

## **Summary of Findings**

### **A study of women's roles in ministry**

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### **Method of Study**

1. **Team-based** – I studied this with an interactive group. The reason for this approach was that it seems to enlist the gifts and experiences of various group members, and because the thinking of the group can serve to direct and/or correct mere individualized thinking. Hearing different thought processes and perspectives helped the group to see the issue from many facets.
2. **Broad reading** – We sought to read various books and articles on this issue. As much as possible, we attempted to read authors who came to diverse conclusions on the Bible's teaching on women's roles. In addition to the Bible and numerous articles, our main texts were:
  - a. *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* by William J. Webb.
  - b. *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* by Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger.
  - c. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* Edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem.
3. **Hermeneutical training** – With any issue like this, it is very important to employ sound methods of interpretation. At the end of the day, we are seeking to get at the true and lasting meaning of texts that are at least two thousand years old. The group's first task was to study how to study an issue such as this. This process starts and ends with one key concept – context.

**Context** – It is not an overstatement to say “context determines meaning.” Everyone is familiar with certain words, expressions, or actions having different meanings depending upon the context in which they occur. When looking at context, our ultimate goal is to (as close as humanly possible) understand what the initial readers and author would have understood when they read or wrote the statements under consideration. In order to put this puzzle together, the student must study and make sense of the following layers of context (going from smaller circle to larger circle):

- a. **Grammatical** – Words and expressions have a relatively stable meaning during given periods of history. However, words do not typically have singular meanings. Almost every word and phrase has a “range of meaning”. This means that the word or phrase means one thing in one context and can take on a different meaning when the context changes. This is how language has always worked, and our modern English examples of this principle are legion. The interpreter must seek to determine the range of meaning of the given words and phrases, apply the rules of syntax dictated by the sentence, and then choose the option that best fits the following layers of context.
- b. **The Piece of Literature** – Each passage of Scripture must be understood in light of how it “fits into” the train of thought and argument of the document it is found in. We believe that these pieces of literature have a flow of thought that comes from a divinely inspired human author. Thus, we are required to work to understand what is truly being said, rather than being free to make each isolated text say whatever fits our personal whims and opinions.
- c. **Social-Historical** – The student must seek to understand the social-historical context of the original author and readers. What was going on in their community and broader culture that warranted the writing of this letter? If corrections are being given, what is being corrected? If encouragement is given, what are they being encouraged to embrace or avoid? The fact that we stand two thousand years removed from New Testament culture

means that we will always be learning new things as new discoveries are made. This does not change the meaning the Bible, but helps us better understand the meaning of the Bible. The Bible is not fallible, but our knowledge and understandings are fallible!

- d. **Scriptural History** – A specific passage of Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the whole testimony of Scripture. If Scripture clearly says something in one place, we must reconcile this with the passage under our consideration. We must also take into account the fact that God progressively revealed more of His nature and plan throughout Scriptural history.

**Summary of the process of contextual interpretation** - When it is unclear what a particular passage means, we seek to employ the following process:

- i. Interpret in light of the immediate context of the passage (see above).
  - ii. Interpret in light of progressive revelation – God worked in different ways at different times in history, and chose to reveal progressive amounts of information about Himself and His plans throughout Scriptural history.
  - iii. Interpret Scripture in harmony with other Scripture.
  - iv. Interpret the unclear in light of the clear.
  - v. Interpret the “spirit” of the passage that is to be applied to all people in all places (not the literalistic meaning that may be culturally bound).
  - vi. Choose the interpretation that makes the best sense of all the relevant data.
4. **Common methodological concerns** – The following concerns are often expressed regarding a method of study such as this, and before further progress is made we must deal with these concerns:
    - a. *“We should just read the passage and do what it says.”* Everybody essentially agrees with this, and in most cases it is very easy to get to this point. On the major points, the Bible is excruciatingly clear. However, with some passages it is a real challenge to understand what is actually being communicated and so it is not so easy to just do what it says! If we just take our own simplistic understanding without humbly recognizing our limitations, we run great risk of doing something that does not fit what the passage is intending. Surely we must admit that we always have room to grow in our understanding of 2000+ year old texts that were written in a very different culture and language than our own!
    - b. *“We should just do whatever the passage seems to say to us at any given moment in time.”* Those with this concern maintain that texts have no objective meaning, but can be manipulated to say whatever we want them to say. This is not the perspective of this author or those participating in this study! Rather, we believe there is a meaning in each text. We also believe it is worth it to put in the hard work to get at this meaning. We admit that our understanding is fallible and (hopefully) always progressing. However, this fallibility does not mean we should reject all authoritative and objective meaning. Nor does our imperfect understanding mean that we should not act on our best current understanding of any given text.
    - c. *“This approach is prone to bias and manipulation.”* This is true. However, it is also true of any method that involves humans! Our hope is that the multi-faceted constraints of the interpretive process will expose any unsupported biased readings of the text.
    - d. *“We should not give so much attention to culture while reading the Bible.”* The Bible is a cultural document. In other words, each word was written by a divinely-inspired human author to a particular human audience. Both the authors and the audiences lived in specific cultures, spoke specific languages, and were dealing with specific issues. The wisdom and wonder of God is revealed as He somehow revealed eternal truths about Himself through these specific people, cultures, and circumstances! He could have chosen to give us a trans-

cultural list of rules and regulations. However, He opted instead to reveal Himself as the Unchanging One intertwined with the experiences and cultures of His select people. Apparently, God is okay with and in fact seems to want us to deal with culture.

- e. *“This whole thing is just an issue because it is an issue in our contemporary culture. Why does it matter so much now when it was not an issue a couple hundred years ago?”* We should definitely beware of merely making the Bible say things that sit well with the values of our culture. There are simply some principles and values we will never be able to reconcile between the Scriptures and the world in which we live. However, merely observing that our culture has only recently started to value or think differently about something does not provide any evidence that a particular understanding of the Bible is accurate. Consider these two historical examples of contemporary cultural changes that actually helped people better interpret the Bible:
- i. **The Penance System** – Saint Jerome (347-420 A.D.) produced a Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate. It became the definitive and officially promulgated Latin version of the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. In the 13th century it came to be called *versio vulgata*, which means "common translation". In this translation, Jerome translated Matthew 4:17 as *“Do penance, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* This one mistranslated word – “penance” – became the foundation of 1000+ years of a works-based system that produced outrages to the Gospel like indulgences and the general idea that one had to pay for his own sins in the hopes of someday getting into heaven. This system reigned until Erasmus (a classical humanist) produced a new Greek translation of the New Testament in 1516. Erasmus differed with Jerome’s translation of Matthew 4:17. He maintained that it should be translated: *“Be penitent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* At this same time, Martin Luther (and many others) were disillusioned by the excesses of the Catholic Church of their day, and they were helping the people rediscover the Gospel of grace. This is an example of contemporary cultural issues and scholarship combining to bring about a needed re-examination and re-interpretation of a Biblical text. If Erasmus and Luther would have merely been concerned about what their culture was historically concerned about, then the Gospel of grace may have been lost to us.
  - ii. **The Slavery System** – The New Testament was written in a time and a culture that was dominated by the institution of slavery. It was the backbone of the Roman empire. One would have expected that the Bible would have outlawed this system. However, neither Jesus nor Paul ever said anything to abolish slavery. On the contrary, Paul acknowledged slavery as an element of ancient society, and encouraged slaves to obey their masters and masters to be kind to their slaves for the sake of the advance of the Gospel (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1). In 1 Corinthians 7:21, Paul did encourage slaves to gain their freedom if they could (through buying it in 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman culture) but he never abolished the institution. Priority was placed upon advancing the Gospel within the structures of society, rather than reforming human society to make it mesh perfectly with the Gospel. However, the seeds of change were present within the Gospel and the new way of relating within the church. Within the church, slaves and masters were given equal status and importance and were to relate accordingly (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Whenever human culture was ready to embrace these principles, there was no reason to keep it from happening. But it is important to note that a merely wooden reading of Scripture would offer nothing to warrant

the abolition of slavery. However, people like William Wilberforce and numerous American abolitionists saw that within the Gospel were the seeds of freedom and an equal valuing of all people. This sparked a great and intense debate about how we should read the Bible! Many Christians maintained that the Bible preserved the value of human slavery by what it said and didn't say. In opposition, the abolitionists maintained that the Bible's treatment of the slavery issue was driven by cultural factors. The unjust treatment of slaves and the perceived injustice of the slavery system inspired a widespread re-examination of the Scriptures. It inspired the development of a redemptive hermeneutic. William Webb states this perspective well:

*"Scripture does not present a 'finalized ethic' in every area of human relationship. God challenges his covenant people to act redemptively in the area of slavery (e.g., release for Hebrew slaves every seventh year, provisions upon release, limitations on beatings, slave-free equality statements). The text takes us on a journey that clearly involves restoration of the society to which it was given. However, to stop where the Bible stops (with its isolated words) ultimately fails to reapply the redemptive spirit of the text as it spoke to the original audience. It fails to see that further reformation is possible and that further reformation must happen in order to fulfill the spirit-based component of meaning within the text's words."<sup>1</sup>*

One key to this hermeneutic is comparing the Bible's instructions to the standards of its surrounding cultures. In the case of slavery, the Bible was much more redemptive and equality-minded than its surrounding cultures (in both the OT and NT). Thus, the Bible prompted movement toward freedom whenever the time was right (i.e., when abolition would not destroy the advance of the Gospel by destroying the society).<sup>2</sup>

### **Observations Along the Way**

1. ***This is a fractious and emotionally-charged topic.*** Nearly every article, website, and book exuded fear and frustration. Often times the debate occurred in an environment that lacked respect. This left us frequently scratching our heads. Our team's prayer from the outset has been, "Regardless of our conclusions, Lord, let us have teachable hearts that respect one another and which progressively move toward greater grace and truth."
2. ***It is very difficult for any of us to fully overcome our own experiences and biases.*** This has prompted greater humility and desire to have our interpretations and opinions checked within the study team.
3. ***Our applications need to be consistent and live-able.*** Some of the extreme applications we discovered got into the management of minutiae in a way that was very legalistic and restrictive. It is our hope that our applications will both make sense and also be explainable to anyone who wants to know our rationale for what we do.

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<sup>1</sup> Webb, William. *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001. This is an excellent book on how to study these issues.

<sup>2</sup> Webb also demonstrates that applying this same "redemptive movement" principle has an opposite effect on the current homosexuality debate. The Bible always takes a stricter stance on homosexuality than its surrounding cultures where homosexuality was often celebrated and accepted. Movement is not towards legitimizing homosexuality, but towards universal and timeless rejection of homosexuality as being incongruent with the design of God for human sexuality.

### Interpretations of Key Texts

From cover to cover, the Bible periodically offers descriptive passages that refer to women playing a part in God's redemptive purposes. However, only a few passages seem to speak prescriptively about the roles open to women in the ongoing ministry of the church of God. These passages must be read and analyzed according to the above rules of contextual interpretation. Below are the key texts under examination.

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**1 Corinthians 14:26-35** → **26** What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. **27** If anyone speaks in a tongue, two--or at the most three--should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. **28** If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. **29** Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. **30** And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. **31** For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. **32** The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. **33** For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, **34** women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. **35** If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

### ***How were verses 34 & 35 intended to be understood and applied?***

#### Historical Evangelical Interpretation

Women should be silent when the church gathers as a demonstration of their submissive role within creation. Interpreters who take this position further clarify what they think this "silence" means. The minority group maintains that the command is absolute and universal – women should never utter any word when the church is gathered for instruction, prayer, and celebration. The majority group maintains that this reading is too strict and that Paul was really referring to women not teaching within the gathering. This "teaching restriction" was intended to be normative for all the churches in all places at all times.

#### Problems with this interpretation

1. **It does not do justice to the surrounding context of 1 Corinthians 11-14.** It is commonly known that the Corinthian church had problems with order in their church gatherings. They idolized dramatic and ecstatic worship experiences in a way that led to favoritism and exclusive behavior. This distracted the church from caring for one another and from appropriately engaging non-believers that were in their midst. In 1 Corinthians 11-14 Paul deals directly with these problems. Consider these details that pertain to our study of women's roles:
  - a. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 → Here Paul elaborates on the importance of women wearing head coverings while praying and prophesying in the church gathering. The language and the examples he uses are very strange to us. This is because Paul is dealing with specific cultural issues that are no longer present in our society. The women were throwing off their head coverings in the midst of these ecstatic worship experiences. This ignored their contemporary social customs and gave the message that they were loose women! We

easily write this off as a cultural issue today since women wearing head coverings does not carry that same meaning in our society.

- b. The whole section found in 1 Cor. 11-14 is seeking to get the Corinthians to value one another, to defer to one another, and to have an appropriately ordered and participatory form of church gathering. The Corinthians had no problem with individuals participating in their church meetings. The corrective they needed was to bring greater order to their meetings because all their participation was producing chaos! However, our modern western church culture is heavy on the order and light on the participatory element. In fact, one wonders if we can even grasp what their meetings were actually like. Thus, we must be very careful not to read into the text our contemporary meeting forms and leadership roles.
  - c. The primary concern Paul repeats throughout this section is the elimination of divisions in the body at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:18). All individual elements of this section need to be interpreted in light of this overall theme. It is in this context that Paul in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 states "let the women keep silent..." If we are to read this as a normative, universal teaching on the role of women in the church, then it would seem that Paul has changed or broadened his subject without any clear indication as to why he was doing that. This seems unlikely since 1 Cor. 14:39-40 are still on the subject of the appropriate use of gifts and maintaining order in the meetings.
2. **It does not adequately deal with the facts found in this section.** Consider the following:
- a. 1 Corinthians 11:4-5,13 states the following: *"4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head--it is just as though her head were shaved. 13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?"* In the midst of all of its strange cultural statements, we must be careful not to overlook what this text assumes. Namely, Paul is assuming and affirming that women were allowed to pray and prophesy in the church meetings! Paul's concern was clearly not with the fact that they were doing these things, but with the manner in which they were doing them (see above). In other words, it seems Paul assumed women did and would in fact speak in the meetings.
  - b. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 say nothing about a teaching role. Rather, these verses merely refer to speaking in general. Any attempt to make these verses about teaching requires that the interpreter supply his own categories because the text offers no such categories. In fact one can more easily make the reverse argument! In 1 Cor. 11:4-13 Paul clearly assumes that women did prophesy in the church meetings (note: "prophesy" referred to speaking forth the words of God as guidance for the gathered community). In addition, Ephesians 4:11-16 lists such prophesy as a leadership function that God gifted the church with in order to build up the body of Christ.
3. **It leads to casuistic and untenable applications, and often to the development of arbitrary distinctions.** If we take 1 Cor. 14:34-35 to mean exactly what the mere words in isolation seem to say, then consistent application requires that women never be allowed to speak in any type of church gathering. That means women can't speak in casual conversation. They can't speak in order to teach and train children and other women (which Titus 2:3-5 holds up as model behavior). They can't speak by singing songs. There is no interpreter I am aware of who is willing to go to this extreme. Rather than taking this literal application route, the proponent of this interpretation typically offers arbitrary distinctions to justify their position. The usual claim is that this passage refers only to a formal church service, rather than to an adult equipping or fellowship meeting. What typically follows from this line of reasoning is an endless list of arbitrary environments in which women are permitted to teach or speak. The problem with this is that such a distinction is unsupported by this text and foreign to the Bible. Thus, those that push for a literal (i.e. "just read

what the words say”) interpretation of these few words seem to be trapped by their own methods. This thought process quickly brings to mind the Sabbath regulations that the Pharisees and teachers of the law produced in Jesus’ time.

4. **The text of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 seems to offer us evidence for the actual issue Paul was addressing regarding women in the meeting.** It states, “**34** women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. **35** If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” Apparently, in addition to throwing off the cultural norms discussed above, another problem was that some women were distracting the meeting by badgering their husbands with questions while someone was speaking. Paul is in essence saying, “save your questions for home instead of distracting the meeting.” The following cultural factors probably added to the problems they were experiencing and issues they had to be aware of:
  - a. First century Roman and Jewish culture both were very strict in their approach to women and their public roles. Women were not allowed to speak for themselves in court or in making any business transactions. In *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire*, Judith Evans Grubbs states the situation this way: “There was an aversion to women appearing in a prominent and professional role in public – holding office, speaking in court as an advocate, being a banker, etc. Certain public roles and responsibilities were considered ‘men’s business’ and inappropriate for women.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the broader culture in which Paul found himself, it was considered shameful for women to speak publicly. As 1 Cor. 11:4-13 indicates, Paul was open to this being different in the new humanity known as the church, but he insists here in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 that women keep in mind how they are viewed in the surrounding society since newcomers often joined their meetings. In other words, Paul wanted neither a disorderly environment, nor an environment that offended non-believers unnecessarily.
  - b. Because of public societal norms, men and women were often seated separately in meetings. If that is how the church meetings were formed, then women asking their husbands questions would have been even more distracting (since it likely involved them shouting across the room!).
  - c. Women were largely uneducated in 1<sup>st</sup> century culture. Thus, the reason they likely needed to ask lots of questions was because they had not had the same level of exposure to the Old Testament and general education in Roman society.

#### Summary of the preferred interpretation & application of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

1. Women are allowed to speak in a church meeting according to 1 Cor. 11:4-13.
2. Both women and men are restricted from behaving and speaking in a disruptive manner at a church meeting according to 1 Cor. 11-14.
3. Women could pray and prophesy in a church meeting. In the New Testament, “prophesy” referred to authoritatively speaking forth the truths of God. Usually this merely referred to directed commentary upon the Scriptures and purposes of God. At times it also included a predictive element.
4. Since the broader society held a very restrictive view of women’s competence, morality, and roles, believing women in the church were to make special effort not to abuse their freedoms in Christ. The motivating factor was to be the advance of the Gospel, so they were not to put unnecessary cultural hurdles in front of newcomers who were investigating Christianity.

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<sup>3</sup> Grubbs, Judith Evans. *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A sourcebook on marriage, divorce, and widowhood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

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**1 Timothy 2:8-15** → **8** I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. **9** I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, **10** but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. **11** A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. **12** I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. **13** For Adam was formed first, then Eve. **14** And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. **15** But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

### ***How is this text intended to be understood and applied?***

#### Historical Evangelical Interpretation

This text teaches that a woman's God-ordained (and thus good) place is in the role of a submissive complement to man. Women are equally valued and loved by God, but they are just designed for different roles within society and within the church. She is not to have a position of authority over a man because that is not God's original design in creation. Adam was created first, and then Eve was created from him to serve as his complementary helper. Women are not to have authoritative leadership and teaching roles within the church based on this reality, and also based upon the fact that they have been more historically prone to deception with regard to theological issues. Some also maintain that women are constitutionally incompetent to lead. Paul holds up the case of Eve's deception and fragility to support this perspective once and for all. A woman's proper role is one of a nurturing and supportive caregiver to her family and others. If she continues along this path she will find joy and the fit she was designed for. The curse in Genesis 3 states that this role will come under attack. Being a wife and mother will be difficult, and a woman's desire will be to rule over her husband. However, if her hope is in Christ and she is committed to increasingly becoming the woman she is designed to be, she will experience salvation and fulfillment. Any contemporary struggles with these roles comes from our own desires to push against the order of creation. These directives are not cultural, but are trans-cultural and timeless since Paul goes back to the original creation account to justify his position.

#### Problems with this interpretation

1. **It does not do justice to descriptions of women in ministry in the surrounding context of the New Testament.** The discussion on interpreting 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 should be consulted to support this statement. In addition to Paul valuing women appropriately prophesying in the church gathering, consider the following descriptions of women exerting leadership influence in the New Testament:
  - a. *The first person entrusted with proclaiming the reality of the resurrection of Christ was a woman (Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-18).* This was the key information on which the future of the church depended. It was information that was very hard to understand and believe. If God truly designed women with an inferior ability to grasp and convey theological truth, then why would he sovereignly choose to entrust the most revolutionary truth of history to a woman? The historical evangelical position holds that this is all true and amazing, but that it does not speak to the issue of a woman's fitness to fill a formal and ongoing authoritative leadership role. On the surface this seems to make some sense, but it does not take much pressing on this to reveal the potential for absurdity. For example, Mary came and conveyed her theological truth to a gathering of the disciples –



- most of which seem to have been men. God commanded her to do this. How is this gathering of disciples different than a gathering of disciples at other times? If they had officially called a “formal” meeting to order, would God have restricted her from conveying this truth to men? Is there something substantially different about preparing a theological teaching that women can’t handle, but somehow God thought they could handle conveying one of the most difficult theological truths in human history? When would Mary have been considered “teaching men” and when would she have been “just sharing” with men in a non-authoritative way? In my mind, these questions are very difficult to answer if one holds to a strict historical evangelical interpretive position as described above.
- b. The record of the growth of the early church includes various women who were involved in some form of leadership and teaching.
- i. *Lydia and the church at Philippi (Acts 16:11-15,40; Philippians 4:2-3)* – When Paul and his companions wanted to plant and spread the Gospel in Philippi, they chose to go first to a gathering of praying women. From this gathering, a woman named Lydia was converted to Christ. Later on, after some time had passed and after Paul and Silas are released from prison, we read that the fledgling church was gathered at Lydia’s house. Though this does not speak directly to leadership roles, it is at least curious that Paul would choose to plant the Gospel in an area by first reaching women if they in fact were not permitted to have any leadership role in the church. It is also interesting to note that the only Philippians mentioned by name in Paul’s letter to them were also women (Euodia and Syntyche). They are mentioned as “fellow workers” who have labored side by side with Paul to advance the Gospel. Once again, in and of itself this proves nothing, but it infers that these two women had sufficient influence in the church such as to be destructive when they were in conflict. They are not a picture of silence and submission, and Paul mentions nothing here about their problem being that they were daring to speak up in the church. Rather, he instructs them to “agree in the Lord.”
  - ii. *Priscilla (Acts 18:18-19,26; Romans 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19)*. - The majority of times she and her husband (Aquila) are mentioned, Priscilla is mentioned first. This is unusual in the 1<sup>st</sup> century world, and likely denotes that she played the more prominent or visible role in their labors for Christ. Priscilla is a key teacher of one of the most prominent teachers in the New Testament (Apollos). She is listed as a co-worker and co-leader of a church that meets in her home. There is no indication that she played any type of secondary role. In fact, if she had a male name, one wonders if everyone (including the historical evangelical interpreter) would just assume she was a fully engaged, fully functioning leader and teacher. Since she has a female name, all sorts of arbitrary mental gymnastics are required to explain her prominent role.
  - iii. *The list of co-workers in Romans 16.*<sup>4</sup> 10 of the 27 references in this chapter are to women. This would have been shocking in the heavily patriarchal world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (see point #2 below for further comment). These women are held in high regard by Paul, and there is no indication that they are incapable of theological leadership and ministry.
    1. Romans 16:1-2 – Phoebe is a servant or deaconess of the church at Cenchrea.

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<sup>4</sup> This list is from a teaching by Gary DeLashmutt at <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/nt/romans/gary/rom16-1.htm>

2. Romans 16:3 – Prisca (short for Priscilla) is once again listed here as a “fellow worker in Christ Jesus”.
  3. Romans 16:6 – Mary has worked hard for the Roman believers. This is the same word used to describe good leaders in 1 Thess. 5:12.
  4. Romans 16:7 – Junia was probably married to Andronicus who is mentioned immediately before her. They are “apostles” (similar to our word “missionary”) who have done outstanding work.
  5. Romans 16:12 – Tryphaena and Tryphosa are probably sisters, and Christian workers. Persis (“Persian lady”) has worked hard and is beloved by Paul.
  6. Romans 16:13 – Rufus’ mother has a warm relationship with Paul.
  7. Romans 16:15 – Julia and Nereus’ sister are greeted as saints.
- c. *Titus 2:3-5 calls for women to invest in other women and their children. If women are too “deception prone” to teach men (who are supposedly not as prone to deception), then why are they entrusted with the task of teaching other women and children (who are supposedly the most prone to deception)?* This question almost answers itself. It is illogical to entrust “deception prone” women and children to a group of people who are themselves prone to deception. If anything, this logic would lead one to think that the only group that women should teach is men since they can more easily spot falsehood! Correspondingly, this line of reasoning would lead one to conclude that men should be the ones who teach women and children so as to keep them from their deception proneness.
2. **It does not take into account how strongly the New Testament’s treatment of women contrasts with the patriarchal culture in which it was written.** Clearly, most of the prominent leaders in the New Testament were in fact men. However, it would have been revolutionary to have any females playing prominent and public roles in the church in the 1<sup>st</sup> century culture! The New Testament leaders were very tuned in to the cultural challenges that went with the advance of the Gospel and the formation of the new humanity (the church). There were other instances in which NT leaders made concessions that were driven by not offending their culture or the culture of those they were trying to reach (Jew-Gentile issues - Jewish sensitivities to food sacrificed to Gentile idols, Timothy getting circumcised; the ingrained nature of the slavery system; etc.). Most have no problem noticing that cultural sensitivities were in mind when Paul and various leaders made practical decisions on these issues. It is very interesting that Paul clearly lists male-female discriminations in the same category as Jew-Gentile and slave-free discriminations in Galatians 3:28 – *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* These were the 3 prominent hierarchical social stratifications in the 1<sup>st</sup> century world, and Paul states that this is not how the church is to relate. We are all one in Christ. As with the Jew-Gentile, slave-free issues, it seems that Paul had in mind an eventual abolition of all arbitrary discriminations based off of mere gender. He holds these three as belonging in the same category of ways of thinking and relating that need to be transformed by the Gospel over the course of time.
3. **It attributes to Paul a very suspect use of the Old Testament.**<sup>5</sup>
- a. *Is Paul arguing that all women from Genesis 3 on have been easier to deceive than men?* If so, he seems to be reading into the text something that is not there. The passage only teaches that Eve was deceived. It never mentions that this deception was or would become inherent to the feminine gender for all time and in all places. Any modern interpreter would come under much scrutiny for making such a logical leap...especially since it implicates half of the human population throughout all of history! For example, one could argue that all

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<sup>5</sup> This argument is expanded upon and influenced by Dennis McCallum’s paper found at <http://www.xenos.org/essays/women.htm>

- first-born sons throughout human history are violent because Cain was violent. This line of reasoning attributes a universal trait to a whole class of people on the basis of one incident. In neither case does the original text imply we should arrive at this interpretive conclusion. Rather, the original text merely describes what happened. In addition, if women are in fact prone to deception, Paul's evidence for this comes from the nature of woman before the fall of mankind. In other words, woman is deception prone because God created her this way! Does this really fit with God's initial "good" creation that is described in Genesis 1-2?
- b. *Does Genesis really teach that men are superior to women?* All that the text seems to say is that Adam was created prior to Eve. Thus, Adam does have priority, but not superiority. This fact is important to note when considering alternate interpretations of this text (see below).
  - c. *If this interpretation of God's design is correct, then God Himself directly ignored it in the case of Deborah.* Judges 2:16 indicates that God was the one who placed judges over Israel during that period of their history. Judges 4:4-5 describe Deborah as having the highest possible level of authority in Israel. All the restrictions Paul names in 1 Tim. 2 were already present at the time of Deborah. If her leadership was fundamentally opposed to God's original design, then why would He not have raised up a man to judge Israel at this time?
4. **It does not do justice to the surrounding context of 1 Timothy.**
- a. *The decision to label something "cultural" and something "universal" is very arbitrary.* 1 Tim. 2:9-10 are almost always taken to refer to culture specific issues. Women were distracting the worship gathering because their hair was braided high, was full of pearls, and they were thus flaunting their wealth and importance in a way that distracted the assembly. Women (and men) today are to apply this by just being sure not to draw unnecessary attention to oneself in the gathering. However, in the very next verse (without any shift warranted by the text itself), historical evangelical interpreters see Paul going into a universal statement about women's roles in the church for all time and in all places. Such a shift must be clearly demonstrated to be accepted. The usual supporting evidence for the shift is an appeal to Paul's use of the creation narrative. However, as demonstrated above, this appeal is suspect. I will also seek to demonstrate below that other interpretations are more valid.
  - b. *The same methods are not used with other similar passages in this letter.* For example, 1 Tim. 5:3-16 calls for the church to support widows over sixty, who are known for good works, who have no family, and have not remarried. Younger widows are required to remarry, bear children, and keep the house. Very few bring the specifics of these issues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because most see that the passage is dealing with specific issues that congregation was dealing with. Good principles of care and support are to be found here, but there is no reason to apply this teaching literally. Our setting is different, and it is almost second nature for us to realize that changes in culture dictate how we apply some of the particulars of the Scripture. The same happens with 1 Tim. 2:9-10 and 15. Yet all of these passages are written to the same audience by the same author at the same moment in time. They also all deal with issues that congregation was dealing with – specifically, they all deal with issues related to the behavior of women! Rather than arbitrarily going in and out of the cultural vs. universal zones, it seems wiser to take all of these "women's texts" as a whole and seek to understand what Paul was specifically dealing with in the congregation(s) at Ephesus.
5. **It leads to the same casuistic and untenable applications as listed above in the discussion of the 1 Cor. 14:34-35 passage.**

6. **Its applications and assumptions do not seem to square with reality.** Our experiences and perceptions are always to stand underneath the authority of the Bible. Sometimes we think things are a certain way, but must trust that what God says is in fact true. However, when we are faced with a suspect interpretation of a passage that also does not square with our experience, then I would maintain that we have reason to question the interpretation. Do we actually experience women as more innately deception prone than men? Has human history shown that men can somehow “see through” deceptions because they are men? Are there no women who are gifted to teach and who have some things to offer that the entire body of believers would benefit from?
7. **It inappropriately mutes half of the creation that God created to display His image to the world.** Part of what it means to be created “in the image of God” is that humanity was created “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). If women are not permitted to speak and lead in the most significant ways, it seems we are only getting (at best) half of God’s perspective on things at the highest level of church leadership.

#### A proposed alternate interpretation

This is a challenging passage to be sure, and there is good reason for the multitude of debate that has surrounded it for years. The following is an attempt to make the most sense of the passage in light of sound rules of contextual interpretation. First I will list relevant data that inform the interpretation, and then summarize the interpretation itself at the end.

1. **False teachings are the occasion for writing 1 Timothy.** 1 Timothy 1:3-4 articulates the issues Timothy and the church at Ephesus were facing – “**3** As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer **4** nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God’s work--which is by faith.” Note the following features of this false teaching that are indicated by the text of 1 Timothy itself:<sup>6</sup>
  - a. Asceticism and speculative nonsense were the core of the teaching and these features were engendering strife in their midst. Many were giving into this false teaching, and to such an extent that Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with this issue.
  - b. The key propagators of the false teaching were elders from their midst who had gone astray. This was predicted by Paul when speaking to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-35.
  - c. These straying elders had great influence among some women, probably especially among some younger widows. Issues with women are referred to in 1 Tim. 2:9-15, 5:3-16, and also a related text in 2 Tim. 3:6-7. Whatever the issue was, it was deeply effecting women and the way they related to others in the church community. In fact, 1 Tim. 5:13 reveals that some women were intentionally going from house to house (almost certainly household churches) propagating the false teachings.
2. **A proto-Gnostic false teaching with attributes similar to those described in 1 Timothy was present throughout Asia Minor at this time.** As already mentioned, we must be careful not to pull various cultural details that merely support a conclusion we are seeking. However, if a text is sufficiently vague or confusing and external cultural evidence offers us a way to bring clarity, we are wise to weigh the external cultural evidence beside the passage(s) under consideration. Consider the following information found in a recent book by Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger

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<sup>6</sup> This information is drawn from Gordon Fee’s article titled “Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics, Part III: The Great Watershed – Intentionality & Particularity/Eternality: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as a Test Case”

on this topic.<sup>7</sup> Rather than re-typing my own summary, I have elected to quote key points at length from a recent review of this book.<sup>8</sup>

- a. "The authors argue that the key to understanding this section of 1 Timothy, and indeed, all the pastorals, is the nature of Gnostic (or, more accurately, proto-gnostic) teaching at that time. They not only point out the deep-seated obsession with mother-goddess worship found in Asia minor and especially Ephesus (where Timothy was at the time) but also document that Gnostic teachers had adopted many of the same notions and loosely synthesized them with the Old Testament and Christian teaching. Most important in this regard are two specific doctrines. First, the mother-goddess cults that held all life (including men) had come from the original earth mother. This is well known. But they also show that Gnostics had adopted this belief, and attributed the earth-mother role to Eve. In numerous texts (included in the book) Gnostic teachers maintained that Eve was the original human, and that she gave life to Adam. Readers will immediately realize that if this teaching was current in Ephesus, and if it was being advocated by women in the church, it would perfectly explain why Paul would follow his imperative limiting women's teaching by saying, "For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve."
- b. "Secondly, the authors show that the Gnostics also taught that when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, she was not in error, but actually brought Adam liberation from the oppressive god of the Old Testament. Most of us are aware that the Gnostics usually viewed the God of the Old Testament as a lesser god who foolishly created the material world—a big mistake to dualists who deplored all that is material as sub-spiritual. According to the Gnostics, Adam was suckered by this lesser deity when he claimed to be the only God. They also taught that Eve set him straight when she listened to the wisdom of the serpent and broke from YHWH. This teaching, which they amply document from source material, may have been current in Ephesus at the time Paul wrote his letter. Again, readers who accept this will immediately see that Paul's following comment, "And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression," makes perfect sense."
- c. "The documentation doesn't absolutely show that Gnostics teaching this particular doctrine were present in Ephesus contemporary to the writing of 1 Timothy. However, it does show that such teaching was present in that area not long after the writing. We know that Paul, like other New Testament authors, was already struggling against an early form of Gnosticism because of his comment in 1 Timothy 6:20,21 – 'Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge" [gnosis] - which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.'"
- d. "Kroeger and Kroeger conclude, along with many evangelicals, that women in Ephesus were intimately involved in spreading the new false doctrine that Paul so dreaded. Their translation work on a number of passages made significantly more sense than what we have in the NASB or NIV versions. For instance, the reference to "wives tales" (NIV), "fables fit only for old women" (NASB), or literally, "old women's tales" in 1 Tim. 4:7 has always seemed strangely sexist and out of character for Paul. But Kroeger and Kroeger show that this was actually a term in contemporary use, referring to old women who were the storytellers in the earth-mother cults. In these cults, such elderly women were the main

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger. *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> The review I am pulling from was written by Dennis McCallum and is found at [http://www.xenos.org/essays/role\\_of\\_women.htm](http://www.xenos.org/essays/role_of_women.htm)

propagators of their fertility doctrines and mythology. Now these same false teachings were showing up in the church, again propagated in part by women.

- e. “ Kroeger and Kroeger lay out a study of the word used in 1 Tim. 2:12 for "exercise authority" (NASB) "have authority" (NIV) or "usurp" (KJV). The word, *authentien*, is rare, and only used this one time in the New Testament. Its origins go back to a word for murder, and in a related form means "original" from which, they argue, we get the word "authentic." A cognate of this word is related to our word for "author," meaning to originate. They argue that the word can mean, "to claim ownership or authorship." Based on this research, they argue that the verse could easily be translated, **"I do not allow a woman to teach or proclaim herself author [or originator] of man..."** This translation, which fits so logically with the following verse (about Adam being created first) has some syntactical problems but seems possible in my opinion. Meanwhile, Paul's call that they should be "quiet" (not "silent") and "in submission," is in line with all who take the posture of learners according to the New Testament.”
- f. “Even the very strange verse 15 "But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety," is explained by their interpretation much more plausibly than by the various traditional readings. Many Gnostics held that sex was all right, but not if it resulted in childbirth. Children are material beings, and therefore bad. Some even argued that women might lose their salvation if they had kids (documented by Kroeger & Kroeger). But Paul may be reassuring them that nothing is wrong with having children. The sense would be that women will be saved regardless of whether or not they have children.”

### 3. Conclusions

- a. All of the data associated with 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is best explained as Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding how to deal with a rampant and destructive Gnostic heresy that was impacting the churches of Ephesus. This heresy is detailed in the quoted sections above. The core of the heresy was the teaching that women were the originators of men. The heresy turned the creation account upside down, and reconstructed a new Gnostic god who was opposed to the value of anything physical (thus Paul named the heresy as having to do with inappropriate genealogies and asceticism). Some of the church's elders were propagating this heresy and it was being multiplied through the aggressive teaching of some of the women (especially young women) in their midst. This is why the letter has so much space devoted to clarifying the qualities of an elder. It is also why so much attention is given to the behavior of women in their midst.
- b. The New Testament's lean towards having mostly male leadership was driven by culturally-sensitive, strategic-minded issues. The 1<sup>st</sup> century culture was so patriarchal that having an overwhelming number of women in prominent leadership positions would have introduced an unnecessary stumbling block for the advance of the Gospel. Yet, women did lead in the NT, and there is nothing in the NT that seems to restrict women being more involved in leadership as long as it did not hinder the advance of the Gospel in future cultures.
- c. The timeless principles that are to be applied from this text in general are:
  - Leaders must model lives that are ordered according to sound doctrine (which is essentially a life ordered by the Gospel)
  - Leaders must fight to protect the church from false teachings that deny God's creative purposes and which deny God's grace in favor of any variety of works-based approaches to God (which is what Gnosticism and all other religions leads to and are based upon)
- d. This text and the New Testament do **NOT** teach the following:

- That some type of androgyny is superior. Neither Jesus, Paul, nor this author espouse the elimination of gender differences and distinctives. Men and women are different by design. God desires to work through us as we serve and live together for the glory of God.
- That we should not intentionally order ourselves to resist some the excesses of our society. For example, men in today's American culture are often depicted as scared, stupid, and shallow. It may be wise to intentionally hold up and more proactively call for and develop engaged, wise, and deep men of God in our leadership positions.
- That the teachings about husbands leading their wives in a Christ-like way are now null and void. These texts are still instructive and binding for how husbands ought to think about and care for their families. Part of this leadership includes hearing from and releasing their wives, and this is also a good guide for male-female cooperative leadership in the church.

My final prayer is for us all to have teachable hearts and wisdom in knowing how to live together in a way that best advances the Gospel...even if we differ on such important issues as this one. As with any challenging issue like this, our continual attitude should be one of humility and willingness to dialogue so as to better understand the text and also better live it out together.

*Todd*