

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

my journey to Christian feminism

courtney brown

an independent study in religion

spring 2015

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

introduction	3
on the role of women	7
old testament	9
Genesis 38: Tamar	9
Joshua 2: Rahab	10
Proverbs 31: The ideal woman?	11
Jesus & women	15
Luke 8: The women	15
Luke 10: Mary and Martha	16
Mark 14: Jesus anointed	16
Paul & women	19
Ephesians 5: Gender roles in marriage	19
1 Corinthians 11: Cultural or universal?	21
1 Timothy 2: God's design?	22
co-workers for the gospel	25
further reading	27
special thanks	27

# INTRODUCTION

For my independent study in religion in the spring of 2015, I decided to research the role of women in Christian ministry and the New Testament. I come from a Southern Baptist background, and I grew up in a church with the belief that God had specifically reserved leadership positions in the church and in the family for men. These beliefs weren't necessarily strongly enforced by my family--my parents did an amazing job of illustrating mutual submission and Christlike love for one another--but my church family put a complementarian gender theology into practice in almost every aspect of our congregation.

For a while, it all made sense: the gospel imagery, the idea of letting the men make all the "final decisions," and those ever-sought-after values of "biblical" manhood and womanhood. However, as I grew up and began to lead Bible studies, I grew frustrated by the notion that I couldn't teach without a male co-leader; that it would be wrong for my future husband and I to move somewhere due to my job, but moving for his was allowed and almost expected; or that I was somehow unfit for certain gifts of the Spirit due to my gender. It was incredibly unnerving to watch men and boys debate other men and boys about whether my desire to serve the Lord through teaching was "biblical" simply because of my gender.

Questions about these beliefs were met with honest answers, from church leaders or other Christian influences in my life, but those answers were always tainted, either with a strong cultural bias toward traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, or with the implication that I just wasn't taking Scripture seriously enough. One person told me women shouldn't have authority over men because it allowed men to be passive. *Are women of God called to be passive? I must've missed that passage*, I wondered, as I thought of women like Rahab and Ruth.

Another said my view of gender roles revealed how I thought about the Bible and the Gospel, and I knew what that meant: *Don't believe men should be the head of the household? Don't believe Paul's words are literally, universally applicable? You're just not reading it right. Maybe you should work on trusting God more. After all, this is his design. You wouldn't want to go against his design, would you?*

Embedded in the practical implications of this gender theology was a struggle to understand what it meant to be a "biblical" woman--and the resulting toll it took on my self-identity. I'd always been interested in sports and videography and dreamed of a successful career in sports media; as a result, I didn't have many friends who were girls in the first place. I hated jewelry, crafts and fashion shows, so I never quite felt at home at any women's ministry events. I hated the baking and the sparkles and the baby fever, and none of those things really seemed to teach me much about how to be a godly woman. The girls around me were praised for their "gentle and quiet spirits," while my opinionated and fiery nature made it difficult to feel like I was truly serving the Lord correctly. I wondered if God had purposely made me the way he had to teach me a lesson--that if I would eventually shut up, stop talking and just focus on being more gentle, I could somehow become more godly in the process.

Now, there's nothing wrong with gentleness--it is a fruit of the Spirit after all--but finding my identity in godly personality traits turned out to be no match for pursuing God himself. For all those years, I wondered why I couldn't trust God enough to accept what I thought was his design. I spent night after night poring over passages of Scripture and books and articles, trying to make sense of it all, but nothing clicked. Eventually, after a lot of sleepless nights and a little bit of prayer, I realized: The more deeply I fell in love with Jesus, the more I learned about his treatment of women, the more I learned about the letters of Paul and Scripture as a whole, the more I became convinced--and convicted--that male-only leadership couldn't be God's only design for us.

It was like someone had turned on the light and cleaned the dust out of my soul. I finally felt at peace with who I was in Christ, an identity that stood free from my relationship to a man. Who I was in Christ had nothing to do with how girly I was--I was simply his beloved, and my relationship with him made me a part of his mission of reconciliation for all of humanity. I even ventured so far as to call myself what I used to consider the godly woman's f-word: a **feminist**.

And now I've decided to take on the insurmountable task of writing it all down. This final study is a collection of passages of Scripture and other experiences I've had to work through to fully realize my role in the body of Christ. It also contains notes from interviews I conducted with female clergy here in Stillwater.

I'm not a Bible scholar, so this is not intended to be exhaustive, academic or perfectly in-depth. But I know if I've had to wrestle with these questions about my identity, plenty of other women --with or without seminary degrees--have probably done the same. So, in writing this, I wanted to provide a starting point for women who are interested in learning more about God's design for their callings, marriages and churches--or for men who, like my sweet boyfriend, have got a skeptical and spirited woman on their hands and aren't quite sure what to do with her.

My greatest fear in writing this is I know so many people--whom I love dearly and who have had significant spiritual influence in my life--will read it and think I'm just another Christian teen who's gone off to college and become a liberal. *Another one bites the dust*, right? I hope I can write words of peace and wisdom to show you otherwise.

But no matter your views on gender roles, I hope this study can teach you what it taught me: The gospel is for everyone. There is no room for discrimination or domination over one another in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He is slowly but surely pushing all humanity toward reconciliation, redemption and true equality--and I believe women are an important part of that redemptive movement.

So, won't you join us?

*All verses taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.*

## A QUICK NOTE

In my discussions of biblical texts, I will often use the words “**complementarian**” and “**egalitarian**” to describe two positions on gender roles. For those who aren’t familiar with these terms, here are basic definitions, though they may differ depending on one’s background/circumstances/etc:

**Complementarian position:** Male and female were created by God as equal in dignity, value, essence and human nature, but also distinct in role whereby the male was given the responsibility of loving authority over the female, and the female was to offer willing, glad-hearted and submissive assistance to the man.

(from *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*)

**Egalitarian position:** Not only are all people equal before God in their personhood, but there are no gender-based limitations of what functions or roles each can fulfill in the home, the church, and the society.

(from *Theopedia*)



# ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN

key passages &  
personal reflections



# OLD TESTAMENT

To better understand the role of women in the New Testament, we must start with their history. Throughout the Old Testament, women appear in almost every capacity: we see them as heroines, villains, sidekicks and harlots.

However, only four of those women are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus as listed in Matthew 1, which begs the question: Why these women? What was so special about their stories that compelled Matthew to single them out in this way?

We're not explicitly told why in the passage, but my guess is Matthew wanted to draw attention to Jesus' messy family tree. Sure, coming from David's lineage didn't exactly put him in the lower class, but it challenged cultural and religious expectations of how a savior was supposed to look. This Messiah wasn't quite the strong, powerful king they'd imagined for centuries. No, he was incredibly human: one of us, with baggage, and a crazy family to boot.

A look at these women's names lets us know we're in for quite a story: first, we see Tamar, who slept with her father-in-law after her previous two husbands were killed; then Rahab, a prostitute with great courage; Ruth, who boldly demanded a man's attention in the wee hours of the night; Bathsheba, who became pregnant by King David while her husband was at war; and, of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Certainly this cast of characters seemed unfit to produce a long-awaited savior of mankind --yet this lineage, much too risqué for a Sunday School lesson, so far removed from the prim and proper Christian culture we often cling to, was precisely the one God chose to bring redemption into this world.

We won't examine each of these women's histories in detail, but I believe looking at some of their stories, along with--take a deep breath--Proverbs 31, will give us a better lens through which to view our New Testament passages.

## GENESIS 38: TAMAR

When I first read Genesis 38, I finally understood why people always say the Bible is full of exciting stories. Don't get me wrong; the resurrection still brings me to tears every Easter weekend--but Genesis has some of the best drama I've ever read. Sex, lies and betrayal run rampant, and God's somehow got his hand in it all.

Chapter 38 tells us the story of Tamar, the first woman mentioned in Jesus' genealogy. Tamar married into the family of Judah--the son of Jacob--and, as a wife in this time period, her job was to carry on the lineage through offspring. She married Judah's oldest son, Er, but their honeymoon phase didn't last long: Er was was "wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death" (v. 7). In the event of a husband's death, it was customary for his brother to take his sister-in-law as a wife to "raise up offspring for your brother" (v. 8). So Judah's next oldest son, Onan, took Tamar as a wife, but because he knew the offspring wouldn't really be

his, he “spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother” (v. 9). God took Onan’s life, too, but at that time Judah’s youngest son, Shelah, wasn’t old enough to marry, so he sent Tamar to live in her father’s house until he was of age.

Tamar waited for what I imagine was a considerably long time. While she waited, Judah’s wife --who never gets called by her own name--died, and Tamar found out Shelah was old enough, yet Judah hadn’t made any arrangements for them to marry. So, to take what was rightfully hers--offspring and a continued lineage--she devised a bold and risky plan: she dressed as a prostitute and slept with her father-in-law, and kept his signet and cord as payment (v. 17-18).

When Judah learned of her pregnancy, he was ready to punish her to the fullest extent of the law--until she brought forth his signet and cord. Realizing what he had done, Judah acknowledged his wrongdoing: “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (v. 26).

I’ve heard different interpretations of this passage--many of them politically charged--but what stood out to me most was the character of Tamar, and her boldness. In a time when the world didn’t even consider it important to name all of the female characters of their stories --a time when wives were “given” to men by their parents--Tamar risked everything to stand up for herself. She knew she had been treated unjustly, and she did what she needed to do--no matter how shocking--to earn what was rightfully hers. And she was rewarded for her scandalous courage: before Jacob died, he told his sons of the divine lineage that would come from Judah’s offspring:

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;  
and the obedience of the peoples is his.”  
(Genesis 49:10)

## **JOSHUA 2: RAHAB**

Next in the genealogy is Rahab, who helped hide Israelite spies in her home when they came to find a way to conquer Jericho. Despite her reputation as a harlot (the NRSV explicitly refers to her as a “prostitute”), she knew the God of Israel was truly God, and she chose to align her loyalty with him:

“Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: ‘I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.’”

Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.'" (Joshua 2:8-14)

Again we see a woman--a prostitute, no less--who isn't afraid to ask for what she wants. Thinking of her family, and realizing the God of Israel was who he said he was, she asks for kindness in return. Without ever having experienced God for herself, she trusted he could deliver, and was rewarded for it. She refused to be defined by her past and instead chose to pursue God by helping his people.

We even see her mentioned as one of the few women in Hebrews 11's "hall of faith": "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (v. 31). Though Rahab spent most of her life in sin, she would be remembered for her faith and peace, and would carry on the lineage that would eventually produce a messiah.

## **PROVERBS 31: THE IDEAL WOMAN?**

There are dozens of stories of extraordinary women in the Old Testament, women of courage, strength and faith, whose stories could fill books of their own. But no story has as much influence--and baggage--for modern Christian women as the 31st chapter of Proverbs. The poem is often seen as the ultimate to-do list for godly women--and one of the earliest instances of unattainable standards for them. For many, the passage conjures up feelings of inadequacy, and questions about their ability to measure up to this ideal woman.

As a young girl, I heard Proverbs 31 so many times I can still recite parts of it from memory. Every girls' retreat started and ended with a "sermon" of sorts on the passage--but most of them were more stress-inducing than empowering, and they were all incredibly vague. *She does this. You should do this. Fear the Lord. What?*

I spent years trying to figure out how to take her actions and make them applicable to my life, though I was often confused at how she got so much done if she was supposed to have that "gentle and quiet spirit" thing going on. However, once I learned the context and purpose of the proverb, it began to shift from an impossibly high standard to a celebration of a woman who fears the Lord. It became less of a to-do list and more of an anthem.

First, the poem is written to one man as a guide, not to women everywhere as a call to action. Up in verse 1 (which seldom gets preached with this passage) the author tells us this is a message to a King Lemuel, and this celebration of a godly woman is just a part of a larger passage of wisdom from the king's mother. The passage was intended to provide an example of a capable wife, one of noble character, for the king to keep in mind.

But rather than stopping there and letting it serve as a self-imposed checklist for women in their search for the ultimate husband, let's go deeper. How does the king's mother determine

this woman is praiseworthy? The passage lists several things the wife does well:

**She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.**  
*She will go to great lengths to provide for her family. (v. 14)*

**She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.**  
*She is not only capable of doing business, but she also takes the time to invest in her ventures. (v. 16)*

**She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hand to the needy.**  
*She shows great kindness and compassion to those around her. (v. 20)*

At the end of the passage, this woman is celebrated, but it's not for her accomplishments or success as a wife. No, it's for her godly character:

**"Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue...Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."**  
(v. 25-26,31)

So, rather than seeing this passage as a reminder that I'll never measure up, I see it as a commendation of a woman who fears the Lord. The word used to describe this woman in verse 10 is, ironically enough, a masculine word: *chayil*. *Chayil* is described not as being prim and proper but as having strength and ability. It even has connotations of this woman having the strength of an army--a woman of valor, as Rachel Held Evans so eloquently puts it:

**"Valor isn't about what you do, but how you do it. If you are a stay-at-home mom, be a stay-at-home mom of valor. If you are a nurse, be a nurse of valor. If you are a CEO, a pastor, or a barista at Starbucks, if you are rich or poor, single or married—do it all with valor. That's what makes you a Proverbs 31 Woman, not creating a life worthy of a Pinterest board."**

--Rachel Held Evans, "3 Things You Might Not Know About Proverbs 31"

You see, Proverbs 31 is so much more than an example of traditional gender roles or a checklist for being a good wife. No, it transcends gender and even actions to honor this woman's character. What she does is not as important as how she does it--with strength, dignity, wisdom and kindness. She fears the Lord, and THAT is what makes her praiseworthy--that is why "the heart of her husband trusts in her" (v. 11).

So we must take back the meaning of this passage. Many try to do so, and choose to only preach verse 30, but that verse is so much richer in the context of the entire passage. We should show our men *and* women this passage: Here is a woman who does everything with her whole heart captivated by the Lord. Here are examples of the things she does, but they're not prescriptive. She is not "far more precious than jewels" because she brings her family food--she is precious because of who she is.

So whoever you are, and whatever you do, do everything like the Proverbs 31 woman. Do it with strength and dignity. Do it with wisdom and kindness. Do it as Paul writes in Colossians 3:

**“Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.”**

(Colossians 3:23)



# JESUS & WOMEN

To begin our New Testament study of women, we must look at the main character: Jesus. Does it matter that Jesus only chose male disciples? How did Jesus interact with women? How did they respond to him?

When discussing the teachings and life of Jesus, I always try to keep author Sarah Bessey's advice in mind:

**"May we remember we need the different expressions and experiences of Jesus. We don't have the market cornered on Jesus. May we listen!"**

(Twitter, 2015)

I won't pretend to have the market cornered on Jesus--and much of what I have learned on this subject comes from wonderful authors like Rachel Held Evans and Sarah Bessey. But if we're called to walk as Christ walked, then he should be the first place we look when we don't know what to believe.

## LUKE 8: THE WOMEN

Mention Jesus, and stories of his 12 disciples are sure to follow. Many use their exclusively male membership to suggest Jesus' adherence to traditional gender roles. However, Jesus wasn't a modern-day preacher or pastor--he was a Jewish rabbi, and to hold him to our cultural standards of church structure seems insufficient. In Jesus' time, women weren't allowed to study under rabbis, but that didn't keep Jesus from including women in his ministry:

**"Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."**

(Luke 8:1-3)

These women didn't just travel with Jesus, they provided for him. He had done a work in their life, and they responded by dropping everything to follow him. Could Jesus have challenged cultural restrictions and chosen these women--or any women--as disciples? Absolutely. But I believe he had more important matters at hand, and rather than waging a war on gender roles, he waged--and won--the war on sin and death and set patriarchy on a path to redemption with his sacrifice, like he did on so many other issues--for example, slavery.

Today, we acknowledge that owning humans as property is wrong, and many Christian ministries have sprung up to devote themselves to the task of eradicating slavery in every form. And to that, I say, Praise God! Slavery should be abolished, everywhere, once and for all. But did Jesus explicitly condemn it in any of his teachings? No, in fact, he used slaves and masters as characters in many of his parables (Luke 12). However, we know based on the character and life of Jesus that he would not support slavery, certainly not in its modern form:

“Given God’s creation and repeated prophetic mandates in Scripture of equality and freedom and justice for the oppressed, God’s dream for humanity is clearly not slavery... all this battling to eradicate human trafficking happens despite the fact that there is actually no specific verse in Scripture that prohibits the buying and selling of human beings. Some verses even affirm proper treatment and behaviors of slaves. And yet we accept and understand that slavery is evil precisely because of the Bible and because we understand God’s created purpose for humanity.”

--Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, pp. 28-29

So, are we to say, similarly, that Jesus’ selection of all-male disciples paved the way for male-only leadership in his church? No more than a group of all-Jewish disciples would exclude Gentile men from serving as pastors. Jesus came to pave the way for forgiveness and redemption, and on many other issues, he left room for discussion and disagreement--which compels us to look deeper at the ways he interacted with women in his time on Earth.

## **LUKE 10: MARY AND MARTHA**

In Luke 10, we see Jesus defend a woman’s right to learn from his teaching:

“Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”  
(Luke 10:38-42)

This passage, often used as a “stop and smell the roses” reminder for Christians, gives us another example of Jesus’ radical treatment of women. Jesus spoke directly to the women he interacted with--his longest recorded conversation in the gospels was with the Samaritan woman at the well--and often engaged them in theological discussion. He even chose them to be the first to learn of his resurrection, even in a time where a woman’s testimony wasn’t valid in court.

Jesus treated women as equals and lifted them up beyond the limits their culture had placed on them. He didn’t just allow Mary to sit at his feet and learn--a spot typically reserved for men--he actively defended her choice. She had “chosen the better part,” and it wouldn’t be taken away from her (v. 42).

## **MARK 14: JESUS ANOINTED**

My favorite story of Jesus interacting with a woman is found in Mark 14. The story appears in all four gospels, with the woman anointing Jesus’ head in two, and feet in the other two:

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a

woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor.' And they rebuked her harshly.

'Leave her alone,' said Jesus. 'Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.'"

(Mark 14:3-9 NIV)

The telling of her anointing Jesus' head *and* feet is significant: anointing someone's head often signified their authority and was often used in kings' coronation ceremonies; anointing someone's feet signified service, humility and love and foreshadowed Jesus washing his disciples' feet in chapter 13. This woman recognized Jesus' authority and humility all at once, and in return, Jesus recognized her worship and affection and defended her radical outpouring of love.

This woman poured out perfume worth a year's wages, and Judas was quick to criticize her for it. But Jesus knew Judas' suggestion to give the money to the poor didn't come from a place of actually caring for the poor; it came from a place of selfishness, and Jesus saw right through it. Instead, he placed value on this woman's desire to be fully committed. She had poured out a year's wages at his feet, surely not a small sacrifice. But Jesus valued her worship, and not because of its extravagance or its indulgence. In fact, most male leaders in this culture would have ignored or rebuked the woman for letting her hair down in public--but not Jesus. He valued her worship because he valued her. It didn't matter how she showed her affection--just that she showed her affection to Jesus.

Isn't it interesting how we remember every detail about Judas Iscariot--the thief and betrayer--and yet this woman isn't named in all the gospel accounts, even though Jesus said she would be remembered for her worship? So often we fail to see as Jesus did by looking at the heart. Instead, we look at actions and cultural standards to define what is appropriate and good. This woman did something considered radically offensive for her culture at the time--but Jesus said she would be remembered for it, right along with the gospel.

To me, this passage shows that Jesus values the heart above all else. He desires intimacy, commitment and worship, not precision or performance.

For so long, I felt I was created in a way that was inappropriate for the church. I longed to use my gifts of teaching, but I worried I was offending God with my desire to lead. The breaking point came when a male friend asked me if I was just being selfish in my aspirations--if maybe I was projecting my own desires onto God, rather than the other way around.

I considered the possibility, but then I wondered whether my male counterparts were being

asked the same question. I remembered the celebrations that often occurred when a young boy at church would step forward and express his desire to teach or to pastor. *How wonderful! What an obedient and faithful young man. We are so proud of him for following God's call.*

But as a young girl? *Well, now, aren't you just being selfish? Is this really the way God's calling you to serve him? You must be imagining things.*

Then I learned more about the person of Jesus, who flipped appropriate church standards upside down. He dined with tax collectors, thieves and women of ill reputation. He defended their right to worship even when it was deemed out of place by the religious leaders of that day.

I believe Jesus is less concerned with what we do and entirely concerned with how we do it. If Jesus valued the structure and hierarchy like we so often think he did, he would have immediately asked this woman to cover her hair. He would have scolded her for wasting perfume that was typically reserved for burials and special occasions, but instead, he scolded those who would limit or define her worship.

Jesus values our honest devotion and affection, and he couldn't care less how we fit into molds of what is culturally acceptable. He fulfilled every religious law and statute with his two simple commandments: Love God and love others. Jesus transcended institutional and cultural systems to reconcile all things to himself--and, I believe, to equality:

**"Where are you going to see your lord? In the power and wealth of Herod and Caesar, of kingship and empire? Or in this Galilean Jewish peasant who saw things very differently? Where are you going to see the decisive manifestation of God? In the domination system? Or in Jesus who was executed by the domination system?"**

--Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, p. 184

## PAUL & WOMEN

In any journey to better understand the role of women in the church, it's impossible to skip over the letters of Paul. Some of the strongest--and most controversial--passages against women in leadership are found in the pages of Paul's letters. Much like Proverbs 31--even more so--some of these passages come with heavy baggage.

It also feels difficult for me to write authoritatively on the letters of Paul because, as I've mentioned before, I'm not a Bible scholar. I don't know Greek or Hebrew. I'm not going to pretend I know everything there is to know about the disputes over Pauline authorship, and I certainly wasn't alive at a time where I could know every nuance of each culture Paul wrote to. All I know is the character of Jesus, and the story of his gospel, and I will try my best to reason through those lenses.

I might not even reason that well, to be perfectly honest. I still don't completely understand how a book filled with stories of Jesus' loving advocacy for women can also contain instructions for their silence and submission. There are still nights Paul's words about the creation order drive me to tears, as I sit in disbelief that a God who came to lift the oppressed would go right back to ensuring their marginalization.

But I don't believe that. No, I believe there is more to the story. I don't have all the answers, and I won't touch on every passage, but I will touch on the ones that give me the most difficulty.

As I mentioned earlier, much of my thinking on this topic is not independent--I have spiritual mentors both near and far that have helped me form my beliefs. Much of what I write will reference their words, words of peace and love and grace, not fiery debate. I will try to approach these letters with gentleness and respect:

"The way of Christ is a narrow path. As we walk, we heart-wrestle, wondering; and we pray for wisdom and grace, courage and company...because these aren't just 'issues' or 'debates,' are they? This very book, our conversation, this 'issue' represents people with real lives and real stories and real hurts, real marriages and real churches and very real complex needs. The world is failing women, and we, the people of God, know the solution: our beloved Jesus and his Kingdom ways are good news, in every sense of the words."

--Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, pp. 55-56

### EPHESIANS 5: GENDER ROLES IN MARRIAGE

We can't properly address the role of women in ministry without first turning to their role in marriage. The two have become so entangled that a woman's role in her marriage is often the first bullet point in the justification of male-only leadership in the church.

For me, this passage was one of the biggest hurdles to jump. The gospel imagery of loving sacrifice seems to check out, but it's often distorted into something completely different than what the passage represents.

On its face, Paul's command seems simple enough: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (v. 22,25). But even Paul himself admits this is a "great mystery," and taking these words out of their proper context can distort their meaning altogether (v.32).

We often read these words as Paul's correction to an overtly feminist or matriarchal society--as if he were saying, *Women, you're not submitting enough, and you need to submit more in order to have godly marriages.* But Paul's words came in the midst of an incredibly patriarchal and oppressive environment for women. They were a correction, but not for the women: They placed the burden on the man to love, and to love sacrificially. They were real-life, concrete instructions for how to live out verse 21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

I don't believe Paul's words in Ephesians 5 are universally applicable, as so many pastors argue now. However, many complementarians use this passage to support their analogy for what I like to call The Great Complementarian Dance. *Well, you have to have one leader, they say. Each person gets an opinion, but there must be a final decision-maker for when you can't agree!* They compare it to two-stepping, figure skating or some other form of partner dancing: *You can't have two leaders on the dance floor! The man has to lead in order to keep the balance. Otherwise, the routine would fall apart.*

John Ensor describes this analogy in his article, "An Olympic Lesson for Husbands and Wives":

"He leads her onto the ice and initiates each part of their routine. She receives that leadership and trusts in his strength. His raw physical strength is more on display than hers; he does all the lifting, twirling and catching. She complements his strength with her own; a more diminutive and more attractive strength of beauty, grace, speed and balance. His focus as the head or leader is to magnifying her skills. Her focus is on following his lead and signaling her readiness to receive his next move. He takes responsibility for the two of them and she trusts his leadership and delights in it."

Now, I've got no background in figure skating, but I danced competitively for most of my life, and this analogy never quite sat well with me. Anyone with a dance background can see the flaws in this analogy (nevermind that a marriage is surely much more complex than a dance routine!). For example, in lifts, it's often the woman doing the work--the man simply frames her and gives her some extra height as she gracefully leaps across the stage. I could never quite coherently verbalize my thoughts, however, until I read Naomi Hanvey's eloquent response to Ensor's article:

"Ensor repeatedly uses the word 'lead' to describe the male role and 'receive' or 'support' to describe the female role, but I get the impression that he thinks the couples are improvising. That's not how a skating routine (or a dance routine, or a gymnastics routine) works. In reality, neither party is actually the "leader" – they have a choreographer or a coach (sometimes both) designing the routine, down to the timing and spacing...The couple doesn't have a leader and a follower; they have to move

together as one.”

--Naomi Hanvey, “Complementarianism on Ice? A Dancer’s Response to ‘An Olympic Lesson for Husbands and Wives’”

Maybe that Great Marital Impasse we hypothesize about will require a final decision-maker--but rather than letting gender be the deciding factor, we should trust those moments to our heavenly Choreographer. Marriage is about so much more than the male-female leadership dynamic, and when we lift up male leadership above fleshing out the gospel for each other, we miss the point of marriage itself:

“If wives submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ, and if husbands love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, and if both husbands and wives submit to one another as commanded, we enter a never-ending, life-giving circle of mutual submission and love.”

--Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, p. 83

“It’s not about having a leader and a follower, an initiator and a receiver; it’s about mutual strength, trust, and dedication, and as Christians, mutual submission to the real Leader.”

--Naomi Hanvey, “Complementarianism on Ice? A Dancer’s Response to ‘An Olympic Lesson for Husbands and Wives’”

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11: CULTURAL OR UNIVERSAL?

The gospel-centered language of Ephesians 5 certainly softens the blow of the seemingly lopsided power dynamic. Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for some of Paul’s other letters --for example, 1 Corinthians 11. Here, it seems like Paul places the value of a woman not on herself, but on her relationship to a man:

“But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ...For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.”

(v. 3, 7-9)

Alright, then.

Here, it seems as if Paul skips the cultural institutions and goes straight for creation order. These verses would be hard to swallow if Paul hadn’t surrounded them with two significant points.

First, Paul is not excluding women from speaking in church. In verse 5, he forbids women to pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered, but says nothing about the praying or prophesying itself. Second, Paul goes beyond the original creation order to paint a picture of mutuality in Christ: “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God” (v. 11-12).

It seems Paul is actually just as confused as we are about the appropriate behavior for women in church, as he leaves the final decision up to the church members:

**“Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled?... But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.”**

(1 Corinthians 11:13-16)

I don't have an answer as to why Paul included what seems to be such a rigid adherence to creation order in the midst of a seemingly egalitarian discussion of head coverings in church, but it seems Paul is taking a cue from Jesus by shifting the focus from the actions themselves to the motives behind them. He seems less concerned with whether women are covering their heads and more concerned with their modesty and reverence in worship. Either way, Paul offers advice and then leaves the ultimate decision to the individual congregation, rather than making a sweeping generalization about women:

**“Perhaps, just perhaps, we can't read singular verses or chapters in a vacuum; perhaps we can't read letters written to specific people with specific situations in mind in a specific context and then apply them, broad brush, to the whole of humanity or the church or even our own small selves. Perhaps we need wisdom, insight. We need the Holy Spirit.”**

--Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, p. 59

## **1 TIMOTHY 2: GOD'S DESIGN?**

Ah, 1 Timothy 2.

There's a reason I put off writing about this passage til the very end. The second half of the second chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy has to be one of the most controversial passages in all of Scripture, let alone our discussion about women in ministry. I could rant and rave about them for hours, but I'm not a huge fan of playing into stereotypes, so I'll leave the fire-breathing feminism for another day.

The passage, in its entirety:

**“I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.**

**Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. 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, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”**

(1 Timothy 2:8-15)

Ouch.

Whether complementarian, egalitarian or somewhere in between, this passage is full of land mines. The most obvious: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (v. 12). Less obvious, but still just as confusing: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing"---and we have the creation story tangled up in all of it (v. 15).

So what do we do with a passage like this?

First, we read the passage along with--and in light of--Paul's other letters. Yes, Paul used the creation story in discussing the logistical challenges the church at Ephesus was facing, but he also wrote of women praying and prophesying in numerous other places (1 Corinthians 11:5, as we saw earlier). If his creation mandate for female silence had been universal, we would have seen this story repeated any other place where women were praying and prophesying. (I also suspect we would have heard more about this extra requirement of childbearing in order to be saved.)

Second, we put the passage in its proper context, as we have with the first two passages. We could discuss the dispute over Paul's authorship--or lack thereof--of the Timothy letters, but I'm really not educated enough for that. What we can do is attempt to understand where Paul--or whoever wrote these words--was coming from: the culture, the people and the circumstances. Paul's letters are full of specific and seemingly insignificant details, as many of ours would be today if they were published. (As F.F. Bruce once wrote, "I think Paul would roll over in his grave if he knew we were turning his letters into torah.")

So we must adjust our thinking to account for context. (Note that I'm not suggesting we take any authority away from the Bible--I'm simply saying we should approach it with the correct frame of mind, and with enough humility to understand there may be things about it we'll never understand.)

I won't pretend to be an expert on first-century church culture, but both Rachel Held Evans ([www.rachelheldevans.com](http://www.rachelheldevans.com)) and Sarah Bessey (*Jesus Feminist*) have provided convincing evidence as to why these words were written in the first place. However, no matter the details of this particular letter, the most important lesson is that we do the early church a great disservice when we boil its existence down to a few obscure lines of a letter that no one can clearly explain:

**"The epistles were never meant to be interpreted and applied as universal law. Rather, they provide us with an instructive and inspired glimpse into how Jesus' teachings were lived out by real people, in real communities, facing real challenges. It is not the details found in the letters that we should seek to imitate, but rather the attitudes.**

The details (head coverings, circumcision, meat offered to idols, widow management, hair length, etc.) are rarely timeless, but the attitudes ('as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men,' 'do not cause your brother to stumble,' 'avoid the appearance

of evil') provide guidelines that can instruct us as Christians today.

So the questions we should be asking ourselves today are not: Should we eat meat offered to idols?, or Should women wear head coverings?, but rather, How can we find peace when Christians feel convicted in different ways? and How do we avoid unnecessarily offending others by our appearance?"

--Rachel Held Evans, "For the sake of the gospel, let women speak"

Is it in our best interest to choose an obscure and controversial passage as the foundation for major church doctrine? Probably not. We would be better off examining these as case studies of the first people to ever have to apply the teachings of Jesus to their own lives. Instead of focusing on each little thing the New Testament churches were doing, we should try to identify how each one applied the gospel teachings in a way that was meaningful and relevant to its culture, and examine our own churches to see how we can do the same.

# CO-WORKERS FOR THE GOSPEL

Yet, in the muck of all this frustration and anger, there is hope. There is light peeking through the cracks in this shelter of silence and submission. There is progress being made. Women are beginning to realize their roles in the body of Christ--their manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12).

And so I wish I had an inspiring and moving way to finish this paper. I wish I could write knowing every word is a step taken in the direction of equality.

But I can't.

Even today, my heart is heavy for women who are burdened by confusion and hurt--as I still so often am. Even today, I am struggling as a member of a complementarian church body whose convictions on the matter seem to grow more intense every Sunday.

So what can I do?

I can only continue to pray, to learn and to speak.

I will continue to pray for equality and reconciliation, which will undoubtedly take time. Abolishing major forms of slavery took thousands of years, and it's still taking plenty of time to be eradicated completely. God is a God of justice, but he is not always a God of immediacy.

I will continue to learn with humility, and with grace for those who think differently than I do. I never want to feel like I have all the answers, like I so often used to. I will struggle, but I will ultimately place my confidence not in my intelligence or knowledge, but in my relationship with Jesus Christ.

I will continue to speak truth and wisdom with kindness. Every day, I ask God to give me grace and patience for a Christian culture that is still so disheartening to our sisters in Christ. I will continue to challenge antiquated and distorted views of gender that have no place in the kingdom of God, even when I am fearful.

And I have so much fear to overcome.

Mostly, I fear people will learn I am a feminist and assume my heart is hardened to the authority of Scripture. They will assume I must be rebellious, or that I was raised without any knowledge of the Bible, or that I hate men and want all the power for myself.

To those people, I would say: my heart is so far from being hardened. It aches for women who are oppressed and disheartened. It soaks in those feelings of inadequacy and shame created by cultural gender roles--especially when they are presented as "biblical." It longs for true equality in the body of Christ.

But still, in my inadequacy, in my anger, in my confusion: Jesus reigns, and therefore there is hope.

I see hope in the Scriptures: in Romans 16, where Paul commends the many women who have also helped to advance the gospel; in Philippians 4, where Paul recounts the women who have struggled beside him as co-workers in the gospel; in Acts 2, where women and men alike are entrusted with the precious gift of the Holy Spirit; in 1 Corinthians 12, where the Spirit allots spiritual gifts regardless of gender or any other factor; and in Galatians 3, where we see a vision of the gospel's universal reach through Jesus:

**"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."**

(Galatians 3:26-28)

I see hope in our culture, where women's rights are more frequently brought up in political and social conversations, and where, at the very least, rhetorics of shame and misogyny are slowly dying out.

I see hope in many of our churches, where women are being ordained and taught no differently than their male counterparts--women like my friend Sally, who's a female pastor in the middle of Oklahoma, and is lovingly embraced by her congregation; or like my friend Mary, who left her job at the peak of her career to become a minister because she felt it was how she could best obey the Lord.

Yes, in all this, there is hope.

In all this, I believe God is slowly--but surely--moving us toward his kingdom vision of equality of race, socioeconomic status and gender.

In all this, I continue to struggle beside my brothers and sisters in the work of the gospel, knowing even though the reality of gender inequality is unjust, our ultimate mission is to further the glory of God and the free gift of his Son, and only there will we find true peace and satisfaction.

So, won't you join us?

## FURTHER READING

*Jesus Feminist*, Sarah Bessey (book)

"For the sake of the gospel, let women speak," Rachel Held Evans (online)

"Submission in Context: Christ and the Greco-Roman Household Codes," Rachel Held Evans (online)

"4 Common Misconceptions About Egalitarianism," Rachel Held Evans (online)

"Complementarianism on Ice? A Dancer's Response to 'An Olympic Lesson for Husbands and Wives,'" Naomi Hanvey (online)

"The Church's Missing Half," Halee Gray Scott (online)

## SPECIAL THANKS

To **Dr. Thompson**, whose quiet and humble nature in his teachings about Paul and the New Testament inspired me to even consider the possibility that there might be another way for women in the body of Christ.

To **Andrew**, who put up with my rants and tears as I struggled through my journey to feminism, and who realized seeing me as more of a leader did not make him less of a man.

To **Kelsey**, who sometimes feels like the only one who truly understands.

To **my parents**, who raised me with a real-life example of love and mutual submission in Christ.

To **Rachel Held Evans**, whose eloquent writings encouraged me and gave me great clarity in the moments I thought I must be making all this up.

To **Sarah Bessey**, whose humble and joyful words in *Jesus Feminist* helped me understand that being a feminist didn't mean I had to be angry, and whose book taught me how to make peace with the Scriptures.

To **Sally Houck**, **Mary Hileman**, **Leah Hrachovec** and **Tish Malloy**, for taking time out of their busy schedules to help me take hold of my own beliefs, and for inspiring women everywhere with their service to the Lord.

And to **Jesus Christ**, whose radical love, grace and humility never ceases to catch me by surprise.