

The Pauline Case for the Equality of Women Rev. Eric Carpenter

To understand specifically Paul's outlook on women in leadership, I believe we need to understand three significant perspectives from which he wrote: God's kingdom, cultural accommodation, and Paul's understanding of the Spirit's work. These posts are written from a perspective that embraces women in leadership roles of the church.

Part 1: Paul, the Kingdom and the Radical Equality of Women

I was a young adult when my home church gathered to discuss the ordination of women to the office of Elder. The lead pastor was a strong advocate for this change, but an elder, whom I respected very much, read from 1 Timothy and said, "I think scripture is pretty clear, women are not to have authority over men." Then, one of my female youth leaders stood and, instead of advocating for women elders, said, "I think this is simply Eve deceiving Adam all over again!"

At that time, I was not sure of the clarity of Scripture on this topic: some scriptures seemed to be in favor of women in leadership, but there were a number of scriptures that seemed to argue directly against it. I ended up voting to allow women elders that night, as did the majority of the congregation. But to the disappointment of me and many others, a number of families left the church in disagreement.

Through a long journey of reading, discussing and wrestling with this issue, I have come to embrace women's ordination as elders, deacons and pastors. Not because of shifts within our culture, but because of Scripture. As I have reflected and prayed, the scriptural argument for the leadership and ordination of women has grown exponentially for me. Simultaneously, the scriptural arguments against it have diminished in significance.

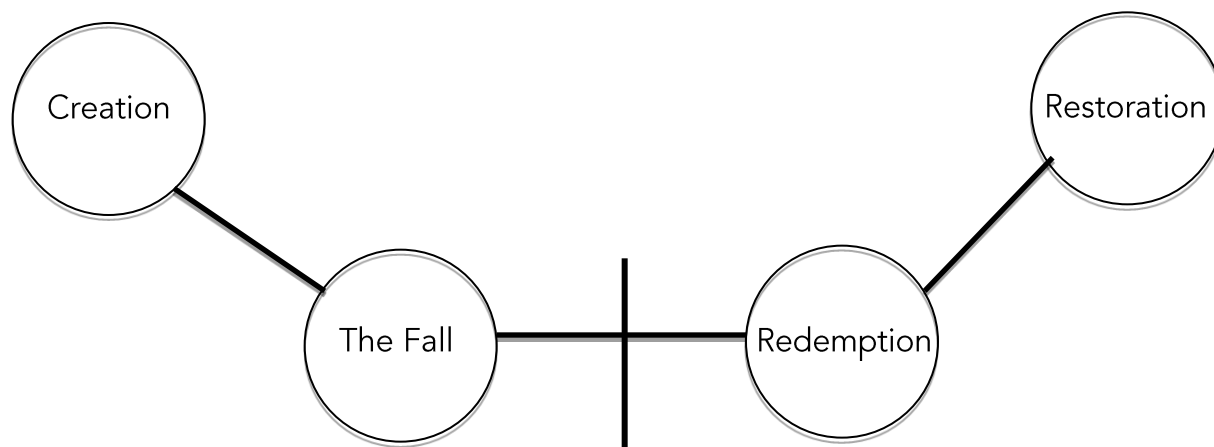
My study of the Kingdom of God has convinced me that the radical liberation of women as true co-workers in the Kingdom is a vital part of the message of the gospel. There are many books and articles to consult about women in leadership, but my approach for this article will be through Paul's lenses of the Kingdom, culture and Holy Spirit.

The Kingdom Theology of Paul

The Apostle Paul included what I call *Framework Passages*: core Bible texts that seem to transcend the particular issue Paul is addressing. They reveal a framework or window through which Paul sees the world. The following passage helps us understand Paul's theology of God's Kingdom.

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:19-22

In this important passage, Paul articulates the past, present and future of God's Kingdom work. It functions as a timeline, demonstrating both "how we got here" and "where we are going." Imagine four sides of a window frame or think of it as four acts of a play – the story of God's Kingdom: **Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration.**



One helpful way to understand biblical issues is to see where they fall within the story of God's Kingdom. If a concept or event is part of Creation (marriage, love and fellowship with God, stewardship of Creation, etc.), then it is part of God's heart and good intentions for us as His children. If it is part of the Fall (disease, divorce, violence, etc.), then it is part of our brokenness, something for which we should seek healing and restoration.

Key Kingdom Question

I recently met with a young couple who had attended our church for only a couple of months. They really liked us but had some practical questions they wanted to discuss as well as one theological matter – women in leadership. She began, "Pastor, growing up we were taught that women are not to teach or have authority over men. But we have noticed that as a church, you allow women to do both. Help us understand biblically how you got there." Over coffee, we opened the word of God together. First, I shared the diagram of the movement of the Kingdom, explaining it in the same manner as above. I asked them this key question: Is the principle of man's rule or dominion over woman part of Creation or part of the Fall?

They were unsure, so we looked at a passage from the Creation story.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
Genesis 1:27-28

In the Genesis story, we see *equality* in our creation and in our divine mandate or call. Man is not called to rule the woman (or vice versa) but together we are called to "subdue" and "rule" over creation. *Together*. Significant!

The couple, however, was still unconvinced (well, specifically the husband) so we looked at a passage from the biblical account of the Fall. The serpent, the woman and the man all received

particular consequences of their rebellion. These consequences were not part of Creation (God's heart and intention) but part of the Fall. Notice especially the last part of the consequences for the woman:

"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Genesis 3:16

It would be hard to overstate the significance of this. This verse helps bring clarity to Genesis 1:27-28: to rule or have dominion was originally part of the shared call of men and women. In the Fall and its consequences, we see the ruling/domination of man over woman introduced. Paul understood the ministry of Jesus and the Church as undoing the works of the enemy and the Fall. Of course, then, addressing this broken aspect of humanity and undoing this part of the curse towards women are part of our Kingdom Call.

Paul's Vision of the Kingdom Come

This reasoning convinced not only the wife in this couple, but also the husband! However, I wanted to complete the picture for them. In another *framework passage* (that which transcends a particular issue), Paul describes what the Kingdom has begun to be and what it will be fully when Christ returns and establishes the age to come.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:26-29 (See also 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11)

How do we understand this incredibly radical statement by Paul? First, we should see it in the context of the book of Galatians. Paul argues that in terms of salvation, privilege and promise, the ground is level at the cross. The Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to receive salvation; baptism has become the sign. Heritage does not determine the true children of Abraham, faith does. Therefore, it is not just the Jewish males that receive the Father's inheritance, but all who are clothed in Christ, whether male or female.

In Roman culture, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood included laying aside the garments of a child and putting on a new toga of adulthood. Paul used this analogy to show that when we are clothed in Christ, we receive all the privileges, rights and responsibilities of living in the Kingdom of God. It does not matter if, in this age, we are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

Another Key Question

Another key question is about restoration of the Kingdom. What will be like? So, we ask: In terms of female leadership, what does restoration look like?

Paul taught that Jesus Christ initiated the Kingdom at his first coming and that it would be fully consummated at his second coming. In the consummation of the Kingdom, all things that were lost or wrecked in the Fall will be restored. This includes the original divine mandate or call upon men and women to rule and steward the rest of creation. In the end the messiah doesn't just rule and reign, but we reign with him.

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! Romans 5:17

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads... And they will reign for ever and ever. Revelation 22:3-5b

When Paul talks of reigning with Christ, do you think he meant only Jewish men that lived free in this life? I don't see how that can be possible in light of Galatians 3:26-29. Restoration means a renewal of the original divine mandate of both men and women ruling with Christ.

Paul as an Advocate for Women

In numerous discussions over the years, I have often heard "Well, it is clear that Paul was no friend of women." I used to agree with that assessment, but I have changed my thinking. I have come to see Paul as a consistent advocate for the radical equality of all God's children; black or white, rich or poor, female or male. The change in my thinking has come first from understanding how significant the kingdom of God was to Paul's thinking and belief. Also crucial to this new understanding was Paul's sensitivity to each culture and context in which he was communicating the gospel and his understanding of the work of the Spirit of God in a New Testament context.

This is a crucial topic in Christianity and if Paul truly was an advocate for the radical liberation of women, it would seem imperative that we would be too. And if Paul truly saw this liberation as a vital part of the good news of the gospel, then it follows that his church should join him in this advocacy.

Part 2: Paul, the Spirit and the Radical Equality of Women

Fresh out of seminary, Brian and I dreamed of launching a church together. I loved Brian's authentic faith. He was a unique combination of intellectual rigor and passionate pursuit of the Spirit. Known to fast and pray for long periods of time, Brian had also just completed his second master's degree.

Based on a dream he had of us fishing together, Brian and I joined forces to plant a church. We agreed on most issues, but women in leadership was not one of them. Not that Brian was "anti-women" – in any sense. But he *did* believe that the Scriptures are God's inspired revelation, and wanted to honor them. Based on 1 Timothy 2:11-15,¹ Brian didn't think women should teach or have authority over men. Since Paul also told Timothy that leaders should be husbands of but one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12), Brian disallowed women serving as elders or deacons.

To Brian's credit, he didn't let these differences prevent him from cooperating in this church plant. (It also helped that we weren't even close to naming elders and deacons.) We agreed to discuss the women's equality issue as we moved forward in ministry.

¹ I will talk about this passage extensively in Part 3.

I remember one two-hour talk. We didn't really argue; we were just two leaders humbly trying to understand the Scriptures together. Neither of us changed the other's mind. I do remember, however, presenting two perspectives that held Brian's attention:

1. The work of the Spirit in both Old and New Testaments.
2. The existence of women leaders throughout Scripture.

The Spirit's Changing Ministry from the Old Testament to the New

I have researched the writings of many leaders and theologians on this particular subject. I've heard Pentecostal leaders teach that the Spirit came UPON people with power in the Old Testament (see Sampson, Saul and David) but was **not** WITHIN them like we see in the New. But when I studied the Old Testament, it seemed clear that there **was** a close relationship with God via His Spirit. Think of leaders and prophets like Moses, David, Jeremiah and Isaiah.

Some evangelical leaders talk of a greater empowerment² of the Spirit in the New Testament compared to the Old. But look at prophet leaders like Elijah and Elisha. Only Jesus surpassed them in terms of power for ministry.

How then is the Spirit's work different between the old and new covenants? The Scriptures are clear. First, through Jeremiah, when talking of the days of the new covenant, the Lord says:

"No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."
Jeremiah 31:34

One of the key differences between testaments is that it is not just the leaders that get to KNOW the Lord (the Hebrew is *yada*, to know through experience). **Every one** of God's children – from the least to the greatest – can walk in personal relationship with Him. This is the SPIRIT WITHIN. Such intimacy isn't just for leaders like Moses and Deborah, but for all people, both men and women.

In Joel we find a significant passage regarding the difference in the ministry of the Spirit between testaments. Through Joel the Lord says:

"And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." Joel 2:28-29

This is one of the key passages that the Apostle Peter used to explain what the people were experiencing at Pentecost. Acts 2 was the fulfillment of Joel's words. The difference emphasized is *not* a new level of power from God, but that his power, his SPIRIT UPON us, is now available to everyone. Joel (and Acts 2:17-18) even highlighted the female/male dynamic.

² For example, the *ESV Study Bible* explains Pentecost like this, "but now the Spirit was coming to people in a new, more powerful way, signifying the beginning of the new covenant age..." (note on Acts 2:4). Also in Acts 8, when the Samaritans were empowered by the Spirit, the ESV uses the phrase, "...new covenant empowering of the Holy Spirit..." (note on Acts 8:17).

His presence and power are not just for the few, but for everyone. Or, as we like to say at our church, *"Everyone gets to play."*

Baptism and Empowerment for Everyone (Including Women)

We see the principle of *everybody gets to play* lived out vividly in the early church. At Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out on both women and men. Listen to the open-wide invitation to receive the promised Spirit:

"And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call." Acts 2:38b-39

Peter's invitation reflects the Joel passage he quoted. He understood that this fullness of the Spirit wasn't just for leaders, or even adult men; it was for all who would respond to Christ Jesus.

We see this empowering baptism for all (see Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8), traced through the story of the early church. In Samaria we read:

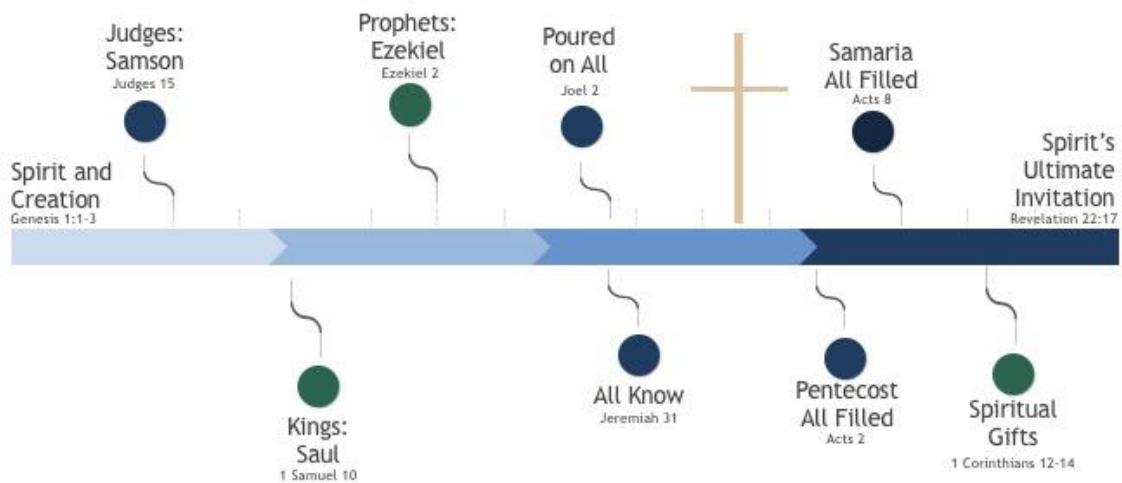
But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized [water baptized], both men and women. ... Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit [Spirit baptized]." Acts 8:12, 17

When the Spirit directed Peter to Cornelius' house in Caesarea, he spoke to ALL of Cornelius' household – his gathered friends and relatives. Listen to Peter tell of his understanding and experience:

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." ... While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. Acts 10:34, 44-45

Yes, the Spirit taught the early church that this gift was *not* just for the Jewish people, but also *not* just for male leaders. Spirit Baptism could empower any believer's life and ministry. It was clear; the Spirit doesn't play favorites. He wanted to empower for ministry young and old, men and women, Jews and Gentiles. I believe this is still his desire today.

Biblical Timeline of the Spirit's Work



The timeline above pictures how the ministry of the Spirit changed from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament, we see the Spirit's work primarily in the leaders of God's people: judges, kings and prophets, including women. Towards the end of the Old Covenant the Lord declared this change: the Spirit would be poured out on all people, from the least to the greatest. As I see it, this was a central part of Jesus' ministry – Spirit baptism for *all* people. We find this in the early church. *All* people were empowered and gifted by the Spirit of Christ for ministry.

Spiritual Gifts for Everyone (Including Women)

With the baptism in the Spirit come the gifts of the Spirit. Within the New Testament Paul lists three major groups of spiritual gifts: Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, and Ephesians 4:11-12. Nowhere, in any of these passages, does Paul distinguish some gifts for men and some gifts for women.

Furthermore, in Paul's biggest discourse on the gifts (woven throughout the whole book of 1 Corinthians, but especially chapters 12-14) he addressed both women and men in their appropriate use. He said, "*Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...*" (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). So his words regarding these spiritual gifts in the worship service were addressed to both men and women.³

³ In 1 Cor. 14:34, Paul seems to say that women should remain silent in church. How then, do you reconcile this verse with 1 Cor. 11:5? Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to dig deeply into this important question, I do want to cite Kris Vallotton's view: "It is very likely that Paul is actually quoting a question the Corinthians posed to him, and that he is answering their concerns in the pre-text and post-text surrounding these verses." (*Fashioned to Reign*, Pg. 142). Vallotton's perspective is supported by the fact that for women to remain silent is not only inconsistent with Paul's theology of equality found in Galatians 3:26-29, but is inconsistent with the instructions he is giving in the very letter itself.

Paul referred to the leaders of the worship service as “prophets” who were utilizing the different spiritual gifts given. 1Corinthians 14:

Now, brothers and sisters⁴, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? (Greek didache, root meaning is doctrine, implying teaching) (14:6)

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters⁵? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction (Greek didache), a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. (14: 26)

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. (14:29)

Presumably, both women and men participated in the worship service. Women not only shared a prophetic word, a tongue, or an interpretation of tongues, but they also shared a revelation, a word of knowledge, or a word of doctrine/teaching. It’s the Spirit who decides who gets what gifts (1 Cor. 12:4). Apparently, he gave all the gifts to both men and women, and women and men freely used them to edify the Body.

The Fabulous Five

Throughout Scripture we find women who served in key leadership roles. Their example should contribute to this subject. Many women were called and empowered to lead within the kingdom of God. I want to highlight five in particular whom the Spirit used in profound ways.

Miriam, gifted as a **Prophet**⁶. Exodus 2:4, 7; 15:20. She was the sister of Aaron and Moses who, alongside her brothers, provided spiritual **leadership** to all the people. In fact, the Lord said of her, “I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.” Micah 6:4b

Deborah, anointed as a **Judge** [leader] as well as a **prophet**. Judges 4, 5. Listen to the authority that she had over all the people of Israel: *Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lapidoth, was leading Israel at the time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah... and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided.* Judges 4:4-5

Phoebe, identified as both a **Deaconess** (Greek *diakonos*) and a **Benefactor** (Greek *prostatis*). Romans 16:1-2. The interesting thing about Phoebe is that *diakonos* is the same Greek word Paul used to say that Deacons are to be husbands of but one wife (1 Timothy 3:12). *Prostatis* is the female derivative of *proistemi*, which means to rule, to be set over, to preside, to provide aid in support of. Paul used this word when he instructed Elders: *The elders who direct (proistemi) the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.* 1 Timothy 5:17

⁴ The New International Translation inserts “and sisters” based on the context of the book, especially 1 Corinthians 11: 4-5. Regardless of how one feels about inclusive language, one has to grant the context of men and women.

⁵ See footnote 4.

⁶ The Old Testament names five women as prophets: Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) and a woman called “The Prophetess” but apparently Isaiah’s wife, (Isaiah 8:3). The New Testament names Anna (Luke 2:36-38) and Philip’s four unmarried daughters (Acts 21:9).

Priscilla (and husband Aquila), mentioned several times in the New Testament. Most notably when she and Aquila **instructed** (Greek *ektithemi*) Apollos. This is the same word used of Paul in Acts 28:23. Apollos was a prominent early church leader (Acts 18:25-26). They also led a church in their home (1 Cor. 16:19), communicating a level of **pastoral leadership** and direction. Paul referred to them as co-workers in Christ Jesus (Romans 16:3). This is the same distinction he gave people like Timothy, Titus and Epaphroditus, to name a few.

Junia (and presumably her husband Andronicus). Paul appears to name these two as **Apostles** when he says *"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was."* (Romans 16:7) Yes, one can translate this passage a little more unnaturally as *"well known to the Apostles,"* but consider that they were *"in Christ"* prior to Paul and imprisoned with him. The Roman authorities imprisoned the leaders, those who influence others, *not* the ordinary members of a movement.

I have come to think of these women as the Fabulous Five⁷. They raise important questions for us. Was Deborah wrong for assuming the leadership of all of Israel as judge and prophet? Is the New Testament a lesser covenant for the likes of Miriam, Deborah and the other female leaders? Was Paul inconsistent when he referred to Phoebe as a Deacon and a Benefactor in his letter to the Romans, considering his instructions to Timothy? Should Apollos not have accepted instruction from Priscilla because she was a woman? Should we choose the more awkward translation regarding Junia to fit with our theology?

My friend, Brian walked away thinking about these questions. I admit, at that time in my ministry, I didn't know how to reconcile the work of the Spirit and these important women with some of Paul's other words, especially in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. It is to this passage that we will next turn.

Part 3: Paul, the Culture and the Radical Equality of Women

Meet Phil and Katelyn, newly engaged and new to our church. Both had grown significantly in their faith in college, but at church they had learned that women were not to teach or have authority over men. They asked me to discuss this specific issue.

To prepare for our meeting, our young couple had read various background sources, including—thankfully—some favoring the full inclusion of women in all church ministries. We carefully explored the issue in the context of the core biblical theme, the Kingdom of God. Little by little, as we considered everything, they were mostly convinced. They recognized the strong arguments in favor of full inclusion but still had some questions. Phil asked, "Pastor, we see the strong arguments in favor of women in leadership, but how do you understand passages like 1 Timothy 2:11-15?"

Katelyn included a very personal question: "I really want to be a good wife when we get married. How do I understand concepts like authority, submission and headship? It seems very confusing." I loved their attitude behind all the questions. Their desire was not to win a

⁷ Yes, I am a University of Michigan fan.

theological argument, but to live faithfully in the Kingdom—according to God’s will. Hallelujah! I pray that we all would approach these questions with such a spirit.

Why Dig Deeper?

For many Christians, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 stands as the foundation for the issues of leadership and authority of women in the church. The NIV translation reads:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. 1 Timothy 2:11-15

These scriptures seem pretty clear, is there reason to dig deeper? After all, an important principle of interpretation is “stay with the plainest meaning of the text when possible.” This text seems to clearly teach that women should not teach or have authority over men.

However, I would argue that there are important reasons to dig deeper into this passage. The primary reason is its inconsistency with the rest of scripture, including scriptures by Paul himself. In the first part we looked at Paul’s kingdom theology (especially Galatians 3:26-29) and in the second we covered not only the Spirit’s giftings of all people but also the “Fabulous Five”: women who were serving in positions of authority, some including authority over men.

In his commentary on Galatians, noted scholar F.F. Bruce, argues for the primacy of Galatians 3:26-29 in all Paul’s writings, specifically, verse 28: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus....* Bruce writes, “Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus ... they are to be understood in relation to Galatians 3:28, and not vice versa.”⁸

Bruce’s comments illustrate another important principle of Biblical interpretation, “interpret scripture with scripture.” **Bruce sees Galatians 3:26-29 as a *framework/foundational passage*. It has preeminence over passages that appear rooted in their cultural contexts.** It is the lens through which we should look at other passages. Therefore, we should interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in the light of Galatians 3:26-29, *not vice versa*.

Of course, we shouldn’t view 1 Timothy just through Galatians 3, but also look at other important passages:

- Genesis 3:16b – *Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you...*
- Acts 2:17 – *I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy...*
- 1 Corinthians 11:5 – *But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...*
- Judges 4 (Deborah), Acts 18 (Priscilla), Romans 16 (Phoebe and Junias).

⁸ F.F. Bruce. *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1982. P. 190.

How do we reconcile these passages with 1 Timothy 2:11-15? We don't believe that God's revelation in one text is inconsistent with another text. Does this mean we should look for ways to reconcile all these different passages with 1 Timothy 2? Read on.

Also think about this passage theologically. At first blush, Paul seems to imply that women should not teach or have authority over men, not only because Adam was born first, but because Eve was deceived first. Doesn't that sound inconsistent with the theology of **forgiveness** and **redemption**? Are we to believe that God forbids women forever from teaching and having authority over men because of Eve's sin? Doesn't Christ's redeeming work break the power of Satan and undo all the effects of the Fall? (1 John 3:8, Acts 26:17-18, Matthew 12:25-29)

In terms of **salvation**, Paul's words in the Timothy passage seem incredibly confusing and inconsistent. What in the world did Paul mean when he wrote "women will be saved through childbearing ..."? What!?! This contradicts all Paul said elsewhere about salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8, Titus 2:11).

When we notice apparent inconsistencies within the scriptures, we must explore further. This is where study of both context and culture come to bear. I have heard it said that discussion of culture and context only comes about when people don't want to believe what scripture clearly says. On the contrary, I think we study context and culture to understand the whole of scripture more clearly. So, let's dig a little deeper into this text. Let's seek to understand Paul's words here not only in the context and culture of 1 Timothy (the city of Ephesus), but also in the whole context of scripture.

Vs. 11: Submission and the Kingdom of God

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission."

Let's pull back from the Timothy passage and ask how submission is understood within the kingdom of God. Yes, women are called to submission, but so is every follower of Christ. Submission is the way of the Christian because it is the way of the cross. We are all called to a life of submission:

- to the Lord (James 4:7)
- to those older in the Lord (1 Peter 5:5)
- to the gospel (2 Corinthians 9:13)
- to civic leaders (Romans 13:5)
- to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- to spiritual leaders (Hebrews 13:17).

The call to submission and obedience is generally about humility, respect and reverence. It is not usually about the forfeiting of rights, authority and giftedness. It is not about power and decision-making; it's about honoring both God and others in positions of authority.

There is not only a mutual call to submission, but there is also a shared call of "quietness" (Greek *hesychia*). Earlier in 1 Timothy, Paul says:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior... 1 Timothy 2:1-3

So, the encouragements that Paul gives to women specifically in verse 11 are nothing he hasn't also said to men elsewhere. He is not "teaching women their proper place." Rather, he is teaching them the "Christian way." In fact, he is teaching them the Christian way of "learning," not to be overlooked by women or men. Paul came from a Jewish context where only men were Rabbis (teachers) and disciples, so his invitation for "women to learn" in any way at all could have seemed revolutionary to some, especially Jewish Christians.

Verse 12: The Significance of a Single Word: *authentain*

"I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."

Paul didn't write his letters in a vacuum. He addressed specific questions; he talked about issues that house churches in different places struggled to understand. 1 Timothy is no exception. He wrote 1 Timothy to refute false teachings bothering the Ephesian believers. (See 1:3-7; 4:1-8; 6:3-5, 20-21). It seems appropriate that we should include 2:11-15 as also correcting a false idea. The appropriate understanding of one particular word in verse 12 can transform our understanding of the entire passage. It helps us identify more clearly what Paul was refuting.

When Paul wrote, "women should not teach or have authority over men," he chose the Greek word *authentain* for 'authority'. This is a unique word. By my count, Paul wrote 'authority/authorities' 25 other times and never used *authentain*. Not only is this word unique to Paul, but also in all of scripture. Ruth A. Tucker points out, "*The word is found nowhere else in Scripture and is uncommon even in secular Greek literature. Where it is used in extra-biblical literature, it usually has a negative connotation and essentially means 'to thrust oneself,' or to 'domineer.'*"⁹ Why would Paul choose such a unique word here?

Strong's Concordance defines *authentain* as "one who with his own hand kills either others or himself." As mentioned above, it carries the connotation of dominating authority. Because of this meaning, KJV translates this passage, "*But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man ...*" 1Timothy 2:12

The clearer understanding of this word dramatically changes how we understand what Paul is challenging. Paul wasn't addressing women exercising authority over men in general, but rather women exercising inappropriate/usurping authority over men.

This line of reasoning seems even more powerful when you contrast it with another instance in which Paul talked about authority between men and women. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul addressed relationships between men and women and at one point he wrote about sexual intimacy:

The wife does not have authority (exousiazo) over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority (exousiazo) over his own body but yields it to his wife." V.4

Incredibly, in the first century setting, Paul argued for equality between men and women in the context of marriage and sexual intimacy. This would have been seen as revolutionary in most cultures of his day. But notice he used the Greek word *exousiazo* instead of *authentain*.

⁹ Tucker, Ruth A. *Woman in the Maze*. InterVarsity Press. 1992. P. 115

Why would Paul use different words in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Timothy 2? Because he was teaching the appropriate use of authority in the first instance, and challenging inappropriate use of authority in the latter. Paul does not forbid the exercise of authority of women over men; rather, he forbade the *inappropriate* exercise of authority (and the teaching that would result from it) of women over men.

Vs. 13 - 14: Correcting the Creation Myths

"For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."

This is a dramatic change of meaning, not only for verse 12, but also in the following verses. When reading the epistles, we often don't know the background arguments or activities to which the author is responding. We have to infer from their words what issue they are addressing. So, if Paul is arguing against inappropriate use of authority of women, then the role of verses 13 and 14 in his argument changes significantly.

He would not bring up the fact that Adam was created first and Eve sinned first to justify why women are not to have authority over men. Potentially Paul was refuting the false arguments that justified female dominance. These arguments could have been origin myths such as, "women brought men into the world, so they should be the rulers of men." Arguments could have been made regarding the introduction of sin, "Men are responsible for introducing sin into the world, so they are not trusted to lead." Was there potentially any teaching of female dominance in Ephesus? The answer is a resounding yes!

According to historians, Ephesus was a center of Roman and Greek pagan worship. Famous for its cult and temple worship of the goddess Artemis (the Greek name for the Roman goddess Diana). In fact, the temple of the goddess was one of the "seven wonders of the ancient world." It was a massive structure and people came from all over the ancient world to participate in the worship rituals.

The people revered Artemis as the predominant goddess in Ephesus. Some scholars think Artemis had taken on the characteristics of Cybele, the mother goddess of fertility worshiped in Asia Minor and served by many prostitute priestesses.¹⁰ In most Greek cities, Artemis was worshiped as a secondary god, but in Ephesus she was preeminent.

Scripture itself attests to Artemis' proclaimed supremacy. In Acts 19 Paul faced great opposition in Ephesus because of preaching against idols, "gods made with human hands." The worship of Artemis was big business there (19:23-41). Demetrius, the silversmith who fashioned silver shrines of Artemis, argued, "... *the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.*" (19:27) This is why the mob who opposed Paul yelled, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (19:28)

In his important book, *Fashioned to Reign*, Kris Vallotton finds significance in two symbols associated with Artemis, a crown and eggs. He writes, "... *Artemis had a crown on her head,*

¹⁰ *NIV Study Bible*

*which could have been a sign of female rulership. Artemis also had eggs surrounding her midsection, which many think are a symbol of fertility.”*¹¹

Vallotton proposes that the teachings of pagan female rulership/domination (symbolized by the crown) and the priority of woman because they are the source of men (symbolized by the eggs) may have crept into the doctrines of the church in Ephesus. Based on Paul’s choice of words and what we know of the surrounding culture, this argument seems plausible.

When people combine belief systems and practices, we call it **syncretism**. From Paul’s words and what we know of the Ephesian culture, it seems likely that syncretism had infected the church in Ephesus. Believers had apparently allowed the teachings and religious practices of the Artemis cult to influence the gospel and how Christians lived it out. This is similar to modern Christians allowing secular values to affect Kingdom living, e.g. playing sports (often “worshipped” by society) on Sunday morning, thus affecting church attendance for parents and children.

If we view the Timothy passage through the lens of Paul addressing syncretistic teachings and practices, you can see how this changes our understanding of his argument. Did Paul justify limiting women because Eve bit the fruit first? Did this act forever relegate her to a subservient role? No. That would have been very unlike Paul.

In vv. 13-14, was Paul really addressing false teaching (as he does throughout the entire book of 1 Timothy) and the mythologies and creation stories of Artemis? If the Ephesians justified female dominance because women were the source of men, then Paul corrected how creation actually took place— God created the man first. This would have undermined completely the rationale for female dominance. If the Ephesians taught that men were responsible for all the sin in the world, then Paul’s teaching that it was Eve who sinned first would directly refute any justification for female supremacy. Doesn’t it seem that Ephesus could have been the perfect seed bed for such false teaching and behavior?

Verse 15: Salvation vs. Protection

*“But women will be saved through childbearing—
if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”*

For a long time, verse 15 has been one of the most confusing passages for me in the whole New Testament. This verse alone should force Christians to dig deeper into NT context and culture. You simply can’t make good biblical sense of this passage unless you explore the cultural context of Ephesus.

As discussed above, Artemis was revered as the goddess of fertility.¹² She enabled women to conceive and preserved them throughout the childbearing process. In v. 15 Paul addressed the

¹¹ P. 175. I recommend Vallotton’s explanations of the relevant passages on equality of women, even though some scholars differ on the details.

¹² “The Ephesian Artemis was believed to have the power to bring new life into the world and to take life away. There is no real evidence that she was a mother goddess.... but several ancient documents reveal that she was believed to be a midwife... It was thought she helped women and animals in labor. Ephesian women would call on Artemis during childbirth to speed up the labor and ease the pain, or, in dire circumstances, they would call on her to bring about a quick death to end their suffering (e.g., [Acts of Andrew 25](#)). Artemis was also the champion and protector of virgins, both male and female.... She was considered a virgin and, unlike mother goddesses, she was

fear that if women became followers of Christ, and fully rejected the goddess, there would be a price to pay in childbirth. In v.15 Paul used the Greek work *sozo* (saved, delivered, healed, preserved, made whole). Context helps us understand which meaning of the word fits best. In context, Paul is not talking about eternal salvation, but is talking about physical preservation and protection.

Therefore, a much better translation of v. 15 is, “women will be brought safely through childbearing.”¹³ So, Paul is **not** promising salvation to women who have kids. He seems to be addressing fears that Ephesian Christians had absorbed from the pagan teachings about Artemis.

Hearing the Text in Context and Culture:

If we allow for the more precise translation of some of the words in this text, as well as the cultural considerations we have highlighted, the text makes far more sense. We can understand these verses in such a way that is completely consistent with both Paul’s teaching and the rest of the New Testament. Below is my simple paraphrase of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 based on contextual and cultural considerations:

Women should receive instruction in quietness and submission, as we are all called to do. This is the way of the cross. I do not allow women to teach in such a way that usurps the authority of a man, she must have an attitude of humility. Despite what you may have been taught previously, Adam was formed first and then Eve. Furthermore, Adam was not the one deceived initially by the evil one, but it was the woman. Eve led the way into our transgressions. That is the true creation story. Finally, it is Christ who will bring you safely through child bearing, not Artemis¹⁴, if you continue in faith, love and holiness with modesty. 1 Timothy 2: 11-15

Wrapping up with Phil and Katelyn

The Spirit of God has great plans for Phil and Katelyn. Based on their foundation of faith and understanding, the Lord will mature them into a faithful husband and wife and empower them as servants of the gospel. Vital for their spiritual formation will be the understanding of mutual submission and the appropriate use of authority in their marriage and in the church.

Thinking of Katelyn in particular, she is not only very well educated, but seems to have some natural abilities in leadership. My hope and prayer is that she, and any other woman called and gifted by God, will not be restricted from leadership because of a misinterpretation of Paul’s words. The church desperately needs all the resources the Lord provides.

not associated with any male consort or god.” 1Timothy 2:12 in context: Artemis of Ephesus and her Temple. Internet post April, 2013.

¹³ See also 2Timothy 4:18 where Paul refers to himself, *...bring me safely...*

¹⁴ Because Paul was aware that his letters would be circulated among the house churches, I don’t think he would have ever named Artemis directly. He would not want to bring more persecution upon the Ephesian Christians. Though this omission is understandable, I think it has added to the lack of clarity surrounding this passage.