



STATEMENT DL-100-3

**THE DEBATE OVER FEMINIST THEOLOGY:  
WHICH VIEW IS BIBLICAL?  
(Part Three in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology)**

**by Ron Rhodes**

The woman is "in all things inferior to the man," said first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Judah, a contemporary of Josephus, said "a man must pronounce three blessings each day: 'Blessed be the Lord who did not make me a heathen...blessed be he who did not make me a woman...blessed be he who did not make me an uneducated person.'"<sup>2</sup>

Jewish Rabbis in the first century were encouraged not to teach or even to speak with women. Jewish wisdom literature tells us that "he that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna [hell]."<sup>3</sup> One reason for the avoidance of women was the belief that they could lead men astray: "From garments cometh a moth and from a woman the iniquities of a man" (Ecclus. 42:13). Indeed, men were often viewed as intrinsically better than women, for "better is the iniquity of a man than a woman doing a good turn" (Ecclus. 42:14).<sup>4</sup>

In view of this low status of women, it is not surprising that they enjoyed few legal rights in Jewish society. Women were not even allowed to give evidence in a court of law. Moreover, according to the rabbinic school that followed Rabbi Hillel, a man could legally divorce his wife if she burned his dinner.

It was in this oppressive context that Christianity was born. Many people — both men *and* women — have hailed Jesus as a feminist because of His elevation of women in a male-chauvinist society. Moreover, Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV) — has been called "the Magna Carta of humanity."<sup>5</sup> Because of the Christian's standing in Christ, it is argued, the subordination of women that was (allegedly) caused by the Fall (Gen. 3) has been replaced with total equality of the sexes in Christ. Any *apparent* biblical teaching of the need for female submission today is based on misinterpretations by male scholars.

Feminism. To some the word represents liberation and long-awaited justice; to others, divisiveness. Emotions have run feverishly high in the debate over women's rights, and the past few decades have seen the debate move into the theological mainstream. Today, women are increasingly being ordained as ministers in many Christian denominations; Bibles are being published using "inclusive language"; and those who stand against either of these often find themselves branded as chauvinists.

Certainly no one can deny that women have suffered abuse at the hands of males throughout history. This has caused theologian Duane Litfin to ask some penetrating questions:

What follower of Jesus could ignore the fundamental injustice of laws that work to the disadvantage of women as women? Who could fail to be outraged at the prospect of a woman being paid a fraction of what a man earns for doing the same work? What fair-minded person is not dismayed when reminded that it has only been within the life spans of many living Americans that women have been thought worthy of the vote? And what believer has not discovered blind spots within his own perspective that, on closer

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271  
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

inspection, caused embarrassment and repentance? Any who are willing to see can find much in the feminist movement to be praised and supported.<sup>6</sup>

I think Litfin is right. But alas, as Litfin also notes, "the worthy goals of the movement do not stand alone."<sup>7</sup>

In this article, my focus will be limited to examining how *evangelical* feminists are arguing their case from the Bible. I will then show why traditionalists reject this variety of liberation theology. First, however, it is necessary to distinguish evangelical feminism from three other varieties of feminism.

## VARIETIES OF FEMINISM

The different subgroups among feminists have been categorized variously. For my purposes, I have chosen to classify them as *secular feminists*, *New Age feminists*, *liberal Christian feminists*, and *evangelical feminists*. These subgroups should not be viewed as having clearly defined lines of demarcation; rather, they are more like clusters along the theological-philosophical continuum. Along this continuum, it is possible that a feminist may fall *between* the clusters, thereby sharing some of the characteristics of two different groups.<sup>8</sup>

**Secular feminists** are humanists who disallow God, revelation, and religion in the discussion of feminism. They view the Bible as a major source of chauvinist ideas and a relic of antiquity that has no relevance to the ongoing debate over the roles of men and women in modern society.

**New Age feminists** are pagans who are typically involved in the worship of a feminine deity or goddess. (The upcoming Fall issue of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL will feature an article by Norman L. Geisler on neopaganism and feminism.)

**Liberal Christian feminists** operate within a Christian framework but approach feminism (and theology in general) from a very liberal perspective. They believe the Bible writers were simply men of their times and were limited in their perspectives. Liberal Christian feminists employ a "hermeneutic of suspicion" — that is, they "systematically assume that the Bible's male authors and interpreters deliberately covered up the role of women in early Christianity."<sup>9</sup> Using such a hermeneutic, it is easy to sift out from the Bible anything one finds offensive to one's feminist tastes.

**Evangelical feminists** are those who generally (not always) hold to conservative views on the Bible and theology but who nevertheless embrace the feminist ideal of abolishing gender-based roles in society, church, and home. They believe the Bible is authoritative and, rightly understood, supports their feminist views.

Historically, the first widely publicized book on the role of women in the church that hinted at the formulation of a specific feminist theology was published in 1968: *The Church and the Second Sex*, by Mary Daly.<sup>10</sup> Following the publication of this book, the market was virtually flooded with books and articles on feminist theology, all of which challenged the idea that female subordination was ordained by God.

In 1975, a conference of evangelical feminists was held in Washington, D.C., that attracted 360 participants from across the United States. The conference formally endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment and established the Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC), a grassroots "consciousness-raising" organization with chapters in many major cities.<sup>11</sup>

Some traditionalists believe that the emergence of evangelical feminism may be an example of the negative influence of trends in the wider culture on contemporary Christianity. However, Christian feminist Virginia Mollenkott rejects this assessment: "We did not become feminists and then try to fit our Christianity into feminist ideology....We heralded the feminist movement because we were convinced that the church had strayed from a correct understanding of God's will for women."<sup>12</sup>

Has the church strayed from a correct understanding of God's will for women? We shall now examine how evangelical feminists argue their case from Scripture. To simplify the task, I shall focus primary attention on the writings of only a few of the major evangelical feminists. Moreover, because of space limitations, I shall examine *only* the major arguments and the major Scripture passages they cite in support of their position.

## EVANGELICAL FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW

We begin with the observation that evangelical feminists react against the idea that the male of the human species is most truly representative of God. E. Margaret Howe, one of the more prominent feminist theologians today, notes that this idea is largely based on Old Testament imagery that represents God as "Father," and ignores the Scriptures which typify God as "Mother." The Lord, for example, is portrayed as a nursing mother (Isa. 49:15), midwife (Ps. 22:9-10), and a female homemaker (Ps. 123:2).

In view of the tendency to view God as a male, Howe says the sexuality of God has often been stressed rather than His personhood. But "we are in the realm of mythology," she retorts, "when we conceptualize God as male, rather than female, just as we would be if we considered him to be female rather than male. The being of God transcends the limitations of sexuality."<sup>13</sup>

***Jesus Was a Feminist.*** As noted earlier, many people have hailed Jesus as being a feminist in a first-century, male-chauvinist society. That Jesus considered women on an equal plane with men is clear, we are told, from the manner in which He taught women. Consider His visit to the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42):

Martha took the typical woman's role: "Martha was distracted with much serving." Mary, however, took the supposedly "male" role: she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching." Martha apparently thought Mary was out of place in choosing the role of the "intellectual," for she complained to Jesus. But Jesus' response was a refusal to force all women into the stereotype: he treated Mary first of all as a person...who was allowed to set her own priorities, and in this instance had "chosen the better part." And Jesus applauded her: "it is not to be taken from her."<sup>14</sup>

Feminist Gretchen Hull calls Luke 10:38-42 "the most significant encounter...because it taught that women should prefer studying theology over a preoccupation with domestic chores."<sup>15</sup>

Aida Spencer, another feminist writer, discounts the fact that Jesus chose twelve men to be disciples. "If Jesus' choice of twelve male [Jewish] disciples signifies that females should not be leaders in the church, then, consistently, his choice also signifies that Gentiles should not be leaders in the church."<sup>16</sup> But, Spencer argues, since Gentiles *are* allowed to be leaders in the church, the same should be true for women.

Feminists also cast Jesus in the role of a feminist in His first resurrection appearance. Mollenkott notes that "women were considered too frivolous and untrustworthy to be witnesses in a court of law, or to teach children — let alone men; yet Jesus commissioned women to be the first witnesses of His resurrection and sent them to teach the male disciples that He was risen."<sup>17</sup>

And because of what Jesus accomplished in His death and resurrection, it is argued, women have been delivered from the male domination that was caused by the Fall (Gen. 3).

***Female Subordination: A Result of the Curse.*** Evangelical feminists argue that male headship and female subordination in the marital relationship is a part of the curse. Indeed, in Genesis 3:16 God pronounced judgment against the woman: "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and *he will rule over you.*"

Mollenkott argues that "sin enters the human condition in Genesis 3. Only after Adam and Eve have substituted their will for God's will does the specter of male supremacy and female subordination enter the picture."<sup>18</sup> Feminist Gilbert Bilezikian thus argues that "it is proper to regard both male dominance and death as being antithetical to God's original intent in creation. Both are the result of sin, itself instigated by Satan. Their origin is satanic."<sup>19</sup>

The good news, feminists say, is that in Christ "the life-giving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). "Theologically speaking," Howe argues, "the death of Christ released humanity from the curse brought about by sin. Woman is no longer to be subjugated under male headship. The mutual and complementary relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall may now be restored."<sup>20</sup>

***Equal in Christ (Galatians 3:28).*** One might say that the theme verse for evangelical feminism is Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Evangelical feminists argue that Paul is *not* speaking in this verse about the equality of men and women in their *spiritual* standing before God, but of the *practical outworking* of that standing in society. Richard and Joyce Boldrey assert

that "Galatians 3:28 does not say 'God loves each of you, but stay in your places'; it says that there are no longer places, no longer categories, no longer differences in rights and privileges, codes and values."<sup>21</sup> Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty suggest that in view of Galatians 3:28, "all social distinctions between men and women should [be] erased in the church."<sup>22</sup>

**Mutual Submission.** Ephesians 5:21-24 instructs men and women: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

How can this passage be interpreted to fit the feminist ideal? Feminists generally make verse 21 — which calls for husbands and wives to "submit to *one another*" — the governing verse of the entire passage. Because of what Christ accomplished at the Cross, the male domination brought about by the Fall has been done away with, and now there is to be *mutual* submission between husbands and wives in Christ.

(Traditionalists, however, often argue that the Greek pronoun *allelous* ["one another"] may carry the meaning "some to others" [Rev. 6:4; Gal. 6:2]. Understood this way, Ephesians 5:21 — as an introduction to verses 22-24 — may be paraphrased: "Those who are under authority should be subject to *others among you* who have authority over them."<sup>23</sup>)

Ephesians 5:22-24 — which calls for wives to submit to their husbands — is problematic for feminists. They explain these verses in any one of several ways. Some argue that a hierarchical model of male/female roles may have been appropriate for New Testament times, but such a model is no longer binding on twentieth-century Christians. Indeed, "an interpretation that 'absolutizes a given historical social order' is unacceptable."<sup>24</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty suggest that "passages which are theological and doctrinal in content [should be] used to interpret those where the writer is dealing with practical local cultural problems. Except Galatians 3:28 [which is theological in nature], all of the references to women in the New Testament are contained in passages dealing with practical concerns about personal relationships or behavior in worship services."<sup>25</sup> Thus, passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24 must give way to Galatians 3:28.

Other feminists say that while Paul taught a hierarchical model of male/female relations in Ephesians, this was based on his rabbinic training and *he was wrong*. Mollenkott is an example of this line of thought and says that passages that teach a hierarchical model should be seen as "distorted by the human instrument."<sup>26</sup>

Still other feminists deal with these verses by appealing to another possible meaning of the word "head." It is argued that Ephesians 5:23 — "For the husband is the *head* of the wife as Christ is the *head* of the church" — has nothing to do with the exercise of authority. Rather, the Greek word for "head" in this verse must mean *source*, a meaning supported by two pieces of ancient literature: Herodotus 4.91 and *Orphic Fragments* 21a.<sup>27</sup>

The meaning of *source* for "head" is certainly compatible with the Genesis account, it is argued, for indeed the woman does have her source in man.<sup>28</sup> Hence, as Herbert and Fern Miles argue, "there is nothing in the fifth chapter of Ephesians that would even remotely indicate" that wives are responsible to submit to their husbands.<sup>29</sup>

(However, New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem researched 2,336 instances of the word "head" [Greek: *kephale*] in all the major writings of the classical and Hellenistic Greek periods, and found no clear instances of such a usage. He says the two pieces of ancient literature cited by feminists — which predate the New Testament by 400 years — are not convincing. Moreover, "all the major lexicons that specialize in the New Testament period give [the] meaning ['authority over'], whereas none give the meaning 'source.'"<sup>30</sup>)

**Speaking in the Church.** Evangelical feminists eagerly point out that Paul allowed women to prophesy in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:2-16). However, the apostle Paul added a qualification: "Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (1 Cor. 11:5, 10). Howe takes this to mean that Paul's only concern in 1 Corinthians 11 was that women maintain their sexual identity *as* women, and that this should be reflected in their manner of dress. "A woman appointed to a leadership position in the church is not adopting a male role; nor, on the other hand, does she stand before the congregation as a sex object...Her hair and shoulders are to be covered because in the redemptive order she stands before God as man's equal, not as the object of man's desire. Thus the veil is a symbol of her 'authority,' authority invested in her by God as a result of the redemptive work of Christ in whom 'there is neither male nor female' (Gal. 3:28)."<sup>31</sup>

In light of these careful instructions, Howe argues, "it would be presumptuous to argue that Paul's later comments in this letter (14:34-35) preclude a woman from ordination on the basis that she is not permitted to speak in the church."<sup>32</sup>

***Silence in the Church.*** In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, the apostle Paul said that "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

Most Christian feminists say the word "speak" in 1 Corinthians 14:34 refers only to general talking or idle chatter and does not include formal lectures, exhortation, or teaching. Hence, women were prohibited by Paul from chattering or disturbing the meeting, but not from formal public teaching or leading.

A more difficult passage for feminists is 1 Timothy 2:11-12, where the apostle Paul said: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." One popular feminist theory for explaining this passage is that Paul was prohibiting women from speaking or teaching because they had not been properly educated.<sup>33</sup> Hence, "because twentieth-century women are better trained and qualified to teach, Paul's directive doesn't apply. His prohibition was meant to gradually fade away along with the disappearance of social distinctions between men and women."<sup>34</sup>

Other feminists interpret Paul's prohibition as pertaining to women who were teaching error or false doctrine in the church. Seen in this light, the prohibition was not intended to be universally applied. Paul was simply dealing with a specific local problem in Corinth in which some misled women were leading others astray.

***The Feminist Approach.*** From our brief survey above, we may conclude that evangelical feminists sometimes argue their case *from* the biblical text (e.g., Gen. 3:16; Gal. 3:28). Other biblical texts, they say, deal with local cultural situations of the first century and thus must not be seen as normative for modern society (e.g., Eph. 5:21-24; 1 Cor. 14:33b-36; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).

Evangelical feminists marshal many other arguments besides those we have cited to support their case. But the above is sufficient to illustrate their basic approach. We shall now turn our attention to how traditionalists respond to this brand of liberation theology.

## A CRITIQUE

Feminist liberation theology has without doubt made some important, positive contributions. I can only mention a few of the more notable here. First, feminist theology has called attention to the invaluable role women have played in the church throughout Christian history. Second, feminist theology has rightly pointed to the failure of many men in fulfilling their God-appointed roles of loving their wives *as Christ loved the church*. If Christian husbands through the centuries had been consistently faithful in following this one injunction, the controversy over gender-based roles in the church could have been avoided (or at least substantially diminished). And third, feminist theology serves as an indictment against the abuse and oppression that women have all too often suffered at the hands of chauvinist men. I consider these contributions important and extremely relevant.

Despite these contributions, however, there are some serious problems that must be addressed. Space limitations regrettably do not allow for a response to each of the passages cited above. I shall therefore limit my critique to a pivotal premise of feminist theology — that is, that female subordination is a result of the Fall, and that in Christ all social hierarchy has been obliterated. If this premise is shown to be in error, then the feminist position on many New Testament passages — including 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:33b-36, Galatians 3:28, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 — is in serious jeopardy.

Feminists appeal to God's judgment against the woman in Genesis 3:16 — "[man] will rule over you" — in their attempt to prove that female subordination was caused by the Fall. A more thorough look at the biblical evidence reveals, however, that this is not the case. Male headship is clearly established in the creation account in Genesis 2 — *before the Fall even took place*. Man was created *first*. And the woman was created from Adam's rib to be his *helper* (Gen. 2:18). Certainly, both male and female were created in God's image and were accorded personal dignity, but God in the creation narrative set them in a nonreversible relation to one another — male in loving headship over the female.

Adam's headship is illustrated in many ways in the creation account. For example, as soon as the woman was created, Adam named the woman: "She shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23). This is significant, because to name someone or something in ancient times implied having authority over the one named (e.g., Gen. 17:5; 2 Kings 23:34; Dan. 1:7).

It is also highly revealing that when God gave instructions about moral responsibility, He gave these instructions to Adam (Gen. 2:16-17). And after the Fall, God first summoned Adam, not Eve, even though *she* was the one who had led him into sin. "Adam, where are you?" God said immediately following the Fall (Gen. 3:9). In Romans 5:12, Adam was held *solely responsible* for the Fall, even though Eve played a significant role.

Certainly one of Adam's failures in the Fall was his abdication of responsibility for leadership. Instead of obeying God and leading his wife, he *disobeyed God* and *followed his wife's lead* (by eating the fruit). For this reason, God begins His sentence against Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife" (Gen. 3:17). In the Fall, therefore, God's intended order of authority was reversed. As Gordon Wenham puts it, "Eve listened to the serpent instead of Adam; Adam listened to Eve instead of God."<sup>35</sup>

In view of all this, God's judgment against the woman in Genesis 3:16 cannot be viewed as the *source* of hierarchical social order. Rather it points to the reality that with the entrance of sin the hierarchical order remains (having been established in Genesis 2), but sin's effect will now be experienced within that order. Hence, God's statement in Genesis 3:16 was simply a divine description of what *would* occur (male domination and oppression as opposed to loving headship), not a mandate which obedient servants of God should attempt to carry out.

***Equal in Christ (Gal. 3:28)***. When Paul says "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" in Christ (Gal. 3:28), he seems to be alluding to the morning prayer of Jewish men in which they thanked God that they were not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.<sup>36</sup> These three classes had severely limited privileges in society.

Contextually, the verses that precede Galatians 3:28 pertain to justification by faith and how a person comes to be included in the blessings promised in the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 15-25). Then, in verse 26, Paul says "you are all *sons of God* through faith in Christ Jesus." For Paul, the term *son* implies heir (cf. 4:7, 31). "In society these three pairs — none of which were ontologically unequal by creation [that is, they were not unequal in their *essence* or *being* as created by God] — are unequally privileged, but in Christ's offer of salvation, Paul argued, there is no distinction. So then, in Galatians 3:26-28, Paul was saying that no kind of person is excluded from the *position* of being a child of Abraham who has faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>37</sup> That Paul was referring solely to one's position in Christ is evident in the words "sons of God," "Abraham's seed," and "heirs according to the promise." It takes a great leap in logic to say that *positional equality* must necessitate *functional equivalence*.

Elimination of gender-based roles is therefore not a legitimate inference from Galatians 3:28. Ontological equality and social hierarchy are not mutually exclusive. The doctrine of the Trinity illustrates this: Jesus is equal to the Father in terms of His being, but He voluntarily submits to the Father's leadership. There is no contradiction in affirming both an *equality of being* and a *functional subordination* among the persons in the Godhead. Likewise, there is no contradiction in Paul saying that "there is neither male nor female in Christ" and "wives, submit to your husbands."

The question we must now address (though very briefly) is, How does the hierarchical order established at creation relate to the "female subordination" passages: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33b-36, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15?

***Speaking in the Church***. 1 Corinthians 4:8-10 tells us that the Corinthians had made much of their newfound freedom in Christ. It is possible that the Christian women in Corinth felt that their new position in Christ was incompatible with wearing a "sign of authority" on their heads in church services when praying or prophesying.

Paul emphasized in chapter 11, however, that the woman's spiritual equality with the man does not in any way do away with the male headship and female subordination established at the Creation. In arguing his case, Paul stated that man "is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor. 11:7-9). Paul based his argument for female subordination on the *order* of creation and the *purpose* of the woman's creation — not on God's declaration to Eve at the Fall. He indicated that the woman brings honor to the man by fulfilling her role of functional subordination, while man brings glory to God by fulfilling the functional role of leader.

In view of this, Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 11:2-11 may be summarized as follows: (1) Man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church, and as God is the head of Christ. (2) Thus, every woman who prays or prophesies in church must do so in a way that preserves the hierarchical social order given by the Creator, and this is to be accomplished by wearing a "sign of authority" on her head.

***Silence in the Church (1 Cor. 14:33b-36).*** How do we relate 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul allows for women praying and prophesying in the church, with chapter 14, in which Paul commands women to be *silent* in church? We noted earlier that many feminists say Paul in chapter 14 was merely forbidding disorderly chatter. Seen in this light, Paul was not prohibiting orderly preaching by women.

This interpretation, however, does not fit the context. Paul instructed women to remain silent *because they were women*, not because they were engaged in idle chatter or were disorderly. In order to be subordinate, Paul said, women must be silent — *just as the law says*. Scholars differ as to what passage(s) Paul may have been referring to with the word "law,"<sup>38</sup> but that is beside the point. The important factor is that Paul was clearly using this word in reference to *Scripture* — whether he was speaking of the Mosaic law (Rom. 7:22, 25; 1 Cor. 9:9) or to the Old Testament as a whole (Rom. 3:10-19; 1 Cor. 14:21).

Paul's appeal to the law therefore shows that he was not simply repeating something he had learned from rabbinic literature, but was teaching something *backed by God's Word*. That Paul cites the law shows that his argument for the silence of women in church was *theological* and *universal*, not *sociological* or *cultural*.

***1 Timothy 2:11-14.*** Another passage in which Paul calls for the silence of women in church is 1 Timothy 2:11-14: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."

Paul here builds his argument for female subordination on the order of creation and the order of the Fall. Paul's reasoning is something like this: "Adam was created first as the head; Eve was created second and she fell first; therefore, women are under some restriction." More is involved here than mere chronological priority. Paul saw the priority in time as indicative of the headship of the male, to which the woman, the "helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18), should respond.

We gain insight about Paul's prohibition by noting that teachers in New Testament times exercised substantial authority over learners.<sup>39</sup> Teaching doctrine in church was therefore reserved for those men whom God placed in authority to represent Him in spiritual matters. Women are not allowed to teach a church congregation, Paul indicated, for this — by the very nature of teaching — would place them in spiritual authority over men.

How, then, does Paul's command to silence relate to his allowance of women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11? In 1 Corinthians 11 the women were speaking *divine* utterances, whereas in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 they were not. Women who spoke under divine control and who were appropriately attired were not exercising their *own* authority over men and so were not in violation of Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2.

I recognize that the question of how to harmonize 1 Timothy 2:11-15, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 has been answered variously by scholars. In *my* understanding of Paul's theology, it would seem that though women are *completely equal* with men in their standing before God, they are forbidden to be in a *functional* position of ecclesiastical authority over men, teaching them in a congregational setting. This implies neither the superiority of the male nor the inferiority of the female. Paul's theology simply reflects the creation order established by God in which man was appointed to function as spiritual head.

Women are *not* prohibited, however, from teaching men on an individual basis — as apparently Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, taught Apollos (Acts 18:26). (Priscilla was evidently teaching under the headship of Aquila, to whom the authority belonged.) Nor are women forbidden to prophesy in a respectful and submissive manner (1 Cor. 11:5-6). Nor are women forbidden to personally address fellow believers, male *and* female, to their "edification, exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:3). Nor are women forbidden to teach women (Titus 2:3-4) or children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14), or take part in other fruitful ministries (e.g., Rom. 16:3, 6, 12). In short, women are privileged to serve God in *many different ways* within the authority structure He designed.

We gain perspective on this issue by recognizing that the biblical world view is based on the assumption that a personal God sovereignly designed an ordered universe to function in a particular way. Crucial to this world view is

the concept of authority. Romans 13:1 tells us that God is the source not simply of all authority but of the very *concept* of authority. "That the universe should be ordered around a series of over/under hierarchical relationships is His idea, a part of His original design. He delegates His authority according to His own pleasure to those whom He places in appropriate positions and it is to Him that His creatures submit when they acknowledge that authority."<sup>40</sup>

Within that authority structure, both men and women are given the privilege of serving Him — but in different ways. Simply because Scripture says women can't teach men in a position of authority does not mean that their ministries are unimportant. To Paul, *all* ministries were significant: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' On the contrary, parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor" (1 Cor. 12:21-23a).

So, should women be involved in ministry in the church? Absolutely! "That women are gifted for and called to service in the church is plain," said J. I. Packer, "and gifted persons are gifts that the churches must properly value and fully use."<sup>41</sup> However, as Packer also notes, this call to service (according to Scripture) is not to involve ecclesiastical authority over men.

### BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

It is deplorable that so many men throughout history have misused and abused God's ordained authority structure by oppressing and dominating women — sometimes justifying their actions by misapplications of the passages discussed in this article. Such misapplications must be condemned as a gross (and sinful) distortion of God's original design for man and woman.

In an enlightening essay, John Piper said that manhood and womanhood are the beautiful handiwork of a good and loving God. Indeed, God "designed our differences and they are profound. They are not mere physiological prerequisites for sexual union. They go to the root of our personhood."<sup>42</sup>

Addressing the need for a return to biblical masculinity and femininity, Piper suggests that "at the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's different relationships...At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's different relationships."<sup>43</sup>

This call for a return to biblical masculinity and femininity led Elisabeth Elliot to comment that "true liberation...comes with humble submission to God's original design."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the noblest achievement of *any* human being — male or female — is to discover God's design and fulfill it. Let this be our goal.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1974), 622.

<sup>2</sup> H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich, 1893), 2:495; cited by Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 93.

<sup>3</sup> M. Aboth 1.5; cited by Neuer, 93.

<sup>4</sup> R. Nicole, "Women, Biblical Concept of," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1177.

<sup>5</sup> Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 142.

<sup>6</sup> A. Duane Litfin, "Theological Issues in Contemporary Feminism," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 334.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Litfin for this observation: 349-50.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, "Feminism and the Churches," *Newsweek*, 13 Feb. 1989, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 122.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Phyllis E. Alsdurf, "Evangelical Feminists: Ministry Is the Issue," *Christianity Today*, 21 July 1978, 47.

<sup>13</sup> E. Margaret Howe, "The Positive Case for the Ordination of Women," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 268.



- <sup>14</sup> *The Post American* (1972); in Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), 114.
- <sup>15</sup> Gretchen Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 115.
- <sup>16</sup> Aida Besanion Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 45.
- <sup>17</sup> Virginia Mollenkott, "What is True Biblical Feminism?" *Christian Life*, Sept. 1977, 73.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>19</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 56.
- <sup>20</sup> E. Margaret Howe, *Women and Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 139.
- <sup>21</sup> Richard and Joyce Boldrey, *Chauvinist or Feminist? Paul's View of Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 33.
- <sup>22</sup> Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974), 72.
- <sup>23</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 494.
- <sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: A Feminist Source Book of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 20.
- <sup>25</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, 18-19.
- <sup>26</sup> Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 104.
- <sup>27</sup> Wayne Grudem, Appendix 1: "The Meaning of *Kephale* ('Head')," in Piper and Grudem, 425.
- <sup>28</sup> Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 139.
- <sup>29</sup> Herbert and Fern Miles, *Husband-Wife Equality* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1978), 31.
- <sup>30</sup> Grudem, 425-68.
- <sup>31</sup> Howe, "The Positive Case for the Ordination of Women," 273.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, 71.
- <sup>34</sup> Mary A. Kassian, *Women, Creation, and the Fall* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 116.
- <sup>35</sup> G. J. Wenham, "The Ordination of Women: Why Is It So Divisive?" *The Churchman* 92 (1978), 316.
- <sup>36</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, "Role Distinctions in the Church," in Piper and Grudem, 158.
- <sup>37</sup> H. Wayne House, "Neither...Male nor Female...in Christ Jesus," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March 1988, 54.
- <sup>38</sup> See H. Wayne House, "The Speaking of Women and the Prohibition of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September 1988, 301-318.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.
- <sup>40</sup> A. Duane Litfin, "Evangelical Feminism: Why Traditionalists Reject It," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September 1979, 267.
- <sup>41</sup> J. I. Packer, "Let's Stop Making Women Presbyters," *Christianity Today*, 11 Feb. 1991, 21.
- <sup>42</sup> John Piper, *What's the Difference* (Wheaton, IL: The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1989), 8-9.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## GLOSSARY

**chauvinist:** A person who in a prejudiced way believes in the superiority of his or her group. A "male chauvinist" is a sexist who assumes an innate male supremacy in most important areas of activity.

**feminist:** Broadly speaking, a person — female or male — that advocates equal rights, equal status, and equal opportunity for women in a male-dominated world; a person who favors the abolishment of gender-based roles in society, the home, and church.

**hermeneutic:** A method of interpreting Scripture. "Hermeneutics" is that branch of theology that prescribes rules and guidelines by which the Bible should be interpreted.

**inclusive language:** language that eliminates or greatly reduces male-centered terms in an attempt to be more "inclusive" of both genders.