



STILL
Side by Side

Janet George

A concise explanation of biblical gender equality

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CBE International
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Still Side by Side: A Concise Explanation of Biblical Gender Equality

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Published by CBE International
122 W Franklin Ave, Suite 218
Minneapolis, MN 55404
cbeinternational.org

ISBN: 978-1-939971-84-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-939971-87-6 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-939971-86-9 (Mobi)
ISBN: 978-1-939971-85-2 (ePub)

Still Side by Side: A Concise Explanation of Biblical Equality is available in the following languages: Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, English, Finnish, French, German, Haitian Kreyol, Hindi, Khmer, Ki-Swahili, Korean, Luganda, Nepali, Portuguese, Russian, Shona, Spanish, Tamil, Urdu, Xhosa, and Zulu.

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Introduction

In college I was asked to teach a workshop at a weekend retreat for college students. When I told my boyfriend he discouraged it because the Bible says women shouldn't teach men. So, I declined. We both just wanted to be obedient to Scripture as we understood it. I attended the workshop and the man who replaced me was a wonderful person, but not an effective teacher. I remember sitting there thinking, "This sure does not seem right!" Want to know what happened to the boyfriend? I married him! Here's the rest of the story:

Matt and I started our marriage in 1978 thinking the Bible taught there should be hierarchy in the home and church. That meant men were the leaders and decision makers. It's not that we thought God valued men more than women, but that they had specific roles. Over the years, we felt a growing conflict between what we thought the Bible taught and our own experience.

Since then we have discovered a wealth of scholarship presenting a different view. Egalitarians (or equalitarians) believe the Bible teaches the fundamental equality of all believers, who are free to exercise their God-given gifts in the home, church and society. This means all positions of ministry should

be based on giftedness and ability, not gender. And the home should be a place of mutual submission, encouragement and leadership.

But we have continued to experience situations where men and women are limited by a view of hierarchy. I went into a Christian bookstore the other day and the women's section included books on chocolate, exercise and decorating. The men's section had books on leadership, finances and current events. What message is this giving our sons and daughters? Matt and I attended a wedding where it was said submission meant the wife should do what her husband says, even if he is wrong. And we know a missionary couple whose financial support was withdrawn because they both teach.

Did you know...

- Paul does not use the term “head of the home” in the Bible.
- Scripture says we are to submit to each other, not just women to men.
- The word “helper” used to describe woman in Genesis is also used to describe God.

Let's find out the truth so we can all freely serve our Lord Jesus side by side!

Creation

Then God said, “*Let us make mankind in our image*, in our likeness, *so that they may rule* over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “*Be fruitful and increase in number*; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:26-28, emphasis added).

There are two clear authority structures here: God’s authority over all creation, and man and woman’s joint authority over the earth and the creatures. From the beginning, there was no intent for men to have authority over women. Together they are to bear and raise children and have dominion over the earth—and that’s an adventure!

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a *helper suitable* for him” (Genesis 2:18, emphasis added).

The term “helper” or “ezer” has been widely misinterpreted to mean that women were created to serve men and be subordinate. Linda Belleville

Q: The Bible says women were created to be helpers for their husbands. So weren’t men created as the adventurous leaders?

A: Men and women were created to be partners, equally responsible for God’s kingdom.

explains: “All of the other nineteen occurrences of ‘ezer’ in the Old Testament have to do with the assistance that someone of strength offers to someone in need, namely, help from God, a king, an ally or an army. Moreover, fifteen of the nineteen references speak of the help that God alone can provide” (1). An example is:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1-2).

The word “suitable” or “knegdo” means face to face, equal to or corresponding to. A “helper suitable for him” means a partner corresponding to him in every way! The woman was created with the abilities necessary to come alongside Adam and accomplish their God-given mission. God created men and women as equal partners, intended to work side by side.

It is said that “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It’s dangerous to put one person (the man) in a leadership position that is unearned and unaccountable. God knew this—that’s why partnership, not hierarchy, is the design. God intended a healthy mutual accountability within the husband/wife relationship. To stray from this and impose a hierarchy of power and authority tragically can contribute to verbal and physical abuse. Let’s stick to the original design.

The Fall

To the woman he said, “I will make your *pains in childbearing* very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and *he will rule over you.*” To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:16-19a, emphasis added).

Q: It seems that in many cultures, men are dominant. Is that because God created men that way?

A: Male domination is a curse of the fall, something to be overcome, not embraced.

Both man and woman participated in the fall. Their choice of sin brought these consequences: an adverse environment, pain in childbirth and male domination. These aren’t directives of how we should live, but the evil effects of sin entering the world. A husband ruling over his wife, like thistles in the field, is something to be overcome, not embraced! Belleville explains, “The divine intent was that of a partnership—a co-dominion over the earth, a co-responsibility to bear and raise children, and a co-duty to till the land. Dominion of one over the other was not the intent... [it is] a relational dysfunction that resulted from disobeying God” (2). We are to *still* serve side by side.

One in Christ

Q: God loves and values everyone, but don't men and women just have different roles?

A: Roles should be based on gifting, ability and experience, not gender.

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

Some say this verse describes men and women being equally loved, valued and saved (equal in being), but they have different functions (unequal in role).

There are examples of subordination in roles, such as teacher/student or employer/employee. But these functions are based on ability, and are temporary. The student is subordinate in the classroom because of the teacher's ability, but it is temporary. If the teacher worked in a restaurant the student owned, the roles would be reversed. Roles are constantly changing, based on situations and qualifications.

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis has explained that female subordination, however, is not based on ability, but rather on being female. And it is not temporary—she will never be able to grow out of it. This crosses from being unequal in role to being unequal in being. It is illogical to say a woman, no matter her ability, must be under the authority of men in every situation and, at the same time, say she is equally valued (3).

And note that this verse is not just talking about

men and women. Imagine saying that roles should be determined by race or class!

Paul is not saying that we are all identical and somehow “uni-sex.” This verse announces that race, class, and gender are irrelevant in the work of Christ, that all are equal. Many verses in the New Testament confirm that all believers are equal in being and function: John 17:20-23; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; Ephesians 4:4-8, 11-13.

The church must model unity in this fractured world. Any word, attitude or policy that insinuates women are “less than” men in any way hinders our example of God’s inclusive love.

Q: There has to be a person in authority to make decisions. Doesn’t it seem natural for it to be the man?

A: In order to have accountability, and take advantage of knowledge and experience, decision making should be shared.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

In today’s society, women and men are equally suited to and capable of thoughtful decisions. To strip an intelligent woman of the right to use her reasoning abilities diminishes her and all those around her. God’s desire is, as in the beginning, mutual authority and decisions made in community with one another. We are to serve side by side.

There will be times when discussions come to an impasse. Here are some ways of settling split decisions (not necessarily in order) (4):

1. Seek guidance from God, individually and

Q: In the Old Testament, only men were priests, so aren't husbands the priests, or the spiritual leaders of the home?

A: Everyone has equal access and equal responsibility to God.

- together. Help each other find time alone with the Lord as well as praying as a couple.
2. When possible, wait for agreement before moving forward on an important decision.
 3. Attempt to submit to each other, listen, respect, and show empathy for the other. Respect each partner's process of discernment and seek unity. "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10).
 4. Exercise individual spiritual gifts, natural talents and expertise in the debated area.
 5. Compromise. Try to evaluate each person's motives and desires.
 6. Identify pros and cons.
 7. Consider that the person who has more at stake should have more say in the decision.

But you are a chosen people, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9, emphasis added).

There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that the husband is the priest of the home. It cannot be said more emphatically—through Christ, all have equal access and responsibility to God! As John Phelan puts it "The curtain of the temple has been torn in two and now all people have access to God. All God's people are priests. All God's people are holy. All God's people have the Spirit" (5).

“Father” is one of many metaphors for God that describes one who, in that day, imparted inheritance and protection. God is not male. God is spirit (John 4:24). Both women and men are made in the image of God and equally reflect God. Mimi Haddad states, “If we insist that God is male, that is idolatry, and we’ve made God in our image, which is contrary to Scripture” (6).

Jesus came as a man simply because he had to be able to preach in the synagogue, where women were prohibited from preaching at that time. Christ became our salvation as God in human flesh—not as a man.

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

If you weaken one strand, it does not strengthen the cord. A truly healthy relationship is one of mutual respect. If it is agreed that both parents share responsibilities and decisions as to what is best for the family, it only doubles the benefit to the children. Encouraging parents to seek God’s will for their lives does not mean the children are any less cherished or less a priority in the family. Rather, it is a good example for both parents to willingly support each other and their vocation, be it full time in the home, outside the home or a combination.

The third strand is Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the home. Where Christ is honored and everyone is respected, love abounds.

Q: Since God is our Father and Jesus was a man, shouldn’t men be the spiritual leaders?

A: God is not male. God is spirit, whose image both men and women reflect.

Q: How do you respond to those who say we are tearing the family apart by not following traditional roles?

A: A home where biblical equality is practiced can only strengthen the family.

Keep in mind, there are many instances where there is not a mother and a father in the home. In these circumstances, it certainly does not help the single parent to impose stereotypical roles. These families are strengthened with understanding and help from the whole body of Christ.

Jesus and Women

He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons (Mark 3:14-15).

Richard and Catherine Kroeger explain, “Jesus did indeed have a group of women with him who ministered and accompanied him on his preaching mission. But to have sent them forth alone on a public preaching and healing mission would have been impossible. Talmud scholars were told never to speak to a woman in public, even their wives. Nor were they permitted to discuss the things of God with a woman, as this was an enticement to sin...Jesus fully appreciated that conversion must take place before such attitudes could be changed” (7).

It is also noteworthy that there were no Gentile disciples. So, if the disciples are a model of church leadership, then all non-Jewish men would also be ruled out.

A Woman Disciple

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, *and also some women* who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons

Q: Why didn't Jesus choose any women disciples?

A: Jewish males were chosen because they could accomplish the mission at that time. Now, all are called to fulfill the Great Commission.

Q: Were women involved in Jesus' ministry?

A: Jesus' respect for women and inclusion of them in his ministry could be considered radical!

had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means (Luke 8:1-3, emphasis added).

Women weren't even counted in public gatherings, but Jesus welcomed their assistance and financial support.

Jesus Teaches Women

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

Women were barred from most education at the time of Jesus. However, when Mary took the position of a disciple, at the feet of Jesus, he defended her right to learn. Note that Jesus said of her choice, "It will not be taken from her," though many have tried.

A Woman Evangelist

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the

town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him...Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did” (John 4:27-30, 39).

Women were avoided in public and viewed as a temptation to sin, but Jesus shocked his disciples when he started a conversation with the unrespectable woman at the well. This is the longest private conversation of Jesus that is recorded. He then encouraged her to be an evangelist to her town. Because of her witness, many came to believe in Jesus.

Jesus Establishes Priorities

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:27-28).

Women were valued primarily as bearers of children, but Jesus said it is most important to be a disciple.

Women Teach Disciples about the Resurrection

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matthew 28:8-10).

A woman's testimony was not accepted in court, but Jesus chose two women to witness and announce his resurrection.

Jesus never taught the subordination of women. He came to reverse the effects of the fall, and his attitude toward women reflected this. Jesus redeemed women from sin and from prejudice, and set them free!

Spiritual Gifts

...this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. *Your sons and daughters will prophesy*, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, *both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:16-18, emphasis added).

Now *to each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them *to each one*, just as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11, emphasis added).

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8).

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as *faithful stewards* of God’s grace in its various forms (1 Peter 4:10, emphasis added).

Q: God gives spiritual gifts to believers, but aren’t these different for men and women?

A: God gives spiritual gifts as needed; gifts are never divided by gender.

Whenever gifts are mentioned in the New Testament, there is no hint of gender differences, even for gifts considered to entail authority. It severely hinders the work of the gospel when half of the population is limited from freely serving as gifted.

Jesus instructed in Matthew 9:37-38 “...The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Why would anyone want to discourage God’s people from working?

At the 2004 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism Forum in Thailand, 1,530 participants from 130 countries came to discuss how to energize “the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.” One of the affirmations reads “We affirm the priesthood of all believers and call on the church to equip, encourage and empower women, men and youth to fulfill their calling as witnesses and co-laborers in the world-wide task of evangelization” (8).

Cynthia Westfall really drives this point home: “Any believer who either fails to do what God intends or fails in doing it for the right reasons with holy character will pay a profound price in the eschatological judgment. This is exactly the point of Jesus’s parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30. Whatever believers have received from God must be invested in order to benefit him and accomplish his purposes, and if they refuse to do so, the consequences are severe...Men who ban or restrict God’s appointments in terms of how a woman will function in the church will be liable.” (9).

Women in the Bible

Scripture describes many women in positions of leadership. They are mentioned less often than men because of the culture of that time. But, if it were wrong for women to lead or teach, they would never be appointed or commended in Scripture.

- Anna (Luke 2:36-38), and four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9) were prophets.
- Priscilla taught, along with Aquila, the ways of God to Apollos (Acts 18:24-26), established a church in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19) and was called a co-worker by Paul (Romans 16:3).
- Phoebe was a deacon and benefactor of Paul (Romans 16:1-2).
- Lydia met with believers in her home and welcomed Paul and Silas (Acts 16:13-15, 40).
- Junia was an apostle (Romans 16:7).
- Euodia and Syntyche were co-workers of Paul (Philippians 4:2-3).

Q: Weren't all the leaders in the early church men?

A: Given the social circumstances, there are an amazing number of women leaders in the New Testament.

Silence

Q: Doesn't the Bible say women shouldn't speak in church?

A: The verse in Corinthians that says women should be silent refers to protocol of that time. It has nothing to do with women's ability or propriety today.

Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop...For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14:26b-30, 33-35).

In the 21st century it is no longer disgraceful for a woman to speak in church. As a matter of fact, many people are hindered in their faith because they see Christianity as a male-dominated religion.

The principle in this Corinthians passage is that there should be maintenance of order in worship services. Note that women are not the only ones asked to be silent. Anyone who was going to speak in tongues was told to keep quiet if no interpreter was present. Also,

if one prophet was speaking and revelation came to someone else, the first prophet was to stop. The service was to be orderly because God is a God of peace.

Craig Keener writes, “Ancient Mediterranean protocol would disapprove of an other-wise honorable woman addressing unrelated men... Women on average were less educated than men, an assertion that no one genuinely conversant with ancient literature could doubt...Paul avoids social impropriety by advising the women to avoid questioning other men during the gathering, but he is not against their learning...With greater understanding, they might become better able to articulate themselves intellectually in the same assemblies in which they could pray and prophesy. Viewed in this light, the real issues are not gender but propriety and learning—neither of which need restrain women’s voices in the church today” (10).

Also, if Paul meant that women must always be silent, he would not have given instruction to cover their heads while praying and prophesying in church three chapters earlier (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Authority and Teaching

Q: Since the Bible says women shouldn't teach or have authority over men, doesn't that mean women should not be teachers or pastors?

A: The verse limiting women's authority in Ephesus could be applied today by saying untrained people cannot combat false teaching.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety (1 Timothy 2:11-15, emphasis added).

The principle here is combating false teaching. The concern is expressed immediately in 1 Timothy 1:3.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer (1 Timothy 1:3).

Paul adds that women were the target of false teachers:

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women... (2 Timothy 3:6a).

“A woman should learn”

The first four words of this verse are the most dramatic and radical, but they are often skipped over. Paul said women should learn. He thought the

best way to fight false teaching was through correct teaching. And women should learn in the way of all good rabbinical students: quietly and with respect for their teacher.

“I do not permit a woman to teach”

Paul obviously means women are not allowed to teach before they are adequately trained, because he praises Priscilla's ability to teach (Acts 18:24-26 and Romans 16:3-5). And note that she taught with her husband, Aquila, in Ephesus, the very church that received the letter that contains this passage.

“Or to assume authority over a man”

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis states, “The word in verse 12 that is translated ‘authority’ (authentein) is not the word used elsewhere in the New Testament to denote the positive or legitimate use of authority (exousia); in fact, this word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Moreover, it has a variety of meanings in ancient Greek usage, many of which were much stronger than mere authority, even to the point of denoting violence” (11).

Paul specifically prohibited an aggressive, domineering attitude that would be inappropriate for any believer.

“She must be quiet”

Women were to learn quietly and not disrupt, as was the expectation of all rabbinical students.

“Adam was formed first”

In Genesis, God gave his instructions to not eat of the “tree of knowledge” directly to Adam, before Eve was created. Thus Eve did not have direct instruction from God. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis explains this further: “The point of the illustration is that, in order to avoid deception and serious error, those who lack instruction in God’s Word (as did Eve and the Ephesian women) should defer to the expertise of those who are more thoroughly instructed (as were Adam and the male leaders in the Ephesian church)” (12).

“Saved through childbearing”

This is a difficult part to understand, but here is one explanation: The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was huge and included a treasury room with 400 guards. Artemis was widely worshipped as a fertility goddess who helped women, especially in childbirth. Paul addresses this practice by suggesting women do not need to look to Artemis to be kept safe while giving birth; they can, instead, have faith in Jesus. Mimi Haddad writes, “In confronting false teaching in Ephesus, Paul suggests that women will be saved through childbirth. Is Paul implying that women will be saved in childbirth not through the worship of Artemis, but by remaining faithful to Christ?” (13).

Craig Keener brings out a critical point: “The Bible permits women’s ministry under normal circumstances and prohibited it only under exceptional circumstances...The one Bible passage that explicitly prohibits women from teaching the

Bible—in contrast with numerous passages that endorse various women communicating God’s message—is addressed to the one church where we specifically know that false teachers were effectively targeting women” (14).

In summary, except in isolated situations, the overall teaching of Scripture is that all the gifts are given to both women and men and they should be encouraged to participate at all levels of ministry. We can’t expect to be God’s hands and feet to the world with half of them shackled!

Headship

Q: Doesn't the Bible clearly say the husband is the head of the home?

A: The Bible never says that the husband is the head of the home. It does say that man is the head of woman, and God is the head of Christ. In context, "head" could mean "source of life" between people and within the Trinity.

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11:3).

"Head" or "kephale" is often thought to mean authority. But it can also be translated "source," as in the head of a river.

There are two reasons why the word "head" in 1 Corinthians 11:3 could mean "source of life," rather than "authoritative leader." First, the relationships are listed in chronological order of origin. Cynthia Westfall points out, "Christ is the source of man's life because he is the creator who formed man in Genesis 1:4–9. Man is the source of woman's life because she was created out of man in Genesis 2:18–23. God the Father is the source of Christ the Son's life in eternity" (15).

The application of this thought is wonderful. As Mimi Haddad writes, "In Genesis, God creates woman from man's body. Likewise, Christ is the origin or source of the church. Christ died to bring others to life. In the same way, husbands are to love their wives sacrificially—as their own flesh. This underscores the idea of oneness, of intimacy" (16).

Second, saying that “head” means “authoritative leader” would imply subordination within the Trinity, which has been deemed unorthodox and heretical throughout church history.

Let’s look closely at this verse with “kephale” defined as “authoritative leader”:

- the authoritative leader of every man is Christ (yes).
- the authoritative leader of the woman is man (maybe).
- the authoritative leader of Christ is God (no—Jesus is not eternally subordinate to the Father).

Kevin Giles explains, “Virtually all Christians agree that in the incarnation the Son subordinated himself to the Father. He functionally assumed the role of a servant. But most Christians do not believe that the Son’s subordination in the incarnation is definitive of the Father-Son relationship in the eternal or immanent Trinity. In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul asserts that the Son had equality with the Father before he voluntarily emptied himself to become a man and die on the cross, and that afterward he was exalted to reign as Lord” (17).

The verse makes more sense when “kephale” is defined as “source of life”:

- The source of every man is Christ (yes).
- The source of the woman is man (yes—in creation, woman was made out of man).
- The source of Christ is God (yes—Jesus was

sent from God the Father in the incarnation).

Next consider some verses that describe Jesus as the head of the church. Note that they do not describe his role as leader or authority. “Head” describes Jesus as the first source of life and salvation and provider of growth.

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who *fills everything in every way* (Ephesians 1:22-23, emphasis added).

Instead, speaking the truth in love, *we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head*, that is, Christ. *From him* the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, *grows and builds itself up* in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:15-16, emphasis added).

They have lost connection with the head, *from whom* the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, *grows as God causes it to grow* (Colossians 2:19, emphasis added).

Just as Jesus is head (source of life and provider of growth) of the church, so husbands are to be to their wives.

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy...In

this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies... After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does for the church. (Ephesians 5:23-29)

Philip Payne notes, “[Paul’s] subsequent description of Christ’s relationship to his body, the church, states nothing about Christ’s authority, but says that Christ loved and gave himself for the church (Ephesians 5:25), to make her holy... (5:26), feeding and caring for her (5:29). These are his actions as savior, the source of life and nourishment of his body, the church. Paul calls the husband to imitate Christ’s actions in relations with his wife, not to assume authority over her.” (18)

If you are still not convinced, I challenge you to read Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen’s essay “What Does Kephale Mean in the New Testament?” Here’s a sample: “The most complete Greek-English lexicon (covering Homeric, classical and koine Greek) in current existence is a two-volume work of more than 2,000 pages compiled by Liddel, Scott, Jones and McKenzie, published first in 1843... This lexicon lists, with examples, the common meanings of kephale. The list does not include ‘authority,’ ‘superior rank,’ ‘leader,’ ‘director,’ or anything similar as a meaning” (19). The Mickelsens go on for fourteen pages talking about Greek. Philip Barton Payne’s response to the Mickelsens’ article says, “The Mickelsens actually understate their case from Greek usage. Including its 1968 supplement, the Liddell and Scott lexicon lists forty-eight separate English equivalents of figurative meanings of kephale. None of them implies leader,

authority, first or supreme” (20).

In summary, rather than intending that men succumb to the sad result of the fall, which included ruling over their wives, God intends husbands to be a source of life and encouragement to their wives! Just as Jesus is to us!

Merrill-Groothuis expands, “Ironically, understanding the head of the wife to mean the leader of the wife defeats the biblical purpose of the head as nurturer of the life, health and growth of the wife. A person cannot grow into full spiritual, emotional and intellectual maturity if she is denied the opportunity to take responsibility for her own life, if she is treated as a child who needs to have her decisions made for her by someone else...Hierarchical marriages also stunt the husband’s growth in character and sanctification, [missing out on] the learning and loving of two equal partners in the service of Christ’s Kingdom” (21).

Submission

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ... And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (Ephesians 5:21-22, 25; 6:5, 9a, emphasis added).

Submitting to one another is the key verse here, instructing how we can demonstrate the filling of the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) in our homes. Paul was using submission of wives to their husbands, in that culture, as an example of how we should submit to each other. Obedience by wives and slaves was required by Jewish and Roman law and was the accepted cultural norm. But for the early church, the priority was spreading the gospel, not disrupting the laws. So, Paul is explaining how to act in the confines of a patriarchal society, with good Christian virtues—submission (not obedience) and love (not rule).

J. Lee Grady summarizes, “Submission, not in the sense of domination or rulership over another, but in the sense of preferring one another and not

Q: The Bible says wives are to submit to their husbands. Isn't that alright when it is intelligent, willing support?

A: Submission of wives and obedience of slaves was expected in the first century. But Paul instructs Christian households to behave in a new way: submit to each other!

demanding personal rights, should be operating in the entire body of Christ in order to reveal the love of Christ to the world” (22).

Conclusion

Women and men have too often been curtailed from healthy relationships and effective ministries because of one way of interpreting a few verses of Scripture. This is not the first time this has happened. In the United States, during the 1800s, the defenders of slavery relied heavily on their interpretation of the Bible. They noted that Jesus referred to slaves in parables, that Galatians 4 uses illustrations from slavery, and Ephesians 6 commands slaves to obey their masters. Stan Gundry says, “Someday Christians will be as embarrassed by the church’s biblical defense of patriarchal hierarchicalism as it is now of the nineteenth century biblical defenses of slavery” (23).

Scripture must be interpreted according to the context, time period, and overall themes. Consider if any of the following situations conforms to the total message of the Bible:

- An inspired woman who is attending a local seminary is told she can give a brief testimony to the congregation, but just in a particular place in the sanctuary, saying nothing that could be viewed as teaching.
- A child is deprived of medical treatment that the mother has researched and gotten recommendations for, because the husband disagrees and says no.

- A woman, who is accomplishing a great deal in a growing ministry, is fired when new men join the board who believe women should not be in a leadership position.
- A wife is verbally and physically abused by her husband, a deacon in the church. Her pastor counsels her not to make him angry, but to submit and to pray.
- A woman in college is discouraged from pursuing a promising career and is instead told that God's perfect plan for her is to get married someday. She is told she will be unable to sufficiently serve her husband while working outside of the home.

Admittedly, there are differing opinions on this topic. But, if we are to err, let us not err on the side of restricting the work of God. Let us encourage the entire body of Christ to exercise all the gifts, for the whole world. The needs are great, and God knows... *everyone is needed!*

About CBE

Leading Together, Serving as Equals

CBE International (Christians for Biblical Equality) advances the gospel by equipping Christians to use their God-given talents in leadership and service regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class.

Founded in 1988, CBE is a US-based 501c3 nonprofit supported by a community that believes the Bible, properly interpreted, calls women and men to lead and serve as equals, based on Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28:

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

Who we are

A Global Community

With supporters, ministry partners, and local chapters from over one hundred denominations and sixty-five countries, CBE engages Christians with conferences, adult and youth curricula, multi-media resources, award-winning publications, a blog, and more.

CBE collaborates with pastors, churches, schools, and NGOs around the world to eliminate gender-based violence and human trafficking, and improve girls’

access to education by raising the status of women.

Helping the Church Prevent Abuse

In the US and around the world, one in three women are victims of physical abuse by an intimate partner, and studies show abuse is as common in the church as in society. CBE is working with church leaders to prevent abuse and create communities where women and men flourish as equals.

Healing and Hope

For more than thirty years, CBE's articles, books, and conferences have provided healing and hope for Christian women and men around the world.

What we do

CBE's ministry revolves around several core components.

Publications. CBE publishes an academic journal, *Priscilla Papers*, and a popular online + print magazine, *Mutuality*, quarterly. These award-winning publications are through print subscriptions and are free online.

Bookstore. CBE Bookstore is the place to find resources on the Bible's call for women and men to share leadership and service equally. Each book has been reviewed for quality and relevance to CBE's mission. The bookstore also carries exclusive CBE-published books.

Conferences. Each year, CBE hosts an international conference featuring world renowned pastors, scholars, and speakers to educate, encourage, and equip Christians to advocate for biblical gender equality.

Chapters. Chapters are CBE's hands and feet in communities around the world, providing a way for local CBE members and supporters to connect and minister together.

Mission Statement

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.

Core Values

1. Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
2. Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin.
3. Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from females what God has given them: their dignity, and freedom, their leadership, and often their very lives.
4. While the Bible reflects patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy in human relationships.
5. Christ's redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
6. God's design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a man and a woman, celibate singleness and mutual submission in

Christian community.

7. The unrestricted use of women's gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel in the world.
8. Followers of Christ are to oppose injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that marginalize and abuse females and males.

Envisioned Future

CBE envisions a future where all believers are freed to exercise their gifts for God's glory and purposes, with the full support of their Christian communities.

To learn more, visit cbeinternational.org

Endnotes

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Founding Member of CBE International,
author, editor, and teacher

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ISBN 978-1-939971-84-5



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