

# Why Not Women...

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(September 6, 2013)

Mennonite Brethren in North America have been discussing the issue of women in the church for fifty years. This rich journey resulted in the 1999 General Conference resolution, which reflected consensus around the affirmation, “That women be encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate. The church is to invite women to exercise leadership on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions, and agencies.”<sup>1</sup> Although the 2006 Canadian Conference resolution blessed “each member church in its own discernment of Scripture, conviction and practice to call and affirm gifted men and women to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership,” it did so explicitly in the spirit of this earlier resolution.<sup>2</sup>

Mennonite Brethren continue to hold differing convictions regarding the role of women in ministry leadership. A recent example is a sermon entitled, “Why Not Women?” in which Jeff Bucknam, lead pastor of Northview Community Church in Abbotsford, BC, offered an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 with implications that stand in contrast to the 1999 resolution.<sup>3</sup> While no Canadian Mennonite Brethren church is “compelled to act outside its understanding of Scripture on the matter of women in ministry leadership,” the lack of a deep consensus among us means that we have not yet arrived at the “unity of the Spirit” to which we are called (Eph 4:3, 13).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we are not exempt from the interpretive task and it is to this end that we must continue to read the Scriptures together. My response to Bucknam’s sermon is an attempt to reflect further regarding how our underlying assumptions and differing convictions shape our interpretation of the biblical text. While much can be said about 1 Timothy 2, I will follow Bucknam’s sermon outline. I have tried to represent the sermon accurately – I essentially transcribed it – and all quotations without footnotes are taken from the sermon itself. My hope and prayer is that both Bucknam’s sermon and this response will encourage the church to continue searching the Scriptures together.

**Jeff Bucknam, “Why Not Women?” (Northview Community Church, Abbotsford, BC, Canada, May 19, 2013), <http://northview.org/messages/>.**

## A. Introduction

Thesis: The Bible teaches qualified men are called by God to be the primary teachers and leaders in local churches. I believe that the complementarian or historic view is the right one.

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<sup>1</sup> “Women in Leadership Recommendation,” *Yearbook: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches*, 62<sup>nd</sup> Convention (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>2</sup> “Board of Faith and Life: Women in Ministry Leadership Resolution,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, February 24, 2006, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Bucknam’s sermon uses the same title that Loren Cunningham, founder of Youth with a Mission, used for a book on the same topic—although Cunningham arrives at very different conclusions. See Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM Publishing, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> “Board of Faith and Life: Women in Ministry Leadership Resolution,” 15.

## B. Five Favours

1. Can we treat this issue graciously? (5:05)
2. Can we treat this issue seriously? (6:00)
3. Can we agree to name our presuppositions? (8:15)
4. We need to engage well. (9:50)
5. Please don't expect too much.

## C. Five Questions

1. What is the historical background to it all? (11:10)
2. What does it mean that women should learn quietly with all submissiveness? (17:36)
3. What does it mean to teach and to have authority? (22:52)
4. What do Adam and Eve have to do with it? (27:40)
5. What does childbearing have to do with that? (33:36)

## D. Five Objections

1. Isn't this just a cultural command? (40:25)
2. Doesn't this treat women like second class citizens? (44:45)
3. Isn't qualified men having leadership and women submitting to them a recipe for oppression? (49:25)
4. What if a woman is gifted to teach? (53:10)
5. I know about several churches with female elders and preachers and they seem to be healthy to me. (54:37)

## E. Concluding Challenge (56:00)

## A. Introduction

The sermon begins by setting up the discussion about women in the church as a contrast between those who are critics of the Bible because of its oppressive patriarchy and those who hold a high view of Scripture (who “believe the Bible is God’s very words and therefore it holds the same truthfulness as he holds”). While many acknowledge that those who hold a high view of Scripture can take two different positions regarding the interpretation of this passage—often labeled as egalitarians and complementarians—the sermon consistently links a high view of Scripture with the complementarian approach. This implies that those who interpret the Bible differently do not take seriously the authority of God’s Word because they do “take Paul to mean what he said.” This approach presents several concerns.

First, simply affirming the inspiration and authority of all Scripture does not eliminate the need for us to interpret of the meaning of the text. Asserting the authority of Scripture does not solve the problem of differing interpretations, as the history of the church clearly illustrates. Even Peter admitted that some passages of Scripture were difficult to understand (2 Pet 3:15-16).

Second, by closely aligning the complementarian approach with the authority of Scripture itself, one moves dangerously close to equating an interpretive approach with the very Words of God. Trevor Hart cautions, we “should never take the fatal step of identifying our interpretations (however careful they may be) with the text itself, or with ‘the meaning of the text itself.’ To do so is to bestow upon them a finality, a sufficiency, which lifts them above the text and out of reach of criticism. Far from establishing the text’s authority, therefore, this is a strategy which effectively overthrows it, and enthrones our interpretation in its place...[We] are no longer genuinely open, therefore, to consider it afresh, or to hear it speaking in any other voice than the one which [we] have now trapped, tamed, and packaged for observation.”<sup>5</sup> This, of course, still recognizes that there are interpretations of the Bible, which are both wrong and heretical. The point is that while we can declare clearly, unequivocally, and with conviction what the Bible

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<sup>5</sup> Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 138.

teaches, we must also engage with other believers who also hold a high view of Scripture, yet differ in their interpretation, with a level of humility. We all stand under the Word – the Bible is our final authority.

Third, what Paul “meant” to say refers to what he intended to communicate to the first century church in Ephesus. This is the literal reading of the text. We are reading the Bible literally when we seek to hear what Paul intended to say, in the particular way he said it, as he addressed the situation of his readers. But here we need to be careful because what Paul “meant” to say may not be the same thing as what the text “means” for us today. To make this distinction is not to set aside the text, or disregard the authority of Scripture, or use culture as the grid for interpreting the Bible. Rather it is simply recognizing that we do not live in first century Ephesus. Paul literally meant that church members should greet each other with a kiss, that women should not wear braids or costly gold jewelry, and that they should cover their heads. This was his intended meaning. Yet what the text means for us, its significance for us now, its application for our lives is the second half of the process of biblical interpretation, which cannot be confused with first seeking to understand what the text meant in its original context.

Finally, when a particular interpretation is equated too closely with the authority of the Bible itself, differing interpretations may be too easily disregarded or denounced as unbiblical. Instead, the process of seeking God’s truth entails walking towards each other as brothers and sisters, even when we disagree.

The claim that the issue of women in church leadership has only been a debate during “the last 50 years,” assumes that previously the church “held a consistent view on the subject.” Complementarians will often claim that they stand in line with the tradition and history of the church, which was maintained by evangelicals until the 1950s, when this historic approach was “thrown aside in favor of a more feminist, more egalitarian view.”

The journey of the church regarding the role of women, however, reveals a history that was neither consistent nor free from debate. The debates within the history of the church about the role of women have been well documented, particularly during the late 1800s and early 1900s, a time which has relevance for our current disagreements.<sup>6</sup> The first wave of feminism (in contrast to the second wave during the 1960s) emerged during the 1840s because of the influence of evangelical Christianity and the revivals which had spread across the United States and Britain. As a result, women sought to give public expression to their faith by addressing the moral issues in society such as the abolition of slavery. While this movement eventually became politicized around women’s suffrage (the right to vote), the impact within evangelical churches was significant as women began attending Bible schools in large numbers and directing their energies into church ministries and mission. New evangelical denominations that emerged during this time, such as the Nazarene Church and the Pentecostal movement, reflected this openness to women’s involvement in church leadership (and ordination) – a stance they continue to hold to this day. The entrenchment of the Fundamentalist movement during the 1920s brought with it increased restrictions on women’s involvement in churches, schools, and institutions. As a result, many churches again began to mirror the wider societal and cultural traditional values, which

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); Janette Hassey, *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry around the Turn of the Century* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986); Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Susan Hill Lindley, *“You Have Stept Out of Your Place”: A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996);

regulated women's involvement to private and domestic roles. To suggest that the debate about women's roles within the church and home only emerged during the 1950s omits this diverse and rich history of evangelicals in North America.

Furthermore, the traditional view of the church over the centuries looked very different from the contemporary complementarian position. At the heart of the church's traditional historic view has been the belief in the inferiority of women – something which complementarians do not condone today. Yet in the history of the church the language regarding the role of women was stark and unambiguous: women are inferior, they are “a subordinate class,” they are “born to obey,” they are to keep silent in public, they are responsible for sin, and they are “weak and fickle.”<sup>7</sup> This is what we find in the history of the church's interpretation of the Bible regarding the role of women. During the 1950s, Mennonite Brethren also reflected these overtones as seen in D. Edmond Hiebert's commentary on 1 Timothy where he reasoned that a woman could not “assume the office of a public teacher in the congregation” for this position of “superiority and authority” was “inconsistent with her divinely assigned position of subordination to the man.”<sup>8</sup> To claim to stand in line with the historic position of the church requires facing the reality of what the church has actually believed over the years. While complementarians do not hold that women are inferior to men, but rather that the sexes are equal, this affirmation represents a much more recent understanding reflecting the influence of the feminist movements on their interpretation of the Bible.

Too often the debate about women in church leadership is defined as a choice between an egalitarian position, which holds “that women have full access, the same as men, to every area of ministry in the local church”; and a complementarian position, which believes “that women are encouraged to pursue any area of ministry anywhere in the church save the role of elder.” To frame the issue as whether we stand in one of two interpretive camps tends both to polarize and to politicize the debate, leaving little room to actually work together with those we disagree with in our search for God's truth. Ironically, the reality is that both sides of the debate affirm the equality *and* complementarity of men and women.

## **B. Five Favors**

While it is important to approach questions about women's involvement in the church graciously because there are “good Christians on both sides of the issue,” it is unfortunate that this issue is often framed as a tension between “those who will accommodate Scripture to culture and those who will attempt to shape culture by Scripture.” This assertion raises several issues.

First, what do we mean by culture? Culture for the most part simply refers to the varied ways in which different communities of people live their lives, which also includes the values and attitudes held by a society.<sup>9</sup> Our Canadian culture isn't something “out there,” which somehow imposes itself upon us from the outside. Rather we can all likely recognize that we've internalized both Christian and cultural values, so the line between faith and culture reflects a

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 189.

<sup>8</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 60. Hiebert was Professor of New Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary at the time.

<sup>9</sup> See Doug Heidebrecht, “Culture Clash: What Do We Mean by ‘Culture?’” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, September 2007, 8-9.

line through our own hearts.<sup>10</sup> The church cannot extract itself from its cultural setting and culture cannot be defined simply by whatever external influences we may disagree with.

Second, instead of treating culture as if it was a single negative entity, our approach must be one of discernment where we discriminate between what is good, what is neutral, and what is bad within a particular culture. The New Testament's caution about the pressure to conform to this present age (Rom 12:2), the danger of loving the things of this world (1 John 2:15-17), and the deception of the world's wisdom (1 Cor 3:18-19) are very relevant for us today. Yet it's not culture as a whole that comes under condemnation but rather aspects of culture, which undermine or stand in opposition to God's will and purpose. There are influences within any culture that must be resisted and rejected. Yet both Jesus' incarnation, where he became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14), and Paul's willingness to become a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Cor 9:20-21), present us with models for engaging within a culture without rejecting it outright or wholesale. The church's mission mandate calls for the contextualization of the gospel, which affirms the uniqueness of diverse cultural settings.

Third, to suggest that those who hold an egalitarian approach have been swayed by culture whereas those who hold a complementarian position are not influenced by culture is like saying, "I can swim in the water without getting wet." For most of its history, the church's traditional understanding of women's roles uncritically mirrored the cultural values and attitudes of the surrounding society. Rather than being a force for cultural transformation, the church has often argued for maintaining the status quo of the surrounding culture.

The call to name our presuppositions and be aware of the glasses we wear as we engage in this discussion is an important reminder that no reading of Scripture is purely objective. However, the reality is that both a complementarian as well as an egalitarian approach will in some ways reflect the values and attitudes of western culture.

## C. Five Questions

### 1. Historical Background

I agree with those who are cautious about appealing to the significance of first century culture in Ephesus either as a lens for explaining the meaning of Paul's instructions to women in 1 Timothy 2 or as a rationale for setting aside the text.<sup>11</sup> While there are helpful studies regarding the role of women in Greek and Roman society, attempts to identify a specific cultural background, such as the presence of a feminist goddess, based on archaeological reconstruction or external literary parallels is problematic.<sup>12</sup> The fragmentary nature of the archaeological evidence along with the inability to establish direct rather than speculative connections between these external literary references and Paul's words in 1 Timothy do not provide a good basis for interpreting the meaning of the text.

Nevertheless, the recognition of the presence of false teachers within the Ephesian church is a critical aspect of the historical situation behind Paul's instructions to women in 1 Timothy 2. Paul explicitly identifies the presence of different teaching within the church at Ephesus as the

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<sup>10</sup> See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 20-28.

<sup>11</sup> My reflections in this section are drawn primarily from Doug Heidebrecht, "Reading 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in Its Literary Context," *Direction* 33, no. 2 (2004): 171-184. See <http://www.directionjournal.org/33/2/reading-1-timothy-2-9-15-in-its-literary.html>.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful guide to understanding the setting of first-century women, see Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

primary reason for writing to Timothy (1 Tim 1:3-4). His instructions about how Timothy should deal with the false teaching are found at the beginning, middle, and end of the letter so there is no mistaking that this is Paul's main concern in the letter. The instructions surround two sections that specifically teach various groups within the church how to behave as the household of God in light of the threats they are experiencing from the false teaching (1 Tim 3:15). Here is an outline of 1 Timothy:

1:3-20	2:8-3:13	4:1-16	5:1-6:2	6:3-21
Instructions to Timothy about false teaching	Household of God - 2:8 Men - 2:9-15 Women - 3:1-7 Overseers - 3:8-13 Deacons	Instructions to Timothy about false teaching	Household of God - 5:1 Men - 5:2-16 Women - 5:17-25 Elders - 6:1-2 Slaves	Instructions to Timothy about false teaching

The evident parallelism between the two "Household of God" sections suggests that they should be read in light of one another. Furthermore, the parallel use of matching words and similar ideas in these two chapters addressing women line up like a ladder and clearly highlight the same situation underlies both sets of instructions.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, what this means is that Paul's instructions to women in chapter 2 are connected to his instructions to women in chapter 5. We now have much more information about the specific historical context or situation regarding women in the church in Ephesus from the book of 1 Timothy itself.

*1 Timothy 2:1-15*

- 2:2 -- godliness
- 2:3 -- pleasing in sight of God
- 2:1 -- supplications, prayers
- 2:9 -- braided hair, gold, costly attire
- 2:10 -- good works
- 2:10 -- profess godliness
- 2:11 -- let a woman learn
- 2:11 -- quietly with all submissiveness
- 2:11 -- do not permit a woman to teach
- 2:14 -- woman was deceived
- 2:15 -- saved through childbearing

*1 Timothy 5:2-16*

- 5:4 -- godliness
- 5:4 -- pleasing in sight of God
- 5:5 -- supplications, prayers
- 5:6 -- self-indulgent
- 5:10 -- good works
- 5:12 -- abandon former faith
- 5:13 -- learn to be idlers
- 5:13 -- idlers, gossips, busybodies
- 5:13 -- going house to house
- 5:15 -- strayed after Satan
- 5:14 -- bear children

Rather than recognizing the similarities between these two chapters, the sermon attempts to reconstruct the historical background to the text on the basis of the false teaching itself. Part of the problem is that a precise description of the different teaching continues to elude scholars as is evident from the varied descriptions of the nature of the false teaching within commentaries. Nevertheless, several elements are discernible from the Pastoral Epistles.

First, Paul describes the teaching that has pervaded the church as "different" from his own proclamation of the gospel (1 Tim 1:3; 6:3). This language parallels his concerns about a "different" gospel that was causing contention in the churches in both Galatia and Corinth (Gal. 1:6; 2 Cor. 11:4). Paul labels this different teaching as something that is "falsely called knowledge," which contrasts with "healthy" teaching (1 Tim 6:3, 20). Surprisingly, very little of

<sup>13</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 70; and Gordon D. Fee, "Women in Ministry: The Meaning of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in the Light of the Purpose of 1 Timothy," *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 122 (1990): 11-18.

the actual content of this “different” teaching is described, although it appears to involve the forbidding of marriage, the promotion of abstinence from certain foods, and the claim that the resurrection has already taken place (1 Tim 4:3; 2 Tim 2:18). Numerous references to myths, genealogies, and the law suggest that this different teaching is also connected with a particular understanding of the Old Testament (1 Tim 1:4, 7; 4:7; 2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:14; 3:9). Paul alludes to a Jewish influence but does not explicitly identify the actual content of these myths (Titus 1:10).

Second, Paul’s alarm about the propagation of this different teaching appears to be directed towards people within the church itself. Those who occupy themselves with this different teaching have “deviated from,” “renounced,” “missed the mark,” or “wandered away” from the primary goal of Paul’s instruction (1 Tim 1:4-6; 4:1; 6:21; 2 Tim 2:15; 4:4). Several individuals are named, presumably because they are known by people in the church (1 Tim 1:19-20; 2 Tim 2:15, 17-18). Concern about the character and behavior of leaders within the church (1 Tim 3:1-13; 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9) alludes to Paul’s earlier warnings that “some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them” (Acts 20:30). The danger that some leaders may “fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil” appears to be very real (1 Tim 3:6-7).

Third, this deviation from the truth reveals an emerging division between teaching and lifestyle evidenced by the rejection of conscience (1 Tim 1:5, 19; 4:2; Titus 1:15). Those who teach differently hold to an outward form of godliness but deny its power—“they profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions” (2 Tim 3:5; Titus 1:16). They appear to be motivated by the lure and love of money, “imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Tim 3:3, 9; 6:5, 10; 2 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:10). In contrast, Timothy and the church in Ephesus are called to express godliness, which reflects a true knowledge of God demonstrated by a corresponding lifestyle (1 Tim 2:2; 4:7-8; 6:3, 6, 11).<sup>14</sup> Godliness is the key answer to the perversion of the false teaching in Ephesus.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, Paul characterizes the different teaching that is pervading the church as meaningless talk, disputes about words, and profane chatter (1 Tim 1:6; 6:4, 20; 2 Tim 2:14, 16). This idle talk, which breeds senseless controversy and promotes speculation, is furthermore described as “contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim 1:4; 6:4, 20; 2 Tim 2:23; Titus 1:10; 3:9). On the one hand, Paul asserts that those promoting this different teaching do not really understand what they are saying; on the other hand, this idle talk is a direct result of deception (1 Tim 1:7; 4:1; 2 Tim 3:13; Titus 1:10). This inability to understand the truth is likened to being caught in the snare of the devil and held captive to do his will (1 Tim 6:5; 2 Tim 2:15-26).

Fifth, the different teaching appears to have had a significant influence upon entire households (Titus 1:11). Certain women have been captivated by this teaching, but despite their desire to learn, they have not been able to comprehend the truth (2 Tim 2:6-7). The profane myths of this different teaching are also likened to “old wives’ tales” (1 Tim 4:7).

Rather than using a comprehensive description of the false teaching to define the background to Paul’s instructions to women in 1 Timothy 2, the sermon emphasizes the few references that seem to stress a form of asceticism by forbidding marriage, promoting the

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of godliness in 1 Timothy, see I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 135-44; and Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 147-52.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Paul only uses the term “godliness” in the Pastoral Epistles.

abstinence from certain foods, and claiming that the resurrection has already taken place (1 Tim 4:3; 2 Tim 2:18). This leads to the baffling conclusion that the false teaching has somehow led to women “casting off their gender distinctions” because they no longer felt the “need to adhere to certain distinctions between themselves and men.” There is nothing in the Pastoral Epistles that could support this kind of interpretive conclusion. Even the quotation from scholar Doug Moo admits the speculative nature of what is proposed: “while we cannot be sure about this, there is good reason to think...” It seems like a contemporary concern about “gender distinctions” is being read back onto the text as if Paul was addressing exactly the same issue. The “evidence” used to support this supposition is Paul’s reference to “childbearing” in 2:15 – the very text in question.

It is also problematic to appeal to apparent similarities between the nature of the false teaching in Ephesus and what concerned Paul in 1 Corinthians as evidence that Paul’s overarching concern was to maintain gender distinctions. While unpacking the historical context to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians requires a more detailed response than is possible here, it is simply inappropriate to conflate 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians together and assume that they are addressing exactly the same issue. There is no indication in 1 Timothy that that women thought they were like the angels who didn’t need sex and could cast off marriage and the use of “head coverings, which were a symbol of their authority under their husbands.” On the other hand, reading the Pastoral Epistles together is much more appropriate because of the similar situation linking these letters. Perhaps what is more difficult to reconcile is that Paul actually assumes in 1 Corinthians that women were actively involved in public prayer and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5) – the very activities that are apparently being prohibited in Ephesus. Paul’s concern in Corinth is not whether women prophesied in public, but that they did so in an appropriate manner. An emphasis on greater freedom for women within these early churches did not mean that the issue behind such freedom was an attempt to remove gender differences.

The sermon suggests that an “unbalanced emphasis on Paul’s own teaching,” particularly Galatians 3:28, lies behind Paul’s need to “right the balance by reasserting the importance and the ongoing significance of those role distinctions between men and women that he saw rooted in creation.” By referring to Galatians 3:28 as the source of an “unbalanced emphasis,” this text is seemingly deemed irrelevant to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2.

But Galatians 3:28 represents a broad emphasis on the new creation within Paul’s letters that describes something so radical that he can find no other way to describe it except with creation language (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:15-16; and Col 3:10).<sup>16</sup> In Christ God has done something so innovative that it can only be called a new creation! Paul explicitly identifies those in Christ, the church, with this new creation - which must no longer be perceived from a human point of view (2 Cor 5:16-18). To suggest that the “old creation” defines relationships in the church is to set aside clear biblical teaching about the nature of the body of Christ.

This recognition of a new way of relating within the church is exactly what we find in one of the key texts discussing the significance of creation and women in the church (1 Cor 11:8-12). First, woman was created from man (Gen 2:22) because the source of woman was the man. Paul states that this is reversed in human experience because it is now man who comes from woman through birth. Furthermore, “in the Lord” – in the body of Christ, the church – relationships are different because men and women are now interdependent. So it is not the “old creation” that defines male/female relationships in the church but a new way of living because of

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<sup>16</sup> See Doug Heidebrecht, “Distinction and Function in the Church: Reading Galatians 3:28 in Context,” *Direction* 34, no. 2 (2005): 181-193. See <http://www.directionjournal.org/34/2/distinction-and-function-in-church.html>.



Christ. This is what Galatians 3:28 also affirms with its quotation of Genesis 1:27 – in Christ there is no longer “male and female.”

Paul’s point in Galatians 3:28 is not that male and female differences are erased, for these have been created and blessed by God for his good purpose. God has created men and women to complement each other!! Rather, Paul declares that the differences between men and women do not count (Gal 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19) and should not be the basis for making distinctions (showing favoring to one over the other) between men and women, or Jews and Gentiles, or slaves and free. This radical teaching about the nature of the gospel and the church is exactly what the complementarian position denies. While differences between these pairs are not to be eliminated, making distinctions based on these differences shows favoritism, which at its heart fails to reflect God’s own impartiality (Rom 2:11; 10:12; Acts 10:24, 38; Eph 6:8-9). The complementarian position maintains that simply and only because a woman is a woman she cannot hold certain positions in the church. Did the early church have elders who were Gentiles or slaves, or did those differences also serve as the basis for making distinctions regarding who was recognized as a leader in the church?

Finally, in an aside to this section on the historical background, the sermon contends that the direct application of Paul’s restrictions in 1 Timothy regarding women, which is based on a “creation order,” should only be applied to the gathered church. No application of the “creation order” is required for women’s roles in society such as business or government. The logic behind limiting a “creation order” only to the church/home is confusing and represents a shift away from earlier theologians who attempted to work out the implications of such an order for all of society. If it is a creation order, such as the institution of marriage, shouldn’t it be applied to everyone?

So what can be said about the historical background to 1 Timothy 2? The description of the false teaching that emerges from the Pastoral Epistles provides the overarching context within which the individual passages are to be interpreted. The false teaching addressed by Paul in 1 Timothy has pervaded the church, and more significantly, this teaching has been promoted by people within the church itself. This raised serious concerns about the character and behavior of leaders in the church and prompted Paul’s instructions regarding expectations for leaders. Paul describes the false teaching over and over again as meaningless and idle talk, disputes about words, and profane chatter (1 Tim 1:6; 6:4, 20; 2 Tim 2:14, 16). The acceptance of the false teaching within the church is the direct result of deception (1 Tim 1:7; 4:1; 2 Tim 3:13; Titus 1:10). Finally, this false teaching has had a significant influence upon entire households and women in particular have been captivated by this teaching. Paul’s instructions to women in chapter 2 makes sense when read within the context of this description of the false teaching, which arises out of the Pastoral Epistles themselves.

It is in this context that Paul’s instructions to young widows in chapter 5 are also relevant. The presence of widows in the church should not be surprising because it is estimated that in Greco-Roman society during the first century 9% of women between the ages of 25-29 and about 40% of women between the ages of 40-50 were widowed.<sup>17</sup> The younger widows in the church in Ephesus have incurred condemnation for violating their pledge to Christ (1 Tim 5:12), in contrast to women whose public promise or profession of godliness has been demonstrated by their good works (1 Tim 2:10). These younger widows “learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and

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<sup>17</sup> Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 124-125.

busybodies, saying what they should not say” (1 Tim 5:13). This parallels Paul’s characterization of the false teaching as meaningless talk, profane chatter, and old wives tales. Paul’s concern that some of these younger widows “have already turned away to follow Satan” (1 Tim 5:15) is also a clear reference to the effect of the false teaching on leaders in the church (1 Tim 3:6-7). The activity of the younger widows, who go about “from house to house” spreading idle talk, is contrasted with Paul’s description of his own teaching in Ephesus where he taught the church both “publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). To go from “house to house” is literally to move from church to church since Christian fellowships met in homes at this time. So the negative influence of the younger widows’ idle talk would have spread throughout the house churches in Ephesus. The parallels between chapter 5 and chapter 2 in 1 Timothy highlight the relevance of what is going on with the younger widows in Ephesus for understanding the historical background behind Paul’s instructions to women.

## 2. Learn Quietly with All Submissiveness

Some claim that the key to understanding why women were called to learn quietly is because women didn’t have access to education in the ancient world. Therefore, once women have been educated, then they should be able to teach. The context suggests, however, that the focus is not learning per se but how women learn. The sermon observes that just like the instruction to men in 2:8 is concerned with how they pray, without quarrelling and anger, and the instruction regarding women’s dress is concerned with the modest manner of dress – so here the emphasis is on how women need to learn in quietness with all submissiveness. In the immediate context “quietness” does not mean “silence” but a “peaceable, non argumentative demeanor,” which is how it is used earlier in the chapter (2:2) in the call for believers to live a peaceable and quiet life, particularly in relation to the government.

The two references to “quietness” frame verses 11-12 in what is called a chiasm structure – a common way used in the ancient world of organizing ideas through the use of parallel repetition in order to highlight the main point in the middle.

a woman in quietness  
I let learn in all submission  
but to teach, a woman I do not permit  
nor to have authority over a man  
but to be in quietness

The call for a quiet and peaceable response by women frames this entire section and is a reflection of the how all believers are to live in this way. This contrast between living a quiet life and being idle and a busybody (see 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:11-12) corresponds with the concern about younger widows who are active idlers, gossips, and busybodies (1 Tim 5:13).

Submission is directly linked with learning, not quietness, and is paralleled with the reference to authority. Rather than “learning to be idle,” like the younger widows, women are instead called to learn in all submission. While the object of learning is not stated here, learning in the Pastoral Epistles is coupled with a knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 3:6-7; cf. 1 Tim 2:4) and a devotion to good works (Titus 3:14; cf. 1 Tim 2:10)—both ideas present in this context. Submission is used to characterize relationships when there is a concern about ensuring that the church not be discredited with people in the wider society (1 Tim 3:4; Titus 2:5, 9-10; 3:1-2).

Any attempt to learn by either women or men requires submission to a teacher. If anyone is argumentative then they are not open or even capable of learning from someone else. The linkage between learning and submission is not a specific characteristic of women but a key aspect of learning for all people. The sermon's example, of a man who is preaching to the gathered church and then is interrupted by women yelling "no," contradicting him verbally, and outright saying, "that's wrong," is foreign to this passage. In fact, it was specifically the men in Ephesus, not the women, who were quarreling and arguing in the church (2:8). Rather than creating a scenario that is imposed onto the text, the context of 1 Timothy already provides a setting where the younger widows are acting in ways that were directly addressed by Paul's prohibition in chapter 2.

### **3. Teach and to have Authority**

Paul's use of "permit" should not readily be set aside as if it only referred to his own opinion and did not carry any significance for the life of the church. In fact, women do a lot of teaching in the New Testament, which is never condemned – Priscilla instructing Apollos (Acts 18:26) and older women teaching younger (Titus 2:3). The sermon surmises, "clearly, Paul does not mean every kind of teaching is outlawed to women." The critical question remains, what kind of teaching is actually prohibited here? The sermon defines the teaching Paul restricts as the "official kind of teaching...done by recognized leaders of the church as they guard the deposit handed down by Paul to pass on to others." The conclusion drawn is that "Paul does not allow women to preach the official sermons."

To be clear, the content that a woman is not permitted to teach is not stated in the text. We have already noted that Paul's purpose for writing 1 Timothy was to combat the emergence of false teaching in the church, which he contrasts with the sound teaching that corresponds with godliness (1 Tim 1:3, 10; 6:3). To prohibit women from teaching within this context implies that what they are teaching is not sound, for elsewhere women are encouraged to teach what is good (Titus 2:3). This prohibition to teaching is precisely Paul's response when he encounters rebellious empty talkers and deceivers who are promoting the false teaching: "they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach" (Titus 1:10-11). This "muzzling" (literally) of errant teachers is in direct contrast with Paul's call to hold on to sound teaching so that one may be able to refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9).

In order to define the teaching in focus here, some make a distinction between official teaching done by the recognized leaders of the church and unofficial teaching. Others have made the distinction between public and private teaching, which would then allow Priscilla to take Apollos aside to teach him privately. However, the text makes no distinction between official and unofficial teaching. What exactly could possibly characterize official teaching? Would it be teaching certain doctrines instead of others; or passing on certain truths instead of others; or repeating what Paul said instead of expressing your own understanding? Because the text does not state the content of the teaching, any attempt to make an official/unofficial distinction is a distinction imposed on the text. When Priscilla, who lived in Ephesus (Acts 18:19), "explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:26), was this somehow an unofficial kind of teaching? Elsewhere, when Paul encourages believers to "teach and admonish one another," he makes no distinctions between different kinds of teaching nor does he restrict women from teaching (Col 3:16).

The sermon attempts to establish a link between teaching and the use of the word “authority” to substantiate an official/unofficial distinction in the teaching. In other words, the sermon claims that Paul doesn’t want women to have authority. By partnering the words “teach” and “authority” together, the suggestion is made that Paul is referring to “the special domain of elders” who are the only ones able to offer official authoritative teaching in the church. The use of “teach” and “have authority” then becomes shorthand for the work of elders because the difference between overseers (the reference in the text is to overseers not elders) and deacons is that overseers must be “apt to teach.” The application that follows in the sermon is that “women shouldn’t be the official teacher or elder in the church.”

The sermon moves from claiming the text prohibits women from preaching official sermons to concluding that women are restricted from being official teachers/elders in the church. These are two different things – one is an activity, the other is a position. Paul is clear, however, that believers “teach one another” (Col 3:16) and “submit to one another” (Eph 5:21). Furthermore, what is it about teaching by elders that makes it uniquely authoritative? Does not the authority of what is taught emerge from the Scriptures as God’s inspired Word, the truth of what is taught, and the empowerment of the Spirit? If control of what is taught in the church is so closely tied to a particular position in the church, then it seems that the authority resides in the position itself or the one who is doing the teaching and not in what is actually being taught.

What is not acknowledged in the sermon is that the word for “authority” in 2:12 is not the regular Greek word for “authority” but a rare term (αυθεντεω) used only here in the entire New Testament. The exact meaning of this term and whether it is used in either a positive or negative sense has been the focus of vigorous debate.<sup>18</sup> This kind of disagreement among scholars suggests that we need to walk carefully as we attempt to interpret the meaning of this word. Several things need to be recognized.

First, the claim that the two terms – “teach” and “authority” – refer to one concept would mean that Paul is prohibiting women from authoritative (or official) teaching. However, the word “authority” here is not an adverb modifying teaching but is instead connected by a conjunction that does not subordinate one term to the other.<sup>19</sup> The sentence structure itself does not allow for an interpretation that argues what is prohibited is “authoritative/official teaching”!

Second, why would Paul choose such an unusual word for authority (there are only four known references prior to Paul in Greek literature)? The choice of this word is significant and suggests that the nuance cannot be conveyed by the more common term for authority.<sup>20</sup> Probably the best study of the meaning of this term is by Scott Baldwin (a complementarian) who concludes that its likely meaning is one of the following options:

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<sup>18</sup> For example, see H. Scott Baldwin, “A Difficult Word: αυθεντεω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 65-80; George W. Knight III, “αυθεντεω Reference to Women in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *New Testament Studies* 30:1 (1984): 143-157; Carroll D. Osburn, “αυθεντεω (Timothy 2:12),” *Restoration Quarterly* 25:1 (1982): 1-12; Andrew C. Perriman, “What Eve Did, What Women Shouldn’t Do: The Meaning of αυθεντεω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44:1 (1993): 129-142; and L. E. Wilshire, “The TLG Computer and Further Reference to αυθεντεω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 120-134.

<sup>19</sup> William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 128.

<sup>20</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 458.

1. to control, to dominate
2. to compel, to influence someone
3. to assume authority over
4. to flout the authority of<sup>21</sup>

Each of these options carries with it a negative connotation.

Third, Andreas Köstenberger (a complementarian) argues convincingly that Paul’s sentence structure here, where two infinitives are both negated and connected by *oude* (οὐδε), means that the two concepts are either both viewed positively in and of themselves or are both viewed negatively in and of themselves.<sup>22</sup> So this means that “teach” and “authority” must both either be positive or they must both be negative. Our options for understanding the meaning of these terms are:

- “I do not permit a woman to teach [positively] or to exercise authority over a man”
- “I do not permit a woman to teach [error] or to domineer over a man”

William Mounce concludes, “if this means ‘to exercise authority,’ then Paul is prohibiting any type of authoritative teaching that places a woman over a man. If it means ‘to domineer’ in a negative sense, then it is prohibiting a certain type of authoritative teaching, one that is administered in a negative, domineering, coercive way, thus leaving the door open for women to exercise authority in a proper way over men.”<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, the meaning of “teach” and “authority” must be determined from the context of 1 Timothy itself. The focus of Paul’s entire letter to Timothy is the presence of false teaching within the church. He is concerned that this teaching should not be spread further. Also, in light of the immediate emphasis on quietness and the call for submission, the use of “authority” is an attempt to prohibit what contrasts with quietness and submission. Therefore women are prohibited by Paul from teaching error and they are to learn quietly and in full submission rather than domineering men.

We need to step back now to acknowledge honestly that we are trying to the best of our ability to make sense of a very difficult passage. As we do so, we make interpretive decisions that ultimately lead to our understanding of the text. The extensive debate over the exact meaning of the rare word Paul uses for authority calls us to walk with humility regarding our conclusions. Nevertheless, the context of the passage must be our guide for determining meaning. Even Baldwin recognizes the negative connotation of its use here – to control/dominate, compel, assume, or flout authority. It is in light of the biblical context itself that I am convinced that Paul’s instructions here are directed primarily towards the presence of false teaching in the church.

#### **4. Adam and Eve**

The heart of the complementarian approach to 1 Timothy 2 rests on the understanding that the reason Paul says women can’t be elders in the church is because Adam was created first,

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<sup>21</sup> Baldwin, “A Difficult Word: αὐθεντεῖν in 1 Timothy 2:12,” 73, 79-80.

<sup>22</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, “A Complex Sentence Structure in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 103.

<sup>23</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 128.

which points to God's creation design and its implications for the church. Proponents of this approach will reason that although God could have created humanity any way he wished, he chose to create man first and then make woman from the man. This order of creation, thereby, establishes a certain authority and submission structure between husbands and wives and in the church. At the fall, however, it was Eve who took the leadership in the conversation with the Serpent and Adam was the one receiving from her. On the basis of God calling Adam first when he came into the garden and because Paul identifies Adam as the source for sin entering in the world (Rom 5), the claim is made that God always orders Adam first and then Eve. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul now points out that what was happening in the church was going against God's created design, because his instructions regarding women are rooted in the creation account. By doing this, it is argued, Paul establishes the permanent subordination of women to men as a trans-cultural principle.

But it is exactly here where a whole set of assumptions, identified as the "order of creation," are read onto the text itself. There are two basic ways of understanding what is meant by the "order of creation." The first way of understanding the "order of creation," based on a straightforward plain sense of the text, views this order as a chronological sequence where Adam was created first then Eve. This simple creation sequence or order has been appealed to as the basis for establishing men as superior and women as inferior by both the Jewish rabbis and in the historic or traditional interpretation of the church. This order of creation paralleled the Old Testament practice of primogeniture, or the priority of the firstborn, which was a common value within ancient cultures. Here are some examples from church history:

**John Chrysostom (347-407)** - "What has this to do with women of the present day? It shows that the male sex enjoyed the higher honor. Man was first formed; and elsewhere he shows their superiority."

**Martin Luther (1483-1546)** - "God himself has so ordained that man be created first—first in time and first in authority. His first place is preserved in the Law. Whatever occurs first is called the most preferable. Because of God's work, Adam is approved as superior to Eve, because he had the right of primogeniture."

**James Moffat (1938)** - "a male being exhibits on earth the divine authority and dominion, as he was directly created by God; he has supremacy over the female...for she is his counterpart in the order of creation, made from him and for him."

**Donald Guthrie (1957)** - "...the priority of man's creation places him in the position of superiority over woman, the assumption being that the original creation, with the Creator's own imprimatur upon it, must set a precedent for determining the true order of the sexes."

However, from our perspective now, it is difficult to defend the inferiority of women simply based on being created second since humans were created after the animals and God often overturned the priority of the firstborn (for example – Ishmael/Isaac, Esau/Jacob, Jesse's son/David, David's sons/Solomon). Evangelicals today do not practice primogeniture as a biblical pattern to follow. To stand in the historic traditional interpretation of this passage is to believe that women are inferior to men because men were simply created first.

The second way of understanding "order of creation" is constitutively or prescriptively where God constitutes or structures human relationships in creation by placing man above the woman, thereby prescribing man's priority. The language of "God's design" in creation is often used to describe this. However, this constitutive/prescriptive way of understanding the order of creation is a relatively new theological development in the history of the church and can be

traced back to a German Lutheran theologian in the 1860s.<sup>24</sup> It only moved into North American debates about women in the church during the 1950s where it was picked up by American fundamentalists and later evangelicals.<sup>25</sup>

This view is problematic for several reasons. First, the only possible grounds for establishing a creation order subordination of women is found in 1 Timothy 2, the very text we are trying to interpret! “Nowhere else in all of Scripture is there any comment on the fact that in Genesis 2 woman was created second.”<sup>26</sup> In the only other passage to refer to some kind of creation order in relation to men and women, Paul recognizes the reversal of the original creation sequence and describes relationships between men and women in the church as interdependent (1 Cor 11:8-9, 11-12). In Ephesians the relationship of husband and wife is not grounded in the order of creation but in Christ’s relationship to the church (Eph 5:22-23). An order of creation theology at best ignores and at worst sets aside the clear New Testament teaching about the significance of a new creation. Furthermore, if God permanently subordinated women to men as an unchanging ideal or trans-cultural principle, then it would follow that such a creation order should be applied to all humanity in every area of society – not just the church and home. Finally, appeals to a creation order tend in practice to preserve the existing traditional social order as if it was what God willed. It uncritically endorses a status quo that cannot be challenged even by the revelation in Christ!

Now this is NOT to say that the creation account in Genesis 1-2 doesn’t have anything to say regarding life both in the church and in society. God created humanity in the image of God as male and female (Gen 1:27). Both men and women are given dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26, 28). God instituted marriage as a complementary union between a man and a woman (Gen 2:24). We could identify many more aspects of the creation account that are relevant for shaping our faith and life. The point here, however, is that the sequence of creation, where man was created first and woman second, does not prescribe the permanent subordination of women. On the other hand, the curse of the “rule of the husband” over his wife (Gen 3:16), as a consequence of the fall and like other effects of the fall, is something that the church should seek to transform.

So why does Paul refer to Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2? The main point of the text is not that Adam was created first and Eve second, but that Eve was deceived and Adam wasn’t. The significance of the creation sequence is in relation to deception, where Adam being formed first is directly linked with not being deceived and Eve’s creation second is linked with being deceived.

For Adam was formed first  
then Eve  
and Adam was not deceived  
but the woman was deceived  
and became a transgressor  
yet she will be saved through childbearing . . . .

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<sup>24</sup> Edward H. Schroeder, “The Orders of Creation—Some Reflections on the History and Place of the Term in Systematic Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43, no. 3 (1972): 165, 171; and Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 154-159.

<sup>25</sup> See Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of Woman in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955).

<sup>26</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 172.

The whole movement of the text is to make the case that because of deception, the woman became a transgressor...and yet she will be saved. What is fascinating is that the sermon makes no mention of the woman's deception nor does it make any attempt to explain what deception means in this passage. Yet this is the whole point – the “woman was deceived”!

The significance of Eve's deception for the situation facing the church in Ephesus is clear because of the danger of the false teaching. Deception was a key characteristic of teachers who were promoting the false teaching in the church (1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 2:13; Titus 1:10) and Paul feared Satan's continuing ability to influence those in the church (1 Tim 3:6-7; 2 Tim 2:26). The themes of salvation, godliness, and knowledge are common to both 1 Timothy and the temptation account in Genesis, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). This also reflects the earlier connection between knowledge of the truth and salvation (1 Tim 2:4). A comparison between Eve and the younger widows in chapter 5 is also alluded to when some of them have violated their first pledge and “have already strayed away after Satan” (1 Tim 5:11-12, 15).

In the only other reference to Eve in the entire New Testament Paul also uses her deception by Satan as a warning against following a “different gospel” and the possibility of being led astray from one's devotion to Christ:

**2 Corinthians 11:2-4** - I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid *that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.* For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or *if you accept a different gospel* from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

Here the entire church is compared to Eve, not just women, and she becomes an example of the danger of being deceived by false teaching. The example of Eve is used by Paul in both places as a warning to the church not to be deceived.

Unfortunately, the historic traditional interpretation of the church has been that women are more easily deceived than men, thus further substantiating their subordinate role. But Paul is neither saying that women are more easily deceived than men nor that Eve is a model for the permanent subordination of women. Rather, the connection between Eve being deceived and Paul's earlier instructions to quietly learn in submission and not to teach or dominate men makes sense as a response to women who have already been deceived and led astray by false teaching. Yet Paul also holds out hope because even though this deception has led to transgression there is the possibility that women can be saved.

## **5. Saved through Childbearing**

Paul's reference to being “saved through childbearing” is one of the most difficult phrases to interpret in the New Testament. The interpretive options are many and include the following:

- Women will be saved by bearing children.
- Women are physically preserved during childbirth.
- Women will be saved by the childbirth of the Messiah.
- Women's salvation is dependent upon their children's perseverance in the faith.
- Women's salvation refers to the bearing of “spiritual children” or good works.



- Women will be preserved from Satan by bearing children.
- Women will be spiritually saved by adhering to their God-ordained role in the domestic sphere.

The sermon proposes the last option in this list with its interpretation of the word “childbearing” as a metonymy - where one word is used to stand for a whole range of things. It claims that Paul picks out the term “childbearing,” which describes the unique domain of women, and extends it to stand for all areas of femininity. So “childbearing” now refers to everything regarding what it means to be a woman. While God has called women to a particular kind of femininity, a kind of life that is complementary to their husbands and the men in their lives, this doesn’t mean that every woman will have children, but that there is a unique role God has called women to fulfill.

The sermon suggests that the language of salvation is threefold and can be used to describe the past (have been saved), the present (are being saved), and the future (will be saved). Therefore, part of the “race of salvation for women is to embrace their unique feminine calling.” Even though “childbearing” or femininity is not the only arena where their salvation is being worked out, women should not push back against it or try and be like a man because that will denigrate and reject the way that God has made women. Women should embrace God’s call on their lives as he has revealed it in Scripture.

It is surprising, given the typical complementarian emphasis on a literal reading, that “childbearing” is now so readily interpreted as a metonymy, which goes far beyond the literal meaning of “childbearing.” By moving beyond the meaning of the word itself and defining it as a metonymy, one is free to fill the term with whatever meaning one chooses because it is no longer tied to the biblical context. So now “childbearing” refers to a unique kind of femininity, God’s divine calling, and women’s roles. But how are these defined? Within which particular historical setting should our understanding of women’s roles be defined? The medieval feudal system? The separate spheres ideology of Victorian England? The middle class American dream of the 1950s? And what particular cultural setting should define a unique femininity? An Indian caste society? An African tribal culture or a Latino culture? Or perhaps a Canadian consumerist middle class society influenced by the feminist movement? How do we determine what this trans-cultural principle of femininity should look like?

What is significant is that the term “childbearing” is very rare and appears only twice in the entire New Testament – here in 1 Timothy 2:15 and in 5:14 with reference to the younger widows! The use of this unique term in these two parallel texts highlights the need to interpret its meaning in light of each other. The meaning of the term “childbearing” itself includes both the actual birth of children as well as all that is entailed in raising these children – but it does not refer to some wider conception of femininity. The term is used in 5:14 as part of Paul’s counsel to young widows to get married, bear children, manage their homes, and be careful not to give the enemy any opportunity for slander. Its use in the context of the younger widows would point readers back to its earlier use in chapter two and Paul’s concern about the effect of the false teaching. The use of “childbearing” in relation to widows also implies that the references to women in chapter two cannot be limited to married women only.

The concern for woman’s salvation points back to the earlier assertion that God desires everyone should “be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). This concern also reflects the broader affirmation in 1 Timothy that salvation in Christ Jesus challenges the false teaching (1 Tim 1:15; 2:5-6; 3:16; 4:10). To be “saved” most likely includes both a reference to

eschatological salvation (will be saved) and the idea of being kept safe or protected (for both aspects of salvation in the same context see also 2 Tim 4:18 and 1 Cor 7:16). So being saved would entail being kept safe from the false teaching and eventually being saved from sin/death. Interestingly, the same parallel idea is also found in Paul's instructions to Timothy in 4:16.

**1 Timothy 2:15**

yet she will be saved through childbearing  
if they *continue* in faith and love  
and holiness with self-control.

**1 Timothy 4:16**

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.  
*Continue* in this for by doing so  
you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Paul instructs Timothy to train himself in godliness (1 Tim 4:7), which is demonstrated by setting an example for believers in his lifestyle (1 Tim 4:12) and by paying attention to his teaching (1 Tim 4:13). By doing so, Timothy is able to save both himself and his hearers. To be clear, Timothy is not the one who can save others, for only God is able to save (1 Tim 4:10). But believers will be kept safe from the false teaching, which will ultimately lead to their salvation, if they follow Timothy's example and teaching. In the same way, in chapter 2, women will be saved if they continue in faith, love, holiness, and self-control.<sup>27</sup> The danger of being led astray by Satan for younger widows who are idlers, gossips, and busybodies is thwarted when they marry, bear children, and manage their households (1 Tim 5:13-15).

Similarly, women are kept safe/saved through childbearing because it reflects a practical expression of their "profession of godliness through good works," which contradicts immodesty, lack of quietness, and deception (1 Tim 2:10; 5:10). The list of characteristics women are called to "continue in" parallels the broader concern for the maintenance of character and a godly lifestyle that is consistent with the gospel (1 Tim 1:5; 2:2, 15; 4:12; 6:11). This does not imply a salvation by works (Titus 3:4-7) but that the danger of wandering away or missing the mark of faith because of deception by the false teaching can be counteracted with a godly lifestyle.

The concern for remaining firm in the face of deception is also the context for the only other use of the call "to continue" in the Pastoral Epistles:

...while evil people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, *continue in what you have learned* and have firmly believed. (2 Tim 3:13-14)

Continuing in the true teaching of the gospel and demonstrating a godly lifestyle consistent with that teaching will keep one safe from the menace of deception. Here we also have a contrast between what is learned and the deception of the false teaching. So all three uses of the call "to continue" in 1 and 2 Timothy are set in the context of deception and the danger of the false teaching in the church.

The sermon concludes with a summary statement: "Men and women have been created differently to fulfill complementary roles in the home and in the church and embracing this teaching, embracing those roles, brings freedom and joy and rejecting them brings frustration and danger." This summary statement looks very different from the actual text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The biblical context of 1 Timothy in particular and of the Pastoral Epistles in general provides the best interpretive cues for understanding the meaning of Paul's instructions to

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<sup>27</sup> The shift from the singular to the plural may include both Adam and Eve from the immediate context (1 Tim 2:13) although it is more likely a return to the earlier references to women (1 Tim 2:9-10).

women in 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Rather than looking outside the text for meaning, this approach calls us to read the passage carefully within the flow of the entire conversation of the larger context. The biblical context provides a check on the perspectives we bring to the text and the cultural glasses we wear.

Reading 1 Timothy 2:9-15 within its biblical context demonstrates that Paul's instructions for women are integrated into his larger purpose for writing Timothy: a proper response to the presence of false teaching in the church. Women, most likely the younger widows, were involved in some way with the promotion of false teaching, and Paul seeks to prohibit them from continuing to deceive others. Paul's overarching concern that women reflect godliness through good works acts as a counterbalance to the deceptive temptation and destructive effects of the false teaching. Paul's response is consistent with both his instructions for the entire church and his concern for Timothy, thereby indicating that he is not addressing women here simply because they are women.

The relevance of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 for the life of the contemporary church is grounded within the purpose of the entire book. Instead of using a selective "cut and paste" approach to application, the significance of this passage emerges out of a holistic reading of the text within its biblical context. The correction of those who were caught in deception was to be done with gentleness because "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil" (2 Tim 2:25-26). Sometimes the appropriate response was even to "rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in faith" (Titus 1:13). Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is an example of his correction of women who were involved in promoting false teaching in the church. In the face of threats to the faith of the church, the goal of Paul's instruction was the call to godliness: true knowledge of God reflected in a consistent lifestyle. Godliness is to be evidenced by self-control, quietness, submission, and continuing in faith, love, and holiness. This is a message the church also needs to hear today.

## **D. Five Objections**

### **1. A Cultural Command**

The sermon addresses a possible objection that Paul's prohibitions may just be culturally embedded commands, like the holy kiss or head coverings, by contending that Paul's appeal to the creation account means his instructions extend beyond any particular culture. Two examples are used in the sermon: Jesus' appeal to Gen 2:24 in his debate with the Pharisees regarding divorce (Mark 10:1-12); and Paul's discussion about homosexuality and "natural relations" in Romans 1:26-27. The sermon claims that if you want to throw teaching about gender roles "under the bus," you will have to do the same with Jesus' teaching about divorce and Paul's teaching about homosexuality since both are rooted in a creation design. It contends that just because our culture struggles with these issues doesn't mean that the Scriptures are wrong at this point. Rather, believers are to sit under God's Word, not over it, especially when it is explicitly tied to the way God made people.

The assumption that a reference to creation automatically indicates a trans-cultural principle is undermined by the unwillingness to apply Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy regarding women to all of society. If it is a creation order, then it should be applied to all of God's

creation. In reality, it is a much more difficult and nuanced interpretive process that is needed to determine what in Scripture is trans-cultural and what is culturally bound.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between how we read the Bible regarding divorce/remarriage and homosexuality and how we interpret the Bible regarding women in church leadership. Evangelical churches have struggled with the pervasive reality of divorce/remarriage within both society and the church. I suspect that very few churches apply a straightforward restrictive reading of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, but rather attempt to faithfully teach and encourage the biblical ideal of lifelong marriage and compassionately respond to the reality of broken relationships.<sup>29</sup>

The issue of homosexuality and women in church leadership are also two very different hermeneutical issues. In the Scriptures there are both affirming and restricting texts regarding women in the church, whereas the Bible consistently prohibits the practice of homosexuality. The practice of homosexuality is a moral issue while being a woman is not a moral issue. Mennonite Brethren have defined questions about the role of women in the church as a polity issue. In order to move beyond a straightforward reading of the text regarding the practice of homosexuality, one must engage in a revisionist hermeneutic, something Mennonite Brethren reject.<sup>30</sup> The affirmation of women in church leadership does not require a revisionist hermeneutic. To say that affirming women in church leadership will lead to an affirmation of homosexual practice does not take seriously the hermeneutical differences between these two issues nor the history of the church. For example, although the Pentecostals have affirmed women in church leadership for over 100 years, there is no move among them to affirm homosexual practice. Just because some may see a relation between these two issues does not mean that these issues are directly connected.<sup>31</sup> It is inappropriate to uncritically assume that if someone affirms women in church leadership, they will be moving down a slippery slope toward the affirmation of homosexual practice. This simply is not the case.

I would affirm the call to sit under the Word rather than assume we can be over it. This calls us to be careful listeners to the Word, open to the Spirit's guidance, and willing to submit our assumptions to the teaching of Scripture. This does not mean, however, we are exempt from the interpretive task where we diligently study the Scriptures and engage together in our search for truth.

## **2. Treat Women like Second Class Citizens**

The sermon attempts to address concerns that limiting women's roles essentially means limiting their value. In contrast this thinking is challenged because a person's role does not

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<sup>28</sup> See William, J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> See David Ewert, "When Marriages Fail: Divorce and Remarriage" (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life, 2002), <http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/PDFs/F&L%20-%20When%20Marriages%20Fail.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> See "Homosexuality: A Compassionate Yet Firm Response" (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life, 2004), [http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/PDFs/Homosexuality\\_A\\_compassionate\\_yet\\_firm\\_response.pdf](http://www.mbconf.ca/resource/File/PDFs/Homosexuality_A_compassionate_yet_firm_response.pdf); and "Resolution on Homosexuality," *We Recommend....(Part III, 1978-2002)*, ed. Abe J. Dueck and David Giesbrecht (Winnipeg: Historical Commission, 2002), 62-64.

<sup>31</sup> See Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*.

determine his or her value. Everyone has an equal part to place because each person has been formed in a particular way. For example, all positions on a sports team are important and teams only win when people play their proper roles. The Trinity is used as an example where there is an eternal equality between persons but a differentiation between roles. Therefore, worth is not determined by role because essential equality and functional differentiation can exist side by side. The assumption that a limited role necessitates a diminished personal worth, is declared to be a non-biblical secular view of reality. Nowhere in Scripture are role and ultimate worth every equated. The good news of God's kingdom is that it doesn't matter what function a person performs, what matters is repentance, entering the kingdom, and living out one's salvation as a regenerated human being of equal worth with all members of the same body, regardless of role. The sermon contends that there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom and differentiated callings between men and women don't translate into differentiated values.

It is true that the variety and diversity within the church, where each member plays his or her part in building up the body of Christ, is an expression of God's gifts to the church (1 Cor 12). However, the use of the specific language of "women's roles" in the church represents a recent shift away from the historic traditional position of the church, which explicitly and frequently referred to the inferiority of women and the superiority of men.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, contemporary complementarians do not consider women to be inferior—they just have different roles assigned by God. However, this appeal to differentiated roles (the French word *role* refers to the part an actor plays on a stage) only emerged in the discussion about women in the church during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>33</sup>

We must rightly teach that different roles should not be equated with personal worth. The Bible consistently teaches "that our maleness and femaleness are grounded in our God-given nature, and not in the things we do."<sup>34</sup> But just because a subordinate role does not necessarily imply a person's inferiority or limited worth, doesn't mean that it never implies this.<sup>35</sup> If a subordinate role is directly linked to the essential nature or being of a person, then that person, no matter their level of education or experience, has a permanent identity that is subordinated to others.<sup>36</sup> A woman, because she is a woman and for no other reason, is locked into a permanent subordinate role where her gender identity determines that she can never become a leader in the church.<sup>37</sup> The use of the term "role" to describe this is confusing because it no longer simply refers to what one does, but to the essential or ontological identity of the person. Merely asserting women's equality with men is just that, an assertion. This becomes more evident when distinctions based on role subordination are applied to different races, economic levels, or castes. Galatians 3:28 directly challenges not only how we understand our identity but also our role/function in the church because in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female."

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<sup>32</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 179.

<sup>33</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 179-180.

<sup>34</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 181.

<sup>35</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 181.

<sup>36</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 182.

<sup>37</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 182.

### **3. Recipe for Oppression**

The sermon goes on to respond to the objection that perhaps women submitting to qualified men in leadership could be a recipe for oppression. The sermon admits that men have often subjected women and it is rare to find a marriage where a husband bears responsibility for headship and exercises it in humility and love rather than by force and authoritarianism. It also acknowledges that there are reasons why the feminist movement emerged, and if Christian men had been servant leaders in their homes rather than conceited chauvinists, then the feminist movement would have died a quick death and we would not have the current problems between men and women in society. However, the sermon cautions against the temptation to reject all male headship as bad if a woman has had negative experiences. The abuse of a thing does not negate its proper use. What should be condemned is bad male leadership, not male leadership in total. Men need to learn the high calling of leadership modeled after the life of Jesus where they don't lord it over people.

It is difficult but commendable to seek to confront the pervasive and oppressive subjugation of women throughout history and across cultures. While it is correct that the abuse of something should not lead to its total rejection, the sermon does not explore why male leadership has been so prone to abuse. Perhaps there are deeper issues, other than whether leaders are either male or female, that need to be addressed. Issues of authority and power are rarely talked about in the context of the church and these must be transformed by God and modeled after the life of Jesus.

### **4. Women Gifted to Teach**

The sermon moves on to address questions regarding the involvement of women who are gifted just like men. It claims that eldership is not something you are gifted to do – elders have lots of different gifts. Rather believers are all gifted in certain ways and are called to use those gifts according to God's design. Gifts are to be used for the good of the community and the representation of God (1 Cor 12-14). The sermon proposes that God puts a curb on some women's gifts – they ought not to be the teaching pastor of a church or an elder. Rather, women should embrace every other avenue of ministry and seek to use whatever God has given them in as full a way as they can.

The Bible clearly teaches that it is the Spirit who distributes the gifts as he determines and God arranges the members in the church as he chooses (1 Cor 12:11; 12:18; 12:28). There is no hint in any of the texts discussing spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4; Rom 12) that certain gifts are somehow distributed only to men or that women are restricted from using certain gifts. Furthermore, the numerous "one another" passages throughout Paul's writings never give any indication that some things are done by men and not by women. The Spirit distributes a wide variety of gifts for the purpose of building up the church and for the common good (1 Cor 12:4-7). If the Spirit gifts a woman in order to build up the church, why would the same Spirit curb the use of that gift? The church's role is to recognize and encourage the gifts, which the Spirit gives in order that the fullness of the Spirit can be experienced in the church. We need to be careful that we do not limit what the Spirit wants to accomplish in the church by restricting what he has already given.

Women's involvement in the New Testament church is wide ranging. The prophecy from Joel, declared at the formation of the church at Pentecost, finds expression in the life of the church (Acts 2:17-18). Women demonstrate different gifts – Junia is an apostle (Rom 16:7); Priscilla is a teacher (Act 18:24-28); and the daughters of Philip are prophets (Acts 21:19). Women take on various positions in the church – as co-workers (Priscilla in Rom 16:3 and Euodia and Syntyche in Phil 4:2); deaconesses (1 Tim 3:11); and also as a patron and deacon (Phoebe in Rom 16:1-2). There are numerous women identified as house church leaders in the New Testament – Lydia (Acts 16:40); Chloe (1 Cor 1:11); Priscilla (1 Cor 16:19 and Rom 16:3); Nympha (Col 4:15); and Apphia (Philemon 2). What is rarely acknowledged is that in 1 Timothy 5:2, the term for elder is used in its feminine form in reference to women elders – *presbuteras*. While this is almost always translated as “older women,” Paul clearly uses the term “elder” in reference to women.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the relationship between the Spirit's gifting and positions in the church. Even though several positions in the church can be identified - overseers and deacons (patterned after the model of the household) and elders (patterned after the model of the synagogue) – the New Testament does not give us a well defined church polity or governance structure.<sup>38</sup> Pastors are not part of this list because in the New Testament “shepherding” is either a gift (Eph 4:11) or a function (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). While there seems to be overlap between the language of overseers and elders, the terms are not synonymous (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5, 7). In 1 Timothy the parallel references to overseers/deacons/deaconesses in chapter 3 and elders in chapter 5 do suggest that the term “elders” is a more inclusive term that would overlap with the other positions – including deacons and deaconesses. There also seems to be some distinction made between different functions among the elders themselves (1 Tim 5:17).

Often the rationale used to restrict women from positions in the church is the single reference to overseers being the husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:2). It is not surprising that elders in the church were men because this model of leadership was adopted from the Jewish synagogue system and likely carried over its patriarchal values. Even though this is the case, this reference cannot carry the full weight of restricting women from leadership positions in our churches today for several reasons.

First, as can be seen from the above list, women were already actively serving as house church leaders (overseers) and deaconesses.

Second, the conclusion that women can't be elders because virtually all references to elders (with the exception of 1 Tim 5:2) assume that they are male is an argument from inference. This means that nowhere does Paul directly answer our question regarding whether women can be elders - it is inferred from the practice of the early church. If we would be consistent with this method of application, then we should also restrict people from serving as elders who are younger - elders literally were older (1 Tim 5:1-2), unmarried (1 Tim 3:2), or who do not have children (1 Tim 3:4).

Third, there is nothing about the qualifications for elders – good character, spiritual maturity, and gifting (in some way) – that would automatically disqualify women from being recognized as leaders in the church. Interestingly, the same word used for the gift of leadership (Rom 12:8) and to describe elders who “rule” (1 Tim 5:17) is also used of Phoebe and translated as patron (Rom 16:2).

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<sup>38</sup> See Bruce Guenther and Doug Heidebrecht, “The Elusive Biblical Model of Leadership,” *Direction* 28, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 153-165. See <http://www.directionjournal.org/28/2/elusive-biblical-model-of-leadership.html>.

Finally, while it is the Spirit who gifts believers as he determines, it is the church that establishes positional, organizational, or governance structures to legitimate authority and effectively facilitate functions. What these positions actually look like will vary over time and across cultures. For example, the position of senior or lead pastor makes sense within our context, but it is foreign to what we see in the New Testament church. This recognition should at least make us cautious about creating too rigid boundaries around positions in our churches that more likely reflect contemporary cultural values and effective organizational patterns than biblical principles.

## **5. Churches with Female Elders and Preachers**

Finally, the sermon responds to the challenge of healthy churches who have female elders and preachers. This is called the “missionary challenge.” Even though Christian women lead and preach overseas – and God uses them – this does not mean we “judge what is right simply by what works.” Just because God uses a thing doesn’t mean he tacitly approves of it, which can be illustrated by God using bad preaching to save people or blessing polygamous kings to rule over Israel. Rather, the church has an ideal that is described in the Bible and we strive for this ideal, even though we are very rarely there. Bucknam admits here, “. . .it’s a testimony to the grace of God that he uses crooked sticks like me and like this church to achieve his great ends. But because he uses crooked sticks doesn’t mean we should be crooked sticks.”

I find it difficult to understand how the work of thousands of faithful women who have made significant sacrifices to follow God’s calling in order to preach the gospel in difficult cross-cultural settings can be discounted, as if their ministry was something that God would use but not approve. And now around the world – in India, Congo, and Colombia for example – Mennonite Brethren churches are ordaining women and affirming them for church leadership positions. Does God have one standard for Canadian churches and another for other churches around the world? It’s also extremely perplexing, incomprehensible, and disheartening to see women compared to “crooked sticks” that God still chooses to use.

## **E. Concluding Challenge**

The sermon concludes with a reference to Elizabeth Elliot’s description of true femininity. She describes two women in the Bible. Eve, when she received the Word of God said, “I don’t think that I like that very much, so I’m not going to listen. I’m going to go my own way and do my own thing. I’m going to come up with good reasons why I ought to do it.” She was led by the Serpent. When the angel comes to Mary, on the other hand, and declares God’s Word to her, she responds, “May it be to me as you have said.” Elliot holds these two women up and asks, which one are you more like? When it comes to what God says in his Word, do we go our own way like Eve or do we gratefully submit to it like Mary?

The sermon ends with a quote from Dorothy Patterson, “I’m bound by the teachings of his Holy Word in the Bible. I then want to submit, humble myself to relinquish my rights voluntarily, to yield to the principles found in his Word. I want no confusion or divisiveness in his church. I may seem oppressed but in reality I’m freed. I’m under his protection, my attitude must maintain a servant’s heart, my goal is to be obedient to the biblical mandate because my reward will come from him.”



The contrast between these two women, Eve and Mary, sets up an unfair caricature that depicts those who affirm women in church leadership as being rebellious, defiant, and selfishly going their own way. Unfortunately, Elliot even misrepresents Eve since Eve was actually deceived rather than being brazenly disobedient! The only appropriate response to the permanent subordination of women appears to be an unquestioning subservience. Surely the debate about how to interpret the Bible regarding women in church leadership is not a black and white choice between defiance to God's Word and quiet submission to his will?

I am concerned that if we begin the conversation regarding how to interpret the disputed texts in the Bible with the assumption that anyone who affirms women in church leadership has already compromised the authority of God's Word because of the influence of secular culture, then how do we actually talk seriously together about how to read the Bible? Furthermore, if our attempt to engage in conversation is framed as a debate between two opposing and incompatible camps – egalitarians and complementarians – then we have politicized the debate leaving little room to actually work together with those we disagree with in our search for God's truth. The challenge moving forward is how we can search the Scriptures together, openly seeking the Spirit's guidance and honestly talking with one another, and through it all loving one another as sisters and brothers in the Lord.