

# Male and Female Roles: Gender in the Bible

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

In little more than half a century, American culture has experienced a massive restructuring of values and reorientation of moral and spiritual standards. One facet of this multifaceted effacement and erosion of biblical values has been dramatically altered gender roles. The feminist agenda has penetrated the American social landscape. Indeed, the onset of the feminist movement in the turbulent 1960s sparked a significant adjustment of societal norms resulting in the transformation of virtually every sphere of American culture—from the home and the church to the business world and beyond. Women now routinely serve in historically male capacities, including the military, politics, sports, and a host of community services including fire, police, ambulance, etc.



Make no mistake, a number of changes with regard to gender have emerged that may be deemed beneficial and positive. Nevertheless, the **overall** impact on American civilization has been negative, and the erosion of femininity has ushered in a host of evils that are hastening America's moral implosion (e.g., abortion and homosexuality). Concomitant with the effort to eradicate gender differentiation has been the degradation of masculinity and the restructuring of the family unit (the fundamental building block of humanity—Genesis 1:27; 2:24). As womanhood has been devalued and her function altered, the rest of society has suffered dramatically. After all, women inevitably exert a profound influence on culture and society—for good or ill. Virtuous femininity is the glue that holds human civilization together. In the words of American poet William Ross Wallace's immortal poem, "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle, Rules the World" (1865). Sadly for America, feminism has overturned the rocker, thrown the baby out with the bathwater, punched Dad in the face, and stomped away from the house in a huff.

## THE BIBLE STILL HAS THE CORRECT PERSPECTIVE

Amid this polarization that plagues American civilization in general, and Christendom in particular, one chasm continues to widen between those who wish to conform to Bible protocol and those who wish to modernize, update, and adapt Scripture to a changing society. The cry of those who are pressing the feminist agenda is that the church in the past has restricted women in roles of leadership and worship simply because of culture and flawed hermeneutical principles. They say we are the product of a male-dominated society and have consequently misconstrued the contextual meaning of the relevant biblical passages.

The underlying catalyst for this social turmoil, and resulting gender confusion, has been the rejection of the Bible as the authentic Word of the divine Being Who created the Universe and humans. Even among those who continue to profess their allegiance to Christianity, large numbers have capitulated to political correctness and abandoned the traditional, i.e., biblical, depiction of gender roles as defined by the Creator. In their quest to maintain relevance among the shifting sands of secular culture, they have imbibed the spirit of the age, been infected by humanistic philosophy, and consequently have compromised the clear teaching of Scripture on the role of women (cf. "Gender Inclusive..." 2013; "Believe It..." 2006; Pauls, 2013; "The Role of..." 2006; Stirman, 2010).

As attitudes soften and biblical conviction weakens, Scripture is being reinterpreted to allow for expanded roles for women in worship. If one who studies the biblical text concludes that women are not to be restricted in worship, he is hailed as engaging in "fresh scholarly exegesis." But the one who studies the text and concludes that God intended for women to be subordinate to male leadership in worship is guilty of prejudice and being unduly influenced by "Church tradition" or "cultural baggage." How is it that the former's religious practice and interpretation of Scripture is somehow curiously exempt from imbibing the spirit of an age in which feminist ideology has permeated virtually every segment of American society?

Nevertheless, Bible teaching on this subject is not that difficult to ascertain. Recent attempts to redefine gender roles fall flat, not only before a sensible assessment of relevant Bible passages on the subject, but in the face of the 2,000 year history of Christianity which has, for the most part, demonstrated a generally accurate grasp of the basic parameters of God's will on this matter. Such has certainly been true in America where the Founders and 18<sup>th</sup> century men and women embraced the

Christian worldview, and believed that “family integrity was indispensable for the public safety and happiness” (West, 1997, p. 85).

## RELEVANT BIBLE PASSAGES

A detailed study of the relevant biblical texts in one article is impossible. However, God’s Word is essentially simple on any significant subject in the Bible [NOTE: For useful discussions see Hicks and Morton, 1978; Piper and Grudem, 1991; Cottrell, 1992; Highers, 1991; Laws, 1994; Warren, 1975; Miller, 1994; Miller, 1996.] In fact, it is the more recently emerging “scholars” with their intellectual complexities and imported seminary bias that have contributed to the confusion over this subject (e.g., Osburn, 1993). Carroll Osburn summarized his discussion of 1 Timothy 2 in the words—“Put simply, any female who has sufficient and accurate information may teach that information in a gentle spirit to whomever in whatever situation they may be” (1994, p. 115). Is such a cavalier attitude to be allowed to so easily dismiss the historical and biblical distinction between the sexes? The reader is invited to give consideration to the following brief summary of New Testament teaching on the subject of the role of women in leadership in worship and the church.

### 1 Corinthians

Chapters 11 and 14 of First Corinthians constitute a context dealing with disorders in the worship assembly. The entire pericope of 11:2-14:40 concerns the worship assembly, i.e., “when you come together” (cf. 11:17,18,20,33; 14:23-26). Paul articulated the **transcultural** principle for all people throughout history in 11:3—“But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” “Head” clearly refers not to “source” but to “authority” (see Grudem, 1985, pp. 38-59). Therefore, God intends for women to be subordinate to men. [NOTE: The equality of male and female in Galatians 3:28 pertains to salvation status, not role.] Corinthian women were obviously removing their veils and stepping forward in the assembly to lead with their Spirit-imparted, miraculous capabilities, i.e., prophecy (12:10; 14:31) and prayer (14:14-15). Such activity was a direct violation of the subordination principle, articulated by Paul in chapter 14. In chapter 11, he focused on the propriety of females removing the cultural symbol of submission.

The women were removing their veils because they understood that to stand and exercise a spiritual gift in the assembly was an **authoritative act of leadership**. They recognized that to wear a symbol of submission to authority (the veil) while simultaneously conducting oneself in an authoritative fashion (to lead in worship) was self-contradictory. Paul’s insistence that women keep their veils on during the worship assembly amounted to an implicit directive to refrain from leading in the assembly—a directive stated explicitly in 14:34. The allusions to Creation law (11:7-9; cf. 14:34) underscore the fact that Paul saw the restrictions on women as **rooted in the created order—not culture**. Also, Paul made clear that such restrictions applied equally to all churches of Christ (11:16).

Later in the same context (in chapter 14), Paul addresses further the confusion over spiritual gifts and returns specifically to the participation of women in the exercise of those gifts in the assembly. He again emphasizes the universal practice of churches of Christ: “as in all churches of the saints” (14:33). [NOTE: Grammatically, “as in all churches of the saints” links with “let your women keep silence.” Cf. the ASV, RSV, NIV, NEB, NAB, etc.] The women who possessed miraculous gifts were not to exercise them in the mixed worship assembly of the church. To do so was disgraceful—“a shame” (14:35). To insist upon doing so was equivalent to (1) presuming to be the authors of God’s Word, and (2) assuming that God’s standards do not apply to everyone (14:36).

Granted, 1 Corinthians chapters 11 and 14 address a unique situation. After all, spiritual gifts are no longer available to the church (1 Corinthians 13:8-11; see Miller, 2003a), and veils, in Western society, are no longer a cultural symbol of female submission (see Miller, 2003b; cf. Moore, 1998). Nevertheless, both passages demonstrate the clear application of the transcultural principle (female subordination in worship) to a specific cultural circumstance. The underlying submission principle remains intact as an inbuilt constituent element of the created order.

### 1 Timothy 2: The Central Scripture

I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control (1 Timothy 2:8-15).

The premier passage in the New Testament that treats the role of women in worship is 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The remote context of the book is proper behavior in the life of the church (1 Timothy 3:15). The immediate context of chapter two is worship, specifically prayer (1 Timothy 2:1,8). The context does not limit the worship to the church assembly, but includes the general life of the church.

In this passage, Paul affirms that adult males (*andras*) are to lead prayers anywhere people meet for worship. "Lifting up holy hands" is a figure of speech, metonymy, in which a posture of prayer is put in place of prayer itself. Their prayers are to usher forth from holy lives. On the other hand, women are admonished to focus on appropriate apparel and a submissive attitude. Notice the contrast framed in the passage: Men need to be holy, spiritual leaders in worship while women need to be modest and unassuming. "Silence" and "subjection" in this passage relate specifically to the exercise of spiritual authority over adult males in the church. "Usurp" (KJV) is not in the original text. *Authentein* should be translated "to have (or exercise) authority" (NKJV, ESV, NIV, RSV, NASB). Thus Paul instructed women not to teach nor in any other way to have authority over men in worship.

Why? Why would an inspired apostle place such limitations on Christian women? Was his concern prompted by the culture of that day? Was Paul merely accommodating an unenlightened, hostile environment, stalling for time and keeping prejudice to a minimum, until he could teach them the Gospel? Absolutely not. **The Holy Spirit gives the reason for the limitations, and that reason transcends all culture and all locales.** Paul states that women are not to exercise spiritual authority over men because **Adam was created before Eve**. Here we are given the heart and core of God's will concerning how men and women are to function and interrelate. But what does the chronological priority of Adam have to do with the interrelationship of male and female?

### Grounded in Creation—Not Culture

Paul is saying that God's original design for the human race entailed the creation of the male **first** as an indication of **his responsibility to be the spiritual leader of the home**. He was created to function as the head or leader in the home and in the church. That is his functional purpose. Woman, on the other hand, was specifically designed and created for the purpose of being a subordinate—though not inferior—assistant. God could have created the woman first, but He did not. He could have created both male and female **simultaneously**, but He did not. His action was intended to convey His will with regard to gender as it relates to the interrelationship of man and woman.

This feature of Creation explains why God gave spiritual teaching to Adam **before** Eve was created, implying that Adam had the created responsibility to teach his wife (Genesis 2:15-17). It explains why the female is twice stated to have been created to be "an help meet **for him**," i.e., a helper suitable for the man (Genesis 2:18,20, emp. added). This explains why the Genesis text clearly indicates that in a unique sense, the woman was created **for** the man—not vice versa. It explains why God brought the woman "to the man" (Genesis 2:22), again, as if she was made "for him"—not vice versa. Adam confirmed this understanding by stating "the woman whom You gave to be **with me**" (Genesis 3:12, emp. added). It explains why Paul argued in the Corinthian letter on the basis of this very distinction: "Neither was the man created **for the woman**; but the woman **for the man**" (1 Corinthians 11:9, emp. added). It further clarifies the implied authority of the man over the women in his act of **naming** the woman (Genesis 2:23; 3:20). The Jews understood this divinely designed order, evidenced by the practice of primogeniture—the firstborn male. God's creation of the man **first** was specifically intended to communicate the authority/submission arrangement of the human race (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:8).

Observe that Paul next elaborates on this principle in 1 Timothy 2:14 by noting an example of what can happen when men and women tamper with God's original intentions. When Eve took the spiritual initiative above her husband, and Adam failed to take the lead and exercise spiritual authority over his wife, Satan was able to wreak havoc on the home and cause the introduction of sin into the world (Genesis 3). When Paul said the woman was deceived, he was not suggesting that women are more gullible than men. Rather, when men or women fail to confine themselves to their created function, but instead tamper with and act in violation of divinely intended roles, spiritual vulnerability to sin naturally follows.

God's appraisal of the matter was seen when He confronted the pair. He spoke first to the head of the home—the man (Genesis 3:9). His subsequent declaration to Eve reaffirmed the fact that she was not to yield to the inclination to take the lead in spiritual matters. Rather, she was to submit to the rule of her husband (Genesis 3:16; cf. 4:4). When God said to Adam, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife..." (Genesis 3:17), He was calling attention to the fact that Adam had failed to exercise spiritual leadership, thereby circumventing the divine arrangement of male-female relations.

Paul concludes his instructions by noting how women may be preserved from falling into the same trap of assuming unauthorized authority: "She will be saved in childbearing" (1 Timothy 2:15).

“Childbearing” is the figure of speech known as synecdoche in which a part stands for the whole. Thus, Paul was referring to the whole of female responsibility. Women may avoid taking to themselves illicit functions by concentrating on the functions assigned to them by God, undertaken with faith, love, and holiness in sobriety (i.e., self-control).

Some argue that this text applies to husbands and wives rather than to men and women in general. However, the context of 1 Timothy is not the home, but the church (1 Timothy 3:15). Likewise, the use of the plural with the absence of the article in 2:9 and 2:11 suggests women in general. Nothing in the context would cause one to conclude that Paul was referring only to husbands and wives. Besides, would Paul restrict wives from leadership roles in the church—but then permit single women to lead?

## DEACONESSES

Those who advocate expanded roles for women in the church appeal to the alleged existence of deaconesses in the New Testament. Only two passages even hint of such an office: Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11. In Romans 16:1, the term translated “servant” in the KJV is the Greek word *diakonos*, an indeclinable term meaning “one who serves or ministers.” It is of common gender (i.e., may refer to men or women) and occurs in the following verses: Matthew 20:26; 22:13; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 2:5,9; 12:26; Romans 13:4; 15:8; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 16:1; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; 11:15,23; Galatians 2:17; Ephesians 3:7; 6:21; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7,23,25; 4:7; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Timothy 3:8,12; 4:6.

The term is used in the New Testament in two senses. First, it is used as a technical term for a formal office in the church to which one may be appointed by meeting certain qualifications. Second, it is used as a non-technical term for the informal activity of serving or attending to. Additional words in the New Testament that have both a technical and non-technical meaning include “apostle,” “elder,” and “shepherd.” To be rational in one’s analysis of a matter, one must draw only those conclusions that are warranted by the evidence. In the matter of deaconesses, one should only conclude that a deaconess is being referred to when the context plainly shows the office is under consideration.

In Romans 13:4, the civil government is said to be God’s deacon. In Romans 15:8, Christ is said to be a deacon of the Jews. In 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 6:4, Paul is said to be a deacon of the New Covenant and a deacon of God. Apollos is listed with Paul as a deacon in 1 Corinthians 3:5. Obviously, these are all **non**-technical uses of the term referring to the service or assistance being rendered.

Nothing in the context of Romans 16:1 warrants the conclusion that Paul was describing Phoebe as an official appointee—a deaconess. “Our sister” designates her church membership and “servant” specifies the special efforts she extended to the church in Cenchrea where she was an active, caring member. Being a “servant of the church” no more implies a formal appointee than does the expression in Colossians 1:25 where Paul is said to be the church’s servant.

Some have insisted that the term in Romans 16:2 translated “help” implies a technical usage. It is true that *prostatis* can mean a helper in the sense of presiding with authority. But this word carries the same inbuilt obscurity that *diakonos* does in that it has a formal and informal sense. But since the verse explicitly states that Phoebe was a “helper” to Paul, the non-technical usage must be in view. She would not have exercised authority over Paul. Even his fellow apostles did not do that since he exercised high authority direct from the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37-38; Galatians 1:6-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:14). Only Christ wielded authority over Paul.

Romans 16:2 actually employs a play on words. Paul told the Corinthians to “help” (*paristemi*) Phoebe since she has been a “help” (*prostatis*) to many, including Paul himself. While the masculine noun *prostates* can mean “leader,” the actual feminine noun *prostatis* means “protectress, patroness, helper” (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 718). Paul was saying, “Help Phoebe as she has helped others and me.” She had been a concerned, generous, hospitable, dedicated contributor to the Lord’s work. Paul was paying her a tremendous tribute and expressing publicly the honor due her. But he was not acknowledging her as an office holder in the church.

The second passage that some have appealed to in order to find sanction for deaconesses in the church is 1 Timothy 3:11. In the midst of a listing of the qualifications of deacons, Paul referred to women. What women? Was Paul referring to the wives of the church officers, or was he referring to female appointees, i.e., deaconesses? Once again, the underlying Greek term is of no help in answering this question since *gunaikas* (from *gune*) also has both a technical and non-technical sense. It can mean a “wife” or simply a “female” or “woman.” It is used both ways in 1 Timothy: “female” in 2:9-12,14 and “wife” in 3:2,12; 5:9.

Five contextual observations, however, provide assistance in ascertaining the meaning of the passage. First, a woman cannot be “the husband of one wife” (3:12). Second, in a discussion of male deacons from 3:8-13, it would be unusual to switch in the middle to female deacons for one verse without

some clarification. Third, referring to the wives of church officers would be appropriate since family conduct is a qualifying concern (3:2,4-5,12). Fourth, “likewise” (3:11) could simply mean that wives are to have similar virtues as the deacons without implying they share the same office (cf. 1 Timothy 5:25; Titus 2:3). Fifth, lack of the possessive genitive with *gunaikas* (“of deacons”) or “their” does not rule out wives of deacons since neither is used in other cases where men/women are being described as wives/husbands (Colossians 3:18-19; Ephesians 5:22-25; 1 Corinthians 7:2-4,11,14,33; Matthew 18:25; Mark 10:2).

Insufficient textual evidence exists to warrant the conclusion that the office of deaconess is referred to in the New Testament. Outside the New Testament, Pliny, Governor of Bythynia, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan about A.D. 110 referring in Latin to two *ministrae* (female ministers). This term has the same ambiguity within it that *diakonos* has. He could have been referring to official appointees, or he just as easily could have been referring simply to servants. In any case, a passing reference by an uninformed non-Christian is hardly trustworthy evidence. Christian historical sources from this same period do not refer to the existence of female appointees even though they do discuss church organization (Lewis, 1988, p. 108).

Not until the late third century in the Syrian *Didascalia* do we find reference to deaconesses. Their work consisted of assisting at the baptism of women, going into homes of heathens where believing women lived, and visiting the sick (ministering to them and bathing them). A full-blown church order of deaconesses does not appear until the fourth/fifth centuries. Again, their responsibilities consisted of keeping the doors, aiding in female baptisms, and doing other work with women (Lewis, pp. 108-109). Those within the church today who are pressing for deaconesses and expanded roles for women would hardly be content with such tasks.

Even if women were deacons in the New Testament church, they would not have functioned in any sort of leadership or authority position over men. They were not to be appointed as elders. If Acts 6:1-5 refers to the appointment of deacons (the verb form is used) in the Jerusalem church (Woods, 1986, p. 199), they were all males and their specific task entailed distribution of physical assistance to widows.

The evidence is simply lacking. The existence of a female deaconate within the New Testament cannot be demonstrated. Those who insist upon establishing such an office do so without the authority of the Scriptures behind them.

## UNEQUAL OR INFERIOR?

A final word needs to be said concerning the fact that both men and women must remember that Bible teaching on difference in role in no way implies a difference in worth, value, or ability. Galatians 3:28 (“neither male nor female”), 1 Timothy 2:15 (“she shall be saved”), and 1 Peter 3:7 (“heirs together of the grace of life”) all show that males and females are equals **as far as their person and salvation status is concerned**. Women are often superior to men in talent, intellect, and ability. Women are not inferior to men anymore than Christ is inferior to God, citizens are inferior to the President, or church members are inferior to elders. The role of women in the church is not a matter of control, power, or oppression. It is a matter of submission on the part of **all** human beings to the will of God (Ephesians 5:21). It is a matter of willingness on the part of God’s creatures, male and female, to subordinate themselves to the divine arrangement regarding the sexes. The biblical differentiation is purely a matter of **function, assigned tasks, and sphere of responsibility**. The question for us is: “How willing am I to fit myself into God’s arrangement?”

## CONCLUSION

The role of gender, like most of the values of Western civilization, is in the throes of confusion and redefinition. Those who resist unbiblical redefinitions are considered tradition-bound, narrow-minded, chauvinistic misogynists, as if they cannot hold honest, unbiased, studied convictions on such matters; as if the Bible has been misunderstood all these years. If the Bible authorized it, no man should have any personal aversion to women having complete access to leadership roles in the church. Indeed, many talented, godly women possess abilities and talents that would enable them to **surpass** many of the male worship leaders functioning in the church today.

Those who reject the divine inspiration of the Bible will remain unaffected by and disinterested in the teaching of the Bible regarding gender. However, the Bible stands as an unalterable, eternal declaration of God’s will on the matter. By those words we will be judged (John 12:48). For those who respect the Bible as the Word of God, Bible teaching is fatal to the notion of female leadership in the church and home. May we all bow humbly and submissively before the God of Heaven.

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