THE CHRISTIAN WOMAN

by Ronald L. Dart

Born to Win
Making Life Work

Bible Study Notes
A Series of Notes on Topics That Impact Your Life

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". . .her price is far above rubies"
(Proverbs 31:10).

There are no women in heaven," chuckled the preacher. "How do I know this? The Lord revealed it in Revelation 8:1 when he said there was *silence* in heaven for about the space of half an hour."

It was all very amusing, and even the ladies enjoyed a little laugh at their own expense. After all, more than one of them had "talked someone's ear off" sometime in the past 48 hours.

Still, there was a little hurt in the laughter of some. To them it was just one more "put-down" for women. Only this time it came from an unexpected source, their pastor, from whom they felt they had a right to expect *support*, not humiliation.

It is bad enough to endure discrimination and even denigration from the world at large without having to endure it in the church. Why, even in this sanctuary from the hurts of the world, do women find themselves being hurt yet again?

"Who am I?" the Christian woman asks. "*What* am I? Why did God make me a woman? Am I under some sort of curse? Am I only offered a *secondary* salvation? Am I some sort of *inferior* creature—a divine afterthought?"

Why have the churches left women so confused about their identity? What have churchmen *taught* about the role of the Christian woman? From whence come these teachings? The answer may surprise you.

The Church "Fathers"

From the very earliest time, the attitude of the "church fathers" toward women was tragic. Tertullian, for example, saw woman as the personification of fundamentally evil sex. He exhorts the Christian woman to wear somber clothes and to conduct herself as Eve:

". . . mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derived from Eve—the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition. 'In pains and anxieties dost thou bear (children), woman; and toward thine husband (is) thy inclination, and he lords it over thee.' And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil's gateways: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die" (Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* 1.1, *The Fathers of the Church*, Volume 40, pp. 117 f.).

Tertullian

Shocking isn't it? Stripped of all frills, he says in the plainest terms that there is a sentence of God upon the female sex that lives on and the guilt goes on too. He says that women are the devil's gateway, the first deserter of the divine Law, the destroyer of man, and ultimately responsible for the death of the Son of God. Women, mind you.

When we understand that Tertullian was one of the earliest (A.D. 160-225) and most influential of the church fathers, and that his influence was so pervasive that he has been called the father of Latin theology,

we begin to get an idea of how early and how strong was the negative attitude toward women in the theology of the visible Christian church.

But where did Tertullian get these ideas? From the Bible? It is of at least passing interest that the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, not generally accepted as canonical by Protestant churches, is quite negative about women: "Do not look upon anyone for beauty, and do not sit in the midst of women; for from garments come the moth, and from a woman comes woman's wickedness. Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace" (Ecclesiasticus 42:12-14).

Another of the early church fathers, Origen (A. D. 185-224), stated, "What is seen with the eyes of the Creator is masculine, and not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh" (Origen, *Selecta in Exodus* xviii.17, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Volume 12, Column 296 f.). Origen is also quoted elsewhere as saying that it is not proper for a woman to speak in church, however admirable or holy what she says may be, merely because it comes from female lips.

Yet another church father, Epiphanius (A.D. 315-403), wrote: "For the female sex is easily seduced, weak, and without much understanding. The Devil seeks to vomit out this disorder through women. . . We wish to apply masculine reasoning and destroy the folly of these women" (Epiphanius, *Adversus Collyridianos*, Migne, *Patrologia Graece*, Volume 42, Column 740 f.).

There were some curious lines of reasoning to be found among the early church fathers. Cyril of Alexandria (A.D. 376-444), for example, explained why Mary Magdalene did not immediately recognize Jesus after his resurrection thus: "Somehow the woman (Mary Magdalene), or rather the female sex as a whole, is slow in comprehension" (Cyril of Alexandria, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Volume 74, Column 689). Leonard Swidler finds Cyril's conclusions contradictory since: "… the most celebrated non-Christian mathematician and philosopher of the neo-Platonic school in Alexandria was a woman, Hypatia. But in a neurotic sort of way the two elements fit together, for Hypatia, known for her 'great eloquence, rare modesty, and beauty,' attracted many students and naturally opposed much of what the authoritarian, violent Cyril stood for. Her existence as a proof of the falsity of Cyril's image of woman's uncomprehending nature was swiftly cut off by Christian monks who dragged her from her chariot into a Christian church, stripped her naked, cut her throat, and burned her piecemeal; Cyril was deeply complicit, indirectly if not directly" (Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Volume 7, 15, as quoted by Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, page 345).

And so this pervasive attitude continued on west with successive church fathers including Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, and Augustine.

These latter two seem to have had grave difficulties with their sexuality. In his struggle with himself, Jerome lived the most extreme ascetic life in the desert. During this period he was filled with the wildest sexual fantasies: "Although in my fear of hell I had consigned myself to this prison where I had no companion but scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself amid bevies of girls. My face was frail and my frame chilled with fasting, yet my mind was burning with desire and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead" (Jerome, Epistle 22:7).

"At times he (Jerome) gratuitously projected debaucheries on women whom he did not even know and about whom he had no information, as for example, in his letter to a Christian ascetic woman in Gual in which he describes in lurid detail her imagined behavior, such as her mincing gait, pretended ascetic dress, carefully ripped to display the white flesh beneath her shawl which she allows to slip and quickly replaces to reveal her curving neck" (Jerome, Epistle 117, as quoted by Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, page 347).

Jerome in the desert, tormented by his memories of the dancing girls of Rome. Painted by Francisco de Zurbarán.

Augustine also struggled with his desire for sex and his belief that sex was evil: "A good Christian is found in one and the same woman: To love the creature of God *(quod home est)* whom he desires to be transformed and renewed, but to hate in her the corruptible and mortal conjugal connection, sexual intercourse and all that pertains to her as a wife *(quod uxor est)*" (Augustine, *De Sermone Domini In Monte* 1.15 Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Volume 34, Col. 1250).

Augustine saw woman as the expression of the flesh: "Flesh stands for woman, because she was made out of a rib. . . the Apostle has said: Who loves his woman loves himself; for no one hates his own flesh. Flesh thus stands for the wife, as sometimes also spirit for the husband. Why? Because the latter rules, and the former is ruled; the latter should govern, the former should serve."

As late as the sixth century Gregory the Great is quoted as saying, "In holy scripture (the word) 'woman' stands either for the female sex (Galatians 4:4) or for weakness, as it is said: A man's spite is preferable to a woman's kindness (Sirach 42:14). For every man is called strong and clear of thought but woman is looked upon as a weak or muddled spirit" (Gregory, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Volume 75, Column 982 f.).

The Source

From whence came these beliefs? Are they biblically derived? Do they come from the Bible? We see them clearly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but this tradition is not alone. It seems that most human societies and religion are shot through with ideas that *at best* regard woman as man's inferior, and at worst as being essentially evil.

In the orthodox Hindu religion, it is believed that women cannot obtain salvation as women, but only through being reborn as men. In the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, woman is seen as ". . .an all-devouring curse. In her body the evil cycle of life begins afresh, born out of lust engendered by blood and semen. Man emerges mixed with excrement and water, fouled with the impurities of woman. A wise man will avoid the contaminating society of women as he would the touch of bodies infested with vermin."

In first century Jewish society, an adult male Jew thanked God three times a day for not having made him a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.

He certainly did not get this idea from the Bible. Chances are, it derived from Hellenistic or Greek society where a fundamental tenet held that a man was to be grateful that he was born a human being and not a beast, a man and not a woman, a Hellene and not a barbarian.

There is ample reason to believe that the traditions of the Jews, and even the later Christian societies regarding women, might well have been derived from Gentile cultures. But did they find *any foundation at all in the Bible?*

In the Beginning

In the beginning, God had a plan for man and woman. There are certain things that are evident in his original intent. We have two main ways of understanding this intent. First, some things are evident in the design of man and woman. The bodily structure and physical and biochemical functions of men and women differ in important ways. As someone aptly pointed out, the fact that the human species is mammalian has far-reaching and inescapable sociological consequences. The female, obviously, is designed for bearing and nurturing children. The male, on the other hand, is designed for protecting and providing for his family. Consequently, the male is generally larger and stronger than the female.

It's not difficult to proceed to the conclusion, then, that it was within the scope of God's *original plan and intent* that the larger, stronger, and more mobile male would tend to be dominant in male-female relationships. It's a simple matter of the sociological consequences of biology.

The other way we discern God's intent is in the creation itself. Jesus himself recognized in that account an "original intent."

It came to pass on a day that the Pharisees came to him, attempting to lay a snare, and asked, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Jesus' answer is simple and direct: "Have you not read, that he which made them *at the beginning* made them male and female, and said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and *they twain shall be one flesh.* What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matthew 19:3-6).

It is important to note that Jesus did not say, "they twain shall be *master* and *servant*." Nor did he describe them as lord and slave. Rather, he describes an *entirely different* relationship: "They twain shall be *one flesh.*"

But is such a relationship implied in the earliest accounts of the creation of woman? Yes, it is, beginning in Genesis 2:18: "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *help meet* for him."

The expression "help meet" has often been taken to mean *helper* in the sense of servant, menial, apprentice or, in the extreme, a slave. The Hebrew, however, will not justify such a meaning. In fact, the word *help* is often used of God himself. In Psalm 46:1, for example, God is called "a very present help" in time of trouble. Numerous examples could be given, but it is clear that the word does *not* mean "help" in a

subservient sense. What the Scripture *does* imply is that man alone is incomplete, inadequate to God's purpose.

Returning to Genesis 2:19-20, we find the very curious account of the naming of the animals. The account almost sounds as though God expected he *might* find a helper for Adam among the animals and would not need to create woman at all! It's almost as if woman was sort of a "divine afterthought," a solution to a problem that had not otherwise been found; not so. As James put it, "Known unto God are *all* His works *from the beginning*" (Acts 15:18). The *physical designs* of man and animals show clearly that God *never* expected to find Adam's mate among the animal kingdom. The end of verse 20 is merely a simple statement of this fact.

Yet another misconception arises from Genesis 2:21: "And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'" Some of the early church fathers suggested that because woman was taken from Adam's rib that she was somehow *inferior* to man.

The Apostle Paul makes an interesting refutation of this theory in the 11th chapter of 1 Corinthians. He is in the process of discussing a rather obscure practice of the time having to do with head coverings, long and short hair, the shaving of heads, etc. In the process, he appeals to a pattern of leadership descending from the Father to Christ, to the husband, and to the wife. However, lest someone assume that the woman is *inferior* to the man or less important in this relationship, Paul cautions: "Nevertheless neither is the man without woman, neither is the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man (Eve was taken from Adam's rib), even so is the man also by the woman (every man since Adam has come from the womb of a woman); but all things of God" (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

Paul seems to be taking up God's statement that it was not good for man to be alone and continuing to point out that both man and woman are *incomplete* without the other. Interestingly enough, the fact that all men since Adam came from women and that we all tend to revere our mothers, conceivably could lead to matriarchy. It's almost as if God's *purpose* in taking our first mother *out of Adam* was to create an *equality* between men and women—to prevent women from having the ascendancy because all men come from women. Do you suppose there would have been different sociological consequences through the ages had God created *Eve first* and taken Adam *from her?*

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." Then God said, "Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life." And that is what happened. Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! (Genesis 1:27-31).

It may be easier to argue that God's intent in taking woman out of man was to create *equality* between the sexes than it is to argue that it was his intent to make man superior to woman.

Some of the early church fathers attempted to conclude from this account that woman was not only inferior to man, but that she, unlike man, *was not made in God's image.* And yet we are told clearly in the original creation account, "So God created man in his *own image*, in the image of God created he him; *male and female* created he them" (Genesis 1:27). *Man* in this verse is used in the generic sense. Man was created male and female. Woman, like man, *is* created *in the image of God.* Later, in commenting on the work that he had done that day, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (v. 31), including woman.

So man and woman were *both perfect* in their creation. They were both created in the image of God. Woman was created *for* man, but a simple study of male anatomy will show that man also was created *for woman.* There is *nothing* in the creation account to imply female inferiority, male superiority, or to justify a man

lording it over his wife.

Returning to Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees: After he had cited the Genesis account and made his oft-quoted statement, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder," the Pharisees replied, "Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?"

An important question was asked, and a vital answer was given: "He saith unto them, 'Moses because of the hardness of your heart suffered you to put away your wives: but *from the beginning it was not so*' " (Matthew 19:8).

Jesus clearly stated that God had an *original intent* for man and woman which had gone astray through human weakness. The permission of divorce under Moses was *not* an expression of the original intent of God. *It was an accommodation to human weakness and a merciful response to human sin.*

The First Sin

Man went astray so soon! The very first man and the very first woman sinned and changed the course of history for all mankind. The account of this sin is found in the third chapter of Genesis, and from this account, much of the understanding (and misunderstanding) of the nature of woman has proceeded.

"Now the serpent was more subtile than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, 'Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?' " (Genesis 3:1).

Tertullian no doubt would have underlined the word *woman* and observed that Satan struck at the first family through its weakest link. Some modern interpreters have done the same, but it is a gratuitous assumption. There is nothing in the Genesis account to indicate any such thing. Some of the same interpreters who tell us that Satan will strike the family at its *weakest* link will also tell us that Satan likes to strike a religious organization at the *very top.*

The story of the deception of Eve is familiar. She responded to the serpent with an accurate accounting of God's commandment. The serpent questioned God's motives and lied to the woman about what the tree was *really* for.

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, *and gave also unto her husband with her*, and he did eat" (Genesis 3:6).

From this account Tertullian derived his accusation, "You are the Devil's gateways: you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is death—even the Son of God had to die." But wait. It is true that the woman was *first* in transgression, but she was not *alone* in it. Her *husband was with her!*

It is curious that so few have noticed that the argument that Satan struck at the family through its weakest link is self-defeating. If Adam was morally the stronger of the two, why did he not speak? Why did he not argue with Satan? Why did he not assume the role of leadership in this situation? We are presented with an image of Eve carrying on a dialogue with the serpent while Adam stands meekly by. Eve turns and hands the forbidden fruit to her husband and he eats, no questions asked! Eve was *first* in the transgression to be sure, but why do we assume she was *worst?*

Perhaps some of this derives from other biblical writers, such as Paul. Consider the following from Paul's first letter to Timothy: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

This Scripture has sometimes been used by churchmen to argue that woman was the "first cause" of sin in the world. That she was the one who was guilty, not Adam. This argument is also self-defeating. Look carefully at verse 14. We are told that Adam was *not deceived* while Eve was. Question: Who has the greater responsibility? The one who is *deceived* and sins or the one who is *not* deceived and sins? (See Luke 12:47-48).

Paul answers this question for us elsewhere, and

without ambiguity: "Wherefore, as by one *man* sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. . . Nevertheless death reigned from *Adam* to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of *Adam's* transgression . . . For if by *one man's* offense death reigned by one; much more they that received abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:12-17).

Isn't it interesting that in this account of what many call the "original sin," full responsibility for the introduction of sin in the world is laid at the feet of *Adam*, not Eve?

Why, then, does Paul seem to lay the responsibility at Eve's feet in his letter to Timothy? Let's look at it again, but this time let's look at the entire context of chapter 2. The subject of the chapter is prayers, intercession, and giving of thanks. Paul exhorts that prayers be made for kings and all in authority and, indeed, for all men. The *context* of Paul's remarks about women begins in verse 8: "I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works."

The wording almost sounds like a shift in context between verse 8 and verse 9. It sounds like verse 8 is talking about prayer and verse 9 it talking about women's apparel. The words "in like manner," however, imply that he is also talking about women praying but that he is concerned that the women in Timothy's church may be giving more attention to their appearance than to their attitude and their prayers.

Is Paul suggesting that women should not braid their hair? If they have a gold wedding ring, are they not to wear it? If their husbands should give them a gift of lovely cultured pearls, are they to leave them in a box at home? Somehow, this seems unlikely, especially in view of God's own conduct toward Israel recorded in Ezekiel 16:10-12. Here God is pictured as clothing Israel with badger's skins, fine linen, and silk. He is pictured as decking Israel with ornaments, bracelets, neck chains, jewels, earrings, and even a beautiful crown.

It seems plain enough that Paul is calling on women, *when they come together for prayer*, to adorn themselves modestly. It seems unlikely he would be prohibiting the wearing of pearls on a social occasion.

Why, then, does Paul draw the Genesis account of the woman's first sin into this exhortation? What Paul is doing is drawing a *historical analogy* from the book of Genesis in order to remind women that no matter how polished, no matter how cultured, no matter how prim, no matter how proper they may be, they are subject to deception and sin. Women are not morally superior to men. Any haughtiness on their part is out of line. It is as simple as that. Paul is *not* trying to establish a doctrine that women may not wear jewelry; nor is he trying to establish a doctrine of female inferiority, or blaming women for the sins of all mankind. It simply appears from the context that there were a few women in Timothy's church who had become vain and may have been trying to usurp authority over their husbands, or even over Timothy himself.

It's an old, old story. Jesus, Paul, and the other Apostles had indeed been champions of women in their society. Paul had written: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The women in the church had come to appreciate fully their "liberty in Christ." But it seems inevitable that in any such situation there will be a few who will carry things entirely too far. A few women, having experienced even greater liberation than the men had experienced, may well have become somewhat arrogant—even to an assumption of female *superiority*. It would be a terrible mistake to take Paul's writings out of context and use them in an attempt to establish female inferiority.

We should also point out that it would be a mistake to take too literally Paul's admonition that a woman should not teach. For he wrote to Titus with some specific instructions for older women in the church: "That they (the older women) may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home (Greek: keepers of the house), good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:4-5).

What Paul seemed to be saying to Timothy was that women should not teach men—not that they shouldn't teach at all.

Another note in passing: Paul was not trying to suggest in his comments to Titus that women should be confined to the home. The expression is not "keepers at home," but "keepers of the house." When coupled with Proverbs 31:10-31, the position of keeper of the house obviously is one of *considerable responsibility*. She is not just another household servant.

We'll have more to say on Paul's writings later.

The First Punishment

Returning to the third chapter of Genesis, we find Adam and Eve so smitten with guilt that they hide themselves from the presence of God among the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:8). After God had made inquiry of them as to what had happened, he immediately cursed the serpent: "And the LORD God said unto the serpent, 'Because thou has done this, thou are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' " (vv. 14-15).

It's important to notice in this account that God curses only the ground (v. 17) and the serpent. He does not curse the man. He does not curse the woman. Both the man and the woman, however, *must bear their punishment*. In the pronouncing of the punishment upon man and woman, there are two words in common to both; the words "in sorrow," which mean in pain, anguish or struggle. No change in the *role* of man or the *role* of woman is suggested. What is suggested is that the woman shall bear children *in sorrow*.

It is important enough to repeat: In punishing the man and the woman, God *did not change their sociological roles*. Neither the design of women to nurture children, nor the design of man to protect and provide, were changed. But it was not going to be easy any longer.

Also, in verse 16, God said to the woman: "And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." Notice that this passage is descriptive, not prescriptive. It is in the simple future tense (he shall), not the imperative (he must). God is not describing the way things *should* be, but the way they *will* be as the result of sin. And, in truth, down through all generations, woman has been dominated. In nearly every society the woman has experienced the *rule* of man. She has been treated like a slave and even bought and sold. Often robbed of her human rights, she was treated as chattel, or property, by her husband.

But *from the beginning it was not so.*

This passage is not a description of the way God *wants* things to be, but the way they will be when men go contrary to his words. It is not God's will for man to "lord it over" his wife. For a *Christian* to use this verse to justify the oppression of his wife is an utter travesty! The Christian man and wife should be *one flesh* as it was from the beginning.

Can a Woman Lead?

If indeed it was God's *intent* that women be subordinated to men throughout history, we should expect God to assiduously avoid circumstances where women dominate. Is this the case? Has God *ever* used a woman in a position of leadership over men?

The answer is a clear and resounding *yes!*

Perhaps the most notable example in Scripture is a woman named Deborah, a prophetess and a judge in Israel in the years following Joshua, introduced in the fourth chapter of Judges: "And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in Mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment" (Judges 4:4-5).

There can be little doubt that Deborah was the dominant leader in Israel at this time. It is evident from the fact that when she sent for Barak, the military commander, he came at her bidding (v. 6).

Deborah was a *prophetess*. The Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*, and its feminine form is *nebiah*. There are many different sorts of prophets to be found in the Bible, but essentially a prophet or a prophetess is one through whom God speaks. Consequently, when she called Barak, he realized that God had a message for him.

Her message was simple. God had commanded Barak to go and take 10,000 men to fight against Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army. Barak's response is of considerable interest: "And Barak said unto her, 'If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go' " (v. 8). He was dependent upon this woman, not only as a messenger of God, but as a source of moral support and as an *obvious leader*—although not herself a *military* leader.

Deborah went with him, but she warned that the honor of the battle would not be Barak's but the Lord would give Sisera into the hand of a woman. The

battle was fought, Sisera and his men fled in disarray, and Sisera himself was killed by a woman named Jael who drove a tent peg through his head.

The entire account would be strange indeed if God shared the inclinations of Tertullian, Augustine, and Jerome. Clearly, he does not.

Some interpreters are fond of citing this period in Israel as a time when all the men were so weak that there was no one left but a woman to lead Israel, as though it were a *low point* in Israel's history. Yet, it was a time when a great battle was fought and won, followed by 40 years of peace. A strange circumstance for a time when God was so displeased with the character of the men of Israel. The truth is that God chose a woman to hold the position of leadership during this particular point in history.

Miriam, the prophetess

Miriam and Huldah

There are two other prophetesses of note in the Bible. The first is Miriam, Moses' sister. In Exodus 15, we find "Miriam the *prophetess,* the sister of Aaron," taking a timbrel in her hand and leading all the women in a song of triumph. Her words have found their way into Scripture as the song of Miriam.

Much later in Israel's history, King Josiah began to reign. In his 18th year, a book was discovered in the Temple, the book of the Law. When King Josiah heard the words of the Law read to him, he rent his clothes and immediately sent to inquire of God, for he realized that the wrath of God was upon these people because they had not listened to the words of this book. So he sent Hilkiah the priest and others to inquire of God. They went to a woman named Huldah, a prophetess.

And she said unto them, "thus saith the LORD God of Israel, tell the man that sent you to me, thus saith the Lord. . ."

Thus begins a rather lengthy prophecy about the evil that was to befall Israel, and a promise that it would not fall in the days of Josiah because of his humility before God. It is a simple account, but it underlines once more that, occasionally, for reasons of his own, God decides to speak to man through a woman. To be sure, instances of feminine leadership were rare indeed in Old Testament times. But, then, instances of righteous *male* leadership are rare enough as well.

The Prophetess Huldah, wife of Shallum

It isn't as if God wanted to establish feminine dominance, or even to erode the principle of male leadership. But it may have been necessary for him to make a statement that women were not to be treated as man's inferiors.

Jesus and Women

As Leonard Swidler aptly points out, "The first thing to be noticed about Jesus and women is that in all of the four gospels, nowhere does Jesus treat women as inferior" *(Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, page 163). From our comfortable 21st century vantage point, it may seem unremarkable that Jesus at no time in his ministry expressed negative attitudes toward women. It is, however, *quite* remarkable viewed in the light of first century attitudes toward women. Rabbi Eliezer of that century is quoted saying, "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman!" The historian Josephus states, "The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man." Jewish men of the day, following the Greek tradition, prayed daily in thanks to God that he had not made them women. Jewish men would not be seen talking to a woman in public—not even their wives! Under no circumstances should a woman *touch* a man in public. Into this world came a man with a *totally different attitude toward women.*

Perhaps the most important thing in Jesus' Gospel is that he preached a *personal* salvation, and this personalism extended to women. This was revealed,

almost inadvertently, in a chance encounter with the Sadducees, who believed there is no resurrection from the dead. The objective of the encounter was to trap him with one of their favorite questions.

They were fond of asking the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, a question deriving from the Mosaic law, which provided that if a man's brother died with his wife having had no children, then his brother should take his wife and raise up seed to his brother. The law in question comes from Deuteronomy 25:5.

The Sadducees then posed this question based upon the law: "There were therefore seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and died without children. And the second took her to wife and he died childless. And the third took her; and in like manner, the seven also; and they left no children, and died. Last of all, the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them is she? For seven had her to wife" (Luke 20:27-33).

Their question is almost as revealing as Christ's answer. Clearly they understood *woman as belonging to man* even in the Kingdom of God! Jesus' answer is of vital importance: "And Jesus answering said unto them, 'The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage, but they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage, neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels; *and are the children of God*, being the children of the resurrection'" (Luke 20:34-36).

According to Jesus, women are equally the children of God with men in the resurrection. *Men and women are equal as objects of salvation.*

The Sadducees' question about who the woman would belong to was rejected as containing a false assumption. *Jesus did not see a woman's existence as totally defined by her relationship to a man;* in other words, as someone's daughter, wife, mother, widow, or harlot. Jesus saw women, first of all, as individuals with personal access to God and his Kingdom.

The Dignity of Woman

In the Gospel account, we frequently find Jesus using women in his stories and parables, but there is a remarkable omission from these stories. In his parables, Jesus *never* cast negative images of women. He speaks of unjust judges, harsh and cruel masters, wicked and slothful servants, but every image of women is positive. In one of his parables, the parable of the unjust judge, he casts a poor widow against an unjust male judge and commends the widow as an example of persistence in prayer.

It is no accident that Jesus is careful to maintain the dignity of women. He lived in an age when few would. He did not share the attitudes of his predecessors or his contemporaries and it was important that he made a statement about his attitude toward women. No wonder he had such a strong and loyal following among women!

It might be worth noting the remarks of a modern Jewish scholar who comments on Jesus' teachings on divorce!

"In these verses the originality of Jesus is made manifest. So far, in the sermon on the mount, we have found nothing that goes beyond Rabbinic religion and Rabbinic morality, or which greatly differs from them. Here we do. The attitude of Jesus toward women is very striking. He breaks through oriental limitations in more directions than one. For (1) He associates with, and is much looked after by, women in a manner that was unusual; (2) He is more strict about divorce; (3) He is also more merciful and compassionate. He is a great champion of womanhood, and in this combination of freedom and pity, as well as in His strict attitude to divorce, He makes a new departure of enormous significance and importance. If He had done no more than this, He might be justly regarded as one of the greatest teachers of the world" (Claude G. Montfiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teaching*, pages 217 f.; London, 1930).

The Sinful Woman

On the occasions where Jesus did come into contact with a woman who was a sinner, his attitude was one of *total forgiveness.* There are two exceptional incidents in Jesus' ministry, and they provide perhaps the greatest encouragement Christ gave to penitent sinners.

A profoundly moving incident took place at the home of a Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner. When Jesus was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's home, a woman of the city with a bad reputation—she was "a sinner"—knelt behind him weeping and began to wash his feet with tears, to wipe them with the hairs of her head, and to kiss his feet and anoint them with ointment. The incident is all the more remarkable when we understand that, in *that* society, a man did not publicly speak to his own wife, let alone to a strange woman and especially to a known "sinner." It was unheard of for a Jew, especially a Rabbi, to be seen speaking with such a woman, but Jesus not only spoke

with her but let her touch him and kiss him. It was a scandalous thing for a woman to let her hair down in public. So scandalous, in fact, that it was grounds for divorce. This woman uncovered her hair, loosed it, and wiped Jesus' feet with it. Jesus was deeply moved. The Pharisee was thoroughly offended.

Jesus contrasted the woman's attitude with that of the Pharisee and continued: "Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47).

More than one Christian has knelt before his God in tears of gratitude to realize that, no matter how wretched we become, utter and complete forgiveness is possible from Christ. We know it thanks to a "fallen woman" who brokenheartedly washed Jesus' feet with tears of sorrow.

It is strange, isn't it, that even when Jesus encountered a woman who was a sinner he managed to use her as an example of love.

On another occasion, Jesus was presented with a woman who was a sinner in a totally different context. This time Jesus was sitting in the Temple early in the morning and the Pharisees brought to him a woman who had been taken in the act of adultery. Their purpose was to put him on the horns of a dilemma. He was, of course, a respected teacher of the Law, but on the other hand, they were living in a Roman society. If he said that the woman should not be stoned, then he was rejecting the law of Moses. If he said they should go ahead and stone the woman, he was in conflict with Roman law.

But it may be that a much deeper factor was involved here. By this time in his ministry, Jesus was already known as a champion of women. His behavior was in much too great a contrast to the society around him. They were also presenting him with the dilemma of retaining his reputation as a Rabbi and teacher of the Law or retaining his reputation as a champion of women. They felt he could not do both.

The Scribes and the Pharisees preferred to deal with such situations impersonally, and concerned themselves solely with the legalities involved in dealing with the situation in the abstract. Jesus sidestepped all the legalisms and abstractions, and dealt directly with the persons involved. He said: "He (the person) that is without sin among you, let *him* first cast a stone at her (the person accused)" (John 8:7).

No one in the crowd, then, could deal with this as a pure abstraction. They had to look at themselves as persons, and perhaps for the first time in their lives, look at a woman as a *person*.

"And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst" (John 8:9).

The visual image is powerful. We see Jesus, seated and writing on the ground. We see a woman standing a few paces in front of him, silent, alone.

"When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, 'Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?' She said, 'No man, Lord.' And Jesus said unto her, *'Neither do I condemn thee*. Go, and sin no more' " (vv. 10-11).

In these instances, Jesus chose to illustrate an uncondemning attitude to the most *desperate* of sinners in his society. For it was bad enough to be a woman in Jewish society of the first century. It was much worse to be a woman condemned.

There are more examples that could be drawn, but these will suffice to show that Jesus was indeed a champion of women. Among those he came to set free, the blind, the halt, the oppressed, how could he neglect one of the most oppressed classes of his day—the woman?

The Missing Apostle

As his ministry progressed, Jesus made many disciples, men and women. The time came when it was necessary for him to choose 12 of these disciples for a *special* responsibility. They were to be named *Apostles*—there were to be 12 of them as witnesses (official witnesses) of his resurrection.

Before making this decision, Jesus went out into a mountain to pray and continued all night in prayer to God. The next day he called his disciples together, and of them, he chose 12 whom he named Apostles. He

chose Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Simon Zelotes, Judas, and Judas Iscariot (Luke 6:12-16).

Is there anything unusual about this list? Viewed in the light of first century social customs, it is certainly unremarkable. But viewed in the light of Jesus' *record*, and his credentials as a champion of women, it is remarkable indeed. *He appointed no woman to this responsibility.*

This decision was no oversight. Jesus had spent the *entire night* in prayer before the decision was made. It was a prayerful, reasoned decision. Nor was it an accommodation to a prejudiced society. That would have been totally out of character for this unconventional man.

Later, when the replacement for Judas was selected, two men, Joseph and Matthias, were put forward for selection. It was apparently not within the plan of Jesus Christ that a woman be named among the 12 Apostles.

Still later, when the next step in the development of the ministry takes place, we have a situation where a woman might well have been named.

"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6:1). The word "ministration" is the Greek *diakonia*, the word from which we get the word "deacon." In its various forms, it is most often translated "minister," "ministry," or "to minister."

The 12 Apostles called an assembly of all the disciples and reasoned that it was not sensible for them to leave the preaching of the Word of God in order to take care of the ministry of the more *physical* needs of the church. This appears to be the beginning of the *pastoral* ministry.

They then called upon the brethren to select "seven men" whom they might appoint over this matter. So they chose Steven, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas—*all men.*

Why? We might be tempted to argue that the Apostles were engaging in male chauvinism when they selected these seven ministers, but we can't argue that about Jesus' selection of the original 12.

What then? Were women not to be involved in the work of the church? Hardly. The Book of Acts and the epistles are replete with illustrations of women *very* active in the work of the church.

In Romans 16, Paul mentions a number of women who were active in the work, naming Phebe as a *deaconess*. "I commend unto you Phebe, our sister, which is a deaconess of the church which is at Cenchrea" (Romans 16:1). The word translated *servant* in the King James Version is the Greek word for deacon (translated "minister" in most applications in the New Testament). Doubtless Phebe was a servant of the church at Cenchrea, and the indication is that she was an *official* servant, not just one who helped out. This is particularly evident in verse 2, where Paul admonishes the Romans to receive her "in the Lord" and give her whatever assistance she needs, saying, "For she hath been a succourer (Greek: *prostatis*) of many, and of myself also" (Romans 16:2).

It is curious that most translations sidestep the meaning of the Greek word *prostatis*. The Revised Standard Version translates it "helper" and the New English Bible, normally very accurate, makes a complete departure, translating it as "good friend." The word is used only once in the New Testament, but its meaning is well known from classical Greek. It means, properly, *a woman set over others.* A *prostatis* is a female guardian, or protector. It is derived from the

Priscilla and Aquila

Greek verb which means "to be over, to superintend, or preside over." It includes the meaning of "to care for, or give attention to," in the sense of one who is responsible. Clearly Phebe was a highly responsible woman *in the church.*

Immediately following, Paul sent greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, his "co-workers" in Christ Jesus. The word "helpers" in the King James Version is incorrect because the Greek word includes a prefix showing that they are helpers together with Paul, "co-workers." It is very evident that Priscilla was *active* as well as her husband. In fact, we find them mentioned in the Book of Acts carrying out a singularly important role in educating a powerful preacher, Apollos. It was

not just *Aquila* who expounded the way of God more perfectly to Apollos, but Aquila *and* Priscilla (Acts 18:26). It was Priscilla and Aquila who together risked their lives for the sake of Paul (Romans 16:4).

Paul was at great pains to salute and honor those women in Rome who had labored "in the Lord." Two of these are Tryphena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12). He also salutes another woman, Persis, who "much labored" (worked especially hard) *in the* Lord (v. 12). Mary also is commended for her work for Paul and the others (Romans 16:6).

Syntyche

In writing to the Philippians, Paul mentions two other women, Euodias and Syntyche, who worked with him, and exhorts the Philippians to "help those women which *labored with me in the gospel*" (Philippians 4:2-3).

The Personal Ministry

When we consider Jesus' attitude toward women set in such *powerful* contrast to prevailing attitudes of his day, and we see the deep involvement of women in the work of the early church, we are still left with the important question of why Jesus did not include a woman among the original 12 Apostles and why no woman was named in the ordinations of Acts 6.

There seems to be a distinction in the New Testament between levels of the ministry. On the other hand, we have the *public* ministry of the Apostles and men like Stephen, Philip, and Apollos. On the other hand there seems to be a *personal* ministry of men like Aquila, women like Euodias, Syntyche, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. While it seems to be pleasing to God for women to be involved in a *personal* ministry, it was apparently not Jesus' intent that women become involved in a *public* ministry. We will find this borne out by Paul's teachings in his later epistles.

1 Corinthians 14

"Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Adam Clark correctly points out in his commentary on this book that the early church had up until this time followed the tradition of the Jewish synagogue service. It was a *Jewish* ordinance that women were not permitted to teach in the assemblies or even to ask questions. Does this passage of Scripture, then, mean that it's not permitted for a woman to receive a message or inspiration from God and then convey that message to others?

Adam Clark points out that Paul is not being at all inconsistent: "It is evident from the context that the apostle refers here to *asking questions*, and what we call *dictating* in the assemblies. It was permitted to any *man to ask questions, to object, altercate, attempt to refute*, etc., in the synagogue, this liberty was not allowed to any woman. St. Paul confirms this in reference also to the Christian church; he orders them to *keep silence*; and if they wish to *learn anything, let them inquire of their husbands at home;* because it was perfectly indecorous for *women* to be contending with men in public assemblies, on points of doctrine, cases of conscience, etc. But this by no means intimated that when a woman received any particular *influence from God* to enable her to teach, that she was not to obey that influence; on the contrary she was to obey it, and the apostle lays down directions in Chapter 11 for regulating her *personal appearance* when thus employed. All that the apostle opposes here is their *questioning, finding fault, disputing*, etc., in the Christian church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues; together with the attempts to usurp any authority over the man, by setting up their judgment in *opposition* of them; for the apostle has in view, especially, acts of *disobedience*, arrogance, etc., of which no woman would be guilty who was under the influence of the Spirit of God" (Adam Clark, *Clark's Commentary*, Volume 6, 1 Corinthians 14:34).

As we have before observed, the church had up until this time continued to observe the Jewish tradition of the synagogue. This chapter represents one of the first instructions to the New Testament church *modifying* that tradition. Apparently the Corinthian church degenerated into a certain amount of confusion to which the synagogue had generally *not* been subjected. It arose because of the gifts of prophecy and the gifts of tongues that existed in the church.

Since God was not the author of confusion (v. 33), Paul felt that a certain amount of *order* had to be introduced into the services. Consequently, he made a modest change in the traditions of the church.

But why is it that Christian churches today do not follow the pattern of services revealed in 1 Corinthians 14? The answer is relatively simple. These instructions represent a *modification of church tradition*; something that Paul had the full authority to do. The combined ministry of the 21st century church has the same authority: they may modify tradition as necessary to meet changing times and circumstances. There is ample evidence in the New Testament that church tradition, while binding upon a Christian (Matthew 16:19), could be changed in ways that the Law of God could not. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is a case in point. It is obvious that the traditional Passover service had included a meal prior to this epistle. Paul changed all that, and the change endures to this day.

We in the 21st century church draw *inferences* from apostolic tradition and do our best to adhere to it. We do not, however, feel *bound* to it in all of its parts. For example, we do not *strictly* adhere to the structure of the ministry described in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4; we follow an entirely different order of service in the church; we allow women to sing in the church; and we are generally not hesitant to allow women to ask questions in a Bible study.

Most Christian churches, however, still observe the distinction between the public and personal ministry, and, while encouraging women to become involved in a *personal* ministry, many still do not place women in the *public* ministry.

Carefully restudying Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 14, we can easily come to the conclusion that Paul was not attempting to "put down" the "weaker" sex. That would be a flagrant contradiction of what he wrote in Galatians 3:28. Rather he was indicating that it is *"indecorous"*—it is *beneath* the woman—for her to engage in a verbal rough and tumble in the church. It is a matter of retaining our *respect* for women rather than getting involved in an argument with them. Hopefully, someone soon concluded that it was also indecorous for *men* to engage in such conduct.

Although Paul was not putting down women in this text, he nevertheless, seems to support the suggestion that women should not be involved in a *public* ministry. But *why?* The answer is not easily seen but perhaps we can lay some groundwork that will help us understand.

The Christian Family

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and He is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24).

What a shattering admonition! Preached in stentorian tones, and with the emphasis placed just so, this Scripture could be made to sound as if Paul had reverted completely to the Jewish and Greek customs and had gone back from the attitude and teachings of Christ. This interpretation stands as a monument to the human proclivity for seeing what we want to see or expect to see. Like any other Scripture, this passage must be viewed in its context. This passage and the verses following are given in *illustration* of the admonition of verse 21: "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; *submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God."*

For those of us who are used to traditional patterns of dominance/submission, one of the most difficult concepts to fathom is the New Testament concept of *mutual submission*. Paul was speaking primarily concerning Christ and the church in this passage (v. 32), but his illustration involves marriage and the family. Having exhorted us to submit ourselves to one another in the fear of God, he explained *what kind* of submission he was talking about. First, wives are admonished to submit themselves to their own husbands. Then the husbands are told to love their wives as *Christ loved the church*. The wife is exhorted to submit herself to the *leadership* of her husband, and the husband is exhorted to submit himself to the *needs* and *desires* of his wife and family.

This was not describing the sort of family where the woman has to flee the home with her children and go to a crisis center where she can be protected from her brutal husband. This was describing an ideal *Christian family*.

There is an important qualification in Paul's designation of the husband as the head of the family: "For the husband is the head of the woman, *even as Christ is the head of the church*."

Just what sort of relationship is this?

On the night of the last supper, when Jesus knew that he was to die the next day, and knowing that the Father had given everything into his hands and that he was come from God and going to God: "He riseth

from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded" (John 13:1-5).

At least some of the disciples were utterly shocked by what Jesus was doing. They thought of him in terms of being their Lord and Master, not their servant. Peter even attempted to protest, but Jesus explained: "Know ye what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them (John 13:12-17).

If we are to conclude that the woman is to submit herself to her husband, as unto the Lord, then we must also conclude that the husband must be prepared to "wash his wife's feet." After all, the servant is not greater than his Lord.

Unfortunately, we, like the disciples, may have a distorted idea of what Christian *leadership* is supposed to be. The mother of two of Jesus' disciples came to him asking that her two sons might sit, one on his right hand and the other on his left, in the Kingdom of God. She was asking for what she perceived to be the most powerful positions at that time. Jesus called everyone together in order to *immediately* straighten out their attitude in this matter. He explained: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise *dominion* over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But *it shall not be so among you*: but whosoever will be *great* among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be *chief* among you, let him be your servant; Even as the Son of man came not *to be ministered unto*, but *to minister*, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).

So when Jesus spoke of man being the *head* of the wife, he was not speaking in the Gentile terms of "dominance/submission," but in his own terms of *leadership through service*.

Returning to Ephesians 5, we do not find the Apostle Paul advocating a male *dominated* marriage of the Gentile sort. Rather, he was describing the ideal Christian marriage with both husband and wife fulfilling their roles. No man can demand that his wife be "subject to him in everything" unless he is prepared to submit his own desires and needs to the welfare of his family.

Remember this is a *description of a relationship* and the description includes: "Husbands, love your wives *even as* Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it."

No matter how willing or desirous one party in a marriage may be, it would be utterly impossible for one side of this equation to exist alone. It is impossible for a wife to *perfectly* submit herself to a husband "as unto the Lord," when her husband is not loving her as Christ loved the church. A married couple may strive for and eventually grow into a semblance of this relationship, but neither has the right to demand it over the other when they have not even begun to fulfill their own responsibility.

Paul went on to exhort, "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man yet ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: . . . This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she respect her husband" (vv. 28-33).

The whole passage is a description of a *beautiful* relationship—an *ideal* relationship which few couples have ever attained. But in a *glimpse* of what we wish our marriages to be, we can see the relationship that Christ wishes between himself and the church.

In any kind of human group relationships, in marriage or out of marriage, patterns of leadership *will develop*. It is, of course, obvious that Paul supports the concept of male *leadership* in marriage, but it is a leadership among *equals* with differing responsibilities.

There is no conflict with this teaching in the Book of Genesis. The pattern was set forth there as well. Indeed, the pattern of male leadership was set forth in the *design* of a man and woman. Paul was emphasizing

the need for *mutual submission* in marriage and in the church.

Even in the context of society, Paul's admonition for husbands to "love your wives even an Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it," must have been astonishing to his readers. Husbands were exhorted to "love their wives as their own bodies" (v. 28). The leadership in the family of a man who submits himself to loving his wife and his children as Christ loved the church, who loves his family like his own body, should pose no problem of *mutual* submission on the part of his wife.

1 Peter 3:7

Peter approached the subject from a slightly different perspective. He was concerned about the woman who has an unconverted husband: "Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they may also without the word be won by the conduct of the wives" (1 Peter 3:1).

Even though the husband is unconverted, the pattern of *leadership* in the home need not be disrupted.

Peter went on to present the same argument Paul did regarding outward adornment: "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel" (1 Peter 3:3). Bear in mind that Peter was not advocating straight hair and nudity. Like Paul, he was contrasting the adornment of the *heart*, "the development of character," with the undue attention some give to *outward* adorning. He went on to say, "But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is *not* corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (v. 4).

All this probably sounds great to a man who is inclined to lord it over his family, but the exhortation does not stop there. Peter continued to espouse the same principle of *mutual submission* that Paul advanced: "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge giving *honour* unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (v. 7).

What did Peter mean when he said that the woman is the "weaker vessel"? There is no indication in either the Bible or our own experience to lead us to believe that the woman is weaker in moral character. And it would be folly to conclude that the woman is weaker in regard to physical or mental courage. How, then?

The context would lead us to believe that he is talking about *physical* weakness—for we know that men are, by and large, stronger than women.

Peter's choice of words should make it clear what he was talking about. The word "honor" is derived from a Greek word which means *respect*, value, consideration. We do not *respect* people for being *morally weak*. Peter was telling us that a man should use his head. He should dwell with his wife according to *knowledge*, and should be considerate of any weaknesses his wife might experience. He should *respect* her, and he should help her.

Peter was simply acknowledging something that we all know. Women are not as large, as strong, or as fast as men. Consequently, we are to *respect* our wives and *take care of them*. It's done in simple ways. We don't leave our wives to grapple with the heavy door of a car and a baby at the same time. We open it for her. If it is going to be awkward for her to seat herself at a table, we hold her chair for her. For generations, men have *risen* when a woman entered a room as a gesture of *respect* to "the weaker sex."

But Peter gave not one, but *two* reasons why we should respect our wives. The Greek says that a man should give honor unto the female, (1) as unto the weaker vessel and (2) as being *joint heirs of the grace of life*.

What did Peter mean by the expression "heirs together" or "joint heirs"? The word in the Greek means simply "a fellow heir, a joint heir, one who obtains something assigned to himself with others." In what sense is woman a joint heir with man?

Some have suggested this was meant in the sense of *dependency*. In other words, the wife's inheritance of the grace of life was in some way dependent upon the actions of her husband, her submission to him, etc. Some have even gone so far as to say that a man might not make it into the Kingdom of God if his wife doesn't (and vice versa). Others have thought that perhaps their wives could act as their "assistants" for all eternity, thereby keeping their wives "under" them throughout the ages.

Interestingly enough, we have already seen Jesus' answer about this question. We aren't left in any doubt at all. When The Sadducees asked him about the woman who had been married to seven successive brothers, they wanted to know whose wife she would be in the resurrection. Jesus made it clear that they are all, men and women, the children of God.

It would appear, then, that what Peter was saying is that men and women are "joint heirs," *not* in a sense

of *dependency*, but in the sense of being *heirs of the same thing*. It would more accurately be translated into English "and as being *heirs equally* of the grace of life."

This meaning is borne out when we look at other places in the New Testament where the same expression is used—only in Romans 8:17, Ephesians 3:6, Hebrews 11:9, and 1 Peter 3:7. Of special interest is Ephesians 3:6, where a subtle play on words in Greek is lost in the English translation. In this chapter Paul spoke of the mystery of Christ which is, paraphrased, "that the Gentiles should be *joint heirs* and a *joint body* and *joint partakers* of his promise in Christ through the gospel." The point in this verse is not that the Gentiles' salvation is somehow *dependent* upon that of Israel (joint heirs), but that they are *heirs equally* with Israel; that they in no way have an inferior inheritance.

Now let's reconsider 1 Peter 3:7, rearranging the words slightly from the Englishman's Greek New Testament: "Husbands likewise dwell with the female according to knowledge, rendering them respect as with a weaker vessel and as *heirs equally* of the grace of life, *so that your prayers not be cut off.*"

What Peter was saying, in the simplest possible terms, is that the failure to respect our females as weaker vessels and as heirs equally of the Kingdom of God *can interfere with our own relationship with God!* Why?

Because Jesus Christ intended that the marriage relationship represent his own relationship with the church. Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Christ does not "put down" the church or treat the church as an inferior entity. A *Christian* man who mistreats his wife, "puts her down," treats her as an heir of an inferior salvation, is making a mockery of Christ's relationship with the church. Why *should* God hear his prayers?

The Head of the Family

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul stated, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God"(1 Corinthians 11:3).

There can be no doubt that Paul taught male *leadership* in marriage, but it should be noted that the man is *also* under the leadership of Christ. And we have elsewhere pointed out *what kind* of leadership that is.

There follows in this chapter one of the more curious passages in Paul's writings. There is very little agreement among biblical commentators as to exactly what Paul meant by this lengthy discussion of hair and head coverings.

Of particular interest is the passage beginning in verse 14: "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame to him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given to her for a covering." It's not immediately clear what Paul meant by "nature itself." Indeed, if we look at the *physical creation*, we might conclude exactly the opposite! The lion, for example, has a huge mane of hair, while the lioness does not. The lesson from the animal kingdom is ambivalent.

What, then, could Paul have meant by the expression "nature itself"? He must have been referring to the fact that, in human societies, in general women wear their hair long and men wear their hair short. If so, then he was referring to the nature of things *sociologically* rather than biologically. Notice the appeal to the judgment of the readers in verse 13: "Judge in yourselves: Is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" Apparently Paul was talking about human attitudes. He was saying that human beings consider it a shame for a man to have long hair and a glory for a woman to have long hair. For indeed it can be no shame before God for a man to have long hair, because of the way God accepted the Nazarite (Numbers 6). For the Nazarite, long hair was a sign of subjection and humility, but it was no disgrace.

Some commentators suggest that Paul was dealing with the confusion of the sexes in outward appearances. Some say that he was breaking with Jewish tradition which called for a man to cover his head when praying. Others point out the Greek custom of the worshipers of Aphrodisia, who shaved their heads annually in mourning for the death of Adonis. And no one seems to agree on what Paul meant when he said, "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels" (v. 10).

Since Paul made no appeal to the law in this passage, we can only conclude that he was dealing

with tradition and custom. The 21st century church may certainly draw inferences regarding a differentiation of sexual roles, but any attempt to turn this into a church doctrine is doomed to failure from the start. Paul had to have known when he said, "If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to see her," that someone would ask the question, "How long is long?" Paul's comments here were not intended to establish a doctrine for the church to enforce, but to urge that proper appearance be maintained in the worship of God in their culture, in their time.

Mutual Responsibility

Neither Peter nor Paul was advocating a Gentile-fashion, male-dominated marriage. They were advocating mutual submission with the man of the house in the position of *leadership*, respecting his wife as she respects him.

But why should the *man* be in a position of leadership rather than the woman? The answer is not simple, but it is easy to see how a struggle for leadership would be damaging to the family. Rather than allow such a thing to take place, God simply ordained that the stronger of two otherwise equal persons should lead. He then told us that the relationship is to be a relationship of mutual submission with each bearing an *enormous* responsibility for the other.

Nature itself tells us that leadership patterns will emerge any time human beings are thrown together. Whether there be two people, three people, or more, it is always the same. If there is any degree of social interaction, one personality will tend to dominate. Since the design of human beings ordained that man should be stronger, the pattern of male *leadership* existed from the start. When *sin* entered the picture, it became a pattern of male *domination*. The strong bear rule and, when there is no moderation influence, the results can be terrifying.

With Jesus Christ, sin *leaves* the picture and a whole new pattern of leadership emerges in the Christian family.

Woman and the Church

A better understanding of God's pattern of leadership for the family may help us better understand his pattern for the church. Paul made it clear that the relationship between a man and his wife is intended to serve as an analogy of Christ's relationship with the church (Ephesians 5:32).

Furthermore, Jesus came to reveal the Most High God to us as our *Father*, once again using the family relationship to teach us more about God (Matthew 6:9).

It's not difficult to see how a power struggle, or a reversal of roles in the family, could leave children not only confused about the family, but confused about God as well. For Paul saw the man in the family as the *image* of God (1 Corinthians 11:7).

When we then consider the influence of the *preacher* in the church and on the family, and we remember what a powerful role model he can become, perhaps we can begin to see why Jesus and Paul placed man in *this* role while granting an effective *personal* ministry to women like Phebe, Priscilla, Euodias, and Syntyche.

But are women somehow *diminished* because they are not called to preach? It is an *important* question, and, believe it or not, a serious question to some men as well. Because of the respect in which the preaching ministry is regarded, even some men have lacked self-respect because they have not been able to attain to that ministry.

But Paul made it very clear that not everyone in the church is given all of the gifts of the Spirit. He pointed out that "there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4).

"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gift of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits; to another diverse kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally, as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:8-12).

Simply because a man or woman is not called to preach does not mean they are somehow less in God's

eyes. There are many other gifts that are vital to the church—faith, healing, prophecy, discernment, and especially the greatest gift of all, love. Paul pointed out that not everyone can be an Apostle. All are not prophets. Not everyone can be a teacher, speak in tongues, or have the gift of healings (vv. 29-30). He then proceeded with the beautiful 13th chapter to tell us about the greatest gift of all, the gift of love; the one gift available to all.

To whatever extent we believe that a member of Christ's church is diminished because he or she is not a preacher or a minister, we reveal the extent of our own ignorance of the true purpose and calling of the ministry.

But why, women ask, have we so often been squelched, blocked, or put down when we have tried to be of service in the church?

One of the great tragedies of the 2,000 year history of the church is that churchmen have not always been driven by the noblest of motives. The power and prestige of the ministry can become idols to be jealously guarded. To such a person, anyone, man or woman, who gets too good, too fast, becomes a threat, and that threat must be dealt with.

The attitude of John the Baptist stands in stark contrast. When John's disciples expressed concern about Jesus' success, he replied: "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: But the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. *He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:25-30).

Some women have made the mistake of assuming that they were being put down simply because they were women. In fact, they may have been put down because they posed a threat (real or imagined) and the *excuse* for putting them down was that they were women. When the threat is a man, he must be dealt with in other ways. Motives must be impugned, character questioned, human foibles carefully scrutinized. In a way, it's a blessing to be a woman in such circumstances. No careful examination is required. She can be dismissed by petty egotists simply because she is a woman.

It takes no great insight to realize that the underlying motive behind all this is simple *fear*. Some men have feared the loss of power and prestige. Others have inveighed against women wearing makeup, short skirts, and tight sweaters, not so much out of a sense of morality as out of a fear of the darker side of their own desires.

But fear is not of God: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

Why should the church fear the involvement of dedicated women? Surely we all realize that there is more work to be done than all of us together can ever accomplish. Why, then, intimidate and discourage half the church?

Dedicated Christian women who have a desire to serve their God can become a *powerful force for good* in any church. No church can be blessed that puts down, humiliates, and denigrates women. Women are made in the image of God, especially gifted to reveal the compassion and mercy of God, and specially gifted to serve *people* in a very *personal* way. To the Christian woman come special gifts of the Spirit of God. It is enough for her to *identify* those gifts and use them in serving God. May God give grace to Christian men to rejoice in the service and gifts of Christian women and honor these women, as *heirs equally* of the grace of life.

Who Are These Women?
What Did They Do?

Name	References	Notes
Anna, a prophetess	Luke 2:36-38	
Apphia	Philemon 1:2	
Bernice	Acts 25:13-14, Acts 25:23, Acts 26:30-32	
Chloe	1 Corinthians 1:11	
Claudia	2 Timothy 4:21	
Cozbi	Numbers 25:6-9, Number 25:14-16	
Damaris	Acts 17:34	
Dorcas (Tabitha)	Acts 9:36-41	
Drusilla	Acts 24:24	
Elizabeth	Luke 1:5-7, Luke 1:13, Luke 1:24-25, Luke 1:36, Luke 1:40-44, Luke 57-61,	
Euodia (Euodias)	Philippians 4:2-3	
Hannah	1 Samuel 1:1-28, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, 1 Samuel 2:19, 1 Samuel 25:12	
Lydia	Acts 16:13-15	
Noah	Numbers 26:33, Numbers 27:1-11, Numbers 36:1-12	
Rahab	Joshua 2:1-21, Joshua 6:17, Joshua 6:22-25, Matthew 15, Hebrews 11:31, James 2:24-26	
Rebekah	Genesis 20:23	
Rhoda	Acts 12:12-17	
Huldah	2 Kings 22:13-28	
Mother of the sons of Zebedee	Matthew 20:20-23, Matthew 27:55-56	
Zipporah	Exodus 2:22, Exodus 4:18-20, Exodus 4:24-26, Exodus 18:1-6, Numbers 12:1 (possible reference)	