



A “Plain Reading” of Scripture

Many people hold a hierarchical view of the relationship between women and men because they understand that to be the clear position of Scripture. They believe a “plain reading” of passages like 1 Timothy 2:12, 3:2, and Ephesians 5:22–32 (to name a few) establishes a universal and eternal order in both ministry and household contexts. They may accuse egalitarians of twisting Scripture or even throwing it out altogether, abandoning biblical authority in order to support a position which goes against these mandates. Those who hold a hierarchical position often say things like “I am just reading what the Bible says,” applying an Occam’s Razor¹ approach to the (often English or other modern translation) text. The suggestion is that there is no interpretive work required in approaching the Bible, and that anyone who engages in such interpretation does so with the intention of contorting Scripture to support their desired position.

In fact, the opposite is true. It is precisely *because* of our very high view of Scripture and its authority that we believe in the biblical equality of women and men. In both our name and throughout our work, we intentionally use the phrase “biblical equality” in part to highlight that the source for our beliefs on this issue is the Bible.

What is the disconnect? How can something seemingly so clear be understood any other way?

The answer lies in the difficult work that is translation and exegesis.² Though most readers of the Bible are familiar with the existence of different translations of the Bible (the New International Version or the King James Version, for example), many may not know just what makes those translations different from each other. The whole subject of translation and work in the “original languages” (Greek and Hebrew) may seem obscure or even intimidating to those not familiar with it.

Those who have experience in more than one language (contemporary or otherwise) know that translation is complex work that involves more than swapping words from one language to another. Idiomatic expressions like “quitting cold turkey” make sense to North American English speakers but leave the non-English speaker wondering what cold poultry has to do with giving up a habit. Translating this phrase requires understanding what it means in its original context, correctly interpreting it, and communicating it in a new language. If this is already an intricate, nuanced process between two contemporary

languages, how much more so is it when you bring in ancient Greek or Hebrew—languages separated from us by thousands of years, miles, cultures, and contexts, each with their own expressions, ideas, and worldviews?

In the middle of all of that is the tricky question of interpretation. Contrary to what many believe, interpretation is not a manipulation of the text, but an inescapable part of reading. Even modern-day texts require interpretation, something we often engage in without even thinking about it. We would consider it absurd to treat the instructions of a cookbook with the same weight as a book of legislation, and we easily differentiate a television script for a popular law show from an actual legal court transcript, for example. The question is not whether we interpret the texts we read, but how we are interpreting them and if we are doing so correctly.

The passages mentioned above may seem straightforward in specific modern day English translations, but what did the original languages say? Does a “plain reading” refer to the passages as we have received them in contemporary English, or as they were originally written? What was the context and purpose behind their original writing? A number of questions begin to come up as we consider all that goes into the art of translation.

In this issue of *Mutuality*, we hope to bring the subject of Bible translation out of the seminary classroom. Articles featuring a case study on how translation can affect a community, an examination of translator bias, as well as a new look at a biblical passage that has been used to restrict women, provide practical examples that demonstrate the critical importance of getting it right when working with God’s word. When coming to the biblical text, we must carefully and faithfully navigate complex issues involved in Bible translation and study. We hope this issue will help you come to a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches about the relationship between women and men.

Notes

1. Occam’s Razor is a philosophical principle that the simplest explanation is most likely the correct one.
2. Exegesis is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially Scripture. Some consider translation to be a subset of exegesis, while others argue that they are intertwined, if not synonymous. For simplicity, we will be using the term *translation* throughout the issue.

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