeing the heart (located in the body) as the location of the mind.

Even with our modern scientific knowledge about the brain and its location in the head, we also know that most of the “orders” the brain gives to the body are actually initiated by “orders” from the body, as the body senses heat, cold, pain, and obstacles and directs the brain to make adjustments accordingly. The head and the body truly have a two-way relationship, with each part equally but uniquely giving, receiving, and initiating at different times and in different ways.

Paul's point, then, is that within the body of Christ men and women are like two different parts of the same body. We need each other. Paul uses the head metaphor to say this in 1 Cor 11:3, and he says it more explicitly in 11:11. Men and women are different, but interdependent.

## Interdependence

### Head Coverings

What does the interdependence between men and women have to do with head coverings? Remember that not all women were legally allowed to cover their heads, and the ones who were allowed would likely want to cover as a form of protection. A covered head gave a woman status and honor, because it meant that she was connected to a man who could protect her honor. Many English translations of 1 Cor 11:6 make it sound like women were refusing to cover their heads,<sup>20</sup> but the Greek phrase literally reads “if a woman is not covered” and does not imply that any of the women were resisting being covered.

It is much more likely that women who were not legally allowed to cover their heads wanted to wear a head covering while they were praying and prophesying, but someone was telling them not to.<sup>21</sup> For slaves and prostitutes who became part of Christ's body, it would make sense for them to want to have that symbol of honor within the family of believers. Now that they belonged to Jesus, who had taken away their shame, when they stood up to pray or prophesy it would be humiliating for them to stand in front of everyone, especially all the men, with an uncovered head. Their uncovered hair would be a symbol of their shame, and it would also be considered alluring and provocative to the men in the congregation. Even today, in modern cultures, if a former prostitute who became a believer was expected to dress provocatively in church, it would be disgraceful and humiliating for her, awkward for everyone, and distracting for some people.

Paul says in 1 Cor 11:13, “Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (NIV). This word “proper” is not about whether something is morally right as much as whether it is fitting, suitable, and appropriate to the context.<sup>22</sup> Paul is appealing to the Corinthians' inherent sense of propriety.

It is possible that a man or group of men was trying to prevent the lower-class women in the congregation from covering their heads.<sup>23</sup> Although we do not know for sure what the situation was, there is grammatical evidence that it was not only women who were being quarrelsome about head coverings. In 1 Cor 11:16 the word for “quarrelsome” or “contentious” is a masculine adjective, which implies that at least one man was involved in the quarrel.<sup>24</sup> If Paul had only been reprimanding women it would have been a feminine adjective.

Still, it is quite possible that there were also some women trying to keep other women from covering their heads. Some members of the church were claiming superiority over others, and the women who did have the legal right to cover their heads may have resented having their superiority taken away if all the women were allowed to wear coverings during a worship service. Nevertheless, Paul insists that within Christ's body, everybody has the same status. Every woman is allowed the honor of a covered head.

For the Corinthian women, standing in front of the congregation with an uncovered head was as shameful as standing there with a bald head (1 Cor 11:6). First Corinthians 11:6 suggests that, within the Corinthians' cultural context, it would be disgraceful and embarrassing for a woman to shave off all of her hair, and women who could not or did not cover their heads carried a similar shameful stigma. This is why Paul says in v. 5 that “every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head” (NIV). She dishonors her own literal head.

## Paul's point, then, is that within the body of Christ men and women are like two different parts of the same body.

But Paul has just said that “the man is the head of a woman,” so she is also disgracing the men, especially her metaphorical head, her own husband (if she has one). Paul is reminding the Corinthians that they are one body, so what is shameful for one part of the body is also shameful for the other parts. Any man who tries to keep a woman from covering her head is not only shaming her head; he is also shaming his own head. Within the metaphor of the man as head and the woman as body, what is shameful for the body is shameful for the head, so when a woman within the Christian community is shamed, so are the men, especially the husband of that woman. He cannot damage her honor without damaging his own, because his honor depends on hers as surely as a head depends on a body for life.

### Women as “the Glory”

Paul elaborates on the connection and interdependence between men and women in 1 Cor 11:7–9, and he does so in a way that honors women and raises their status within the body of believers. In v. 7, he says that “woman is the glory of man.” The word translated “glory” is defined as “the condition of being bright or shining, brightness, splendor, radiance. A state of being magnificent, greatness, anything that catches the eye. Honor as enhancement or recognition of status or performance, fame, recognition, renown, honor, prestige.”<sup>25</sup> “Glory” describes “persons who bestow renown through their excellence.”<sup>26</sup> For example, in Luke 2:32, Jesus is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (NIV). Israel has renown because of the excellence of Christ.

Being “the glory” is therefore an immense privilege. Humankind, as God's image, has the privilege of being God's glory—the most magnificent and splendid part of creation, the part that brings God the greatest honor and renown. And women have the privilege of being the glory of humanity. As Westfall puts it, “she is both the image and glory of God, and she has such additional beauty that she is the glory of humanity. She is the glory of man by virtue of the fact that she was created from him, and that is why her glory, her beauty, reflects on him.”<sup>27</sup>

Later in the chapter, in v. 15, Paul asks whether “if a woman has long hair, it is her glory” (NIV). “Her hair,” says Westfall, “is something valuable that needs to be protected and managed appropriately.”<sup>28</sup> In

many cultures in which women are required to cover their heads or faces, it is because women and their beauty are seen as dangerous, a threat to men and their purity. Paul, however, takes a different view and sees women, including their glorious hair, as one of the most magnificent parts of creation, a part that brings great honor to God. A woman's hair, in Paul's view, was something so good that it needed to be carefully guarded and protected from those who would abuse it. Within the Corinthian cultural context, that meant covering it.

### ***Woman Created from Man***

The reason woman has the incredible privilege of being the glory of man is that "man did not come from woman, but woman from man" (1 Cor 11:8 NIV). Woman gets to be the glory of man because she was formed from the man. As we have pointed out, this is a privilege, but at the same time it balances the interdependence between men and women. Westfall points out that "male and female would not be interdependent if the creation order was reversed and if the first man came out of woman."<sup>29</sup> Since every other man has come from a woman, that would put women in a position of independence that Paul is not advocating.

Paul goes on, in v. 9, to say that woman was created for the sake of man, and this is also a privilege.<sup>30</sup> Paul is pointing out that it was not the woman who was alone needing the man. Rather, it was the man who was alone needing the woman. This statement, says Westfall, "means that man needed woman and knew it. . . . The woman met a need and provided a service, which also invokes the principle of reciprocity in which the woman is the patron (helper) and the man is the client."<sup>31</sup> Greco-Roman culture was built on these patron/clients relationships, but it was the husbands who were the patrons and the wives who were the clients. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the first man was a client in need of a helper, a patron. As Westfall puts it, "Adam was the one who needed Eve as a companion, partner, and procreator; he benefited from her creation, not the other way around."<sup>32</sup> This idea would have been shocking to Corinthian men living in a culture in which they were the patrons within the marriage relationship.

In summary, Paul gives women a place of incredible honor and privilege in 1 Cor 11:7–9. Women are not only the glory of creation by virtue of being human; they also get to be the glory of humankind, because they were formed out of the very image and glory of God. It was the first man who was in need of the woman, not the woman who was in need of the man. This is why Paul concludes in v. 10 that, "It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head . . ." (NIV). Many English translations take significant interpretive liberties with this verse and say that a woman should have "a symbol of authority on her head" (ESV) or "a covering on her head to show she is under authority" (NLT). The Greek text, however, simply says that a woman should have authority on or over her head.

If it is assumed that the Corinthian women were trying to remove their coverings and Paul was telling them to keep them on, then this verse needs to mean something about women being under authority. However, it is necessary to perform spectacular grammatical gymnastics with the Greek text to arrive at such a meaning. In Greek, "having authority" means being the authority, and there are

no examples in the NT or in other Greek literature where this phrase "have authority" refers to being under someone else's authority.<sup>33</sup> Gordon Fee says that "by all normal rules of language and grammar" 1 Cor 11:10 is not talking about women being under authority.<sup>34</sup> Rather, it is giving authority to women.

It is likely that some of the Corinthian women who wanted to cover their heads during worship were being prevented from doing so, and Paul was defending their right to wear head coverings within the context of the house church. With this understanding, we can read v. 10 according to the normal rules of the Greek language. Paul is giving these women authority over their own heads by giving all of them the right to decide whether to cover their heads. This means that they no longer needed a man to give them the right to wear a head covering.

### ***Mutual Dependence***

Within the first ten verses of 1 Cor 11, Paul hands a remarkable degree of honor, privilege, and authority to women. One might wonder whether Paul is saying that women are somehow better or more privileged than men, but Paul anticipates this question and qualifies the honor and privilege of women in vv. 11 and 12. It may have been the first man who needed the first woman, but women still need men just as men need women. Men and women are mutually dependent on each other, and both are fully dependent on God.

To emphasize this, in v. 11a, Paul is qualifying the authority he has given to women in v. 10 by saying, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man" (NIV). If v. 10 were about the authority of men over women, we would expect Paul's qualifying statement to be framed the other way around, stating that men still are not independent of women.<sup>35</sup> Its structure suggests that it is the women's authority he is qualifying, to make sure that it is not abused. Westfall says that v. 11 "may indicate Paul's awareness that his support for 'women's rights' to cover their heads may override the conventional authority of some of the Corinthian men over their wives, sisters, daughters, or slaves, and he is making it clear that he is not empowering women to operate independently without consideration of their family or masters."<sup>36</sup>

Paul realizes that, if taken to an extreme, his words could be used to suggest that women do not need men at all. Even though the women have authority over their own heads and do not need a husband or a father to give them the right to wear a head covering during worship, Paul maintains that, in the Lord, women are still not independent of men, and neither are men independent of women.

### ***Conclusion***

For the Corinthian women, covering their heads was a privilege that gave them both protection and status within their culture, but it was not a privilege available to all women. The emphasis on boasting and divisions throughout the rest of the letter supports the possibility that Christian women who wanted to cover their heads during worship may have encountered resistance if they did not have the right to cover their heads within Corinthian society. Paul's use of the word *kephalē* should be read with its literal meaning of "head" as a part of the human body, with Paul using it metaphorically to describe the mutual

interdependence between men and women within the body of Christ. Read within its appropriate cultural context, 1 Cor 11:3–16 grants women a position of freedom and honor within the church. Because they were created from the image and glory of God, they are privileged to be “the glory of man.” It was the first man who was in need of the first woman, not vice versa, and, within the Corinthian house churches, women are given authority over their own heads. Rather than placing women under the authority of men, this text recognizes women as the glory of men and acknowledges that women are deeply needed by men (as men are by women). Within the Corinthian women’s cultural context, this was expressed by giving them the freedom to choose to cover their heads during worship.

In Christ, we are one body, and each part is unique and different but still dependent on the other parts. Just like a head and a body are unified, inseparably connected, and mutually dependent on each other, men and women in the church ought to realize their unity and inseparable connection in Christ by living in mutual dependence and in submission to each other. Within our own cultural contexts today, our unity and interdependence will not always be expressed through what we do or do not wear on our heads. Nevertheless, as Christian women and men today, we must strive to live out our unique identities in unity and interdependence in ways that are relevant to our cultural contexts and that honor all parts of Christ’s body.

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## Notes

1. For further information, see Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 26 ff. and the sources she cites.
2. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992) 14–15.
3. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 29–30.
4. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34.
5. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 20.
6. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 21; see further, Westfall, “‘This is a Great Metaphor!’: Reciprocity in the Ephesians Household Code,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts (Brill, 2013) 561–98.
7. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 30.
8. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 33.
9. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34.

10. 1 Cor 11:18–19; 6:1–7, 12–20; ch. 7; 8:1–13; 11:21–22; ch. 14; and ch. 15.
11. 1 Cor 4:6–7, 1:10, 10:17, and 12:12, respectively.
12. For the meaning “authority,” see Wayne Grudem, “Does *kephalē* (‘Head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *TJ* 6 NS (1985) 38–59; for the meaning “source” see Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “What Does *kephalē* Mean in the New Testament?,” in *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. A. Mickelsen (InterVarsity, 1986) 97–110.
13. Richard S. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē* (‘Head’): A Study of the Abuse of One Greek Word,” *Priscilla Papers* 30/2 (Spring 2016) 18.
14. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē*,” 10.
15. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē*,” 10.
16. Christy Hemphill, “*Kephalē* is a Body Part: Unified Interdependence in Relationship in Ephesians 5,” *Priscilla Papers* 35/2 (Spring 2021) 3–9.
17. J. M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997) 1248.
18. *De motu animalium* (“Movement of Animals”) 10.703a; *De partibus animalium* (“Parts of Animals”) III.10.672b; in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1984).
19. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo*, vol. 5 (Harvard University Press, 1934) 311, 313.
20. Such as the NLT (“if she refuses to wear a covering”) and ESV (“if a wife will not cover her head”).
21. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34–35.
22. BDAG 861.
23. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 33.
24. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 36–37.
25. BDAG 257.
26. BDAG 257.
27. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 103.
28. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 42.
29. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 73.
30. Contra Thomas Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991), 133.
31. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 103.
32. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 41.
33. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987) 519 (574 in the 2014 rev. ed.).
34. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 519 (574 in the 2014 rev. ed.).
35. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 522–23 (577 ff. in the 2014 rev. ed.).
36. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 41.



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# Negotiating Boundaries: Reading Pauline Prescriptions in Their Cultural Context

Colin Gauld

In his ministry, both to Christians and to those who were not Christians, Paul found himself negotiating his way through social conventions and cultural boundaries which, in many cases, were contrary to the gospel he proclaimed. Two such situations relate to the role of women and are found in Eph 5:21–33 and 1 Tim 2:11–12. These are often read today as prescriptions which determine, to a large extent, the function of women in homes and churches.

This article explores the way Paul sensitively responded to and negotiated the culture of his time. It will be argued that Paul's prescriptions, in these two passages at least, should be seen as context-dependent applications of Christian principles and, as a result, are not necessarily binding in twenty-first-century homes and churches. Rather, Paul's negotiating strategies invite us to consider how we too can carefully work our way through our cultural boundaries in the interests of the message of the gospel.

## Paul in His Cultural Context

In Paul's world, Rome was in control. Within Israel, Jews shared responsibility for law and order with Roman appointees, and Jews were often involved, for example, in the collection of Roman taxes (Luke 5:27–28; 19:2). Outside of Israel, however, government was in the hands of non-Jewish authorities at all levels.<sup>1</sup>

A range of gods were worshipped (Acts 17:16) including Diana/Artemis, who is particularly important for understanding several NT texts when manifested as Artemis of the Ephesians, the patron goddess of Ephesus (Acts 19:28).<sup>2</sup> Worship of the Roman emperor was well established, with the emperor considered a god and the saviour of his people. According to the inscription on the Priene Calendar,<sup>3</sup> Caesar Augustus was considered a god and a saviour, and his exploits were recognised as “good news” (Greek *euangelion*, translated “gospel” in the NT) by those who worshipped him. In spite of this, in Israel the Jewish people were given a great deal of freedom to worship their God as they wished.

The common language was Greek, and Greek philosophers (Acts 17:18) were well known to those who were educated (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12). Slavery was widespread in Roman, Greek, and Jewish societies, with slaves having few protections, although eventual emancipation was often achieved.

Some of the major (and largely undisputed) features of the first-century cultural context which might influence the understanding of the biblical text as it informs women's ministry today were the hierarchical relationships among men, women, children, and slaves. The structure of these relationships, with men at the top and slaves at the bottom, was widely (although not universally)<sup>4</sup> accepted in the societies of the Roman empire. This structure was taken for granted by first-century Roman citizens, including Paul. Men possessed

authority over women in Greek, Roman, and Jewish societies and occupied most positions of government, education, and industry. Higher education was available almost exclusively to men, and educated men made the decisions that affected all members of all communities. The place of women in marriage and divorce was much more precarious than that of men.<sup>5</sup>

The ministry of the early Christians, including Paul, was carried out in at least three distinct contexts: (a) among Jewish people in Israel in the temple or in synagogues and, beyond, among Hellenised Jews and Gentile “God-fearers” like Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48; see also Acts 2:5; 13:26, 50; 17:4, 17) who were sympathetic to Jewish beliefs and practices, (b) among Gentiles in public settings, and (c) within congregations of Hellenised Jews and Gentiles in Greco-Roman cities outside of Israel. Significantly, Paul's ministry was adapted to each of these settings and demonstrated his response to the social environment in which he shared the good news of Jesus.

## Ministry among Those Familiar with Israel's Story

In the first setting, Christian leaders such as Peter, John, and Stephen reminded their Jewish listeners of what their Scriptures said and urged these people to accept the truth that Jesus, who had recently been killed by their leaders, was now alive and was therefore shown to be the foretold Messiah.<sup>6</sup> This was likely the message Paul preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–47) as well. While some (sometimes many) of the listeners believed what they heard, opposition from those committed to the teaching of the Jewish leaders often led to negative, sometimes violent, responses (e.g., Acts 5:33; 7:57–58; 9:29).

## Public Ministry among Gentiles

Paul's speech in Athens is a good example of his ministry in the second of the above settings. Athens was a centre of Greek learning and a gathering place for Greek philosophers and others interested in debating the intellectual issues of the day. Paul's strategy was not simply to tell them they were wrong and provide them with the truth. Instead, he identified a means by which he was able to say what he wanted and to ensure that he gained a hearing. He became, briefly, one of them (1 Cor 9:22). Noticing that, along with the many altars in the city to named gods, one was to “The Unknown God,” Paul proceeded to explain who this “unknown god” was. He spoke in their language and quoted their own philosophers (Acts 17:28; see also 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12). In this way he gained a hearing. While some believed what he said, others thought his words were nonsense, and still others were not so sure and wished to hear more.

In Ephesus, Paul preached, taught, and spoke to individuals, convincing some of the truth of the good news of Jesus. Eventually,

however, as recorded in Acts 19, a riot ensued because the craftsmen who made silver shrines of Artemis, patron goddess of Ephesus, believed that their business would suffer if people turned from worshipping Artemis (Acts 19:23–41). The city clerk, as he attempted to quell the riot, advised the silversmiths to take their grievances to court rather than engage in violence. While he claimed that the truth of Artemis and her image which fell from heaven was undeniable, he asserted that Paul and his friends had done nothing wrong; they had “neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess” (Acts 19:37 NIV). He urged the silversmiths, if they believed they had reason to bring a charge against Paul and his friends, to do so and have the charge dealt with by a legal body. In this case, Paul had not directly confronted the religious leaders of the city but simply engaged in discussion with ordinary citizens about the life of Jesus. Of course, what he had said did have implications for their worship of Artemis. But Paul was not about large-scale social revolution; his ministry was to people who would listen, and he was concerned with ensuring, where possible, conditions where people would listen to him. Confrontation with the followers of other gods occurred, not because Paul made a deliberate effort to bring this about, but as a result of other circumstances.

During his ministry, as described in Acts, Paul placed a great deal of trust in the Roman legal authorities whom he believed would establish his innocence when charges were brought against him. He was therefore scrupulous to remain within the boundaries of the laws of his day and to throw himself on the mercies of the various tribunals (Jewish or Gentile) responsible for the upkeep of law and order. In Corinth, Gallio the Roman proconsul saw no problem with Paul’s ministry as far as Roman law was concerned and ejected the Jewish complainants from his court (Acts 18:12–17). Paul himself claimed to Porcius Festus in Caesarea Maritima, the centre of Roman government in Judea: “I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar” (Acts 25:8 NIV).

### ***Ministry in House Churches***

In the third setting, Christian congregations and households, Paul discussed in more detail issues and implications relating to the gospel, knowing that these contexts were more private.<sup>7</sup> The focus of his letters and personal ministry was right thinking about the role of Jesus in history and the implications of Christian living, especially amid those who were not Christians. Paul’s audience for this ministry included many non-Jewish believers for whom many of the OT practices Paul claimed were not relevant. However, he saw it as important to acquaint them with the way Scripture had anticipated the coming of Jesus the King. Some Jewish believers sought to impose their practices on non-Jewish believers—which Paul strenuously opposed (e.g., Acts 15:1–2). Much of what Paul wrote was in response to particular problems which arose among Christians in Greek and Roman settings, and he frequently encouraged the people to live in such a way that their lives provided an example which would invite others to join them. Certainly, he advocated that they live in a way which would not discredit the faith among those who dwelt in cities in which Christians lived (Rom 12:17–18; 1 Cor 10:31–33; Col 4:6; 1 Thess 4:11–12; 5:15; see also Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 3:15).

The NT provides guidance for first-century husbands and wives in what have been called “household codes” (Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 3:1–7). These are adapted from similar household codes found in the Greco-Roman world and deal with the same types of relationships—husband/wife, parent/child, and master/slave. Lynn Cohick describes the situation: “We find that the biblical household codes reflect the range of views held by ancient philosophers, but every popular position comes under the scrutiny of Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and return.”<sup>8</sup>

So, while Paul’s writings do imply cultural change, he was careful not to say anything that explicitly called for wholesale cultural change. For example, many times he claimed that Jesus was Lord and that before him all knees would bow in submission and worship including, by implication, those of the emperor (Phil 2:9–11; Rom 14:9; Col 2:10, 15). On the other hand, he advocated that Christians should be obedient to the existing authorities (Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1) since all authority is under God’s authority.

An instructive example of Paul’s careful negotiation of culturally defined boundaries in each of these three settings is in his advice to masters and slaves. In his letters to the Ephesian and Colossian Christians (Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–4:1) his advice seems to be to slaves who may not have had Christian masters and to masters who may have had non-Christian slaves. While refraining from overt criticism of the institution of slavery, or of the cultural relationships between masters and their slaves, Paul advised Christian slaves to carry out their duties as though they were serving Jesus while Christian masters were encouraged to treat their slaves justly and fairly since they had a Master in heaven. This advice is appropriate in the second of the above settings. However, in the letter to Philemon, we have advice given to the Christian master of a slave who was now a Christian and, while Paul also refrains from criticism of the institution of slavery, he urges Philemon to consider Onesimus “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Phlm 16 NIV). Within the third of the above settings such open advice was possible. David DeSilva expresses the situation in this way:

Even if the gospel inherently pushes in egalitarian directions, seen for example in the recognition that slave and master are actually “brothers” in the Lord (Philem 15–16) and are equal in God’s sight (Eph 6:9), the author of I Timothy (in concert with several other New Testament authors) does not consider these to reflect the essential agenda of the gospel. Rather than fight these battles, which would fuel society’s suspicion against the group as subversive of the social order, he postpones those battles in favor of the larger interest of nurturing an environment in which the gospel can spread and every person come to a knowledge of God in Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:4).<sup>9</sup>

Beyond Paul’s letters, E. A. Judge sets out how the NT tracks three stages in the relationship between Christians and their Greco-Roman social environments.<sup>10</sup> The first is exemplified by the situation in Acts and Romans where Paul sees the Roman authorities as ministers of God, upholding justice in the interest of law and order. The third is exemplified by Revelation, written at a time when the Roman authorities were actively persecuting Christians (and Jews), leading to a more open repudiation of Roman authority by Christians (although in coded form). Between these, the second stage is one where Christians submit to the authorities but without confidence

that justice for them will be upheld. Nowhere do Paul's letters or Acts claim explicitly that Caesar was not a god, but the gospel Paul preached clearly implied this (Rom 14:9; Phil 2:9–11; Col 2:10, 15). It is in the book of Revelation (for example, chs 17 and 18) that criticism of the Roman empire and its leader can most clearly be found.

### Paul and Cultural Boundaries in 1 Timothy 2:11–12

One of the passages in the NT about which there is a great deal of contention, not least among evangelical Christians, is 1 Tim 2:11–12: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over [1984 NIV ‘have authority over’] a man; she must be quiet [1984 NIV ‘be silent’]” (2011 NIV).

For most living in our present age, v. 12a, “I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man,” seems like a command from Paul. These words leap out and demand attention because they appear to be a definite instruction and, perhaps, they seem to push against the feminist aspects of the culture of our time.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the stance taken with respect to the role of women in the church, this passage acts for twenty-first-century readers as the basis upon which the rest of the passage is to be understood—Paul does not permit women to teach or have authority over men.

However, it is unlikely that Paul's first-century audience would have understood his statement in v. 12a in this way and as the main point of the passage. It was particularly uncommon to allow women to teach or have authority over men in first-century settings. This would be true regardless of whether Timothy understood Paul's use of the rare Greek word *authentēin* to mean something like “have authority over” (as in the 1984 NIV), “assume authority over” (as in the 2011 NIV), or “dictate to” (as in Tom Wright's *The New Testament for Everyone*<sup>12</sup>). However, their response to Paul's encouragement for women to learn (v. 11) would be quite different. This was an encouragement which went against the contemporary cultural norms, and first-century readers would probably sit up and take note. For them, v. 11 would be the focus of Paul's message to Timothy in this part of his letter. Paul's statement in these verses is to be understood as an encouragement to women to do something out of the ordinary rather than as a restriction echoing more typical expectations for women. As such, the notions of “quietness” and “submission” as understood by twenty-first-century readers and hearers require reconsideration. If women are being encouraged to learn, the prime submission would be to the words of Scripture or to God himself. Instead of requiring women to learn without disturbing others, it is more likely that Paul is requiring others to refrain from disturbing them as they learn—they are to learn without being disturbed by others!<sup>13</sup> To reinforce this encouragement, Paul repeats it at the end of v. 12: “She must be undisturbed.”<sup>14</sup>

How then would his audience understand Paul's intention in v. 12a? From what has been said above, one of Paul's concerns was that behaviour should be such that Christians are able to gain a hearing from those in the surrounding non-Christian community. Even though there were many issues in the Gentile community that offended Paul, his own aim was not to advocate wholesale change but to gain a hearing for the gospel of Jesus. The consequences of this gospel for the lives of new Christians would eventually follow. Promotion of radical change would interfere with this process

and make the witness of Christians much more difficult because of resulting opposition. This means that v. 12a, instead of being a command, would most likely be read as reassurance by Paul that, while encouragement for women to learn might be a rather radical change, Paul was not about to go further and allow women to teach or to have (or assume) authority over men and thus make life more difficult for members of the church at Ephesus.<sup>15</sup>

If vv. 11 and 12b are indeed the focus of this passage for first-century Christians, the role of Paul's appeal to Gen 2 and 3 in 1 Tim 2:13–14 is to be seen as a reason for educating women rather than that the reason women should not be allowed to teach or to have authority over men.

### Paul and Cultural Boundaries in Ephesians 5:21–33

The Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures in which Paul was immersed and which he, therefore, would largely have taken for granted were relatively uniform with respect to the normal, hierarchical relationship between men and women. There was little basic difference between the status of women in these societies, with heavy (but not universal) restrictions on what women could do in educational, political, legal, or family spheres.<sup>16</sup> Paul was concerned that the gospel be presented in such a way that it gained a hearing (1 Cor 10:32–33). Although what he said about Jesus struck at the foundations of Roman society, he did not openly attack firmly established institutions of that society. In Christian households and congregations, all members would be required to love (John 13:34; 15:12, 17; Rom 13:8; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12; 2 John 5), serve (Gal 5:13), encourage (1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:24–25), teach (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16), admonish (Col 3:16), bear with (Rom 12:10b; 15:1; Col 3:13), and submit to (Eph 5:21) one another, but Paul here chooses from such a list “submit” for the wife and “love” for the husband. His advice in the household code in Eph 5:22–6:9 appears to focus on the ways each participant could most easily disrupt the relationship: slaves could be lazy; masters could be harsh; wives could be unsubmitive; husbands could be unloving. Thus, slaves are advised to serve their masters wholeheartedly as if they were serving the Lord; masters are advised to refrain from threatening their slaves; wives are advised to submit to their husbands; husbands are advised to love their wives. Of course, all these attitudes are those which elsewhere in the NT are required of all Christians, but it appears they are selected here as the most appropriate needs for counteracting potentially disruptive influences in relationships. It is also possible to see Eph 5:21 (“submitting to one another”) as an over-arching command which subsumes many, perhaps all, of the others.<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife, he appeals to an analogy with another apparently hierarchical relationship—that between Christ and his church. Paul argues that wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord because “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (5:23 NIV). In the next verse, Paul instructs the wife to submit to her husband “as the church submits to Christ” (NIV).

Thus, the choice of this hierarchical analogy is dependent on Paul's prior pragmatic acceptance of a view that the existing

relationship between husband and wife is hierarchical, which was the status quo in his time. However, there is nothing in Paul's argument here which compels us to draw the opposite conclusion (as many do), namely, that because the relationship between Christ and his church is hierarchical the relationship between husband and wife is also necessarily hierarchical. George W. Knight quotes W. J. Larkin with approval: "The instruction for conduct in marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33 becomes unquestionably binding when seen as a reflection of Christ's relation to the church."<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the claim by Knight, who sees "husbands and wives as analogues of Christ and the church,"<sup>19</sup> the opposite is in fact the case in Eph 5:22–25: the loving relationship between Christ and his church is used to illustrate the nature of the relationship between a husband and wife in a culture where this relationship is already hierarchical. One could imagine that, if Paul lived in a society based on more egalitarian relationships, he would not use this analogy but would draw on another more appropriate one (or, at least, focus on other aspects of the Christ-church analogy than that of hierarchy).

Alongside his preaching of the message of Jesus, Paul was concerned with propriety of behaviour within a first-century social structure and of necessity adopted that structure, knowing no other.

## Conclusion

For many Christians, any appeal to cultural considerations in seeking to understand the Bible amounts to a distrust of Scripture or provides opportunities to smuggle in avenues by which the authority of the Bible can be undermined.<sup>20</sup> However, Paul was aware of many aspects of the culture in which he was embedded and especially of those aspects which were contrary to the gospel he preached. He was careful, as far as possible, to remain within first-century cultural boundaries while, at the same time, preaching a message that implied radical changes to many of those boundaries. Paul was more concerned with gaining a hearing for his message about Jesus than with attacking wholesale the society in which he lived.

Paul encouraged Timothy to ensure women learned without being disturbed, while himself ensuring that he was not about to make things more difficult for Timothy by letting women assume authority over men in a culture where this was not a generally accepted practice. Household codes led to order in Greco-Roman households, but Paul ensured, in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, that these codes for Christian families reflected Christian virtues of mutual submission and love. In both cases, the hierarchical relationship between men and women can be seen as an interim culturally dependant feature, into which Paul infuses enduring Christian virtues. As well as taking seriously the role of first-century cultural norms in helping us understand biblical texts, we can also learn from—and be inspired by—Paul as we negotiate the cultures of our time.

## Notes

1. E. A. Judge, "St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society," in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* by E. A. Judge, ed. David Scholer (Hendrickson, 2008) 113.
2. On Artemis of Ephesus, see Sandra Glahn, "The Identity of Artemis in First-Century Ephesus," *BSac* 172/687 (July–

Sept 2015) 316–34; Glahn, "The First-Century Ephesian Artemis: Ramifications of Her Identity," *BSac* 172/688 (Oct–Dec 2015) 450–69; and Glahn, *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (IVP Academic, forthcoming).

3. The text of the inscription can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar\\_Inscription\\_of\\_Priene](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar_Inscription_of_Priene).
4. Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023) 32–34. Gupta shows, for example, that upper-class women could occupy a higher social status than a man of lower class.
5. Judge, "St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society," 109–15.
6. Acts 2:14–41; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 7:2–53.
7. Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 39. Gupta points out that, in many Greco-Roman private homes (especially those of wealthy people), there were public spaces where patrons could meet clients and visitors.
8. Lynn Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2020) 343. Extended discussions of first-century household codes can be found in Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 342–348 and Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 185–99.
9. David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2004) 763.
10. E. A. Judge, "The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups," in Scholer, ed., *Social Distinctives*, 53–55.
11. For example, see Douglas Moo, "What Does it Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men: 1 Timothy 2:11–15?," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991) 180.
12. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters* (SPCK, 2003) 22. Discussion of debates about the meaning of *authentēin* can be found in Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 170–73 and in Jamin Hübner, "Translating αὐθεντέω (*authentēō*) in 1 Timothy 2:12," *Priscilla Papers* 29/2 (Spring 2015) 16–26.
13. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 22, 25; N. T. Wright, "The Biblical Basis for Women's Service in the Church," *Priscilla Papers* 20/4 (Autumn 2006) 5–10.
14. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 22.
15. This possible problem would no doubt be compounded by the apparent prevalence of false teaching in the church at Ephesus. See Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 165–77.
16. See endnote 8.
17. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 348–50.
18. George W. Knight, "Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19," in *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 166 (223 in the 2021 ed.), quoting W. J. Larkin Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Baker, 1988) 109.
19. Knight, "Husbands and Wives," 161.
20. See, for example, Claire Smith, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women* (Matthias Media, 2012) 46.



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# In Spite of the Culture

## A Sermon

Beulah Wood

Looking at cultural attitudes, I made a list of married women of the Bible this week and found myself surprised. Do we not all know that in the culture of Bible times, women were not part of decisions and did what they were told? Husbands owned and controlled land, assets, and money, and widows did not inherit if their husband died. Wives could be highly regarded if they were “virtuous.” Did that mean they needed only to avoid doing what was wrong, and never mind if they failed to do what was right?

However, I noticed something odd. Many married women *took responsibility and acted without or ahead of their husband*. In fact, it seems to be a strong counter-cultural and accepted strand of ancient Israelite and Jewish history. It recurs often, and with the apparent blessing of God, both in the OT and the NT. There are over a dozen times when, in spite of the culture, a married woman took responsibility, and was right in doing so.

**Many married women took responsibility and acted without or ahead of their husband. In fact, it seems to be a strong counter-cultural and accepted strand of ancient Israelite and Jewish history.**

### Abigail

Let us start with Abigail in 1 Sam 25. Intelligent and beautiful, she was married to Nabal, a man who was wealthy, bad-tempered, and surly. David was a guerrilla chief, leader of a small unofficial army. When David asked for festive food for his men who had guarded Nabal's extensive flocks, Nabal shouted rudely at David's men. In response, David began to plan revenge. Soon, a major fight was brewing between Nabal (with about fifty men on his side) and David (whose four hundred men were armed with swords).

Enter Abigail. Advised of the situation by a loyal servant, she *took responsibility* in order to save him and all their staff. She spoke no word to her husband (25:19). In a short time, she amassed from their family stores two hundred loaves of bread, two bottles of wine, five large bags of popcorn, one hundred blocks of pressed raisins, two hundred blocks of pressed figs, and five butchered sheep. With this feast loaded on donkeys, she threw a gunnysack over another donkey for herself and set off down the mountainside. None too late, her train met David's private army in a steep gully, already marching towards them.

While David ranted, Abigail drew out her considerable powers of negotiation and peace making. She begged David not to attack.

She argued from Nabal's character, that God was leading her to keep David from murder, and that God was the avenger of the wicked. She succeeded. David calmed down upon hearing her tactful, wise words, her honesty about her husband, her apology, and upon receiving her generous gift of food. She was politically astute too, recognising that David had fought “the LORD'S” battles on behalf of Israel (25:28), and that he would become king of a lasting dynasty. She appealed to David's conscience. Would he want to live the rest of his life with the staggering soul-burden of killing innocent men?

Abigail was hugely effective, and David saw it. He thanked her for keeping him from sin. The tag on the end of the story is that Nabal, on hearing the news, seems to have a heart attack, fall into a coma, and die by natural means some days later. The fact is that Abigail took responsibility and was shown to be right.

This deserves further exploration. According to the culture, a good woman did not step in front of her husband and countermand his wishes! However, that is exactly what she did. She acted independently to bring the two parties together and put an extremely generous supply of the family's food resources into the effort, all with no consultation with her husband.

It appears that Prov 16:5 and 7 apply to this situation. “The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. . . . When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone's way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them” (NIV). With Abigail, we are invited to admire a married woman who, against the culture, *took responsibility on her own shoulders* when her husband was in the wrong.

Such an action is far from easy. We know enough ourselves to look at thoughts that may have deterred her.

Abigail was caught, as modern wives can also be, between culture and common sense—following her husband or doing what was right before God and wise for the people around her. What would have gone through Abigail's mind? Perhaps she thought briefly, “Nah! Can't intervene. Not against my husband. That would be wrong. Our society respects only wives who are demure, quiet, and loyal to their husbands.” Perhaps their servant's words rang in her ears, “Think it over and see what you can do. Disaster is hanging over [all of us]” (1 Sam 25:17 NIV).

“What if I do nothing? David sends his four hundred armed paramilitaries. Many people die. I have plenty of food in the storerooms that I could take to him. . . . Okay, I'll do it. If I perish, I perish.” How well she did it! Food for the stomachs of David's men as well as food for David's ears. Both delivered with speed and wisdom and grace.

This story was from around 1000 BC, but it was by no means the first nor the last account of an OT married woman who was honoured in Israelite history for taking responsibility independently of a man.

### **Jochebed, Deborah, and Jael**

Jochebed, mother of Moses, was another such woman (Exod 2:1–10; 6:20). Her husband Amram seems to have said little. It was Jochebed who saved Moses's life by hiding him for three months, making the basket of bulrushes, and placing him along the side of the river Nile.

Most of us know the story of Deborah. She was married to Lappidoth (Judg 4:4). Unless he was dead by this time, he appears to take no action in the story. Yet in a time of national peril, Deborah took responsibility as a prophet and a judge for her nation and then took it upon herself to motivate and even escort Barak into battle.

Jael, whose husband was Heber, acted when Heber was not at home (Judg 4–5). All un-premeditated, she invited the enemy leader, Sisera, into the tent, lulled his battle-weary body to sleep, and dexterously pinned him to the ground with hammer and tent-peg. All three women were culturally unconventional.

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### **Three Mothers**

Samson's mother, the wife of Manoah, did not even have to take initiative. She had the initiative thrust upon her by the visiting angel of the LORD, who sought her out even though Manoah was nearby. The angel asked her to carry out God's command to give Samson the role and status of a Nazirite from his birth and asked the wife to be *accountable* and follow through on the instructions (Judg 13:1–25). In fact, when Manoah seemed to believe the angel should come to him, the angel came a second time to her. She was the preferred one!

Tucked away in 2 Kgs 4:8–37 is another mother who took responsibility. We do not know the name of this woman of Shunem, but she suggested to her husband that they give Elisha a room on their roof when he visited their city. It was she who made the decisions when their young son died (probably of sunstroke), with no consultation with her husband. God blessed her initiative and, through Elisha's prayer, raised the boy to life.

OT culture thought of the husband as a mediator between his wife and God. We recall how Isaac served to bring his wife Rebekah's childlessness before God (Gen 25:21). But Hannah cared nothing

for a husband's mediation. In her longing for a son, she pressed on alone in prayer, making a vow independent of Elkanah (1 Sam 1:9–18). God answered her prayer.

This is becoming a repeated narrative—counter-cultural biblical women going ahead with or without their husbands, *and blessed by God* in doing so. It must be okay. The woman in Prov 31, or women if this is a composite, was certainly no pushover for her husband. He would have had to work hard to keep up with her—businesswoman, trader, financially independent landowner, horticulturalist, cottage manufacturer, as well as wife, household manager, and mother. Her life was not defined by her husband.

### **Elizabeth and Mary**

In the NT, God gave Elizabeth the impetus to prophesy prior to Zechariah, and it was she who insisted, against the relatives, that their son would be called John (Luke 1:60).

Mary's position must have been a total conundrum in her own culture. Why did Gabriel go to her to seek her agreement to being the mother of Jesus? Surely in that society such a decision should be made by her father, or by Joseph to whom she was firmly engaged. Yet Mary did not take Gabriel to meet her father or Joseph. She accepted the visit and the position it put her in as if they were for her to decide—which they were. After all, she was the one who would carry out God's commission.

### **Joanna**

Many of the NT women prophets, deacons, and evangelists (Anna, Lydia, Dorcas, Phoebe, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche, and Philip's four daughters) may not fit this sermon's criteria of married women, but here we can look at one who rarely receives focus. Joanna was married to Chuza, the chief financial officer in Herod's court, and perhaps a Nabatean from southeast Palestine. Joanna may have been Jewish. Under Roman law, married women could hold wealth. Joanna perhaps had her own income or assets or shared her husband's, for it is reported that she and other women were supporting Jesus and the disciples from their own means (Luke 8:3). She was probably educated, confident in circles where she met important people, in touch with the political news and hence able to speak with authority. These women were "serving." It is the word used of a benefactress, a deacon. With the same word, "deacons" administered funds and fed the needy (Acts 6:1–2). Joanna, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene would also administer and disperse funds. It was a commission she had accepted, and Chuza did not appear to be involved.

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## Claudia Procula

One last example is a surprising woman: Claudia Procula, wife of Pontius Pilate. She tried to get her husband to avoid condemning Jesus to death (Matt 27:19). He did not listen to her, but we who read the story now know that she was right and that he should have taken heed.

## Comment

Don't get me wrong. I am not looking to see scores of wives stepping ahead of their husbands and taking decisions. Ephesians 5:21 (NIV) prescribes the attitude for couples and co-workers: "Co-operate." "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul kept such a balance when he wrote, "But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife. . . . a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband" (1 Cor 7:33–34 NIV). Some Bible women modelled this when they acted in concert with their husband, yet with their own agency. One thinks of Priscilla teaching with Aquila; Junia with Andronicus, both apostles; and Apphia with Philemon, both house-church leaders in Colossae. There was even a woman acting with her husband who quite plainly should have refused his initiative. Sapphira should never have agreed with Ananias to their duplicity over the price obtained for their land.

Given all this, it is particularly relevant how our cultural preferences diminish our characterisation of biblical women. In the week that I started reading for this sermon, I went to an installation of paintings of biblical women. It was intended to be sympathetic to women, yet had adjectives that made me, alerted to strong and independent women, cringe at the weak descriptions.

Miriam was described as tenacious; Deborah was a judge to whom people came for counsel; Esther was trafficked, brave, clever; Hannah had unwavering trust; Mary Mother of Jesus displayed surrender, obedience, servanthood; Mary Magdalene was a devoted follower; Priscilla, a leader (with a super-flowery hat) looked frivolous.

To be sure, some biblical women, perhaps including the above at times, were waiting, followers, acted upon by others or by history, lacking agency. Nevertheless, we do not do well to deprive biblical women of their more active character traits. In the paintings mentioned above, the descriptors could have said that Miriam was one of three national leaders; Deborah gave orders to the army general; Esther was determined and highly influential. They could have said Hannah took decisions into her own hands; Mary accepted the right to decide for herself; Mary of Magdala was an apostle to the apostles; Priscilla was also a theologically astute Bible teacher.

Making my list was quite a revelation. So many married women took responsibility and acted without or ahead of their husbands, or acted in concert with their husbands but with independent agency. I can only conclude that God affirmed and blessed their counter-cultural initiatives. With such initiatives valued by the biblical writers of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine, surely we should still value them in the twenty-first century. Rather than demand that wives be submissive, let us be ready to teach about spirited, proactive wives!

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# God as Motherly Father and Fatherly Mother

Joshua Robert Barron

In 1998 as a seminary student, I was assigned Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*, which is now regarded as a classic Christian feminist theology text.<sup>1</sup> Before reading the book, I admit that I was troubled by that feminine pronoun, "She." My culture had taught me, even if only implicitly, that God is "He." Of course, Italian Renaissance artistic depictions of God the Creator as an old (if still ruggedly muscular) man with a long white beard are anthropomorphic (or perhaps merely andromorphic) and not to be taken literally. But what does it mean to refer to God as "She"? Was Johnson implying that God as revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and to Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah) and who became incarnate in Jesus is a goddess? Did this represent an embracing of pagan mother goddess and fertility goddess imagery? That, I thought—and still believe!—is incompatible with Christian faith. But I failed to reflect on the converse. What are the implications of insisting that God is "He" but never "She"? Logically, if referring to God as "She" implies a female goddess with female sexuality, then would not the use of "He" imply a male god with male sexuality?

Among English-speakers, many Christians find the prospect of applying feminine pronouns to God liberating and inclusive. Insistence, often by patriarchists, that God can only be addressed with masculine pronouns has often served to devalue women and to further exclude them from both theological discourse and from Christian leadership. Such an insistence reinforces the pagan idea from Greek philosophy that women are inherently inferior to men in essence and being. Thus, in the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo misinterpreted 1 Cor 11:7 as meaning that "not the woman but the man is the image of God" and later reiterated that woman "is not the image of God" apart from man.<sup>2</sup> This exegetical error is not a reflection of meditation upon biblical texts, but of the predominant Roman-Greco culture of his day. Elsewhere in the same epistle (1 Cor 15:49), Paul "recognized that all Christians were being conformed to God's image in Christ"<sup>3</sup> (see also Rom 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18). In no place does Paul contradict the teaching of the Torah that humans equally, male and female, reflect God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). In 1 Cor 11:7,

Paul's reference to men *existing in the state of* (ὁπάρχων) God's image does not exclude women: both men and women exist in the state of bearing God's image. Paul does ruminate that Man reflects God's glory whereas Woman reflects Man's glory. This could mean that [in this context] men (and not women) reflect God's glory OR that men reflect God's glory and women reflect both God's glory AND man's glory.<sup>4</sup>

**What are the implications of insisting that God is "He" but never "She"? Logically, if referring to God as "She" implies a female goddess with female sexuality, then would not the use of "He" imply a male god with male sexuality?**

While the language Paul uses in this verse can make it seem as though his "purpose is to prove the subordination of woman to man," this most emphatically "is not his conclusion"—Paul is simply insisting that men and women are not, and should not be, indistinguishable from each other.<sup>5</sup> Augustine, however, imports from pagan philosophy an

eternal distinction between men and women that is ontological (that is, of inherent essence and being). Due to Augustine's unparalleled influence in Western Christianity, this unbiblical and anti-Christian idea that women are inherently inferior and of less value than men has continued to have currency in Christian circles. The suggestion that God can perhaps be conceived of as "She" reminds us that male humans and female humans are equally created as God's image and likeness<sup>6</sup> (Gen 1:26) and that "there is neither male nor female" (or, perhaps, "there is not male *versus* female") because we "are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Learning that the "dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14), not only "between different ethno-cultural and linguistic groups" but also between the male and female sexes, "is broken down within the Church" is liberating.<sup>7</sup>

But many English-speaking Christians are especially uncomfortable with applying feminine pronouns to God. Sometimes this is for the same reason that I was first troubled by the book title *She Who Is*. Sometimes it is simply because of tradition—"but that's not what I'm used to!" Sometimes it is because it threatens the power of patriarchalism. This debate brings us to an important question. Is God gendered? Yes and no. God Godself transcends human sexuality. "God is Spirit" (John 4:24) and as such is neither male nor female. In Num 23:19, God gives a message to a prophet that "God is not a man" nor a human (whether male or female).<sup>8</sup> But words for "God" are grammatically gendered in many (though not all) languages. Most European languages have, or historically had, grammatically masculine and feminine pairs, such as the English equivalent of god/goddess. Moving to Western Asia, in Armenian, "no grammatical gender exists, and a single pronoun covers both 'he' and 'she'."<sup>9</sup> (Armenia is especially significant in Christian history, as in AD 301 it became the second political entity, after Edessa, to officially adopt Christianity.) In African languages, the word for "God" is sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, and sometimes neuter. I will return to African examples below.

When we turn to the biblical languages, we find that in the Hebrew OT the primary words for "God," *El* and *Elohim*, are grammatically masculine. This is so even when referring to Asherah, a fertility deity whose female sexuality was emphasized. Since biblical Hebrew lacks a feminine counterpart for the word "god," the Hebrew of 1 Kings

reads, “Asherah, the *elohim* (god) of the Sidonians” (11:5, 33). English versions, however, regularly render the text: “Asherah, the goddess of the Sidonians.” In Greek, there is a masculine/feminine pair: *theos/thea* (“god/goddess”). In the NT and the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT), only the masculine form, *theos*, is used to refer to the God of Israel,<sup>10</sup> who was revealed in Jesus, who was of course incarnate as a human male. Due to this, and due to God’s taking to Godself the name “Father” in both Jewish and Christian revelation, some have (wrongly) developed the idea that God is inherently male in essence and being. This mistaken idea has caused some to fervently argue that God can only properly be referred to with grammatically masculine pronouns.

Much feminist theology is rooted in the need to reject this error. There is also, of course, much feminine imagery for God in the Bible, such as God comparing Godself to a woman giving birth (Isa 42:14), a mother carrying her child (Isa 42:14), a nursing mother who cannot forget the infant at her breast (Isa 49:15), and a midwife (Pss 22:9–10, 71:6; Isa 66:9). Jesus compares himself to a mother hen protecting her chicks (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34).<sup>11</sup> Certainly, there are masculine attributes of male humans and feminine attributes of female humans which can be traced to masculine and feminine attributes of God, as both male and female humans are created in God’s image. The church should remember that both fatherhood and motherhood are rooted in God. This can be done without falling into various mother-goddess heresies and idolatries. A striking example is found in the Syriac *Odes of Solomon* 8.14 and especially 19.1–11, which build on Isa 49:15 to speak of God the Father’s breasts being full of milk.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the obvious theological value of such feminine imagery for God in biblical texts, the arguments for the position that “only masculine pronouns should be used for God” demonstrate an equal ignorance of how languages work and of the history of Christian thought. The OT Hebrew word for God’s Spirit, *Ruakh*, is grammatically feminine. So, a literal translation of the OT would need to translate pronouns (or pronominal suffixes) referring to God’s Spirit as “she.” In the Greek NT, *Pneuma Hagion* (“Holy Spirit”) is grammatically neuter; a literal translation of the NT in English would render pronouns referring to the Holy Spirit as “it.” In Latin, *Spiritus Sanctus* (“Holy Spirit”) is grammatically masculine. In the first centuries of Christianity, multitudes of Christians spoke Syriac, a language closely related to biblical Aramaic. Like Hebrew, in Syriac, *Rukha* (“Spirit”) is grammatically feminine.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for several hundred years, Syriac-speaking Christians and theologians comfortably referred to the Holy Spirit with the feminine pronoun equivalent to “she” in English. This was true in the oldest translations of the Bible into Syriac and in other Christian writers through the first centuries of Christian history. Sebastian Brock notes that:<sup>14</sup>

(1) In the earliest [Syriac] literature up to about AD 400 the Holy Spirit is virtually always treated grammatically as feminine. This is the norm in the three main monuments of early Syriac literature: the Acts of Thomas and the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem.

(2) From the early fifth century onwards it is evident that some people began to disapprove of treating the Holy Spirit as grammatically feminine; accordingly, in defiance of the grammatical rules of the language, they treated the word *ruha*

as masculine wherever it referred to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this shift in practice was in part due to the ever increasing prestige of the Greek language (though of course *pneuma* is neuter, rather than masculine).

(3) From the sixth century onwards what had been only sporadic practice in the fifth century now becomes the norm: *ruha*, referring to the Holy Spirit, is regularly treated as masculine. Even so, the original feminine was not completely ousted, for it can still occasionally be found, chiefly in liturgical texts and in poetry (where some poets use either masculine or feminine, depending on which best fits their immediate metrical requirements).

Even as this change of pronoun use was beginning to take place in the Syriac East, in the Latin West the theologian Jerome (c. 343–420) writes that no one should be scandalized by feminine imagery or pronouns for the Holy Spirit. He points out that while in Hebrew “Spirit” is grammatically feminine, it is grammatically masculine in Latin and grammatically neuter in Greek. He then concludes what we should all repeat: “In divinity [*or, deity*] there is no sex.”<sup>15</sup>

Many African languages lack the gendered difficulties of contemporary English. When it comes to pronouns, Kouya,<sup>16</sup> a Niger-Congo language spoken in Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa, does not have grammatical gender at all. Instead, one singular third-person pronoun refers to humans (translated as he/him or she/her in English) while another third-person singular pronoun refers to non-humans (in English, he/him or she/her or it). For their Bible translation, Kouya Christians assign the pronoun for humans to Jesus and to God the Father, but insist that the pronoun for non-humans is necessary for the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> In Maa, the Nilotic language spoken by the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, all nouns are grammatically gendered as masculine, feminine, or neuter. The gender is indicated by the articular prefix, that is, by a prefix which functions roughly like “the” or “a” and “an” in English. The Maa word for “God” is *enkAi*; the *enk-* is a feminine prefix. Grammatically feminine names for “God” are common in many other Nilotic languages as well (e.g., Kipsigis, NgaTurkana, and Sampur).<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, in some Bantu languages in East Africa (e.g., kiKamba, Gikuyu) the name for God is *Ngai*, a word borrowed from the Maa *enkAi*. But though feminine in Nilotic languages, in Bantu languages *Ngai* is grammatically neuter, neither masculine nor feminine—this is perhaps appropriate “for a being so hard to imagine.”<sup>19</sup>

As a result, the Maasai have no difficulty ascribing feminine characteristics to God. Among the traditional Arusha Maasai of Tanzania, *enkAi* is thought of as being “like a mother and a father,” and women beseeching God for children sometimes address *enkAi* as *Yieyio ai*, “my Mother.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the Maasai do not envision *enkAi*/God as a sexualized goddess. Likewise, Christian Maasai can pray to *Papa enkAi te shumata* (Father God in heaven) without envisioning a being with male genitalia. Indeed, when it is suggested to Maasai that *enkAi* as Father is male or, given that *enkAi* is grammatically feminine, is female, the response is invariably either incomprehension of the question or incredulous laughter at the thought.

When the Maasai mock the idea of God having either a male or female sexuality, they are supported by no less than Gregory of

Nazianzus (c. 329–390), who in his day mocked those who drew from the assignation of a masculine pronoun to God (on the grounds that *theos* is grammatically masculine) that God was therefore male.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the Maasai recognize that God (*enkAi*) is neither male nor female but has both masculine and feminine attributes. What is seemingly contradictory need not be mutually exclusive. As African theologian Charles Nyamiti reminds us, “God, being Spirit, is neither male nor female, so that there can be no question of literally applying sexual characteristics to God.”<sup>22</sup>

The Maasai are also untroubled by the question of whether it is more appropriate to refer to God as “he” or “she.” Indeed, for the Maasai “the question whether Enkai is He, God, or She, Goddess, or It, is a non-question.”<sup>23</sup> Admittedly and as noted above, the grammatically masculine pronouns he/him/his are frequently applied to God in biblical Greek and Hebrew. But as both Jerome and Gregory of Nazianzus have shown, the use of the grammatically masculine pronoun does not mean that God is inherently male. The Maa language only has one third-person singular pronoun, *ninye*. It is not gender-specific, regardless of whether it is referring to a man, a woman, or to God. When Maa translations of the Bible need to refer to God with a pronoun, *ninye* is the only option. Maasai Christians who think in Maa but speak in English, however, will quite comfortably refer to God as “she,” in grammatical agreement with the name *enkAi*. The same is true for other Nilotes in East Africa, including the Turkana, Karamajong, Samburu, and Kalenjin. Drawing on African traditions from all over the continent, Mercy Amba Oduyoye confirms that “the African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source of Being.”<sup>24</sup> This is also a fitting description of the Maasai theological worldview as traditional Maasai recognize that *enkAi* is “the source of everything.”<sup>25</sup>

Different cultural and linguistic perspectives provide different angles to consider. In Eph 3:10, Paul struggles to describe the nature of God’s wisdom. He cannot find a word in the Greek language that will do God’s wisdom justice. So, he made up a new word. In the Septuagint, Joseph’s multi-colored or variegated garment—I picture something like the royal Kente fabrics from Ghana—is called *poikilos*. Paul takes that word and adds the multiplying/intensifying prefix *polu-* (from which we get *poly-* in English), creating a new word, *polupoikilos*, to describe God’s wisdom—the multi-variegated, multi-colored, multi-faceted wisdom of God. Because God’s wisdom—and God’s very nature—is so multi-faceted it is impossible to see all of it from one cultural-linguistic perspective. American, British, Chinese, Dominican, Ecuadorian, Filipino, Ghanaian, Hungarian, Indian, Jordanian, and Kenyan perspectives—each can bring something new (and yet something true) to Christian theology. Each should be valued and each should be willing to be corrected by the others. When the Maasai refer to God as *ninye*, I as a native English speaker am reminded of the wisdom of Gregory of Nazianzus and Jerome: God is neither male nor female. When English-speaking Maasai refer to God (*enkAi*) as “she” or “her,” I am reminded that this is just as correct as my customary usage of “he” and “him” when I refer to God.

## Conclusion

English-speaking Christians would do well to learn from ancient theologians such as Gregory and Jerome, as well as from the Maasai

Christians of East Africa today. Paying attention to Christians from fourth-century Asia and Europe and from twenty-first-century Africa can help Christians worldwide grow in theological maturity and to become more deeply rooted in Scripture. From the examples above, it is clear that grammatical gender is not able to speak unequivocally about the nature of God. God is neither male nor female. While humans, female and male, are created as the image and likeness of God, God is not created either as or in our image and likeness. Unlike us, God does not have a sex. Whether pronouns that grammatically agree with the name for “God” are masculine or feminine or neuter is a matter of linguistic accident and varies from language to language. While Christians should not idolatrously imagine God as a sexual entity, Christians should be free to refer to God with both masculine and feminine pronouns. The use of masculine pronouns points to God’s masculine characteristics, which are inherently inclusive of males. The use of feminine pronouns points to God’s feminine characteristics, which are inherently inclusive of females. We should expand our theologizing in ways which befit God’s character—both as fatherly masculine and as motherly feminine—while avoiding the sexualized errors of both a patriarchal male god and a fertility female goddess. Ancient patristic and contemporary African Christian imagery of God as “motherly Father” and “fatherly Mother” may provide a way forward.

## Notes

Portions of this article were previously published in the author’s article, “My God is *enkAi*: a Reflection of Vernacular Theology,” *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion* 2/1 (2021) 1–20.

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1992).
2. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 12.7.10, trans. Arthur West Haddan, NPNF, 1st Series, ed. Philip Schaff, 3:17–228 (T. & T. Clark, 1956). I briefly discuss Augustine’s exegetical error in my article, “Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect: Reciprocal *enkanyit* in Ephesians 5 in the Maasai context,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7/1 (2021) 7–8. See also Kathryn A. Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Fortress, 2008) Kindle locations 585–601.
3. Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2005) 93.
4. Joshua Robert Barron, “Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect,” 8.
5. Jerome Murphy O’Connor, *1 Corinthians*, NTM 10 (Michael Glazier, 1979) 108.
6. Carmen Joy Imes persuasively argues that we humans are created as God’s image and makes this the thesis of her recent book, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, foreword by J. Richard Middleton (IVP Academic, 2023). See especially her argument that the prepositional prefix 𐤁 (b-) in Gen 1:26, usually translated *in* (“in our image”), should be translated *as*, 4–6.
7. Barron, “Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect,” 8.
8. The Hebrew terms are *ish* (“man, husband, male human”) and *ben-adam* (“son-of-Adam,” a gender-neutral idiom meaning “person”; while the singular can, depending upon context, be specific to a given male person, the plural includes both male and female humans). Interestingly, the Greek OT translates *ish* as *anthrōpos* (a grammatically masculine but sex-neutral term meaning “human person”; both a man and a woman are

equally *anthrōpos*) and *ben-adam* as *huios anthrōpou* (“son of a-human-person”).

9. Sebastian Brock, “The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature,” in *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice (Marshall Pickering, 1990) 73–88, text available at <https://syriacstudies.com/2016/02/26/the-holy-spirit-as-feminine-in-early-syriac-literature-sebastian-brock/>.
10. Interestingly, the pious Egyptian Jewish translators of the OT into Greek translated *elohim* when referencing Ashtoreth in 1 Kgs 11 not with *thea* (“goddess”) but with *bdelugma* (“abomination”).
11. For a convenient list of other examples of feminine imagery for God, see Mimi Haddad, “What Language Shall We Use? A Look at Inclusive Language for People, Feminine Images for God, and Gender-accurate Bible Translations,” *Priscilla Papers* 17/1 (2003) 4.
12. James H. Charlesworth, trans., *Odes of Solomon*, OTP 2:742, 752–53.
13. The Syriac word for “Spirit,” *Rukha*, is sometimes transliterated as *Rucha* or *Ruha*.
14. Brock, “The Holy Spirit as Feminine.”
15. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Esaiam* [“Commentary on Isaiah”] 40.9, in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri opera* [“Works of St Jerome the Presbyter”], CCSL 73, 459. Some would translate the final phrase as “there is no gender.” But as an English professor at my alma mater used to say, “Words have gender; people have sex.”
16. Sometimes Kuya or Kowya.
17. Eddie Arthur, “Pronouns for God: If Someone Doesn’t Know How Languages Work, THEY Should Probably Not Pontificate on the Subject,” *Kouyanet* (28 Jan 2022), <https://kouya.net/?p=13567>.
18. See Aloo Osotsi Mojola’s discussions on this in “Bible Translation and Gender, Challenges and Opportunities—with Specific Reference to Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39/1 (2018) Article 1820, 9 pgs.; and “The Power of Bible Translation,” *Priscilla Papers* 33/2 (2019) 3–7.
19. John Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities: A History of Intimate Diversity,” ch. 6 in *Christianity and the African Imagination: Studies in Honour of Adrian Hastings*, ed. David Maxwell with Ingrid Lawrie, 157–97, *Studies of Religion in Africa* (Brill, 2002) 168, citing Stanley K. Gathigira, *Miikarire ya Agikuyu* (Nairobi: 1934; Sheldon, 1959) 29.
20. Doris Wagner-Glenn, *Searching for a Baby’s Calabash: A Study of Arusha Maasai Fertility Songs as Crystallized Expression of Central Cultural Values* (Phillip Verlag, 1992) 129.
21. Gregory Nazianzen, *The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit (Oration 31)*, trans. Charles Gordon Brown and James Edward Swallow, NPNF, 2nd Series, 7:439–43 (Eerdmans, 1952). See also Gail Ramshaw Schmidt’s discussion in “De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God,” *Worship* 56/2 (1982) 117–31.
22. Charles Nyamiti, “The Doctrine of God,” ch. 6 in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt, 57–64, 2nd ed., International Study Guide 23 (SPCK, 1997) 62; this chapter is an excerpt from Nyamiti’s monograph, *African Tradition and the Christian God* (Gaba, 1980).
23. Jan Voshaar, *Maasai: Between the Oreteti-tree and the Tree of the Cross*, Kerk en Theologie in Context/Church and Theology in Context (Kok, 1998) 136.
24. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Theological Reflections from the South (Regnum Africa, 2002) 95.
25. Zephania Shila Nkesela, *A Maasai Encounter with the Bible: Nomadic Lifestyle as a Hermeneutical Question*, Bible and Theology in Africa 30 (Peter Lang, 2020) 32.



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—Paul Chilcote, Ashland Seminary



# Is There Anything More that Can Be Said about 1 Timothy 2:8–15? “Propriety,” A Surprisingly Significant Word

James Reiher

Do we really need yet another article on 1 Tim 2:8–15? Is there anything left to be said about that contentious paragraph? As the writer of Ecclesiastes lamented: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9 NIV).

I will not be going over ground well-covered.<sup>1</sup> Those who spend time in this passage are aware of the debates and controversies involved:

- Determining the difference between universal truths for all time and local issues being addressed at a point in time.
- Whether the passage is talking about men and women or husbands and wives.
- The debate around the unusual word for “authority” (*authentēin*) in v. 12: does it refer to normal authority or to something more unpleasant, like “usurping authority,” or to something else altogether?<sup>2</sup>
- The debate around what the Adam and Eve illustrations signify: is the word “for” (*gar*, “for Adam was created first then Eve”) *causal* (justifying why women cannot teach or have authority) or is it *illustrative* (introducing examples of what the writer is talking about)?
- If Eve supposedly represents all women for all time and she was deceived (not Adam) and that is why women cannot teach or lead, then how do churches allow any woman to teach Sunday School, lead a women’s Bible study, etc.? Why does the supposed universal truth, or “creation ordinance,”<sup>3</sup> have a point where it can be broken?
- What does “she will be saved through childbirth” mean? Eternal salvation? Physical safety? A vague reference to Jesus Christ coming as a child? Another illustration and allusion to the problems specifically happening in Ephesus?
- Debates around the permanent subordination of women being paralleled to the supposed permanent subordination of Christ to the Father.<sup>4</sup>

This article proposes that *some* things are *still* to be more fully explored. The following discussion will make an observation about 1 Tim 2:8–15 that does not seem to have been given serious attention.<sup>5</sup>

## Overview

The following discussion will focus on one key word: the noun *sōphrosunē*, spelled *sōphrosunēs* in the genitive case. This word appears twice, in vv. 9 and 15 (both in the genitive), and then a cognate (the adjective *sōphrōn*) appears soon after in 3:2 as a condition for overseers/elders. (Further cognates appear throughout the Pastoral Epistles). It is typically translated in ch. 2 as “propriety,” “modesty,” or “self-control.”

It is the contention of this article that this word’s first and foremost meaning is being “clear-headed,” or “a rational thinker,” or “not muddled in thought,” and that Paul is using the word with that meaning in mind.

This article further proposes that *sōphrosunē* in 2:9 is integral to a trajectory that permeates the paragraph. Even though it begins with reference to women’s clothing, it does not limit itself to that. Paul almost immediately goes on in v. 11 to demand that women learn in v. 11 (*manthanetō*, “learn,” is the only imperative verb in the paragraph). By wanting women to learn, he is desiring that certain new converts move from muddled thought to clear-headed thinking about the faith and how it should be lived out. Paul goes on to note Eve’s ignorance in v. 14 (contrasting it to the ignorance of some women in the Ephesian church, again highlighting his desire for them to learn and move out of that ignorant state). He then repeats the word in v. 15 to drive the point home: he wants these Christian women to be clear-headed. Finally, he uses a cognate of the word in 3:2 as a quality essential for leaders: that they be sound in their thinking, clear-headed, not muddled in thought. *This word* is part of a key recurring theme of the paragraph and helps identify the *overarching* concern of Paul here.

The key theme of this famous paragraph is that all the members of the church should be clear-thinking, mature Christians, whose sound thinking leads to mature Christian life seen in the appropriate virtues and behaviours. With that foundation, such people can then be leaders and teachers in the church. Indeed, the letter starts and ends with such concerns about being grounded in sound teaching (see 1:3–7; 6:20–21). This theme, in fact, continues throughout entire epistle.

## Meaning and Translation of *Sōphrosunē*

### Meaning

*Sōphrosunē* first and foremost means reasonableness, rationality, mental soundness; and second, good judgement, moderation, self-control.<sup>6</sup> Clear thinking will indeed lead to right living.

This word does *not* simply mean “propriety” in a stand-alone sense. It can mean, in some contexts, propriety that comes from clear-headed thinking, but neglecting the “clear-headed” aspect does not capture the heart of the word.

Some commentators *only* offer “propriety” or synonyms like “modesty” in their discussion, without any reference to clear-headedness or rational thinking.<sup>7</sup> Other commentators admit the word has this meaning, even if buried in a long list of options. Such commentaries understand it as something akin to “modesty” while ignoring or rejecting the implications of its core meaning for 2:8–15.<sup>8</sup> The standard NT lexicon shows how it can be *combined* with other

virtues (hence good judgement *and* moderation).<sup>9</sup> But to strip this word of its natural meaning (a meaning readily given to its only other use in the NT, Acts 26:25) and to leave it as referring to some other virtue is to damage the word. In our case here, it also weakens the understanding of this passage. It undermines seeing a clear context for what is about to follow in vv. 11–14, come to a climax in v. 15, and then be reinforced in 3:2.

I. Howard Marshall's commentary finds a better all-encompassing understanding of the word. He notes that it originally referred to "a sound mind," but "it represented the virtue of restraint of desire, hence the sense of 'rational', intellectually sound, free from illusion, purposeful, self-controlled, with prudent reserve, modest, decorous."<sup>10</sup> The right use of the controlled mind, the rational and clear-headed thinking that takes place, is like a key to showing the right emotions in one's life. The word, however, does not *just* mean different emotions or personality traits devoid of the key.

### *Different Meanings for Men and Women?*

Some even consider the word to mean "modesty" and "propriety" in 2:9 and 15, but then in 3:2 when a cognate of the same word is used (and they assume it refers to *male* overseers/elders) it suddenly means "clear-headed" and "making sound judgements."<sup>11</sup>

Perschbacher's lexicon offers a brief definition of *sōphrosunē*: "sanity, soundness of mind, a sane mind, Acts 26:25" and then adds "female modesty, 1 Timothy 2:9, 15."<sup>12</sup> Perschbacher's acceptance of a different meaning for the verses that deal with women (whereas Acts 26:25 refers to Paul) is unexplained. This principle of allowing gender to determine the meaning of a word is repeated for the cognate *sōphrōn*. Perschbacher defines it: "of a sound mind, sane, staid, temperate, discreet, 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; 2:2; modest, chaste, Tit. 2:5."<sup>13</sup> Thus the "modest, chaste" definition, with no additional options for "sound mind" or "sane," is reserved for a text clearly about women (Titus 2:5).

***Sōphrosunē* first and foremost means reasonableness, rationality, mental soundness; and second, good judgement, moderation, self-control.<sup>6</sup> Clear thinking will indeed lead to right living.**

Some writers note that ancient Greeks could use the word in a different way for men and women.<sup>14</sup> Patriarchal Greek authors<sup>15</sup> are unashamed in their distinction of how they use the word. "Aristotle states that it is not the same virtue in women as in men,"<sup>16</sup> and indeed, Greek authors tend to emphasise the moral qualities that stem from rational thought, more than the thinking process itself, when it is used of women.

Nevertheless, to imply that Paul is using it in exactly the same way as Greek philosophers or writers used it is a leap that is not

warranted.<sup>17</sup> Paul is writing this word in a paragraph *that insists that women learn* (2:11). His treatment of women is not like the Greeks or the Romans or the Jews of his day. Women are a part of Paul's ministry team. He commends them frequently for their contribution to ministry. Names like Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia—and their ministries—are well known. This is the same Paul who says that, in Christ, there is no distinction between men and women (Gal 3:28). This is the same writer who would say in 2 Tim 2:2 that, once competent men *and women* (*anthrōpos*, "people," not *anēr*, "men") are trained up, then they will be able to train up others after them. When Paul uses *sōphrosunē* of himself (Acts 26:25) it is undeniable he is using it to mean "clear-headed and not muddled in thought." He would not use it differently for women, whom he sees as fully equal in Christ and equally competent to minister on his teams. If Paul is thinking (in v. 9 at least) about its application to how the women dress and present themselves, he is not leaving that thought isolated as he continues the paragraph.

### *Translation*

*Sōphrosunē* wrongly translated as *just* "propriety" creates the impression that the author wants women to *only* show conformity to conventionally accepted standards of behaviour or morals. Without the full meaning of the word, one might read this as some kind of mindless submissiveness, or even ignorant deference to others. Translated as "modesty" or "propriety," it becomes a relatively weak aside, rather than vital information, and undermines Paul's deep desire to have women trained up correctly for ministry.

### *Sōphrosunē in the New Testament*

When Paul starts to talk about women in 1 Tim 2:9, one of the qualities he expects of a godly woman is *sōphrosunē*. This word is not common in the Greek NT. It only appears three times: twice in this paragraph (vv. 9 and 15) and once in Acts 26:25 ("I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable [*sōphrosunē*]" (NIV)).<sup>18</sup>

When Paul begins talking about some of the newly converted wealthy women in the church of Ephesus, *sōphrosunē* enters his mind as a quality he wants them to display, initially in the context of how they dress for church and then in a summary statement after he has written about teaching, authority, and Adam and Eve. When Paul begins to wrap up his reflections on women in the church in Ephesus, he finds it important to state it again. It is, perhaps, his last word on the matter at hand, depending on whether we consider 3:1 the end of the paragraph or the beginning of a new thought.<sup>19</sup> It virtually bookends his comments, and it informs what he writes in between.

### *Beyond Sōphrosunē*

#### *Educational Emphasis*

Paul wants the women converts in the church of Ephesus to go from muddled thinking to clear thinking, from confusion and the baggage of their old views to clarity about the truth of the gospel and how that works out in real life.

It certainly seems that some wealthy (v. 9) women converts who are hoping to be prominent in the church need to be more fully trained up first. They need to sit at the feet of their teachers for a while to learn and grow. After all, their current male teachers have been in Christ longer than they have, and they understand the doctrines and truths of the gospel (just as Adam came first then Eve, these men have been in Christ before these particular women of concern). And these wealthy women converts have baggage to let go: false beliefs and an incompatible worldview that needs correction. The male teachers they currently have, whom they are seeking to usurp authority over, are not the ones who are deceived and are a part of false belief systems. (He parallels Adam and Eve with the situation in Ephesus a second time: it was Eve who was the one deceived, not Adam. The new converts are the ones deceived, not their current teachers). Those same women have *new learning* to experience and some *unlearning* to do. The wealthy and prominent women of Ephesus have been involved with religions and cults before finding Christ, and aspects to their worldview and certain beliefs will be at odds with the Christian message. They need to be trained. That is why the only imperative in the paragraph is in v. 11; Paul commands that women learn. That verse is the high point of the passage.

It is certainly a good thing if anyone (men and women) seek to be overseers (3:1). But that can only come with mature faith, holiness, love, and clear-headedness (2:15).

1 Timothy 2:15 has often been problematic for commentators. It seems out of place, random, confusing, perhaps even embarrassing. But its use of *sōphrosunē*, repeated from v. 9, indicates it continues Paul's flow of thought. He reuses *sōphrosunē* in v. 15, combining it with faith, love, and holiness. To reduce *sōphrosunē* to "modesty" ignores the flow of thought. The women Paul has in mind need to think reasonably and sensibly about *everything*. In fact, if they are well trained in the faith, that will flow over into their daily lives as they live out higher Christian principles.

Note the emerging theme: Paul wants women to be clear-thinking, not muddled in thought, in v. 9. He strongly insists that women learn in v. 11. He parallels, in v. 14, the women who are ignorant and deceived in Ephesus to Eve who was deceived in Genesis. And he says again in v. 15 that he expects women to continue in faith, love, holiness, and clear thinking that will save them from slipping back into error and heresy. *A strong educational emphasis that includes women being trained up permeates the paragraph from start to finish.*

***Sōphrosunē* wrongly translated as just "propriety" creates the impression that the author wants women to only show conformity to conventionally accepted standards of behaviour or morals.**

## Authority and Leadership

Women who are keen to be in positions of authority are being encouraged by Paul to be trained up, but not to grasp at leadership before they are ready for it. There is no shame in waiting or in doing other things while you are learning. There is no shame in motherhood: you can be saved while being a mother too. You can be saved through childbirth, that is, you can still be a forgiven and redeemed member of the church, while performing the role of a mother. It is not to be shunned as if it is an inferior way of spending one's time for a season. Of course, you would need to demonstrate that salvation by a life of ongoing love, faith, holiness, and clear thinking.

## Conclusion

The core meaning of *sōphrosunē* adds weight to the argument that this paragraph's emphasis is about *education and training for ministry*. Paul wants to train up women converts in correct doctrine and practice so they *can* be useful for future teaching and leadership. Paul wants to help the new women converts get to the point where they can teach because they will be well trained and are thinking correctly and reasonably. They would have dropped all the false understanding and mistaken worldview that they brought into the church at the time of their conversion. *Until* they are properly trained, those women cannot teach, and they certainly cannot usurp authority over their male teachers. They might have been prominent in their previous religious cults that Ephesus was famous for, but it is different now. Now, they have to learn and be trained up and demonstrate a mature Christian lifestyle.

Egalitarian interpretations of 1 Tim 2:8–15 are not dependent upon this understanding of *sōphrosunē*, but they are bolstered by translating it more accurately, as "clear thinking."<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. As most are aware, there are two main schools of interpretation regarding this pericope. The "traditional" interpretation (the complementarian view) sees the teaching about women as binding for all time. E.g., Douglas Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?: 1 Timothy 2:11–15," ch. 9 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991) 179–93; 233–52 in the 2021 ed. The egalitarian interpretation sees the teaching as specific to the local Ephesian churches at that time. E.g., Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Baker, 1997) 209–29; Jim Reiher, *Women: Leadership and the Church* (Acorn, 2006) 85–93.
2. For normal "authority," see George Knight III, "Authenteō in Reference to Women in 1 Timothy 2.12," *NTS* 30/1 (1984) 143–57. For other meanings, see Leland Wilshire, "The TLG Computer and Further Reference to *Authenteō* in 1 Timothy 2.12," *NTS* 34/1 (1988) 120–34. See also David M. Scholer, "The Evangelical Debate Over Biblical 'Headship'," ch. 2 in *Women, Abuse and the Bible: How Scripture Can be Used to Hurt or Heal*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Baker, 1996); Ronald W. Pierce, "Evangelicals and Gender Roles in the 1990s: 1 Tim 2:8–15: A Test Case," *JETS* 36/3

- (Sept 1993) 343–55.
3. Consider that A. M. Stibbs wrote that allowing women to lead men would “violate the created order” in the Pastoral Epistles, in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, rev. ed. (InterVarsity, 1970) 1171. He notes that the Adam and Eve references are “guiding principles of universal and abiding application.”
  4. This last issue is more often linked to 1 Cor 11. See Terran Williams, “Subordinating Jesus and Women (and How Influential Evangelical Teachers Led Us Astray),” *Priscilla Papers* 36/3 (Summer 2022) 9–15; Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (IVP Academic, 2002).
  5. I will not be so arrogant as to pretend this is a totally new insight. While I have not found others addressing the implications of the issue I am raising, I admit that I (like every other scholar on the Pastoral Epistles) have *not* read everything written on the passage.
  6. BDAG s.v.
  7. For example, Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Tyndale, 1957; IVP reprint 1983) 75–79.
  8. For example, William Barclay, *The Letter to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, rev. ed. (Christian, 1987) 80–81. Barclay does not discuss the word when it first appears in ch. 2 but does consider it when a cognate appears in 3:2. “It is variously translated of *sound mind, discreet, prudent, self-controlled, chaste, having complete control over sensual desires*. The Greeks derived it from two words which mean to *keep one’s mind safe and sound*” (80). Barclay then looks at the noun (which had appeared twice in ch. 2, but he still does not reference those passages) and explores how various Greek writers used the word (80–81). Essentially, it describes the person who has used reason to tame their passions and desires. It is being clear-headed and insightful in ways that align one’s behavior with such clear-headedness. Barclay’s insights are always worthwhile; it is pity he did not consider the implications of the word in 1 Tim 2:9–15.
  9. BDAG s.v.
  10. I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (T&T Clark, 1999) 182.
  11. E.g., Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, ed. Richard D. Phillips et al. (P&R, 2007).
  12. Wesley J. Perschbacher, ed., *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Hendrickson, 1990) 400.
  13. Perschbacher, *New Analytical*, 400.
  14. For example, Ceslas Spicq, *TLNT* s.v.
  15. My phrase for them, not Spicq’s.
  16. Spicq, *TLNT*, 364.
  17. Spicq does *not* make that leap. A critic of his might not like the way he has highlighted the Greek writers, and might speculate that Spicq implies such a conclusion.
  18. The lexical family has about a dozen other appearances, some of which are mentioned in this article.
  19. Although it is arguable that the chapter break is out of place and the flow of the argument continues into ch. 3, 3:1 is not only an introduction to what follows. It is also a conclusion to the material in ch. 2. The opening sentence of ch. 3 is an unambiguously gender-inclusive statement. 3:1 is, in fact, an

encouraging verse for women seeking to minister in churches. See Jim Reiher, “She Desires a Noble Task,” *Mutuality* 28/1 (Spring 2021) 19–21.

20. For a more thorough examination of what a wide range of Greek scholars say about this word, see my longer paper, “Is There Any More to Say about 1 Timothy 2:8–15? ‘Propriety,’” at <http://jimreiherswritings.com>.

**Paul wants to train up women converts in correct doctrine and practice so they can be useful for future teaching and leadership.**



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# Book Review:

## *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview*

By Randy S. Woodley (Baker Academic, 2022)

William David Spencer

This is a remarkable book that, surprising as it may sound from its title, will be of pertinent interest to *Priscilla Papers* readers. Seeking an alternate way to communicate besides the propositional tools of colonial culture, the author has drawn on First Nations' "narrative theology" (xi), interpreting personal experiences and traditional stories to contrast Western and Indigenous thinking. Opening and closing interviews serve as explanatory bookends for three chapters, "The Myth of History and Progressive Civilizations," "Comparing Western Indigenous Worldviews," and "Decolonizing Western Christian Theology," each chapter followed by "Questions and Response" designed to unpack and emphasize what the author is communicating. A final, helpful index completes this engaging and insightful 141-page comparative analysis.

The author, Randy S. Woodley, is Distinguished Professor of Faith and Culture and Director of Intercultural and Indigenous Studies at Portland Seminary of George Fox University (Oregon). A Cherokee elder who cohosts a podcast called *Peacing It All Together*, he balances academics with the practical, co-administrating with his wife, Edith Woodley, the Eloheh Indigenous Center for Earth Justice along with Eloheh Farm and Seeds company. *Eloheh* "is a Cherokee Indian word meaning harmony, wholeness, abundance and peace."<sup>1</sup>

The book targets what Dr. Woodley views as the majority, primarily male, "Western worldview," which he characterizes as a fix-it mentality: "European minds first want to know and then they immediately want to fix it, quickly. They believe they can fix everything." His alternative? "Listen for a long time," then "structurally and individually . . . heal the relationships between themselves, Creator, the land, and the local indigenous peoples" (41–42).

What will interest *Priscilla Papers* readers is that a sizable part of his program emphasizes the leadership of women. As any egalitarian should, he begins immediately in the book's dedication, citing a number of women among the "Indigenous elders who took the time to help me find my way" (v). On pg. 1, he announces, "My wife and I are farmers/planters, and we grow our food and seeds, so that others can grow their own food." His wife's presence is

apparent all through this book. She leads off his list of acknowledgements and is followed by more women along with men "whose lives and questions caused me to think better and to become a better human being" (xiii).

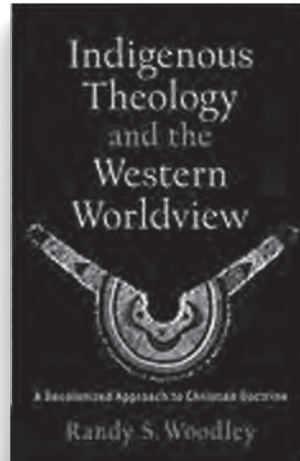
His thinking on female/male relationships was shaped by his mother's plight: "She had to quit school when she was thirteen and move to the city to live with an aunt, so she could work and send money back home to her family." The reason, he sees, was the oppression of women: "She was the oldest daughter. Her older brother didn't have to do that, just the girls—totally unfair" (3).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, this appears to have been a common practice. Like the author's mother, my own mother had to leave

school in her senior year of high school because her father's business failed and her brothers could not find work. She and her mother supported the family; my grandmother by taking in the neighbors' washing, and my mother by working as a waitress, garnering her wages out of tips, which were often stolen by the next patron at her tables. But, despite the necessity that whoever could find work and support the family was pressed to into doing so, my mother's brothers were always given milk to drink, while my grandparents had my mother drink coffee since her childhood, which ultimately weakened her teeth. Any spare money was saved to send her youngest brother to college. In short, the times called for united measures, but in both these cases, the burden would often fall most heavily on female children, while extra gains were used to benefit sons, not daughters.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, Professor Woodley draws this conclusion: "women are smarter than men." What is the connection? "Unfortunately, it's still a 'man's world' and women are oppressed, still being denied equal rights or fair treatment." Therefore, "women have had to think with both a male and a female worldview all along in order to make it in this world. Men, well, we have the privilege of just having to think like men. As a result, women must be smarter than men" (3).

This observation links to a key premise that drives this book: the parallel plight of First Nations people in a Western-thinking majority



culture: “What anthropologists call Indigenous Cosmopolitanism. This refers to the ability to understand and act from two different worldviews or the ability to operate in multiple ethnic cultures” (3).

The author observes that all women, as well as First Nations thinkers of both sexes, find themselves needing to think in two worlds, while men in the Western worldview, as forged by men, usually perceive only one perspective. Hence, the need for consciousness-raising. This is a small and over-populated planet that needs everyone to share perspectives if all are to survive. At the same time, we might add, while valuable for survival, this extra depth of perception can also marginalize both women and consciousness-raised female and male First Nations people with what has been called a Cassandra complex. In Greek mythology, Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy, “had the power to tell the future, announced to all that disaster was nigh, but no one listened.”<sup>3</sup>

Reflective of this reality is Elder Woodley’s highlighting of the crucial need for communal thinking over individualistic thinking. He contrasts Western thinking, summarized as “We are, because I am,” with indigenous reasoning, “I am, because we are.” Thus, he observes, Jesus established “alternative communities.” If all human thinking agreed, it would eliminate “abuse of the female gender [which] cuts across all ethnicity and race as well” (83). As we can see, mutuality, respect, and neighborly care are central to his view of right thinking.

Communal thinking is also illustrated in the author’s approach, couching much of the key teaching in presentations and interpretations of stories. For example, his lesson about respecting tribal (and all wise) elders is conveyed in a Cherokee story about Grandmother Turtle, who volunteers to plunge into the sea to secure mud at Creator’s command in order to raise gratitude for the gift of land on which to live. Disparaging her offer because of her age, the animals run through all the other options, male and female, until they finally return to the now very aged turtle, who succeeds, but at the sacrifice of her life. Teacher Woodley notes, “When I tell that story to little Native kids, do you know what the first thing they say is? Can you guess? They say, ‘They should have listened to Grandmother Turtle! She was the elder!’” (41). In response, we might add: how much wisdom have we in the church lost by ignoring the wise women among us? This is a mistake the wise OT city Abel Beth Maacah avoided and thus saved its people from annihilation (2 Sam 20:16–22). Do we do the same for our gifted Christian women and for the people groups who are our neighbors?

As far as Woodley and First Nations thinking is concerned, “Women are sacred because they can bring forth children,” an observation he links to Paul’s description of the earth groaning in labor pains (Rom 8:22). This gift is a reflection of the image of Creator (as God is called throughout the book), and “giving birth to new life” is, in Woodley’s view, what “Mother Earth” “is all about” (75). Being part of the earth is essential to his thinking, and he expresses it both in his teaching and in his and his wife’s seed company because “we owe it to ourselves, future generations and the earth to be responsible co-sustainers.”<sup>4</sup>

Toward the end of the book, he summarizes “the values that I found to constitute the harmony way.” In this three-page list, he features the following values: “Community is essential, women are sacred, children are loved, elders are respected, family is vital,

everyone is integrally related.” Therefore, “We are remarkably related to everyone and everything, so accept your huge family. ‘Increase your friends and family’” (93).

So endemic in his thinking is the egalitarian perspective that he often (though not completely, e.g., see pg. 20) discards terms like pedagogy and student, since “pedagogy implies that one person, the teacher or adult, has knowledge to share with the other, the receiver or the child,” and “in my graduate and undergraduate courses, I have always referenced my students (another word that implies the former inequality of positions) as “co-learners” or “collaborative learners,” implying “we are positionally equal, learning together” (ix–x).

As readers can gather from these quotations, the author’s style is relaxed and conversational. We readers will benefit most from Prof. Woodley’s book if we enter it with the following attitude: this book is, essentially, the opportunity to sit at the feet of a respected First Nations elder as he sifts through his thoughts on his experiences, his biblical knowledge, and the jewels of his treasury of traditional stories.

## Notes

1. Randy Woodley, “Eloheh,” Randy Woodley: Truth in Story. Accessed July 18, 2023. <https://randywoodley.com/eloheh>. *Eloheh* is also reminiscent of the Hebrew word *’elohe* found in Gen 33:20, “mostly in poetry” designating “the one, true God.” See the entry in Karl Feyerabend, *Langenscheidt Pocket Hebrew Dictionary to the Old Testament* (McGraw-Hill, 1969) 17. The word is used in the name Jacob gives the altar he builds on land he has just bought outside of Shechem in Canaan to pitch his tent, before the disaster with Dinah forces him to move again.
2. In my family’s case, my mother’s older brother, John, who was very kind, took on the role of protector, often taking the punishment for the misdeeds of his younger brother and sister, being boxed on the ears, which was common punishment in those severe days, a pernicious form of discipline that eventually left him deaf in one ear. When he finally found work, he too contributed what he earned to his younger brother’s going to college. So not all men were insensitive or oppressive.
3. Maria Mavromataki, *Greek Mythology and Religion: Cosmogony, The Gods, Religious Customs, The Heroes* (Haitalis, 1997) 241.
4. Randy Woodley, *Eloheh Seeds*, Eloheh Indigenous Center for Earth Justice. Accessed July 18, 2023. <https://elohehseeds.com/index.html>.



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## CBE INTERNATIONAL (Christians for Biblical Equality)

CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian men and women who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28.

*Priscilla Papers* is the academic voice of CBE International, providing peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary scholarship on topics related to a biblical view of women and men in the home, church, and world. "...when Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately." (Acts 18:26b, NRSV).

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CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE's mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

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- We believe in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We believe in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We believe that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We believe the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
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- We believe that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we lament that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We resolve to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.

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- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God's standard for human relationships.
- Christ's redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God's design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women's gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
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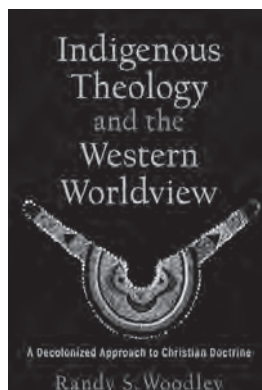
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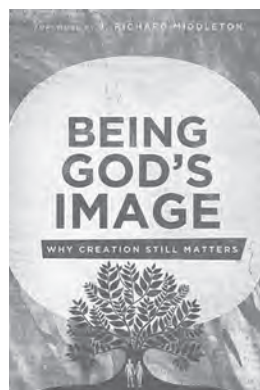
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***Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine***

Randy S. Woodley

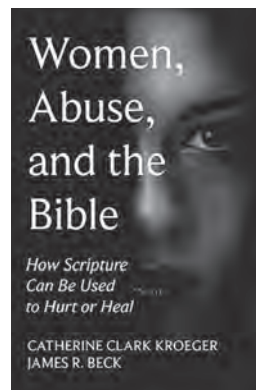
Written in an accessible, conversational style that incorporates numerous stories and questions, Woodley critiques a Western worldview with Indigenous theology. Of interest to *Priscilla Papers* readers is that a sizable part of his program emphasizes the leadership of women and the need for communal thinking over individualistic thinking, noting that mutuality, respect, and neighborly care are central to eliminating the “abuse of the female gender.”



***Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters***

Carmen Joy Imes

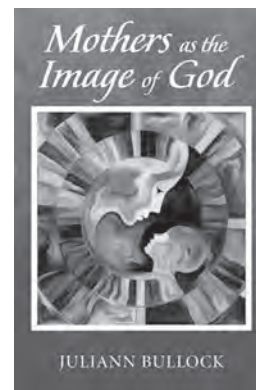
Every human being is created as God's image. Imago Dei is our human identity, and God appointed humans to rule on God's behalf. *Being God's Image* explores the implications of this kinship relationship with God and considers what it means for our work, our gender relations, our care for creation, and our eternal destiny. The Bible invites us into a dramatically different quality of life: a beloved community in which we can know God and one another as we are truly known.



***Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or Heal***

Catherine Clark Kroeger,  
James R. Beck

For clergy, Christian professionals, and laypeople alike, this book speaks frankly of the way that the Bible can be used to hurt or to heal, to disperse God's grace or to obstruct it. With input from counselors, biblical scholars, an abuser, and survivors, this book will challenge churches to honestly address the issues of abuse and offer practical and creative pathways to healing. It serves as a source book for all Christians courageous enough to address the problem.



***Mothers as the Image of God***

Juliann Bullock

Does the Bible ever describe God as a mother, as well as a father? If human fathers can show us what God is like, can we see God's image in our mothers too? *Mothers as the Image of God* explores answers to these important questions, along with many others. This book guides the reader on a series of biblical reflections designed to help both men and women experience the motherly love of God revealed in Scripture, and to nourish women with the knowledge that the feminine aspects of their nature are a profound reflection of the very image of God.