

All One In Christ Jesus: A Consideration of Bible Teaching on the Work of Brothers and Sisters in the Ecclesia

Preface

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This book came to be written for a number of reasons.

In our Christadelphian community the part played by sisters has varied considerably. In almost all ecclesias sisters exercise the same authority as brothers when they vote for ecclesial offices. In some ecclesias sisters are forbidden to take part in any formal discussion; in others they give Bible Class addresses and have done so from the beginning of last century; in most they are not allowed to contribute vocally at Breaking of Bread meetings except in singing.

From time to time those who favour a wider participation by sisters are criticised on the grounds that this is contrary to Scripture. Over the years various articles on the subject have been produced, many arguing that sisters should remain silent in ecclesial meetings. Some of these have been sent to us with the request that we study them carefully. In addition we have examined the Bible in detail for ourselves, as well as commentaries, articles in religious journals, and books on the subject.

It is sometimes stated that the desire for participation by sisters arises from modern feminist arguments. Feminist writers in the world accuse the Bible and particularly the apostle Paul of being anti-women. By contrast, writing from a Biblical position, not a feminist one, we consider that a proper analysis of the Bible and of the apostle Paul's writings presents a very positive approach to the involvement of women.

In this book we seek to examine the issues fairly, to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God, and to explain what we consequently believe to be the correct Biblical application. The conclusion we reach is not based on feminist arguments but on direct Biblical exposition.

We are indebted to a large number of people who have commented on previous versions of this exposition. We have benefited from helpful suggestions from those who agree with us, and from the critical analysis of those who do not share our viewpoint. This updated version takes account of the comments we have received in 2007-2008; we have added considerably more material, and have tried to clarify our exposition where some points have been misunderstood. We continue to welcome constructive criticism of anything we write, and will be happy to correct anything which can be demonstrated to be in error. It is hoped that the analysis produced here will encourage others to discuss the subject in depth, to seek to study anew what the Scriptures have to say, and to be faithful to the Bible by putting into practice the conclusions reached.

Averil & Ian McHaffie

Abbreviations and Acknowledgements

RSV = Revised Standard Version NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

GNB = Good News Bible REB = Revised English Bible

KJV = King James Version

NIV = New International Version

NEB = New English Bible

NKJV = New King James Version

We have usually included the Bible texts on which our reasoning is based rather than simply quoting the reference. This is to help readers to check whether we have analysed the text correctly.

Ancient authors have also been quoted extensively because it is not always easy to obtain access to these writers, whether in the original text or in translation. This book makes information available which is relevant to the context of the New Testament but is generally unknown. References are given so that the wider contexts of these quotations can be examined.

From time to time we have given Greek or Hebrew words, transliterated into English. This is for the sake of comparison and because there are various possibilities of translation and interpretation.

We all depend on others for translation of the Bible from Hebrew (Old Testament) or Greek (New Testament) into English. Translation is not straightforward; words have different meanings according to context, and translations are influenced by the background and understanding of the translators and commentators. It is important, therefore, never to rely on just one translation or on one commentator.

A few sources are given in the footnotes for those who wish to read in further detail. These discuss the text, the background, the meaning and the use of the original words. We are grateful to all the writers we have consulted and from whose works we have quoted and drawn ideas and suggestions.

Since we first wrote this material in the early 1990s, the internet has become widely available. This enables everyone to check the current state of debate about the meaning of words, and the interpretations of passages. Many ancient sources are now online, both in the original text and in translation. Many websites also enable the reader to observe the bias from which various people approach the issues.

This material is available online in Microsoft Word, and as a PDF document.

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Is there a problem?

(1) Is There
a Problem?

For those, like ourselves, who take the Bible as our guide to doctrine and conduct there are two passages in the New Testament which appear at first sight to state clearly the position of sisters in the ecclesia in relation to brothers.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.

(1 Timothy 2:11-12)

These two texts, when translated as above and read in isolation, appear to give straightforward instructions and they are therefore frequently quoted to define female roles within the ecclesia. Yet 1 Corinthians 11 speaks approvingly of sisters speaking in the meeting in prayer and prophecy. How can the command for silence in chapter 14 be reconciled with the approval of sisters speaking in chapter 11? People seek to harmonise the apparent differences in various ways. We shall consider these in detail, but many other passages also have a bearing on the issue. A proper assessment of New Testament teaching must take account of all of the evidence. Since the New Testament refers back to sections of the Old, and since various Old Testament passages are used to argue for the silence of sisters, it will also be relevant to examine Old Testament teaching.

The role of sisters in the ecclesia is a vexed question for at least two reasons. Firstly, the above two passages appear to present a different picture from many others in the New Testament. Secondly, the teaching that women should keep silent seems a strange denial of the God-given abilities which many sisters undoubtedly possess. Our community would benefit considerably if sisters were permitted to speak and teach. Many would agree, except that they consider this is forbidden by Scripture.

The fact that sincere brothers and sisters examine the Bible and arrive at different conclusions on this issue is an indication that Scriptural teaching is not straightforward. It is necessary to evaluate each passage in its context, something which is not easy to do. It is also necessary to decide which passages are key passages and which are subsidiary. This decision will influence the conclusion reached. We will attempt to examine all the issues adequately, and where it is difficult to judge the meaning of a particular passage we will seek to follow general, clear Biblical principles.

The accompanying picture demonstrates that things are not always as obvious as they seem at first sight. Is this drawing a white vase with a black background, or two people facing one another with a white wall behind? How we answer depends on how we view the picture and we can alter this by deliberate selection. The same applies to the role of sisters: we can deliberately select the evidence to argue for their silence or for the reverse.

Selection is often made unconsciously according to background, upbringing and experience. There is a long history of anti-women attitudes among church writers, and these have influenced the way texts have traditionally been translated and interpreted. Our intention in this study is to examine the Biblical material in its context, and to demonstrate how the Bible can and should be understood to favour the active participation in all aspects of ecclesial life by all who are faithful believers.

Not infrequently texts are given a stronger weighting on either side of the issue than they can carry. We will attempt to avoid this, but readers can judge for themselves whether we are successful.

When looking at the New Testament we should note practices approved by the inspired writers as well as direct teaching. Of key importance is the attitude of Jesus, especially in contrast to attitudes taken by others in New Testament times. His teaching, attitudes and practice are fundamental to the position accorded to men and women in the early Christian ecclesias.

Jesus & Judaism

(2) Jesus

and Judaism

The Jews displayed an exalted belief in God and a commendable practical understanding of moral behaviour based on the teaching in the Law and the prophets. Their religion far surpassed that of surrounding nations and should command our respect. Jesus, himself Jewish, taught his followers to live according to the principles underlying the Law and the prophets.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:17-19)

It might be thought from this that Jesus endorsed the teaching and practice of the religious leaders of his day. But he added:

... I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:20)

Basic to Jesus' teaching was the 'Golden Rule': Treat other people as you would like to be treated. He saw this as the essence of God's intention in the Old Testament.

Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

(Matthew 7:12 RSV)

Do for others what you want them to do for you: this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets.

(Matthew 7:12 GNB)

For this reason Jesus objected when he saw the Law applied in a manner which overruled the principle of caring for other people.

Exceeding the Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath day because doing good to others is a more important principle than simply not working. He did not mind being touched by people who were ill because he regarded showing compassion as more important than ritual cleanliness. He moved among outcasts like tax gatherers and prostitutes. The Pharisees objected:

"Why does your teacher eat with such people?" Jesus replied, Go and find out what is meant by the scripture that says: 'It is kindness that I want, not animal sacrifices.' (Matthew 9:11-13 GNB)

Jesus showed a concern for people which seemed conspicuously lacking among the Pharisees who opposed him. By his actions and his teaching he rejected many of the rules taught by the religious leaders, such as attitudes to vows, to ritual washings and to the manner of keeping the Sabbath. Jesus did not criticise Judaism as such, but the way in which the Law was understood and applied by many of those in power.

He emphasised the spirit rather than the letter, the attitude behind the action, not merely the action itself. His hardest words were reserved not for those who found the Law difficult to keep but for those who, by insisting on their rigid standards of interpretation, did not come to God acceptably themselves nor allow others to reach Him.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in. (Matthew 23:13)

Jesus endorsed the teaching of the Law and the prophets, but he saw beyond the interpretations made in his own day and opened up for Jews and Gentiles alike “a new and living way” (Hebrews 10:20).

Jesus Spoke with Authority

After the major exposition of his teaching in Matthew 5-7, it was observed:

... when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:28-29)

We believe that Jesus as the Son of God spoke with God-given authority, revealing God’s will by his example and by his teaching. He lived a sinless life, showing God’s original intention for the human race before sin entered the world. In the context, therefore, of Jesus’ rejection of the applications made by the scribes and the Pharisees, his attitude towards women merits particular study.

Women At The Time Of Jesus

(3) Women

at the Time of Jesus

In the ancient world the position of women varied from culture to culture and within any particular civilisation depending on social class, civil law and religious attitudes.

Sources

It is not easy to interpret the different sources available, and caution must be observed against picking out a view to fit one's own preferences.^[1] Questions need to be asked such as: What social group are we dealing with? Does this refer to rich or poor, rulers or ruled? Is the writer stating his own preference or is he speaking on behalf of others. How much does his thinking and attitude find approval elsewhere in his own time and later? In making comparisons, is like being compared with like? It is difficult to answer these questions, but it is useful to be aware of the limitations in the available material.

Sources for Judaism are the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Apocrypha, the New Testament, writers like Josephus and Philo (both first century AD), and occasional inscriptions.

The Mishnah ("Oral Teaching") is a book of rules compiled in Palestine in the second century AD but using material going back at least to the time of Jesus. It represents the combined teaching of Jewish sages who sought to expound idealised rules for every aspect of life. They aimed to serve God by preserving ritual purity, defining that which was clean and unclean (food, objects, animals, people), and upholding the separation of Jew from Gentile. It is a matter of debate how far these rules were accepted or put into practice.

The Talmud ("Study") comprises the Mishnah with various commentaries upon it by later rabbis. There are two versions, one produced in Palestine, the other in Babylon.

The Legal Position

In official Judaism, women were legally possessions of their fathers and, after marriage, of their husbands.

She continues within the control of the father until she enters into the control of the husband at marriage.

(Mishnah: Ketuboth "Marriage Deeds" 4:5)

By three means is the woman acquired and by two means she acquires her freedom. She is acquired by money or by writ or by intercourse.... And she acquires her freedom by a bill of divorce or by the death of her husband.... (Mishnah: Kiddushin "Betrothals" 1:1)

Thus a wife was acquired in virtually the same way as property:

... Property for which there is security can be acquired by money or by writ or by usucaption [habitual use].

(Mishnah: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 1:1 & 1:5)

As was said centuries earlier,

He who acquires a wife gets his best possession. (Ecclesiasticus 36:24)

Women were expected to stay secluded within the house and to attend to household duties.

... These are works which the wife must perform for her husband: grinding flour and baking bread and washing clothes and cooking food and giving suck to her child and making ready his bed and working in wool....

If she brought slave women as her dowry they could do these jobs instead, but,

Rabbi Eliezer says: Even if she brought him in a hundred bondwomen he should compel her to work in wool, for idleness leads to unchastity.... (Mishnah: Ketuboth “Marriage Deeds” 5:5)

The wife was regarded as an inferior. She had to obey her husband as a master, but on the positive side the husband was obliged to be faithful to her and treat her kindly.

The law ... commands us also, when we marry, not to have regard to portion, nor to take a woman by violence, nor to persuade her deceitfully and knavishly; but demand her in marriage of him who hath power to dispose of her, and is fit to give her away by the nearness of his kindred; for, saith the Scripture, “a woman is inferior to her husband in all things.”^[2] Let her, therefore, be obedient to him; not so that he should abuse her, but that she may acknowledge her duty to her husband; for God hath given the authority to the husband. A husband, therefore, is to lie only with his wife whom he hath married....

(Josephus (30-100 AD), *Against Apion* 2:25)

Children had to respect their father before their mother. If there was danger to life, the husband had to be saved first.

A man must be saved alive sooner than a woman, and his lost property must be restored sooner than hers.

(Mishnah: Horayoth “Instructions” 3:7)

A husband had the right to claim anything his wife found and he could force a vow upon his wife or annul any vow she had made.

According to Josephus, husbands had the right to divorce wives but not vice-versa.

... when Salome [sister of Herod the Great] happened to quarrel with Costobarus, she sent him a bill of divorce, and dissolved her marriage with him, though this was not according to the Jewish laws; for with us it is lawful for a husband to do so; but a wife, if she departs from her husband, cannot of herself be married to another, unless her former husband put her away. However, Salome chose not to follow the law of her country, but the law of her authority, and so renounced her wedlock.

(Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.259)

Nevertheless, a woman who was mistreated could apply to the courts for a divorce. Financial safeguards built into the law also protected the wife, so that casual divorce was difficult for the

husband. According to Mark 10, however, women did divorce husbands, though perhaps Jesus intended his comments for a wider audience than just a Jewish one.

And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12)

Ironically, only widows and women who had been divorced were legally independent from control by men.

Religious Life

In Solomon’s Temple the women had access along with the men but in Herod’s Temple, according to Josephus, women were excluded from the inner court.

... there was a partition built for the women ... as the proper place wherein they were to worship....

There was also on the other sides one southern and one northern gate, through which was a passage into the court of the women; for as to the other gates, the women were not allowed to pass through them; nor when they went through their own gate could they go beyond their own wall. This place was allotted to the women of our own country....

(Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 5.199)

The Mishnah describes the separation of the women from the men in the Temple:

Beforetime [the Court of the Women] was free of buildings, and [afterward] they surrounded it with a gallery, so that the women should behold from above and the men from below and that they should not mingle together. (Mishnah: Middoth “Measurements” 2:5)

In former times women in the synagogues may have been called on to read from the Torah but later they were forbidden to do so.

Our Rabbis taught: All are qualified to be among the seven [who read], even a minor and a woman, only the Sages said that a woman should not read in the Torah out of respect for the congregation.

(Babylonian Talmud, Megilla “The Scroll of Esther” 23a)

Any man could be called on to read from the Law but it was considered a disgrace for a woman to do so, just as it was thought a “disgrace” were a man in rags to do so.

Women and Education

The comments about women being eligible to read indicate a basic literacy, and it is reckoned that the ability to read and write was higher among the Jews than among other peoples. In Old Testament times, women were certainly to be taught the Law.

And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release, at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may

hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God... (Deuteronomy 31:10-13)

After the Exile in Babylon Ezra taught the Law to all who would listen.

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. (Nehemiah 8:2-3)

Ezra was helped in teaching the people.

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

Since women attended the synagogue on the Sabbath, they would continue to receive instruction and exhortation. The words spoken by Mary the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, and Anna the prophetess indicate that they, at least, had a good grounding in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Mishnah mentions the teaching of Scripture to sons and daughters, though some texts omit the words “and to his daughters”:

“... he may teach Scripture to his sons and to his daughters.”

(Mishnah: Nedarim “Vows” 4:3)

[The law] ... commands us to bring [our] children up in learning and to exercise them in the laws, and make them acquainted with the acts of their predecessors, in order to their imitation of them, and that they may be nourished up in the laws from their infancy, and might neither transgress them, nor yet have any pretence for their ignorance of them.

(Josephus *Against Apion* 2, 26)

Since Timothy’s father was a Greek (Acts 16:1) and presumably not a believer, Timothy was taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother who were obviously well educated.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. (2 Timothy 1:5)

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

(2 Timothy 3:13-14)

Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir (2nd century AD) was said to have studied “three hundred laws from three hundred teachers in a single day” (Babylonian Talmud: Bavli Pesachim 62B). She was able to discuss the meaning of Scripture competently with her husband (Berakoth 10a).

Yet there was disagreement about the extent to which women should be taught, as indicated by the omission of “and to his daughters” from some texts of Nedarim 4:3, quoted above. Another passage in the Mishnah illustrates divergent views.

Certain merits may hold punishment in suspense for one year, others for two years, and others for three years; hence Ben Azzai says: A man ought to give his daughter a knowledge of the Law so that if she must drink [the bitter water] she may know that the merit [that she had acquired] will hold her punishment in suspense. R. Eliezer says: If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery. R. Joshua says: A woman has more pleasure in one *kab* [measure of something] with lechery than in nine *kabs* with modesty.

(Mishnah: Sotah “The Suspected Adulteress” 3:4)

The context is the application of the “Bitter Water Rite” (Numbers 5) to a woman suspected of adultery. It was thought that studying the Law enabled an individual to build up merit. A well educated woman therefore might be inclined, it was thought, to indulge in immoral behaviour (e.g. adultery) in the belief that her acquired merit would compensate for her sin. Why the same danger did not apply to men is not clear, but several quotations present women as basically licentious. Because men in general find women sexually attractive, there is a tendency among some male writers to transfer their sexual desires on to the woman and assume it is her nature rather than theirs which is responsible.

Even the sound of a woman’s voice is lustful.

(Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 69a)

Do not look upon any one for beauty,

and do not sit in the midst of women;

for from garments comes the moth,

and from a woman comes woman’s wickedness.

Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good;

and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.

(Ecclesiasticus 42:12-14)

Women, like unmarried men, were not allowed to teach schoolchildren for fear that being in the presence of the opposite sex they would easily fall into immorality.

An unmarried man may not be a teacher of children, nor may a woman be a teacher of children. (Mishnah: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 4:13)

A further element contributed to cut women off from education. Women were exempt from carrying out time-required aspects of the Law, as this would interfere with their household duties.

The observance of all the positive ordinances that depend on the time of year is incumbent on men but not on women....

(Mishnah: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 1:7)

Women were therefore not obliged to attend festivals though they often did so. But exemption from time-required laws easily turned to exclusion, so that women became excluded from active personal participation in study of the Law or active involvement in religious activities in the synagogue even when time-relatedness was irrelevant.

Women are excused from such devotions as twice-daily recitation of *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41), use of phylacteries during prayer (mandated by Deut. 6:8), active participation in public worship (especially in leadership roles), and most important of all, in participation in communal study of sacred texts. (Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah*, OUP, 1988)^[3]

Women were additionally restricted because for part of each month they were regarded as ritually unclean. Attendance at the Temple even in the Court of the Gentiles was then disallowed.

The Temple mount is still more holy, for no man or woman that has a flux, no menstruant, and no woman after childbirth may enter therein.

(Mishnah: Kelim "Vessels" 1:8)

Thus, in the thinking of many who produced the Mishnah, women were generally denied the opportunities open to men to develop spiritual understanding and stimulus, to appreciate for themselves the meaning of God's will and revelation, and to teach and encourage others apart from their own children.

The value seen in studying the Law, but apparently often denied in practice to women, is described by Rabbi Nehorai (2nd century AD).

I should lay aside every trade in the world and teach my son only Torah. For every trade in the world stands by a man only in his youth, but in his old age, lo, he is left in famine. But the Torah is not that way. It stands by a man in his youth and gives him a future and a hope in his old age. (Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin "Betrothals" 82B)

Demeaning Statements about Women

Rabbi Juda ben Elai (150 AD, but echoing statements made earlier) said:

There are three Benedictions which one must say every day: "Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile"; "Blessed be He who did not make me a woman"; "Blessed be He who did not make me an uneducated man."

(Tosephta "Additions": Tractate Berakoth "Benedictions" vii, 18)

This statement should not necessarily be taken as intentionally demeaning to women, but reflects the exclusion of women from religious study, the learning or teaching of the Law, and active participation in congregational worship. For a meeting to take place in a synagogue, ten men needed to be present. Women, were classed along with slaves and minors, and could not be included to make up the ten (Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth, vii, 2). This exclusion of women,

and the legal restrictions laid upon them, reinforced the view that women were inferior beings. Some comments are particularly derogatory.

It is not possible to have a world without either a spice dealer or a tanner. But happy is the one who makes his living as a spice dealer, and woe is the one who makes his living as a tanner. It is not possible to have a world without either males or females, but happy is the one whose children are males, and woe for him whose children are females.

(Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 5:14 C-D)

“And the Lord blessed Abraham in all things” (Genesis 24:1):

What is the meaning of “in all things”?

Rabbi Meir says, “He had no daughter”.

Rabbi Judah says, “He did have a daughter, and her name was ‘with all’.” (Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 5:17A-C)

Rab and R. Judah were walking down the road, and a woman was walking in front of them. Said Rab to R. Judah, “Lift up your feet before Gehenna.” (Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 4:3A)

Women were not allowed to bear witness in court.

... the witnesses must be men, not women or minors.

(Jerusalem Talmud: Yoma “The Day of Atonement” 43b)

According to Josephus this was because of the “levity and boldness of their sex”.

... let not a single witness be credited; but three, or two at the least, and those such whose testimony is confirmed by their good lives. But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex; nor let servants be admitted to give testimony, on account of the ignobility of their soul; since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.219)

Women, it is presumed, do not lead “good lives”. On the basis of Sarah’s denial in Genesis 18:15 it was argued that women are liars.

On occasions the evidence leads in other directions. Rabbi Hisda is reported to have said, “Daughters are dearer to me than sons” (Baba Bathra 141a). The anonymous Palestinian Jew described as Pseudo-Philo (first century AD) presents a favourable view of women; this is thought so unusual that the suggestion has been made that this anonymous writer is in fact a woman.

Domestic Life

In home life we can see a more positive picture. In addition to the usual time-consuming but essential household duties (food, clothes, looking after children), the wife had the huge responsibility of ensuring that the purity laws were kept. These involved thought, knowledge and ability, and any mistake affected her husband and his religious service. It was considered great

merit to a wife to encourage and enable her husband and sons to do the study of the Law from which her fully occupied home-life precluded her:

Wherewith do women acquire merit? By sending their children to learn Torah in the Synagogue and their husbands to study in the Schools of the Rabbis. (Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth "Benedictions" 17a)

Naturally she was expected to adhere to the Law in her everyday morality, as was her husband.

Conclusion

It appears that women at the time of Jesus were restricted by the legal framework and were discouraged from religious involvement outside the home. In domestic life they had considerable influence and responsibility, though they were nevertheless regarded as inferior to men. The demeaning comments are not typical of Judaism alone but of the ancient world in general. Even in modern times such attitudes are regrettably common. Nevertheless, these comments devalued women and suggest that those who spoke in such a way regarded women as "things" rather than people.

Jesus' message particularly appealed to these who were devalued by the religious system – those not able to keep to the Law with its requirements as defined by the scribes and Pharisees. "... this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed," said the Pharisees of those who believed in him (John 7:49).

Jesus' counter-claim was revealed in his prayer:

"I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes." (Matthew 11:25)

In Jesus they had access to God in a manner denied by the traditional interpretations.

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

It is no wonder that this new approach was seen as liberating by those who had previously felt unable to approach God acceptably.

It is instructive to see the positive attitude Jesus adopted towards women. They were regarded by Jesus and the early ecclesias as valued, individual human beings in the sight of God, not as possessions of men and not as "things". From the beginning they played a prominent and active part.

^[1] Katharina von Kellenbach, for example, in *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, (Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1994) objects to the way she considers Judaism has been blackened in order to show Christianity by contrast to be better in its treatment of women. We have tried to avoid this pitfall.

^[2] Footnote in *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (1886) by the translator William Whiston: “This text is nowhere in our present copies of the Old Testament.”

The manner in which a woman’s vow could be overruled would illustrate the point nevertheless (Numbers 30:1-16).

^[3] Judith Wegner, brought up in an orthodox Jewish community in London, was herself originally excluded from Talmudic study. Thirty years later, after becoming a wife and mother, and Assistant Attorney General for the State of Rhode Island, she earned a doctorate in Judaic studies. She was the first woman to read from the Torah in a prominent American conservative synagogue.

How Jesus Treated Women

(4) How Jesus

Treated Women

Jesus' attitude to women was to have far-reaching consequences. Whereas many rabbis regarded women as unworthy of religious instruction, he addressed his teaching and message to men and women alike. In the crowds who followed him to listen and to receive healing there were men, women and children (Matthew 11:7, 12:46, 14:21, Luke 11:27). But gender did not matter: the important criterion for being part of Jesus' family was doing the will of God.

... a crowd was sitting about him.... And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."
(Mark 3:32-34)

Matthew's account (12:49) refers to these people as Jesus' disciples.

... stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."
(Matthew 12:49-50)

The word disciple means "one who learns". Jesus considered that women *should* learn religious truth. He treated women with the honour and consideration which God had originally intended. He applied the Golden Rule consistently. Several times in the Gospels he is recorded as holding conversations with women on religious issues.

Martha and Mary

When Jesus was staying with Martha and Mary it is recorded that Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (Luke 10:39). This expression is characteristic of a disciple learning from a teacher, as with Paul who was educated "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). When Martha complained that Mary was not carrying out her domestic duties, Jesus did not approve her complaint but commented significantly:

"...one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."
(Luke 10:42)

From the traditional point of view, Martha's complaint was justified. A woman's job was to run the home, she was exempt from rabbinic training, and there was no need for her to study the Law for studying the Law was seen as a man's activity. This incident shows how Jesus thought otherwise, and was not prepared to allow the restrictive, traditional position to be enforced on Mary. She had chosen to *learn* ("the good portion") and it was not to be taken away from her.

Whereas in Luke 10 Martha had complained because Mary was taking a religious interest and not helping with the housework, in John 11 it is Martha with whom Jesus mainly discussed. Martha made a confession of belief in Jesus which is fuller than the better known confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30).

She said to him, “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.” (John 11:27)

It is noticeable too that she previously referred to Jesus as “Lord” but when she went to call Mary, she referred to Jesus as “the Teacher”, evidently a role which had meant a considerable amount to Mary and probably to them both.

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” (John 11:28)

It is worth comparing Jesus’ attitude with that of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (c 80-120 AD). When approached by a woman with a Biblical question, he rebuffed her, refusing to answer her question. Only to males would he reply.

A woman of importance (an elderly married woman) asked Rabbi Eliezer: “Why is it that following Israel’s general sin (of worshipping the golden calf) there were three different kinds of death: beheading, plague, and destruction of the body by water?” He avoided answering her question, and replied: “A woman’s proper job is spinning, as it says (Exodus 35:25) ‘All the hard-working women spun with their own hands.’” (According to him, it is useless to teach the Law, or explanation of the Law, to a woman.) His son, Hyrcanus, said to him: “Since you haven’t replied to this woman with a Biblical explanation, you have made me lose three hundred a year ... (which she used to give me as her priestly offering)”. “It is better for the words of the Law to be burned”, replied his father, “than to hand them over to a woman,” (and it’s even worse to do so for money). When this woman went out, the disciples said: “Master, now that you have rebuffed this woman’s question, what answer will you give us on this subject?”

(Sotah III, Moïse Schwab, *Le Talmud de Jerusalem IV*, Paris, 1885, page 261, translated from French)

The Woman at the Well

In John 4 not only did Jesus break accepted conventions by talking to a Samaritan but he discussed religious truth with a *woman*. The disciples were surprised, reflecting the same kind of restrictive attitude as shown by Rabbi Eliezer.

They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” (John 4:27)

The conversation was detailed, contained some of Jesus’ deepest teaching about true worship, and elicited such a response from the woman that she went and told many others in her town about Jesus.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” (John 4:39)

As a consequence Jesus himself was invited to stay two days with them and he converted many more. They had believed first because of the woman’s words, but on seeing Jesus himself they were fully convinced.

They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.” (John 4:42)

Women Followers and Associates

The Mishnah did not approve of a man being closely involved with a woman, not even his wife.

“Jose b. Johanan of Jerusalem [c. 150 BC] said: ... talk not much with womankind. They said this of a man’s own wife: how much more of a fellow’s wife! Hence the sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna.”

(Mishnah: Aboth “The Fathers” 1:5)

The Talmud added:

Our Rabbis have taught: Six things are a disgrace to a disciple of the wise: He should not ... converse with a woman in the street.... (Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth “Benedictions” 43b)

Being alone with a woman was considered improper, even more so if outside a town.

[The statement that a woman may be alone with two men] pertains only to a town. But as to a trip there must be three.

(Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin “Betrothals” 81a).

A wife could be divorced without her marriage-portion for transgressing Jewish custom by speaking to a man.

... what conduct transgresses Jewish custom? If she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man.

(Mishnah: Ketuboth “Marriage Deeds” 7:6)

But Jesus not only conversed on his own with a woman at the well but could be described as one who “talks much with womankind”. He travelled with a group of women who provided for him and the twelve “out of their means”:

And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. (Luke 8:1-3)

“Many others” is feminine. Evidently women formed a large proportion of those who travelled with Jesus. Like the twelve disciples, these women found a relevance in Jesus’ message and in his treatment of them. Like the twelve disciples too (Luke 18:28), these women appear to have given up their family life (at least temporarily) and put Jesus first. Because they were women they would not have been given a hearing had they tried to preach as did the twelve, but they supported the movement financially and practically, and followed Jesus to Jerusalem. The manner of Jesus’ involvement with these followers shows a change in the understanding of the part women could play. Marriage was not their only role, the home not their only place, honourable and important though these are. The women remained with him until the last.

There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed

him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem. (Mark 15:40-41)

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid. (Luke 23:55)

No other rabbi, as far as we know, travelled with a group of women followers.

Though the women were not part of the twelve, they listened closely to Jesus, as Luke's account of the Resurrection indicates.

... two men stood by them in dazzling apparel; and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 24:4-11)

The account records that the women "remembered his [Jesus'] words" (verse 8). The words are those contained in verse 7 "that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." And the angels said: "Remember how he told you" (verse 6). When did Jesus tell the women this? There are four occasions in Luke where we are told that this information was presented by Jesus. In Luke 9:22, 9:44, and 17:25 Jesus warns his *disciples* of his coming rejection and crucifixion, and resurrection. So too in Matthew 16:21

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21)

On the fourth occasion, in Luke 18:31-33, and in the parallel accounts in Matthew 20:17-19 and Mark 10:32-34, Jesus says this only to the twelve, though he may have intended it to be passed on to the others by them. It is evident from the Resurrection account, however, that the women had been told this *directly* by Jesus himself ("remember how he told *you*"), either on an unrecorded occasion, or on the same occasions in Luke 9:22, 9:44, and 17:25 where the term "the disciples" therefore needs to be understood to include the women. They are described as "the women who had come with him from Galilee" (Luke 23:55) and some are named in Luke 24:10, "Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them". Two of these were mentioned as accompanying Jesus and the twelve in Luke 8:2-3. Apart from providing for Jesus "out of their means", they were paying close attention to what he told them, as the Resurrection account indicates. Jesus, unlike other rabbis of his day, was willing to teach women and include them in his circle of followers. These details about the women should caution us against assuming that when we read "the disciples" the text means "*men* disciples".

Physical Contact

Jesus also broke with convention in allowing women to touch him in a way which alarmed his more orthodox critics. He did not cringe or disapprove. Instead, he commended the women for their actions.

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:37-39)

So too in the case of the woman with a haemorrhage. When touched by her, though this would have made him ritually unclean, Jesus did not shrink back as if offended by this act but called her "daughter", and commended her faith (Mark 5:24-34). The significance of "daughter" is illustrated further when he healed a crippled woman.

"Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?"

(Luke 13:16)

Jesus treated these women with compassion, understanding, and as people who should be treated as worthy individuals in the family of God ("daughter of Abraham"). Compare this with how Jesus addressed Zacchaeus using the parallel term "son of Abraham": "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9).

The Woman Taken in Adultery

When the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery, they no doubt thought they had set Jesus a clever trap (John 8:6). Jesus not only skilfully avoided their stratagem to incriminate himself, but he avoided also the male prejudice which lay behind their action. Why had they brought only the woman, not the man too? One answer can be seen in the Mishnah where women were considered to be specially prone to sexual misbehaviour.

Rabbi Joshua says: A woman has more pleasure in one kab^[1] with lechery than in nine kabs with modesty.

(Mishnah: Sotah "The Suspected Adulteress" 3:4)

Jesus turned the accusation on to the accusers, without approving or justifying her behaviour. He talked to her without reserve or embarrassment, and sent her home to make a new start. In contrast to the uncaring, discriminatory and condemnatory attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, he showed deep insight into human nature. He demonstrated both concern and morality in his treatment of the woman.

Marriage

In his attitude to marriage and divorce Jesus likewise cut across the teaching of his contemporaries.

There were two schools of interpretation, each seeking to expound the rules for divorce given in Deuteronomy.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house.... (Deuteronomy 24:1)

The followers of Rabbi Shammai took “some indecency in her” to refer to unchastity alone but the majority took the view of Rabbi Hillel that this phrase could refer to anything a husband disliked about his wife.

He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever (and many such causes happen among men), let him in writing give assurance that he will never use her as his wife any more....

(Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.253) Each group spoke only from a male viewpoint. When Jesus was asked about divorce, instead of siding with one of the two parties (easy divorce or restricted divorce) he confronted both by referring to God’s will from the beginning.

Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. (Matthew 19:3-6)

The discussion had been entirely from the man’s angle; by objecting to divorce, Jesus protected the wife from being treated as a disposable object. He also disallowed polygamy which had been permissible in Judaism, and, in the case of levirate marriage, often inevitable. By saying that divorce was against God’s original intention, Jesus again reasserted the worth of women and the worth of the marriage relationship where the two become one.

Separation from Women

The rabbis dealt with the problem of men’s lustful thoughts by seeking to remove women from their company and their sight.

One outcome of this approach was the exclusion of women from taking part in the religious activities of the synagogue and their physical separation from the men. Jesus, however, taught that men should control their thoughts.

I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away.... (Matthew 5:28-29)

By this approach Jesus opened the way for men and women to mix together socially and ecclesially without the need for the artificial barriers erected by the rabbis. This was a necessary step towards the new male/female relationships which the early ecclesias were able to enjoy.

Jesus’ Positive Image of Women

In taking examples of faithful conduct, Jesus several times chose women: the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), the widow who threw her “two copper coins” into the treasury (Mark 12:42-43), the woman who searched until she found her lost coin (Luke 15:8-9).

Though women are nevertheless mentioned less than men in the parables and in the Gospels, the positive manner in which their conversations and actions are recorded is significant because of the background attitudes to women in Jesus' day and afterward. There is no hint of the anti-women attitudes shown elsewhere:

From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die. (Ecclesiasticus 25:24)

Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good;
and it is a woman who brings shame and
disgrace. (Ecclesiasticus 42:14)

Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach) is 3rd century BC.

Tertullian (c. 200 AD) wrote to women:

You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian, *On Female Dress* 1:1)

Jesus is totally and refreshingly free from this kind of approach to women. There is no suggestion that women are evil, worse than men, unreliable, liars, the cause of this world's ills. In a very male-orientated society he is shown as revolutionary in his approach to women, as he was in his attitudes on many other matters. No longer was the only approved role of women to be childbearing, staying at home and serving husbands (honourable and God-approved though this, of course, is). Discipleship on a wider scale was now open to women. They could study and learn Christian teaching; they could promote and teach the Good News, though the conventions of society would still restrict them. On Jesus' part there was no barrier.

Baptism for a woman underlined how much she was now valued as an individual believer. Previously, under Judaism, her commitment was through the male, for circumcision applied only to men. But in Jesus she was received into the new movement as an individual in her own right. Baptism was the same mode of commitment for male and female believers, underlining the essential unity of the new movement in Jesus.

In character, women are sinners like men. Jesus' teaching about the heart is applicable to all (Matthew 15:18). Both men and women need to repent, and both find new life and salvation in him. Both need to become "a new creation" in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In view of the above it might be expected that Jesus would have appointed at least one woman among the twelve disciples. Considering, however, the common religious and social attitudes towards women, it would be surprising if he had done so.

Market places and council halls, law courts and gatherings, and meetings where a large number of people are gathered, in short all public life with its discussions and deeds, in times of peace and of war, are proper for men. It is suitable for women to stay indoors and to live in retirement,

limited by the middle door (to the men's apartments) for young girls, and the outer door for married women.

(Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* III, 169)

Philo's comment is in the context of upper or middle class households in Alexandria, but the same sort of attitude can be seen in how the disciples responded when they found Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well:

Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, "What do you wish?" or, "Why are you talking with her?"
(John 4:27).

Little success could have been expected, therefore, if Jesus had attempted to appoint women followers in general in a preaching mission, for Jewish attitudes towards woman's authority would have hindered his message. He wished people to respond to his message, and many did, as reported in Luke 10:18. There was no guarantee that they would respond (Luke 10:10). People were not forced to believe, and putting unnecessary barriers to repentance (such as sending women two by two round the villages), would have been counter productive.

Although Jesus' mission was soon to spread to the whole world, it started among the Jews, and was therefore restricted to what was possible within the Jewish environment. No Gentiles or slaves were included among his twelve disciples either. It was only after the resurrection, when the message began to spread world-wide, that women, Gentiles and slaves were able to take a fuller part.

The First Witnesses to the Resurrection

The women were the first to go to the tomb and the first to hear of the resurrection. It seems in line with the attitude of Jesus that it was to the women also that the message of the resurrection was first entrusted. They were the first witnesses, which from a conventional point of view might have been considered of doubtful validity. But the angel at the tomb and then Jesus himself, entrusted them with witnessing the message of the resurrection to the disciples. There is no suggestion here that women are not to be trusted or that it is wrong to listen to a woman's voice.

"Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee: there you will see him."
(Matthew 28:6-7)

Then Jesus said to them [Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, verse 1], "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."
(Matthew 28:10)

The disciples did as the women had said:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

According to the text, this Great Commission to evangelise the world was given to the eleven disciples. Does this mean that only males are to preach and teach? If we consider Jesus’ words, this cannot be a correct conclusion. The command itself is to “make disciples” and teach them to observe “all that I have commanded YOU”; once disciples have learned all Jesus’ commands, then this commandment applies to them. They in turn are under the command to teach others. It is therefore a command which is self replicating; all disciples should seek to make disciples and to teach them to observe all of Jesus’ teaching.

The similar passage in Luke mentions that Cleopas and his companion returned from Emmaus and “found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them”. While reporting that they had seen the risen Lord (Luke 24:36), “Jesus himself stood among them”.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.”

(Luke 24:45-49)

As we see from verse 33 this is not just to the eleven disciples but also to “those who were with them”; and Luke reports at Pentecost that “they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1-4) when they were “clothed with power from on high”.

Here then indeed are commands that involve both men and women learning and then teaching: “... repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” And who is to say that women disciples are not to teach if Jesus says they should?

Throughout history many famous men have been distrustful towards women and have made disparaging or condescending comments about them. No such attitude can be seen in Jesus. He was positive towards them in his speech and his actions, attracted a large number of female followers, and thus set the scene for the fuller involvement of women in the early ecclesias.

Jesus’ Choice of 12 Male Disciples

It is often suggested that Jesus’ choice of 12 male disciples indicates that rulership in the church should be male.

This is a deduction, for Jesus does not state maleness as the reason, and good reasons for choosing males are readily apparent from the text.

Here is the description of Jesus’ appointing the Twelve.

...And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons... (Mark 3:14-15)

In Matthew we are given Jesus' instruction to his twelve disciples.

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 10:5)

On another occasion (Luke 10:1) he chose seventy (or seventy-two) "and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come." These seventy are not named but are presumably male too.

Would it have been appropriate for Jesus to choose women to go on these preaching and healing missions?

We can observe, especially as they were going two by two, that if two female disciples had been sent on their own from village to village, or one male disciple and one female, this would have been completely unacceptable. Two women would have been ultra-vulnerable travelling on their own. A male and a female disciple, if not married, would be considered immoral, as we quoted earlier in this chapter from the Talmud:

Our Rabbis have taught: Six things are a disgrace to a disciple of the wise: He should not ... converse with a woman in the street....

(Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth "Benedictions" 43b)

[The statement that a woman may be alone with two men] pertains only to a town. But as to a trip there must be three.

(Babylonian Talmud: Kiddushin "Betrothals" 81a).

Attitudes to women's uncleanness would also hamper any attempts to heal or have physical contact. Jesus showed no reservation in this regard but other people obviously did. Such restrictions would also apply in the wider Jewish world even after the resurrection. Paul could enter synagogues, address the congregation and debate with the Jews, but obviously women could not do this in the way that men could.

Was Jesus constrained, then, by cultural considerations? We might like to answer, "No", but the answer needs to be, "Yes, to some extent". He used the women at the tomb as witnesses *to the disciples* of his resurrection but could not use them as witnesses outside his own group because women's witness was not accepted. When a replacement was chosen for Judas, the criterion for an apostle was "a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). The witnessing was to be "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) – witnessing the important message of the resurrection in a male-orientated world which refused to accept women as witnesses, even though they *were* witnesses. Inevitably, therefore, a male was chosen; nevertheless from Pentecost onwards God's intention in Jesus was made clear that both men and women would speak forth the word of God and this we see happening in the early ecclesias as reported in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14.

As regards the idea that he chose male leaders, teachers and preachers because only males are acceptable in these roles, we need to balance the other evidence. He used the Samaritan woman at the well to preach to the Samaritans, and the women to announce the news of the resurrection to the disciples. And – as we go on to observe in Chapter 5 – the women workers

described in Romans 16, and people like Euodia and Syntyche were carrying out his work when, as Paul says, “these women ... have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3). Is there any reason to suppose that when Paul describes and names both men and women workers as labouring “side by side” with him “in the gospel” that these were not preaching, teaching and being leaders – at least in so far as they could be in the society of the time?

Since Jesus makes no comment that male leaders, not female, were his desire, it goes beyond the evidence to assert that male leadership for all time in the future was indicated by his choice of the twelve or the seventy. It was appropriate in a strongly male-dominated world that male apostles (the twelve, with Matthias substituted for Judas, and Paul as a thirteenth apostle) handled the initial work. But no apostolic succession is taught in the Bible, and no instructions were given about appointing male successors when the apostles died.

What Jesus “began to do and teach”

Luke comments about his gospel:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.
(Acts 1:1)

There are numerous issues which only became clear as God guided the development and spread of the early ecclesias. In the inspired teaching of the apostle Paul, and the other New Testament writers, we see how in the new creation in Christ Jesus, the work which Jesus began during his earthly ministry was extended and developed. Often there is little directly said in the gospels, and the disciples frequently failed to understand Jesus’ teaching and attitude. Jesus’ comments to the woman at the well indicate the change which would take place under the New Covenant:

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”
(John 4:24)

With hindsight we can understand how later New Testament teaching is a direct outcome of what Jesus started. This is evident in several areas: the attitude to Old Testament food laws (Romans 14:20), keeping festivals and the Sabbath (Colossians 2:16), circumcision (Galatians 5:6), the involvement of Gentiles and women (Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:11-22), and the Temple and sacrifices (1 Peter 2:4-5). It took a long time before these changes were understood. For example, although Mark says, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19), it was not until Peter was given a direct revelation that he understood the change in attitude he was to have both to food and to Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16). Even then he backtracked and he was therefore rebuked by the apostle Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Many early Christians did not properly see the implications, such as those who sought to continue keeping the Jewish law in full (Acts 15:1). In his attitudes and relationships with women, Jesus was distinctly different from his contemporaries, and he accorded them the respect and value which God intended “at the beginning”. This attitude to women was likewise developed and extended in the early ecclesias.

^[1] A *kab* is a measure of food or drink.

What Happened In The Early Ecclesias?

(5) What Happened

in the Early Ecclesias?

That women were actively involved, and to a considerable extent, is shown repeatedly in the New Testament. To us in the twenty-first century this does not seem surprising, but within the context of the ancient world it was a new and important development which followed on from the example of Jesus himself. This becomes obvious as we look through the book of Acts and the letters of the apostle Paul.

After Jesus' ascension the women met at prayer along with the apostles.

All these [the eleven] with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:14)

On the Day of Pentecost "they were all together in one place" when "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4). People asked,

"... how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ... Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. ... What does this mean?" (Acts 2:6-12)

Peter explained the new situation to the puzzled and sceptical onlookers in terms of the prophecy of Joel. No longer was God's Spirit poured out on only a few prophets or prophetesses, as in the Old Testament, but from Pentecost onwards it was to be poured out on all people ("all flesh").

And in the last days it shall be, God declares,

that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions,

and your old men shall dream dreams;

yea, on my menservants and my maidservants in those days

I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

Since this is quoted as a prophecy fulfilled in the events observed, it is reasonable to understand that women actually prophesied on the Day of Pentecost itself.^[1] The prophesying is described as "telling ... the mighty works of God" (verse 11). It is a form of preaching and teaching. The prophesying by both men and women, as predicted here, is shown to be fulfilled as Christianity spread. Philip had four daughters who prophesied, something described favourably in Acts 21:9 when the apostle Paul stayed with Philip in Caesarea. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 approved of both brothers and sisters praying and prophesying.

After the arrest and later release of Peter and John, the believers prayed together.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

We should observe the word “all”, as in Acts 2:4. There is no suggestion that it was just the men who received the Holy Spirit, or just the men who “spoke the word of God with boldness”.

Reports in Acts repeatedly stress that the apostolic preaching was to both men and women. Both sexes believed and were baptized.

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women. (Acts 5:14)

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (Acts 8:12)

After the stoning of Stephen,

a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ... But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

Paul arrested both men and women, which provides us with additional evidence that women were directly involved in the Christian movement. Frequently in conflict situations, it is the men who are arrested and imprisoned. The fact that women were arrested suggests that they were seen as a threat because they too were active promoters of “this Way”.

“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women....” (Acts 22:4)

Acts 8 describes what those scattered in the persecution did.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:4)

Verse 1 said that *all* the believers were scattered “except the apostles”. Evidently, this “preaching the word” was not done by the apostles for they stayed in Jerusalem. It was done by “those who were scattered”, amongst whom were both men and women. Here we see Jesus’ “Great Commission” in action. There are many facets to “preaching the word”. It includes announcement, but also teaching and explaining – or as Jesus put it: “... make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). The book of Acts gives every reason to think that both men and women were actively involved in preaching and teaching as the Christian movement spread.

Influential Women

When Paul and Silas crossed to Europe, Luke wrote with enthusiasm that “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” joined them (Acts 17:4). At Beroea “not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men” became believers (Acts 17:12). This was important because such people could wield great influence in the promotion of the gospel. At

the place of prayer in Philippi, Paul and Silas spoke to Lydia, a business woman (a seller of purple) from Thyatira:

The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household, she besought us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:14-15)

The term “household” encompasses relations and slaves, male and female. Lydia had been a “worshipper of God”, which meant she was interested in Judaism but had not converted to it. In Judaism there was no initiatory rite for women comparable with circumcision for men, whereas conscious commitment by baptism^[2] into Christ was individual to each man or woman.

Lydia’s house presumably became one of the places where believers met just as we hear of “the church in their house” in 1 Corinthians 16:19, referring to the house of Aquila and Priscilla.

Lydia, as a seller of purple (an international trade) would be accustomed to speaking with and making arrangements with all sorts of people, so she would be an ideal person in whose house to centre the ecclesia. After Paul and Silas were released from jail, they visited Lydia and encouraged the new converts:

So they went out of the prison, and visited Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they exhorted them and departed. (Acts 16:40)

In Colossians 4:15 greetings are sent “to Nympha and the church in her house.”^[3] This suggests house-ecclesias in the homes of at least two sisters, Lydia and Nympha. No mention is made of their husbands. Perhaps these women were unmarried, widows, or their husbands were unbelievers, or away from home. Women would in any case “rule their households” (1 Timothy 5:14), and if the household of “women of high standing” did not include children, it certainly included male and female slaves; accordingly these women had considerable influence. Lydia is presented by Luke as a woman of independent means, independent mind and “faithful to the Lord”. Later at Philippi we hear of two similar women, Euodia and Syntyche.

Also in the ecclesia at Philippi was the jailer, a Gentile evidently, and we are not told his name. But he was baptised “with all his family” (Acts 16:33). Paul left Philippi, probably the next day, and called there once more (Acts 20:6). By the time he wrote the letter to the Philippians, there appears to have been a flourishing ecclesia with overseers and deacons (Philippians 1:1). We cannot expect the Gentile jailer to have had much knowledge to build the ecclesia up; the obvious person to have carried on the work of preaching and teaching is Lydia, with her background as a “worshipper of God” even before “the Lord opened her heart” (Acts 16:14).

Fellow Workers and Those Who Labour in the Lord

Sadly, Euodia and Syntyche were in conflict with one another.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. And I ask you also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

The subject under dispute is not disclosed but the influential nature of these two sisters is seen in Paul’s description. Firstly they have “laboured side by side” with Paul, and secondly they are grouped as doing this along with Clement and the rest of Paul’s “fellow workers”.

The phrase “laboured side by side” translates the single verb *synathleo*. It is worth noting that Paul did not say that they worked *under* him, as might have been said by a leader in today’s world. *Syn* means “together”, while *athleo* (which gives us the word “athlete”) means to strive hard, to struggle to win against strong opposition, just as athletes do to achieve victory in the Olympic Games. The same verb was used in chapter 1 verse 27, where it is translated as “striving side by side” for the faith of the gospel.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind *striving side by side* for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

(Philippians 1:27-28, italics ours.)

The verb *synathleo* when coupled with “for the faith of the gospel” is too strong in meaning to indicate simply material help or hospitality. Paul’s description suggests energetic activity to promote the faith and defend it against opponents.

Several words meaning “work” are used particularly for the work of the gospel. The words are the verb *kopiao* and the nouns *kopos* and *ergon*. *Kopos* in particular means “hard work” or “toil” and is a favourite word of Paul’s to describe missionary activity and the upbuilding of ecclesias. “Fellow workers” is *synergoi*, literally “workers together”. These words are used of those who worked together with Paul as leaders in the service of preaching, teaching and providing examples in behaviour. Leadership, patterned on Jesus, is not ordering people about but is service to others. As Jesus says in Luke 22:25-26 “... let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves”.

Writing about his own work and that of Apollos, Paul says:

He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labour (*kopos*). For we are fellow workers (*synergoi*) for God; you are God’s field, God’s building.

(1 Corinthians 3:8-9)

To the Thessalonians Paul writes:

We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labour (*kopiao*) among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work (*ergon*). (1 Thess. 5:12-13)

In 2 Corinthians 8:23 Paul describes Titus as “my partner and fellow worker (*synergos*).” In Philippians 2:25-30 Paul speaks of Epaphroditus as “my brother and fellow worker (*synergos*) and fellow soldier” and says “he nearly died for the work (*ergon*) of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me.” In Romans 16 Paul describes Prisca [Priscilla] and Aquila and Timothy as “fellow workers” (*synergoi*). Urbanus is “our fellow worker in Christ” (*synergos*). Of Mary it is said: “she has worked hard (*kopiao*) among you”, and Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are called “workers in the Lord (*kopiao*)”. In Colossians 4:11 Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus called Justus are the only Jewish fellow workers present at that point with Paul. In Philemon 24, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke are mentioned as fellow workers, while Philemon is also addressed as such. The work Philemon does is described in verses 2, 6 and 7: he has a church in his house, he is sharing his faith, and the “hearts of the saints have been refreshed” through him.

It is significant that both brothers and sisters are described as “workers in the Lord” and “fellow workers”, and there is no difference expressed in the work they do.

How these fellow workers dovetailed with others such as the overseers (bishops) and deacons mentioned in Philippians is not explained.^[4] Like the apostle Paul, they seem to have been able to move about from ecclesia to ecclesia, promoting the gospel. That they are not simply ordinary believers who are cooperating with Paul is clear from the instructions that the brothers and sisters in Corinth are to be subject to them.

Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and labourer. (1 Corinthians 16:16)

The word “men” does not occur in the Greek. Paul’s instructions are “be subject to such people and to every fellow worker and labourer”.

Submit to such as these, and to everyone who joins in the work and labours at it.” (NIV)^[5]

Priscilla and Aquila

Two of those described as fellow workers are Priscilla and Aquila (wife and husband). They travelled extensively – from Rome to Corinth, where they lived with Paul, and with Paul from Corinth to Ephesus, where later they had a church in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19). They were back in Rome and obviously active in the ecclesia there when Paul sent his greetings and described them as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Romans 16:3).

In Acts they are shown teaching Apollos in Ephesus. Apollos became one of the main leaders in the early church.

... when Priscilla and Aquila heard him [Apollos], they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:26)

No reservation is expressed or implied about the fact that both “expounded to him the way of God”. Teaching is evidently one of the activities undertaken by Paul’s fellow workers, as we would expect of those who were spreading the gospel and maintaining an ecclesia in their house.^[6]

Phoebe

The words “fellow worker” are not used of Phoebe, though it is thought she was entrusted by Paul with the responsibility of taking his letter to the believers in Rome.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1-2)

She is called a “deacon” (*diakonos*) of the ecclesia in Cenchreae, and Paul says she was a “helper” (*prostatis*) of many, himself included. Opinion is divided as to how *diakonos* and *prostatis* should be understood.

It is not clear whether *diakonos* refers to a particular ecclesial office as in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1, or whether the word should be translated as “servant” (KJV and NIV).

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.
(Philippians 1:1)

The word *diakonos* is used in 1 Corinthians 3:5 for leaders like Paul and Apollos, who are “servants (*diakono*i) through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” Paul doesn’t claim personal credit for himself or for Apollos in this description, but adds “we are fellow workers for God” (verse 9). The same word is used of Jesus himself in Romans 15.

I tell you that Christ became a servant (*diakonos*) to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

(Romans 15:8-9)

There seems something special, therefore, in describing Phoebe as a *diakonos*. Accordingly, in Romans 16:2 *diakonos* is frequently translated as a title or an office. Translations vary: RSV and the Jerusalem Bible translate “deaconess”; GNB “who serves the church”; NEB “who holds office in the congregation”; REB “a minister in the church”. Though we should all be “servants” of Christ and to one another, Paul’s use of *diakonos* to describe Phoebe suggests she was more than an ordinary member of the ecclesia.

Phoebe is also described as a *prostatis*, the feminine of the word *prostates*. *Prostates* means “leader”, “chief”, “ruler”, and the other words in the New Testament from this same word-group are usually translated with leadership connotations e.g. Romans 12:8 (“authority” GNB, “leadership” NIV) and 1 Timothy 5:17 (“rule” RSV, “who direct the affairs of the church” NIV). Another suggestion is that it may mean “sponsor” or “benefactor” (NRSV) or “patron”, i.e. a believer who supported the activities with her own money.^[7] It therefore seems to underplay the translation of *prostatis* simply to say “helper”. As with *diakonos* it is difficult to be sure of the meaning but the word *prostatis* suggests, at the very least, a woman of important, approved influence.^[8]

Junia/Junias

In Romans 16:7 greetings are sent to Andronicus and Junia/Junias who are described as “men of note among the apostles.” The word “men” is an addition in the English translation. The original says “who are of note among the apostles” and the expression could without difficulty refer to Andronicus (masculine) and Junia (or Julia) (if feminine). GNB says: “they are well known among the apostles”. “Apostles” in this sense does not mean the twelve, but is a term used of those sent by ecclesias either as missionaries or messengers. Such apostles are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28, 2 Corinthians 8:23^[9] and Philippians 2:25: “Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger (*apostolos*) and minister to my need”. “Of note among the apostles” either means “well-known to the apostles”,^[10] or “well-known as apostles”^[11]. However, while the name Andronicus is indisputably masculine, there is disagreement about Junias or Junia (or Julia in some manuscripts). John Chrysostom (347-407), like most ancient writers,^[12] considered she was a woman and commented:

To be apostles is something great. But to be outstanding among them – just think what wonderful praise that is! How great this woman’s devotion to learning must have been that she was deemed worthy of the title apostle. (Homily on Romans 16)

Only Epiphanius (315-403 AD), bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, considered Paul referred to Junias a man, not Junia a woman:

Junias, of whom Paul makes mention, became bishop of Apameia of Syria. (Index of Disciples, 125:19-20)

Epiphanius may preserve an independent tradition that Junias became a bishop, but he also considers Prisca (i.e. Priscilla) mentioned in Romans 16:3 to be a man too, so his evidence is not necessarily reliable.^[13] He was strongly against leadership by women, and wrote: “In very truth, women are a feeble race, untrustworthy and of mediocre intelligence” (*Panarion* 79).

This reference to Junias/Junia has too much ambiguity to prove that women could be described as “apostles”, but gives an interesting example of how words, translations, facts and analysis can vary.

Assessing the Evidence

Although the translation of individual words is sometimes uncertain and there are variant readings in the manuscripts, there is ample evidence from the early ecclesias to indicate a considerable and active involvement by sisters in the work of the gospel.

When Paul speaks of both brothers and sisters as “fellow workers” (*synergoi*), those who “work (*kopiao*) in the Lord”, no difference can be seen in the work described. His workers and fellow workers do the jobs necessary for the promotion of the Christian message and the upbuilding of the ecclesias. The significantly large numbers of sisters involved is in line with the attitude of Jesus when he encouraged women to learn and to spread the message. It follows on from the pronouncement on the Day of Pentecost that now God would speak through both men and women.

This does not mean that all the people described in Paul’s letters did exactly the same. Paul was in a special position as an apostle, but so too were those he described as “fellow workers” and “labourers” (male and female); leadership and teaching as well as action and example must underlie Paul’s comments that believers were to be subject “to every fellow worker and labourer”, “to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord”. Otherwise, what does Paul mean by giving such instructions (1 Corinthians 16:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)? If it is asserted that the work of male and female “fellow workers” and “labourers” is differentiated into male and female roles, despite Paul’s inclusive statements, some evidence needs to be presented.

We will look further at Paul’s letters, observe the way he encourages ecclesial activity and what that means in practice. We will observe, again, that women are well involved, and we will check carefully to see whether different roles in ecclesial activities are specified for men and women in the Lord.

^[1] Acts 2:13 has been quoted to argue that only men spoke with tongues: “These men are full of new wine” (KJV). The word “men” does not appear in the original Greek. RSV translates “They are filled with new wine.” GNB “These people are drunk.”

^[2] Baptism itself, however, was a Jewish practice for converts to Judaism and was applied to both men and women.

^[3] Some manuscripts say “Nymphas and the church in his house” (as KJV) but those manuscripts which are thought to be more reliable say “Nympha ... in her house” (as RSV, NEB, NIV, GNB, NRSV). Some manuscripts say “their house”.

^[4] “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:1-2)

^[5] Submission is putting oneself at the service of others. It does not mean “take orders from”! We understand this passage in 1 Corinthians 16:16 to mean that Stephanas and his family worked hard to support and help the believers. The *diakonia* (“service”, “ministry”) is not explained, but can reasonably be understood to mean spiritual and practical support, i.e. they promoted the gospel by preaching and teaching, and in parallel they put the principles into practical effect in caring and supporting. By saying “be subject to such people and to every fellow worker and labourer” Paul means that the Corinthians should do their best to support them, to follow their good lead, to understand and apply their encouraging teaching about the meaning of the new life in Christ. See also Chapter 25 “The Husband is Head of the Wife”.

^[6] It has been suggested that this teaching was in private, and therefore there is no conflict between Priscilla’s act of teaching here and the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12, “I permit no woman to teach”. The phrase for “in private” occurs several times in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 24:3, Acts 23:19, Galatians 2:2), but is not used here of Priscilla and Aquila in regards to Apollos. The verb “they took him” is variously translated: “they took him to their home” (NIV), “they took him in hand” (NEB), “they took him home with them” (GNB), and “they took him aside” (NRSV). Since they met him in the synagogue at Ephesus, it could mean they taught him in a corner in the synagogue! The New Testament makes no distinction between public and private teaching, and believers normally met in homes anyway for meetings.

^[7] The longest extant inscription in Corinth was set up in AD 43 to Junia Theodora who was honoured for her patronage (*prostasia*). It was one of several inscriptions to her. Her actions as patroness are described in a decree from the Lycian city of Telmessos: “[She] welcomes into her own house Lycian travellers and our citizens ... supplying them with everything.” It is possible, therefore, that hospitality and financial support may be in mind when Paul spoke of Phoebe as a *prostatis*. See *After Paul Left Corinth*, Bruce W. Winter, (Eerdmans, 2001) pages 199-203.

^[8] It is worth observing how the King James Version plays down the relevant words.

I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant [*diakonos*] of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer [*prostatis*] of many, and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers [*synergoi*] in Christ Jesus.

Phoebe is a “servant”, but had Phoebe been a masculine name, the word would doubtless have been translated “deacon”. *Prostatis* is translated “succourer”, and Priscilla and Aquila are “helpers”, although the text clearly says “fellow workers”. Can we see in the KJV the influence of the later church tradition which presumed that women did not hold office, and therefore Phoebe could not have been a deacon, despite the statement in the text? Later translations indicate a more positive assessment.

^[9] In 2 Corinthians 8:17-24 Paul says he is sending two brothers along with Titus “my partner and fellow worker in your service”. These he describes as apostles (*apostoloi*, “messengers”). In the preceding few verses we are provided with the description that one of them is “famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel” and that “he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us”. The second is described as “our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters”.

^[10] M. H. Brurer and O. B. Wallace, after examining Greek usage in many Greek texts, conclude the translation can only be: “well-known to the apostles”, *New Testament Studies* (CUP), Vol. 47, January 2001, pages 76-91.

^[11] Linda Belleville, after examining primary usage in the computer databases of Hellenistic Greek literary works, papyri, inscriptions and artefacts maintains that Junia is feminine, and that the grammar of the phrase without exception means, “notable *among* the apostles”, *New Testament Studies* (CUP), Vol. 51, April 2005, pages 250-269, i.e. Andronicus and Junia are well known apostles.

^[12] E.g. Ambrosiaster, Rufinus, Jerome, John Damascene. “Origen seems to cite the name once as masculine and once as feminine, though the masculine is most likely a later corruption of his text.” See Brurer and Wallace, *ibid*, page 76.

^[13] “Epiphanius is not reliable in preserving and interpreting his sources accurately,” Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter* (2006), page 222.

"Brothers and sisters" in the New Testament

(6) "Brothers and Sisters"

in the New Testament

The New Testament normally refers to believers as *adelphoi*, "brethren". It is sometimes suggested that the masculine is used because the instructions are addressed to male elders. This may be the case at the Council of Jerusalem.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know..." (Acts 15:6-7)

Here Peter is addressing the masculine apostles and elders, and "brethren" translates *andres adelphoi* (literally "men, brothers"). This use of *andres*, however, is a formal way of addressing an audience, and it becomes apparent that "the whole church" is involved in the decision making after listening to the speeches.

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 15:22)

The "whole church" obviously includes the women.

In the New Testament letters, however, *adelphoi* is used on its own or coupled with words like "saints" or "beloved", and it is very clear from the opening and closing greetings that these expressions, though masculine in Greek, are addressed to all the believers and are equivalent to our usage "brothers and sisters". Italics are ours in the following quotations.

To *all God's beloved* in Rome, who are called to be *saints*: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for *all of you*.... (Romans 1:7-8)

To *the church* of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for *you all*, constantly mentioning *you* in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father *your* work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, *brethren* beloved by God, that he has chosen *you*.... (1 Thessalonians 1:1-4)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To *all the saints* in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:1-2)

That *adelphoi* means "brothers and sisters" can also be demonstrated from numerous New Testament passages, like Hebrews 2:11, Hebrews 10:19, Philippians 4:8, James 1:2 & 19.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them *brethren*.... (Hebrews 2:10-11)

Does this apparently masculine language (“many sons”, “brethren”) refer only to brothers, not sisters? Are only brothers sanctified? Is Jesus the pioneer of the salvation only of brothers?

The explanation is that in accordance with normal usage (English or Greek) masculine terms and grammar are employed for statements which include both male and female.

He or *him*, is therefore used when speaking generally and this is understood to include *she* or *her*. In the plural, *they* in English includes both masculine and feminine but without any sense of gender being present, except by context.^[1] To refer to males, or to refer to males and females together, masculine terminology is used. Feminine terminology is used only when referring to females exclusively.

How, then, do we know whether a passage refers to brothers and sisters together, or only to brothers? Paul makes it clear that he is referring to all the believers by his usage of terms like “all” and “each one of you”.

It is right for me to feel thus about *you all*, because I hold you in my heart, for you are *all* partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. (Philippians 1:7)

Let *each of you* look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind *among yourselves*, which is *yours* in Christ Jesus.... (Philippians 2:4-5)

Finally, *brethren*, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What *you* have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with *you*. (Philippians 4:8-9)

Important Implications

This means that passages addressed to “brethren” refer to all the believers unless clearly specified to the contrary or unless there is overwhelming reason to suppose otherwise. The NRSV regularly translates *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters”, and the most recent edition of the Good News Bible does likewise.

I appeal to you therefore, *brothers and sisters*, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (NRSV)

It should be noted that we are not citing inclusive language translations (like GNB, NRSV) to *prove* our point. The reason for using inclusive language in translating *adelphoi* is because this is what the word means in the way Paul and the other New Testament letter-writers express themselves.^[2] This teaching is directed to all members of the ecclesia, both brothers and sisters, and it would not make sense to assert differently.^[3] The inclusive language translations make this clear.

As we continue through Romans 12, although the masculine is used and Paul changes to the singular, the teaching is still to all the brothers and sisters, not just to the brothers:

For by the grace given to me I bid *everyone among you* not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him.
(Romans 12:3)

Despite masculine terms like “he” and “him”, it is obvious that these words apply to all brothers and sisters in Christ. When Paul continues, as below, does this inclusive use of masculine terminology suddenly cease part way through the paragraph?

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.
(Romans 12:4-8)

If in this list of activities Paul included some which were universally agreed to be male-only, then his readers would understand this, and not assume that the all-inclusive masculine terms still included feminine. For example, if writing today to a mixed group of believers, someone said, “Some of you are doctors, some train-drivers, some nurses, some teachers” we might be inclined to regard all of these as possible occupations for both men and women, though wonder whether there were in fact any female train drivers.^[4] But had this been written a hundred years ago, people then would have thought: doctors (men), train-drivers (men), nurses (women), teachers (men or women).

In this passage Paul describes the various activities within first century ecclesias: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, and helping others in various ways. Each of these is practised, with approval, by both brothers and sisters: prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Acts 21:9), service (1 Timothy 5:9-10), teaching (Colossians 3:16, Titus 2:3), exhortation (1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 3:13), charity (Acts 9:36, Hebrews 13:16).^[5] According to Paul’s explanation these activities do not vary according to whether they are carried out by brothers or by sisters but vary “according to the grace given to us” (verse 6). This list is in the masculine according to Greek usage. The fact that activities like helping others, giving to charity, doing acts of mercy – Christian activities which apply to both sexes – are described in this manner (using “he”) again indicates that both brothers and sisters are intended.

Romans 12 continues:

Let love be genuine; hate [masculine]^[6] what is evil, hold fast [masculine] to what is good; love one another [masculine]^[7] with brotherly affection; outdo [masculine] one another [masculine] in showing honour.
(Romans 12:9-10)

Obviously this teaching, though given in the masculine for reasons of Greek grammar, applies to all believers. Some translators, by using the plural or by saying “we” or “you” instead of “he”, make it clear to readers that masculine statements such as those above refer to both male and female.

If our gift is to speak God’s message, we should do it according to the faith that we have; if it is to serve, we should serve; if it is to teach, we should teach; if it is to encourage others, we should do so. *Whoever* shares with others should do it generously: *whoever* has authority should work

hard; *whoever* shows kindness to others should do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:6-8 GNB, italics ours.)

In 1 Corinthians 12 we also find a list of ecclesial activities. Once more the believers are addressed in the masculine “brethren”, but again it is necessary to realise that the masculine includes feminine.^[8]

For by one spirit we were all [masculine] baptized into one body – Jews [masculine] or Greeks, slaves [masculine] or free [masculine] – and all [masculine] were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

When we look at the list of activities we once more note that there is no indication of any male/female division:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:27-28)

Paul does not say, nor does he appear to imply, that God has appointed *men* to be apostles, prophets, teachers, and *women* to be workers of miracles, healers and helpers.

When in 1 Corinthians 14 we read a description of a first century ecclesial meeting, the same applies. Although in the masculine, it is addressed to all brothers and sisters and describes the varied activity.

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

The NIV (inclusive language version, 1998) translates:

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. (1 Corinthians 14:26, NIV)

There is no distinction made as to whether it is a sister or a brother who brings a hymn, a lesson (*didache*, “teaching”), a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation. By saying “each one” when addressing the brothers and sisters, Paul indicates clearly that he is referring to both. Nowhere does Paul add, “Naturally, I mean only the men!” – although it would be quite possible and simple to have said this in Greek.

Two objections can be made to this conclusion. The first is to suggest that Paul disapproves of their coming with “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation” for he goes on to say: “Let all things be done for edification” – the implication being that what they were doing was not “for edification”. We should remember, however, that Paul established the ecclesia in Corinth and stayed there for a year and a half (Acts 18:11). In this letter he is regulating things which have gone wrong (including several people speaking at once), but the basic pattern of worship with “everyone” contributing, and with brothers and sisters praying and prophesying must surely have come from Paul himself. As he says:

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

It would be surprising if the teachings (“traditions”, RSV, “ordinances” KJV) did not include how they were to run their meetings. Paul is criticising not *what* they do but *how* they do it, as with his comments about “the Lord’s supper” (1 Corinthians 11:17-21).

The second objection is drawn from 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Does Paul now make himself clear (in case anyone from his all-inclusive previous comments thinks otherwise) and declare that women should not speak at all? If the New Testament gave no indication that sisters were involved in teaching, exhorting and leadership, it would seem possible that Paul’s all-inclusive statements would be understood by his hearers (on points like these) in a non-inclusive fashion. Hence much depends on how we see verses 34-35 in the context of the whole of the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is discussed in detail in Chapter 8, and 1 Timothy 2 in Chapters 10, 11 and 12, but the overall evidence from Paul’s letters (and specifically from 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, and 14:1-5, “I want you *all* to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy”) indicates that both brothers and sisters normally did speak, and Paul wished them to speak, at ecclesial meetings.

This may seem surprising if we are accustomed to assuming that only brothers took a leading part, but Ephesians 4 illustrates the same point. All the brothers and sisters are addressed:

I ... beg *you* to lead a life worthy of the calling to which *you* have been called.... There is one body and one Spirit, just as *you* were called to the one hope that belongs to *your* call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.... But grace was given *to each of us* according to the measure of Christ’s gift.
(Ephesians 4:1-7, italics ours)

As in Romans and Corinthians, the activities are described with no distinction made between male and female roles.

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ....

(Ephesians 4:11-16)

Ephesians 4 continues with teaching addressed to all brothers and sisters.

... putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members of one another. (Ephesians 4:25)

The question might be asked: “If these different roles were carried out by both brothers and sisters, who were these sisters? We know names of brothers like Paul and Timothy. Who were the sisters?”

In Romans 16 there are twenty-nine people, at least eight of whom are women. More sisters than brothers are listed here as workers.^[9] As we observed in the last chapter, Phoebe is called a “deacon/servant” and “helper” (or “leader”), Prisca and Aquila and Timothy are “fellow workers”, Mary “has worked hard among you”, and Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are “workers in the Lord”. In Philippians 4:2-3 Euodia and Syntyche are described as women who “have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.”

To respond that these sisters simply worked hard supporting the brothers like Martha did for Jesus (Luke 10:40), seems more than inadequate. Does preparing food or discussing only in private really suit these descriptions?

It would, in fact, be difficult to find any way of making a closer identification between the work done by the brothers and by the sisters than presented here. What work was it? Paul uses the same words for work (*kopos* and *ergon*) that he uses of himself and of the brothers. Was it not the work of spreading the gospel and establishing and building up ecclesias – the work listed by the apostle Paul in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4?

This does not mean that every sister did every job, any more than every brother did every job. The evidence supplied above is that capable sisters like capable brothers did what they could to promote the gospel and build up and run the ecclesias – “according to the grace given” (Romans 12:6). This activity, which involved prophecy, teaching, administration, acts of charity, received full divine approval and was done by both sexes.

Finally, three questions need to be asked.

If Paul *had* intended his teaching to be all-inclusive, need he have written any differently? From a grammatical point of view the answer is: “No”. He need not have done. As it stands, his remarks are in all-inclusive Greek.

Secondly, if Paul had intended his teaching to refer exclusively to males, would he have needed to write differently in Greek. The answer is: “Yes”. He would have had to specify: “I mean that men should do this, not women,” using the words *andres* for “men”, *gynaikes* for “women”, or the words “male” and “female” as in Galatians 3:28 (where, of course, he says there is *not* male and female).

Thirdly, if Paul had intended his remarks *not* to be all-inclusive, would he have repeatedly used all-inclusive terms like “all” and “each one of you”?

^[1] Greek, like English, does not have a neutral third-person singular pronoun which is neither masculine nor feminine, other than the neuter *it*, which is not appropriate when talking of a person. In Greek, masculine adjectives, pronouns and participles are used in general statements, without any specifically masculine meaning being necessarily intended.

^[2] We consider that every time Paul writes *adelphoi* as a vocative (i.e. addressing people) he means “believers” or “brothers and sisters”. Anyone can check this with a concordance, and we invite you to do the research and see. Go through every instance of “brethren” in the New Testament letters in Young’s Concordance; look at the letter and the surrounding circumstances to see to whom it is addressed. “Brothers and sisters” is also usually the meaning when other grammatical cases are used, with only a few exceptions where one or two

males are referred to and the word there has to be translated as “brothers” masculine. This might be the case in 1 Cor 6:8, if the example about going to court is against men, as is quite probable; it is certainly the case in 2 Cor 8:22-23 where Paul is talking about Titus & another brother (verse 17), so to translate “brothers and sisters” would not make sense. The same could apply to 1 Cor 16:12 “I strongly urged him [Apollos] to go to you with the brothers.”

In 1 Tim 5:1 the meaning is the normal family meaning: “Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.” Similarly with Stephen’s mention of Joseph’s brothers in Acts 7:13.

In Rom 9:3 *adelphoi* means the people of Israel, as in Heb 7:5, and when Paul addresses the crowd in the Temple (Acts 22:1), the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1), and the Jewish leaders in Rome (Acts 28:17). In these cases, the inclusive language versions continue to translate correctly, i.e. they do not say “brothers and sisters” out of some misplaced concern (as some critics allege) to be politically correct!

The Book of Acts has varied uses where *adelphoi* is often coupled with *andres* (men), generally in formal speeches (about 10 times). This use of *andres* (men) appears to be a specialised usage for beginning a speech, and we should not assume that women were not present, e.g. in Acts 1:16, where Peter addressed the 120 believers, or at Pentecost when Peter addressed the crowd (Acts 2:22, 2:29) and as a consequence “there were added that day about three thousand souls” i.e. men and women (Acts 2:41).

There are about 130 examples of *adelphoi* from Romans to Revelation. Apart from the exceptions above (about 6 occurrences, and never in the vocative case) we maintain that every time the word *adelphoi* is used from Romans to Revelation it means “brothers and sisters”. About 120 examples of *adelphoi* meaning “brothers and sisters” compared with 6 against is quite a strong statistic!

^[3] The preface to the NIV 1995 Inclusive Language edition (page vii) gives further reasons for using inclusive language: “A major challenge facing the Committee is how to respond to the significant changes that are taking place within the English language in regard to gender issues. The word ‘man’, for example, is now widely understood to refer only to males, even though that is not the intention of the corresponding Greek or Hebrew words. Instances of potential confusion abound, as in instructions about preparing for the Lord’s Supper (‘A man ought to examine himself’, 1 Corinthians 11:28), or in pronouncements of beatitude such as in Psalm 1:1 (‘Blessed is the man ...). In these and many other passages, it has become increasingly necessary to have a translation that makes it clear that women and men are both included.”

^[4] It was announced in *The Scotsman* 2nd February 2007 that 21 of ScotRail’s 900 drivers are women, and the company has launched a recruitment drive for more women and ethnic minority applicants.

^[5] This is based on the RSV which translates Romans 12:18, “He who gives aid, with zeal”. The KJV reads “He that ruleth with diligence”. The Greek can be translated either way. Examples of ruling by women can be seen in instructions about Paul’s workers and fellow workers (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16), some of whom were women (Romans 16). See Chapter 7 “Paul’s General Teaching”, pages 48-60. So too in 1 Timothy 5:14 where young widows are to marry and “rule their households”. See Chapter 5 “What Happened in the Early Ecclesias?”, pages 30-39.

^[6] The English verbs are masculine participles in Greek.

^[7] “one another” (*allelous*) is masculine.

^[8] The letter is addressed to *all* believers: “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:2)

^[9] This fact assumes even greater significance if statistics computed from the Roman Empire are correct. It is calculated that there were twice as many men as women in ancient Rome.

Paul's General Teaching

(7) Paul's

General Teaching

Paul was appointed "a preacher and apostle ... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (1 Timothy 2:7). It is mainly from the writings of Paul and events from his journeys in Acts that we have illustrated the involvement, without male/female role-distinction, of brothers and sisters in the early ecclesias.

We now look at Paul's teaching on this subject, going chronologically through his letters. The dates we give are conventional, as suggested in Bible reference books.

Galatians (c. 47 AD)

Paul frequently wrote his letters to correct a misunderstanding, and to give guidance and instruction on issues that were troubling the new believers.

This is particularly so with Galatians, the first of his letters.

He writes to combat a threat to the very Christianity which he preaches, given to him, as he indicates, directly by Jesus:

I would have you know ... the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel ... it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

"O foolish Galatians!", he addresses them (3:1). Why were they foolish? Because they were tempted, under pressure and persuasion, to revert to a form of Christianity which followed their former Judaism, without the difference which Jesus brought. "Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? (3:3)"

Paul therefore reminds them of the true Christian message and its consequences.

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:23-29)

Believers have come into a new relationship with God based not on the Law but on faith. They are in an honoured position now that they believe in Jesus as the Messiah. In declaring this, Paul on the one hand states that all, from whatever background, can be baptised into Christ and become heirs of what was promised to Abraham. "... as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.... And if you are Christ's, you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

But Paul states much more than that.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:28)

If Paul only means that salvation is open to all, he says that in the surrounding sentences. Why, then, add this additional declaration?

Paul's statement specifically picks up the position of his Judaising opponents, and shows how it is reversed in Christ.

To Jews, separation from Gentiles was of fundamental importance. Jews would not eat or associate with Gentiles (Acts 10: 28, Galatians 2:12).

To everyone it was part of the normal world-order that some people were free and others were slaves.

Women, to both Jews and Gentiles, were of lesser importance, occasionally valued in themselves, often despised.

Therefore, before Christ came, ethnicity, status, and gender created very real barriers in religious life. Jesus' message turned accepted attitudes upside down, not just in theory but in practice.

Paul, when a traditional Jew, once prayed thanking God for not making him a Gentile, a slave or a woman. For these three categories, religious participation in Judaism was either impossible or restricted.

Now that the believers "have put on Christ", there is "a new creation" (6:15), and these previous barriers are removed.

Not only therefore is there a new relationship with God and Jesus but with fellow believers. This leads to a better way of behaviour: new, Christ-like attitudes towards each other and towards everyone else too.

But not all agreed. The difference between Paul and the Judaisers is that Paul believed the new creation to be in force now. This is well illustrated by the conflict he mentions with Peter.

At first Peter accepted and practised the new position – as indicated by his vision in Acts.

"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

(Acts 10:34)

But suddenly Peter reverted. When Peter tried to observe distinctions between Jewish Christians and Gentile ones, Paul strongly objected:

But when Cephas [= Peter] came to Antioch I opposed him to his face ... for before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party [i.e. the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who insisted that the Gentile Christians follow the Jewish law].

(Galatians 3:11-12)

Are Jews within the church to be considered differently from Gentiles? The answer is a resounding “No”, and Paul explains why:

In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. (Galatians 5:6)

... neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Galatians 6:15)

And this gives the key to understanding the correct approach to the other divisions.

Was slavery a bar to service in the church, service equal to that of a freeman? Could a slave not pray, not prophesy, not teach, because he was a slave? Slaves because of the culture of the world had to remain in that position socially, but not as regards the ecclesia. Onesimus had to be returned because of Roman law, but he was sent back to Philemon by Paul “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Philemon 16).

And women? Were they as women to be under the previous restriction, allowed only partial involvement? Could a woman not pray, not prophesy, not teach, because she was a woman? Was a *brother* in Christ to thank God daily that he was not a *sister* in Christ? There is no hint of this in Paul. If we understand what he says in accordance with the context, Paul approves of equal service by sisters and by brothers. Life and service within the ecclesia, according to Paul, are not divided up by reference to whether male or female, nor whether slave or free, nor whether Jew or Gentile.

Society might still impose restrictions, and it did. But as far as life and service in the ecclesia was concerned, in Christ you are all one:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)

The ecclesia is a new creation (Galatians 6:15), the old order under the Law applies no more, and this is one of the great truths for which Paul stood.

Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule. (Galatians 6:16)

Thessalonians (c. 50 AD)

Both letters are addressed to “the Church of the Thessalonians” (verse 1). At the end of the first letter (1 Thessalonians 5:27) Paul commands that it should be read to “all the brethren”, (i.e. to all the brothers and sisters).^[1] Paul commends them to “encourage one another (*parakaleo* “exhort”) and build one another up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Then there is a distinction made between the leaders and the rest of the brothers and sisters. The majority are addressed first, and significantly both groups are addressed as “*adelphoi*”, “brothers and sisters.

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labour (*kopiao*) among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish (*noutheteo*) you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work (*ergon*). (verses 12-13)

Then Paul appears to address the leaders themselves.

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish (*noutheteo*) the idlers, encourage (*parakaleo*) the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (verse 14)

In between, Paul encourages them to “be at peace among yourselves”. Then he reverts to addressing everybody.

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

(1 **Thessalonians** 5:15-22)

These instructions are mostly to *all* the believers, but a distinction is there between those who lead and those who need to be guided and helped. Those who lead may have been appointed, or they may be in that position “because of their work” (verse 13), like the household of Stephanas in 1 Corinthians 16:15 who had “devoted themselves to the service of the saints”. The leadership roles are not specified, and no male/female division is shown, but the usual vocabulary can be observed: work (*kopiaio* and *ergon*) for the spreading of the gospel and the building up of the ecclesia; admonition (*noutheteo*); encourage or exhort (*parakaleo*).

The instruction “do not despise prophesying” (1 Thessalonians 5:20) reminds us that prophesying is done by both brothers and sisters (Acts 2:17-18, Acts 21:9, 1 Corinthians 11-14).

At the end of the second letter Paul himself gives encouragement and admonition, and asks all the brothers and sisters to do the same.

... we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort (*parakaleo*) in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness (*hesychia*) and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn (*noutheteo*) him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:11-15)

The NRSV puts it clearly as applying to all:

... Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn (*noutheteo*) them as believers.

The word “quietness” *hesychia* is worth noting as it is a Christ-like characteristic for all brothers and sisters. It is used again in the passage about women learning in 1 Timothy 2, which we discuss on pages 84-85.

Philippians (c. 54 AD, or perhaps 61-63 AD)

In Philippi Paul founded the first ecclesia after his vision from God calling him to preach in Macedonia. He began by talking to the women at the riverside. Apparently there was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi, perhaps because there were too few men to establish one and the women did not count. The ecclesia first met in Lydia’s house (Acts 16:40) and according to Philippians 4:3 two sisters, Euodia and Syntyche, though unfortunately in disagreement at the time when Paul wrote, had worked hard with Paul, Clement and others. Paul’s letter to the

Philippians is the first to mention bishops (*episkopoi*) and deacons (*diakonoi*). Both words are in the plural but no further explanation is given. Teaching about life in the ecclesia and life in Christ is to all the believers without distinction of roles:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9)

Paul left an example, that as he had done, they should copy.

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do....

There is no hint that a major part of Paul's work, preaching and teaching, was an example only to brothers and not to sisters.

Corinthians (c. 54-56 AD)

In Corinthians Paul gives instructions on a large number of issues which had become a problem. In 1 Corinthians chapters 1-6 he comments on matters which had been reported to him. From chapter 7 onwards he in addition replies to questions put to him in a letter from Corinth. Paul's instructions are addressed to all the believers but in this letter, for the first time, there is some distinction made between brothers and sisters.

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul gives instructions on marriage. In this he gives an equality between the couple in their sexual relationship, a direct application of the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) in marriage.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Corinthians 7:3-4)

The reciprocal nature of the marriage relationship is continued throughout the chapter.

In 1 Corinthians 11 a distinction is made when Paul discusses headcovering.

I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

(1 Corinthians 11:3)

In whatever manner the term "head" and the comments about headcovering are to be understood,^[2] the mutual dependency of husband and wife (or man and woman)^[3] in the new Christian relationship ("in the Lord") is strongly asserted.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. (1 Corinthians 11:11-12)

From the point of view of the part played in ecclesial life, 1 Corinthians 11 does not show any distinction in role. There is no suggestion that because the husband is head of the wife,

therefore the wife should not pray or prophesy in the meetings. Paul's concern is not that sisters are usurping roles appropriate only to brothers. It is because sisters *do* follow the same roles as their husbands that Paul fears that the impression may be given that wives no longer honour their husbands if they do not wear veils to indicate their married status.

Paul does not define the meaning of "head" in this passage. It is evident, however, that headship does not mean that a husband is entitled to order his wife about. In Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19 he explains how Christ, as the head of the Church, is the one who provides for and cares for and nourishes it.

Both prayer and prophecy are public activities. Prophecy obviously involves speaking to the whole ecclesia as is described in chapter 14.

... he^[4] who prophesies speaks to men [*anthropoi* "men and women"]^[5] for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

(1 Cor. 14:3)

... those who prophesy speak to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. (1 Corinthians 14:3, NRSV)

The word for "pray" (*proseuchomai*) is the normal word used for prayer, whether silent or spoken, throughout the New Testament. The close linkage with prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 indicates that spoken prayer is intended at this point. Paul teaches, therefore, that both brothers and sisters should address the congregation in prophecy and prayer. This accords with the descriptions in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 where there is no male/female distinction between the activities in the ecclesia at Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:27-28, and 14:26).

In 1 Corinthians 14:1 Paul encourages all members of the ecclesia to prophesy. He repeats this in verses 5, 23-25, and 31.

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.... (verse 1)

Now I want you *all* to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.... (verse 5)

If, therefore the whole church assembles and *all* speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if *all* prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by *all*, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (vs. 23-25)

... you can *all* prophesy one by one, so that *all* may learn and *all* be encouraged.... (verse 31, italics ours)

Provided that those who prophesy do so one by one, *every* member of the ecclesia is encouraged by Paul to prophesy: "I want you all to speak." Prophecy is, in part, teaching, which is why Paul can say "... that all may learn." Towards the end of this section comes the well-known passage which seems to make a distinction between brothers and sisters, a distinction not found in the other passages we have considered so far.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.^[6] (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

The contrast between these two verses and the rest of the teaching and practice in the New Testament ecclesias has provoked considerable discussion. In Chapter 8 (pages 61-71) we examine these verses more fully in their context. Meantime we continue working through Paul's letters chronologically.

“Be Subject to ... Every Fellow Worker”

At the end of 1 Corinthians we find the same terms used about fellow workers as were used in Romans 16. Authority, in a good sense, is assigned to these people as is shown here. Paul asks that the believers in Corinth (“brethren”) should be subject to them.

Now, brethren [*adelphoi* = brothers and sisters], you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service (*diakonia*) of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and labourer. (1 Corinthians 16:15-16)

There is no word for “men” in the Greek, and to insert it into the translation gives a misleadingly masculine impression. The NIV says:

I urge you, brothers, to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work.

GNB says:

I beg you, my brothers, to follow the leadership of such people as these, and of anyone who works and serves with them.

Fellow workers as we saw in Romans can be male or female, and the manner in which they are described here once more indicates a range of activities (“service of the saints” – “service” is *diakonia*,^[7] associated with “deacon” *diakonos*), without differentiation into male and female roles. Paul instructs the brothers and sisters to be subject not only to the household of Stefanas but to every fellow worker.^[8]

Romans (c. 57 AD)

We have already referred in detail to Romans for the practice it demonstrates. Brothers and sisters were involved in all aspects of ecclesial work without any male/female distinction in roles. That this should be so was specifically taught by Paul.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. (Romans 12:6)

In the new life in Christ believers were one body with many members. Each was instructed by Paul to use the God-given gifts not with any sense of pride or self-importance but based on a humble and sober assessment.

The letter to the Romans was written later than 1 Corinthians. If Paul actually considered that sisters should not take a full part in every aspect of ecclesial work, it is strange that not only does he fail to clarify this in Romans, but gives every indication of the opposite both in the description of ecclesial activities in chapter 12 and in the account of fellow workers in chapter 16.

In chapter 15 Paul expresses confidence in the brothers and sisters in Rome and in their ability to teach each other:

I myself am satisfied about you, my brethren [= “brothers and sisters”], that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. (Romans 15:14)

Instructing one another is a mutual activity, which Paul encourages in his next letter too.

Colossians and Philemon (c. 61 AD)

Colossians is interesting for our study because it teaches that all human divisions are transcended in Christ. It makes no role distinctions within the ecclesia, but demonstrates the continuing distinctions in family life and society.

The believers had been baptised into Christ, had put off their old nature and were now living with new standards where former distinctions no longer applied.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:9-11)

It might be wondered why male and female are not mentioned in this list as they were in Galatians 3:28. Barbarians and Scythians have been added to the list, and Scythians were thought to be more barbarian than the barbarians! We suggest that the list covers differences particularly applicable to people in Colossae because it was taken for granted from the beginning that male/female distinctions were inapplicable within the ecclesia.

Colossians 3:12-17 refers to all the believers. It reminds them that they are all “one body” (verse 15) and encourages them to teach and admonish one another.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach (*didaskein*) and admonish (*nouthetein*) one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)^[9]

The words “teach” (*didaskein*) and “admonish” (*nouthetein*)^[10] are the same words as Paul used to describe his own work earlier in the same letter.

... Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning (*nouthetein*) every man (*anthropos*, i.e. “every person”) and teaching (*didaskein*) every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man (*anthropos*) mature in Christ. For this I toil (*kopiaō*), striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

(Colossians 1:28-29)

When Paul instructed the believers at Colossae to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” he was referring to activity in a gathered group, a meeting: there are hymns and spiritual songs. This is not private one-to-one instruction. Again we observe that no distinctions

are made or discernible in the instructions Paul gave regarding the ecclesial work of brothers and sisters.

In everyday life, however, but not in ecclesial life, distinctions remained. This was inevitable. Imagine the problems that would have been caused, not to mention the prompt clamp-down by the Roman authorities, if converted slaves had thereupon declared themselves to be free! Household relationships (wives and husbands, children, fathers, slaves, masters) were an important part of the fabric of society. The standards of Christ, the Golden Rule, could transform these relationships. The letter to Philemon, written at approximately the same date as Colossians, demonstrates how Paul put this into practice.

Ephesians (c. 61 AD)

As we have already observed, there is no male/female distinction in the varieties of ecclesial work. The principle is.

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.
(Ephesians 4:7)

In Ephesians 5:21 there begins a section concerning husbands and wives.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.
(Ephesians 5:21-30)

They are exhorted to a reciprocal caring for one another. Wives are to submit to husbands completely, and husbands are to love their wives completely. Remember that this is all under the introductory statement: "Be subject to one another".^[11] Several analogies are drawn in the way Jesus gave himself completely – even to death. The oneness of the marriage relationship is stressed by the quotation from Genesis.

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one."
(Ephesians 5:31)

Again, there is no suggestion of differences in roles *within the ecclesia*, the overriding principle being that of service to one another:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(Ephesians 5:21)

It is sometimes argued that the analogy in Ephesians 5:23-33 *does* show a differentiation in ecclesial roles. Paul writes:

This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.
(Ephesians 5:32)

Because Christ is head of the church, and the husband is head of the wife, it is argued that just as Christ sanctifies the church and cleanses it to make it holy and without blemish, so too husbands should teach their wives – for they need to be purified and cleansed. Therefore the wife’s role is to submit to this teaching from the husband and it is inappropriate for her to teach her husband in any way. Her role is to submit in everything. Thus brothers are to teach in the ecclesia, and sisters are to learn in silence.

This deduction is faulty because it misuses Paul’s analogy. Firstly, the church comprises one body, brothers and sisters together, and both are in need of purification. Secondly, being submissive to one another is enjoined on all in the ecclesia (5:21). By this, Paul means that each should do his or her utmost to serve the other members of the ecclesia.^[12] Wives are to do this to their husbands, just as the church seeks to do its utmost for Christ, pleasing him by Godly behaviour. Husbands are to love their wives, doing their utmost to please and care for them, just as Christ loved the church by submitting to death.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....
(Ephesians 5:25)

Paul continued by elaborating on Christ’s work for his church:

... that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.
(Ephesians 5:26-27)

It is pushing the analogy further than is reasonable or than Paul seems to intend if we argue from verse 27 that husbands are in a special position to cleanse and purify wives. Paul explains precisely the meaning of his analogy in verses 28-29.

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.
(Ephesians 5:28-30)

This is how husbands and wives should appropriately submit to each other and care for each other. It is a reciprocal relationship. This is how to build a successful marriage; this too is how to construct a successful ecclesia. It is therefore misusing these verses if we argue from them that only brothers should lead in the ecclesia, especially in view of the work ascribed to both brothers and sisters elsewhere in the New Testament. We discuss this further in Chapter 25 “The Husband is Head of the Wife” (pages 163-169).

In his concluding message, Paul again addresses all the believers.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God... Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.
(Ephesians 6:10-17)

The plain meaning behind this pictorial description is that believers should learn divine teaching, and put it into practice in promoting the gospel. They should stand up for truth,

oppose error, and teach the word of God. These instructions are given to “the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1) – to all the brothers and sisters, not just to brothers.

Paul’s Letters from 48 to the early 60s AD

We conclude, therefore, that the overall evidence of Paul’s letters from approximately 48 to the early 60s AD shows no male/female distinction in duties and activities carried out by members of the ecclesias. Nor is any distinction made between private occasions and ecclesial meetings. All members are encouraged to contribute, whether in teaching, prophesying, praying, exhorting or serving in any sphere of activity according to the grace given to them by God.

There are two sets of verses, however, which seem to reverse the whole of this analysis: 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. How are these verses to be understood in a way which is compatible with the rest of Paul’s teaching and practice?

^[1] As explained in Chapter 6 “Brothers and Sisters” in the New Testament, page 40.

^[2] For further discussion on this, see our booklet: *First Corinthians 11:2-16 – Headcovering in Bible Times and the Application Today*. See also Chapter 25 “The Husband is Head of the Wife”, page 163.

^[3] “man and woman” depending on interpretation and context. See page 94.

^[4] Inclusive language, again, for general statements.

^[5] *anthropoi* means “men and women” or “people” as explained on pages 94, 105-106.

^[6] Church/churches = *ecclesia/ecclesias* = assembly/assemblies = meeting/meetings.

^[7] The word *diakonia* refers either to practical work, like serving at tables, or to Christian service like preaching and teaching: “the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word (Acts 6:4); Paul’s preaching and teaching work is described in Acts 21 as “... his ministry (*diakonia*)”: “... he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19). Associated words are *diakoneo* the verb, and *diakonos*, “servant” or “deacon”.

^[8] See explanatory comments also on pages 33-35 on Paul’s fellow workers, and page 59 and Chapter 25 (pages 163-169) for further explanation of “submission”.

^[9] This is the RSV translation of Colossians 3:16. There are two ways of translating this passage, as shown here first in NIV and then in TNIV. Compare:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.
(NIV – 1978)

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.
(TNIV– 2004)

The difference between the translations in this passage is not a difference between word-for-word or dynamic equivalent translation. The difference is how the Greek text is punctuated. There is no punctuation in the original manuscripts, but all current texts now contain punctuation, inserted by the text editors as seems appropriate in their considered judgement. They will decide partly by how they think the words are most naturally grouped, and partly by comparisons with other passages.

Colossians and Ephesians have many similarities. If we compare Colossians 3:16 with Ephesians 5:18-20, it can be argued that Colossians would be better translated to say that speaking to each other (*laleo*, in Ephesians 5:19), teaching and admonishing one another (*didasko* and *noutheteo* in Colossians 3:16), occur in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (as in TNIV). But Paul has already used the same verbs (“warning” – *noutheteo*) and (“teach” – *didasko*) and the same phrase (“in all wisdom”) in Colossians 1:28, speaking of his own work to build up the ecclesia. Paul is not doing this by singing. There are good grounds, therefore, for considering that the RSV and NIV make better sense and fit more closely with Paul’s own work in 1:28. Accordingly, Paul instructs the believers to do the same as he: to teach (*didaskein*) and warn (*nouthetein*) one another “in all wisdom”. While this can be done to a limited extent by singing hymns, the instruction is prefaced by “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”. That sounds like an obvious pre-condition for being able to teach and warn. Further, the nature of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” as depicted in the Bible is more in terms of offering praise to God than in being equivalent to “teaching and admonishing one another”.

^[10] Vine says:

“The difference between ‘admonish’ and ‘teach’ seems to be that, whereas the former has mainly in view the things that are wrong and call for warning, the latter has to do chiefly with the impartation of positive truth, cp. Col. 3:16; they were to let the word of Christ dwell richly in them, so that they might be able (1) to teach and admonish one another, and (2) to abound in the praises of God.”

(W.E.Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, page 31)

^[11] It is important as a matter of accuracy not to separate verse 21 from verse 22. The verb “be subject” is in verse 21, and has to be carried over into verse 22, and continues as the background down to verse 33, or further.

^[12] The verb “submit” or “be subject to” (*hypotassomai*) is formed from *hypo* which means “under” and *tasso* which means “arrange, put in order, place”. Here the verb is passive, and means “put yourselves under”. All of ecclesial service (*diakonia*) is submission to one another. We don’t work for ourselves and our personal benefit; we work for the good of others. Christian submission is putting oneself at the service of others, and anyone who teaches, preaches, serves food, cleans the meeting hall, plays the organ, reads out notices, presides, prays on

behalf of the ecclesia, paints the building, writes letters to the sick, visits those who are ill – anyone who does any of these things is carrying out the commandment: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

“Subjection” is a Latin-based word and it literally means “thrown underneath” i.e. cast under foot of a military conqueror. It is so used in 1 Corinthians 15:27, “For God has put all things in subjection (*hypetaxen*) under his feet.” This military connotation is not, of course, applicable in relationships within the ecclesia or within marriage. We are not being asked to treat each other as conquered victims!

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in Context

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

in Context

We have deliberately looked first at the overall evidence from Paul's letters before examining these verses. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is often quoted with no awareness that the normal picture presented in the New Testament is very different. Do these three verses show that Paul's teaching is the opposite from that otherwise observable in his writings?

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?

If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognise this, he is not recognised. So, my brethren [= brothers and sisters], earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:33-40)

“Let all things be done for edification”

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians about AD 54 from Ephesus. Chapter 12 begins “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren...”. “Now concerning” indicates that Paul is taking up an issue reported to him. As we explain in Chapter 6 of this book (pages 40-47), he addresses both brothers and sisters. He makes this clear by expressions like “*every one*” (verse 6), “*each*” (verse 7), “we were *all* baptized into one body ... *all* were made to drink of one Spirit” (verse 13).

Chapter 12 stresses that although the brothers and sisters have different gifts, apportioned by the Spirit “to each one individually as he wills” (verse 11), these gifts are all to contribute to the upbuilding of the one body, the one community, “that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (verse 25).

1 Corinthians 13 emphasises the importance of Christian caring and concern. Love is much more important than the exercise of any of the gifts of prophecy or understanding, knowledge or faith. “Love ... is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way” (verse 5).

Chapter 14 starts: “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (verse 1). These words are addressed to everybody in the ecclesia. All should desire to prophesy, but in the interests of love, some restriction is necessary. Speaking in tongues is valuable to the individual with this gift, but not helpful to others unless someone is present to explain the meaning. By contrast, prophecy is valuable to all for “he who prophesies edifies the church” (verse 4). We need to remember that “he” is the normal way of referring to both male and female in general statements. Paul has said he wishes *all* to do this (verse 5), and

there can be no doubt that both sisters and brothers spoke in prophecy, as shown by 1 Corinthians 11 and as foretold in Acts 2:17.

There can be no doubt either that the context is a whole meeting of the ecclesia – not some private occasion. “If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues ... if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; ... he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Corinthians 14:23-25).

When the believers gather, each one contributes “a hymn, a lesson [teaching], a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (verse 26).^[1] Everyone is involved, but there is a restriction: “Let all things be done for edification” (verse 26). The purpose is to build people up. This cannot be achieved if those who speak use an unknown language (verse 16), nor if they all speak at once, so that no one can understand what is said. The numbers permitted to speak are to be restricted: “If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret” (verse 27). If this is not possible, “... let each of them keep silence (*sigan* = “to be silent”) in church and speak to himself and to God” (verse 28). Likewise, a restriction is placed on the prophets: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (verse 29).^[2]

Just as the speakers in tongues are told to be silent in certain circumstances, so too are the prophets: “If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent” (*sigan*) (verse 30). The silence is not permanent; it refers to the particular situation in which confusion, lack of learning, lack of encouragement are taking place: “You can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn, and all be encouraged; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (verse 33). To resolve the confusion, uproar and unedifying speaking of numerous people at the same time, Paul has enjoined silence on two occasions (verses 28 and 30), and this on those who are taking a prime part in the meeting. Thirdly he enjoins silence (*sigan*, the same verb) on “the women” – not on those who are speaking acceptably as outlined above (one at a time) but on the women whose speaking is adding to the confused uproar which Paul is trying to stop. There are three clues to the fact that it is disorderly speaking to which Paul refers: “... they... should be subordinate, as even the law says” (verse 34); “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home”; “... it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

Believers are to be submissive to one another, and wives are to be submissive to husbands (Ephesians 5:21-22). Speaking while others were speaking, would be lacking in submission to the other brothers and sisters. “If there is anything they desire to know” suggests the women were asking questions. Perhaps they were taking part in weighing up what the prophets said (verse 29) but in a disruptive and arrogant manner. Asking questions is not something likely to be done by the prophets (brothers or sisters) who spoke to the ecclesia to edify the church (verses 4, 24 & 25) and to convict the unbelievers. The context is of women who lack knowledge and who need to be instructed. Hence Paul’s command: “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.” “... it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” is an appropriate comment on disruptive behaviour. It is not relevant to orderly speech by a woman who speaks to the whole church in prophecy, or to one of those who edifies the church with “a hymn, a lesson, a tongue, or an interpretation” (verse 26).

Anticipating that some in Corinth would not be pleased at his attempt to ensure good order, Paul then challenges them all: “What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only

ones it has reached? If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (verses 36-37). Those who were enjoying prophesying and making no effort to control how they spoke (verse 32) and those who felt that unrestrained speaking with unintelligible tongues was a credit to them, would pit their experience against Paul’s. Hence Paul’s strong response. But the conclusion is clear: “So, my brethren [brothers and sisters], earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order” (verse 39).

When seen in the context of the whole chapter, the verses commanding silence on speakers in tongues (verse 28), on prophets (verse 30), and on women (34 & 35) have an immediate and understandable relevance: “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (verse 33). But Paul’s words cannot be used to argue that *orderly* speaking by women, then or now, should be forbidden.

Three Other Possible Explanations

We have suggested how the verses commanding silence can be properly understood within the whole chapter. There have been various other attempts to unravel the difficulty of why Paul approves of women speaking in chapter 11 and most of chapter 14, but appears to forbid their speaking at the end of chapter 14. **The three main suggestions (which also permit a consistent interpretation of the apostle’s teaching) are that Paul quotes his opponents and refutes them; or that the passage refers to women calling out questions or chattering; or that the words are interpolated here from a different context.**^[3]

(1) Paul quotes his opponents and then refutes them

A notable feature of 1 Corinthians is that Paul repeatedly appears to quote from people in Corinth or to paraphrase things they are reported to have said. He then gives his reply. Some translations put quotation marks round comments such as “All things are lawful for me” (1 Corinthians 6:12-13). Likewise, 1 Corinthians 7:1 can read:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.”
(1 Corinthians 7:1)

It is therefore argued that this passage should be punctuated:

... God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the assemblies of the saints.

“The women should keep silence in the assemblies for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly.”

What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.... So, my brethren [brothers and sisters], earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.
(1 Corinthians 14:33-40)

In written discussion today (and often in emails) people quote what has been said and then answer it. There were no quotation marks in the ancient texts, but the recipients would

obviously recognise their own wording. Verse 36 starts with an expression (the word “e” in Greek, translated as “What!” in KJV and RSV) which, some commentators suggest, can show strong disagreement with what has just been said.^[4]

The verse consists of two rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions are not asked to obtain an answer, but to put the listeners on the spot; to challenge them mentally to agree or disagree.

Versions vary as to how they translate these questions. KJV and RSV present them as surprised, pained, questions:

What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord....

NIV translates as two straightforward questions:

Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If any think they are prophets or are spiritually gifted, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.

Either way, Paul sounds frustrated and exasperated. Why? Not because women were speaking, because he has frequently just instructed both brothers and sisters to do so, in an orderly manner, when the ecclesia meets (verses 26-33).

These rhetorical questions make clear sense, however, if we conclude that Paul quotes his opponents in verses 34-35, opponents who claim that their understanding of the word of God (“as also saith the Law”, KJV) forbids women to speak at all. Paul’s two rhetorical questions therefore object to the teaching on women’s silence in verses 34-35.

Paul wants his readers to answer mentally: “No, the word of God did not originate with us. We are not the only people it has reached. Therefore we accept that what you, Paul, say is the Lord’s command.”

The Lord’s command is summed up in verse 39: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (NIV, inclusive language).

The comment “as even the law says” would fit well with the possibility that former members of the synagogue wish to return to the type of meeting where only the men speak, where women sit apart from the men, and where any learning by the women would be at home. The reference to the law could either be to a Jewish understanding of the Old Testament, or to the Jewish oral law where women were forbidden to address the congregation in the synagogue:

Our Rabbis taught: All are qualified to be among the seven [who read], even a minor and a woman, only the Sages said that a woman should not read in the Torah out of respect for the congregation.

(Babylonian Talmud, Megilla “The Scroll of Esther” 23a)

It is interesting that *The Bible Translator* (January 1995) suggests the following as an alternative which should be offered in translations.

Some of you say, “Women should be silent in the churches, because they are not permitted to speak. As the Jewish law says, they should be subordinate to men. If there is anything they want

to know, they should wait until they get home and then ask their husbands. It is shameful for women to speak in church.” What kind of thinking is that? You are acting as if the word of God came from you! And you men, don’t ever think that you are the only ones who receive this word!^[5]

If, therefore, verses 34-35 are the words of Paul’s opponents, objecting to the new freedom in Christ now given to the women, this would match consistently with our previous descriptions of Paul’s teaching and practice.

Several observations have been made to support the idea of this being a quote from those who opposed Paul’s approval of sisters speaking in the ecclesia.

(1) It is a strange change to suddenly say: “... your women” (KJV)^[6]. Paul has hitherto been addressing both brothers and sisters, repeatedly using inclusive language, “... all of you”, “everyone”.

(2) These verses seem to disrupt the flow of Paul’s writing. If, however, they are a quotation from those who oppose Paul’s teaching, the whole of 1 Corinthians 14 fits together smoothly.

(3) When Paul cites the Law (as in Romans 3:19; 1 Corinthians 9:8), he usually gives the actual quote and explains it. This does not happen here.

(4) Paul elsewhere cites the Law by way of illustration. As far as we can see, he never says that Christians have to keep the Law, and never quotes the Law as a restrictive command for believers in Christ. He goes beyond the Law to the spirit of it, to its fulfilment, e.g. Galatians 5:16-18 “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

(5) It was typical of the Judaisers to try to apply the Law as a restrictive rule: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). Or like the Pharisees to Jesus: “Why are you doing what it is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” (Luke 6:2).

(6) Paul said: “... I myself am not under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20) and much of his writing was to make exactly this point: “Now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” It is unusual, then, if Paul suddenly cites the Law in 1 Corinthians 14:34 in a manner which is so untypical of his teaching everywhere else.

(7) The phrase “it is not permitted” sounds like reference to a pre-assumed legal position rather than a new statement by the apostle. It is uncharacteristically impersonal if this is an instruction from Paul himself.

(8) “... let them ask their husbands at home” The assumption is that all women are married, and that any husband is able to answer any wife’s religious questions. This is very traditionally patriarchal (Jewish or pagan^[7]), but not like Paul who asks that people make up their own minds and take responsibility for their own decisions (Romans 14:5).

(9) “And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home” (KJV). “...if...” The Jews were ambivalent about education for women, but Jesus and Paul advocated and practised it.

(10) The tone of 1 Corinthians 14:36-38 sounds like an outright dismissal of the previous section, with a contrast between “the law says” and “what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord”, hinging on the challenging question “What! Did the word of God originate with you...?” Compared to assertions based on appeal to “the law”, Paul claims authority from the Lord.

(2) The women are not to call out questions or to chatter to one another during the meeting.

The suggestion here is that some women were disrupting the meeting by calling out to their husbands with questions or by talking to each other. Hence “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.”

Talking can happen today in orthodox Jewish synagogues. Here is a letter of complaint which appeared in 1989 in the *Jewish Chronicle*:

Before the service began, the congregants made us welcome but, unfortunately, the handful of women present talked incessantly throughout the service.... As if that were not bad enough, two young mothers arrived, in close succession, carrying tiny babies, one of whom proceeded to scream, the other to gurgle as babies obviously tend to do. The noise reached deafening proportions (the service continuing throughout) and, in desperation, my friend leaned across and demanded that the screaming child be removed.... [A quarrel ensued.] The service disintegrated and there was total uproar.

This was in England. Synagogue means “meeting place”, and ordinary conversation can take place among the women while the men run the activity we would describe as a “service”. Where women had by custom been excluded from participation, they would be inclined to continue in the Christian meeting as they had done previously when in the synagogue (Acts 18:7-8). To instruct the women not to speak but to be in silence would seem thoroughly appropriate to such a context, as it is today when talking during a meeting can be disruptive.

The Bible Translator also suggests the following alternative:

When you come together to worship, the wives should refrain from talking. In fact, they should not talk at all, since as the law says, they are subordinate to their husbands. If they want to find out about anything, they should wait until they get home and then ask their husbands. It is shameful for wives to be talking during the church meeting.

This is not relevant to women who are prophesying or praying or teaching, doing these things “decently and in order”.

(3) This passage is an interpolation – added later

Although all manuscripts contain verses 34-35, some place them after verse 40. Various reasons can be suggested for this. Did a scribe accidentally miss the words out, and then put the omitted verses below? Or did one of Paul’s critics write these remarks in the margin, and a subsequent copyist put them into the text?

After New Testament times there was a move away from the freedom in Christ experienced in the New Testament ecclesias towards a new legalism, with a male priesthood separated from the ordinary believers and a growing antipathy towards women. At such a time these verses could have been added. That additions are possible is shown in a passage like 1 John 5:7-8 which is included in the King James Version but is generally regarded as an interpolation because it is not found in the earlier manuscripts.

However, although interpolation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is a possibility, the fact that these verses appear in every manuscript, and the Western manuscripts which place them in a

different position are considered less reliable, has made it impossible so far to demonstrate interpolation on manuscript evidence.^[8]

It can be observed that the repetition of *en tais ecclesiáis* (“in the assemblies/churches” at the end of 33 and in the beginning of 34) has a clumsy feel to it, but would be just the kind of effect produced where an editor or collector of Paul’s writings might have thought “Here is a suitable point to put in that comment against women speaking”.

Another possibility is that Paul himself wrote these verses in a different context, perhaps addressing the problem elsewhere of women chattering as in the synagogue, and they were then added at this point in his letter when the material was collected.

Other Suggestions

(a) Paul forbids the women to take part in judging the prophets as in 1 Corinthians 14:29,

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

In that case, why does he not simply say: “Do not let your women judge...”?

(b) Paul forbids sisters to speak in formal meetings. But were the earlier references to women praying and prophesying not to formal meetings of the ecclesia? Here Paul says *en tais ecclesiáis*, and *en ecclesia* = “in the churches/assemblies/meetings”, or “in the meeting”. The same expression is used in verse 28 *en ecclesia* “in the meeting”. Verse 23 says “if the whole church [*ecclesia*] assembles”, verse 26 says “when you come together” – and this is the section where Paul says (verse 5) “I want you all ... to prophesy”, and (verse 31) “You can all prophesy ... one by one”. 1 Corinthians 11 where sisters and brothers pray and prophesy is also generally considered a meeting of the ecclesia, hence the discussion about veils. To suggest therefore that Paul is restricting sisters from speaking in formal meetings, but not at others, seems to be reading modern ideas of formal and informal back into the first century and making a distinction not observable in 1 Corinthians.

(c) Praying and prophesying were inspired by the Spirit, so it was correct for women and men to pray and prophesy, but without the spirit, women should not speak. This is certainly not what the apostle Paul says. If women are excluded on this basis, why not the men? All the activities described in 1 Corinthians 14, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4 are regarded as the work of God through His Spirit. If God found it acceptable to work in a speaking manner through both brothers and sisters in Christ in the first century, why not now?

Does Anyone not Try to Interpret Their Way Out?

“Let your women be silent in the churches.” As far as we are aware, no Christadelphian actually accepts this command as it stands. In all ecclesias, sisters do not remain silent: they sing, as do the brothers. The only people to have taken this literally was the Roman Catholic church of the middle ages, where women (and girls) had to remain silent. To get the high-pitched tones for the singing, choir boys were castrated – *castrati*. The last surviving one died as recently as 1861.^[9]

We would say, of course, that this is to misuse the passage. Surely 1 Corinthians 14 says, “They are not permitted to *speak*”? “Ah, yes”, a medieval Catholic could have replied, “but the word

translated speak is *lalein*, which means ‘speak’, ‘sing’, ‘make a noise’. The same word is used in Ephesians 5:19 ‘addressing [*lalein*] one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.’ The Apostle Paul forbids women to do that. ‘They are not permitted to make a noise.’”

So, we Christadelphians all decide by context that Paul didn’t mean women shouldn’t sing.

We suggest in this book that similarly we should all decide by context that it should only be taken as a ban on *disorderly* speaking.

General Conclusions on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Without more specific information on actual events in Corinth, it is not possible to distinguish between some of the alternative possibilities. But we don’t need to. We can be confident that Paul’s words were directly relevant to the problems in Corinth. It is clear that Paul is condemning disorderly speaking earlier in the chapter, not properly organised praying or exhortation. This passage would not have seemed problematic to those to whom it was first written. Being accustomed to sisters addressing meetings in an orderly fashion, and in an ecclesia where Paul had himself already established this as the procedure, it would not have occurred to the early believers to take these words as a general ban on participation by sisters. Once the male priesthood had taken over, however, this became a convenient passage on which to build the male dominance of later centuries. Regrettably, that legacy is with us still.

^[1] Paul started the ecclesia at Corinth (Acts 18:1-18) and this participatory way of organising meetings presumably goes back to his original instructions. Paul is not critical of this method; he encourages it also in Colossians 3:16. But he wishes participation to be done in an orderly manner. There is no evidence when we look at the New Testament ecclesias for our method of doing things with a president and a speaker.

^[2] The “others” may mean the rest of the meeting, or the rest of the prophets. Although the message of the prophets comes from God, they cannot be sure it is not mixed up sometimes with their own thoughts. In Romans 12:6 those who have the gift are encouraged to use it: “... if prophecy, in proportion to our faith”. The meaning is not entirely clear, but there was a need to examine what was said, to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

^[3] The following are among many books which debate the varying possibilities:

Man as male and female, by Paul K. Jewett (Eerdmans, 1975); *Man & Woman in Biblical Perspective*, by James B. Hurley (IVP 1981); *Women in the Earliest Churches*, by Ben Witherington III, (CUP, 1988); *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, by Antoinette Clark Wire (Fortress Press, 1990); *Beyond Sex Roles*, by Gilbert Bilezikian, (Baker Books, 1985); *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway Books, 1991). Each author writes

from a different theological perspective, but the discussion takes place on the merits or demerits of their analysis of Scripture, and it is on this alone that we have sought to study their work. The appendices in *The Corinthian Women Prophets* usefully summarise the various positions adopted by different scholars, supply extensive background quotations from ancient texts, and give detailed bibliographies for further analysis.

[4] The single-lettered word “e” often means simply “or”, but it is used to introduce rhetorical questions, some of which by their very nature imply a degree of surprise or exasperation. The King James Version three times translates this usage of “e” as “What!”, in 1 Corinthians 6:16 & 19, and in 1 Corinthians 14:36, whereas other versions translate simply as questions.

Gilbert Bilezikian in *Beyond Sex Roles* (Second edition, tenth printing 1999, pages 286-288) suggests that “e” can frequently be translated as “Nonsense!”, but this is only partly supported by the examples he gives. D. A. Carson strongly disagrees with Bilezikian in “Silent in the Churches” (pages 149-151) in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* (edited by Piper & Grudem, 1991). Carson’s view, however, that “in every instance in the New Testament where the disjunctive particle in question [“e”] is used in a construction analogous to the passage at hand, its effect is to reinforce the truth of the clause or verse that precedes it” (page 151) is also open to challenge. There are no passages precisely analogous to 1 Corinthians 14:36, and it is unreasonable to assert, as Carson does, that verse 36 must be taken to be endorsing verses 34-35. Rhetorical questions tend to be expressing challenge or surprise, and in the context it is reasonable to consider that verses 34-35 are a quotation of Corinthian views to which Paul takes exception in verse 36. A near parallel is 1 Corinthians 6:19 (a chapter in which most people agree there are quotations from Corinth). Verse 18 is a strange comment if made by Paul, but if it is a quotation from Corinth, to which Paul gives a rebuttal in verse 19, it is more understandable, and the use of language is similar to 1 Corinthians 14:36. Here it is in the KJV but with quotation marks around the suggested quotation:

Flee fornication. “Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost [which is] in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.
(1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

In other words, a writer from Corinth claimed that he could do what he liked as regards sex, since it affected only himself (a prostitute being dismissed as of no account). But Paul replies to this with a surprised, pained, rhetorical question, introduced by “e”: Don’t you know that your body is not your own to do what you like with now that you have been baptised into Christ? It belongs to God.

[5] Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., “The Silence of Women in The Church: Theology and Translation in 1 Corinthians 14.33b-36” pages 101-112, *Technical Papers for THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR*, Vol. 46, No 1, (January 1995) published by the United Bible Societies. We think it is incorrect, however, to translate “... and you men, ... you are the only ones (*monous*)”. This is simply inclusive Greek in the plural and covers both male and female objectors to Paul’s teaching, not just male: “Did the word of God originate with you? Are you the only ones it has reached?”

[6] “Your” may be a later interpolation, and most translations now omit it, but it is retained in NKJV. Its addition changes the meaning, for it turns the comments as an address to the men about the women, rather than an address to the believers jointly as in the rest of the letter. This further suggests an unPauline dismissive attitude towards women.

[7] Cato, for example, in denying women at Rome any right to have a say in public discussion or law making, said in 195 BC, “Could not each have made the same request to her husband at home?”, adding “... it did not become you, even at home, to concern yourselves about what laws might be passed or repealed...” (Livy, *History of Rome*, XXXIV,2)

[8] However, although every extant manuscript contains these verses, recent analysis of the Vaticanus MSS (earlier than Sinaiticus, and Eastern rather than Western text) has demonstrated that marks in the margin indicate variant readings. This was first noticed by Philip B. Payne (*New Testament Studies* 41, 1995, “Fuldensis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus and 1 Cor 14:34-5”, pages 240-262) who argued that the marks in Vaticanus show that some earlier manuscripts omit 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, not merely that they are positioned after verse 40 as in Western manuscripts. J. Edward Miller agreed that the mark (two dots, nicknamed “umlauts”) indicate textual variation, but argued that by their position they indicate only a one-word variation in 1 Corinthians 14:33, not variation in the following two verses. See “Some observations on the Text-Critical Function of the Umlaut in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14.34-35”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 26.2 (2003) pages 217-236. Philip B. Payne defended his conclusions in 2004, maintaining that there is evidence that earlier Greek manuscripts omitted 1 Corinthians 14:34-35: “Thus, Vaticanus, Fuldensis and 88 provide manuscript evidence for a text without 1 Cor.14.34-35, and this evidence deserves to be taken with full seriousness.” He continues, “Even before this manuscript evidence came to light many textual critics such as G.D.Fee argued that 1 Cor.14.34-35 is an interpolation on the basis of Bengal’s first principle, namely that the text which best explains the rise of all the other texts is probably the original text.” See “The Text-Critical Function of the Umlauts in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14.34-35: A Response to J. Edward Miller” by Philip B. Payne, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 27.1 (2004) pages 105-112. There are various comments on the internet which analyse this debate, but whatever the outcome, it appears that new manuscript information may yet emerge.

[9] “During the 17th and 18th centuries in Italy, some 4,000-5,000 boys were castrated annually for the purpose of singing alto in the church choirs. ... the prohibition against women singing in the church choir had its origin in the Bible: ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak...’ ” <http://www.usrf.org/news/010308-castrati.html>

Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus

Paul's Letters

to Timothy and Titus

These three letters are often thought of as instructions from the apostle Paul towards the end of his life as to how ecclesias should be organised for all time to come. The letters themselves give good reason, however, to question this interpretation, and indicate an emergency response to particular problems which had arisen in Ephesus and Crete.^[1] In assessing, therefore, the teaching given, the context is once more crucial but as in Corinthians there is the difficulty that while Paul, Timothy and Titus knew precisely the situation in the ecclesias there, we do not.

Context

It is easy to underestimate the importance of knowing the right context, and *all* the facts of the situation. Automatically we tend to assume we can easily pick the context up when we read the words of Scripture. A modern example may warn us to proceed with caution.

On one occasion in the 1980s the electoral chances of Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada were jeopardised by the portrayal of his wife as an empty-headed, unreliable companion. This image of her was boosted by the publication of a close-up photograph in which she was waving her arms foolishly in the air and appeared to be the worse for drink. Some time later the complete photograph was published. It had been taken when she had tripped on a flight of stairs and was attempting to regain her balance. A split-second, isolated shot by a photographer widely misled the public.

In assessing the context of Paul's letters, particularly where he is dealing with issues which have been reported to him but which he does not state in his reply, we must be careful not to misunderstand. In these letters we possess the message which God wished Paul to convey to the people he addressed. We who read at a distance of over 1,900 years are unlikely to pick up so accurately what is being said unless we acquaint ourselves with the whole background. It is not possible to do this, so we will always be handicapped by seeing only part of the overall picture. Nevertheless, there is much that can be observed.

The Context of Timothy and Titus

These letters are written to deal with major problems in Ephesus and Crete, but Paul does not write directly to the ecclesias there. The danger of which Paul had warned the Ephesian elders had been realised.

... from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:30)

If Paul had written directly to the elders, they would probably have ignored his letter. So, he worked through Timothy, as he explained at the beginning.

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith.... Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. (1 Timothy 1:3-7)

False teachers had thoroughly corrupted the true teaching and practice of the gospel in Ephesus, and much the same had happened in Crete. Paul's response was to commission Titus to appoint responsible elders in each town in Crete, but this was not possible in Ephesus where elders had been in place for some years and were themselves among the promoters of false teaching and practice.

Paul wrote to Timothy as an interim measure because he could not immediately go to Ephesus himself.

I hope to come to you soon but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

Since Timothy was already one of Paul's well-attested fellow workers (Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 16:10), and had been previously sent by Paul on a similar mission (1 Cor. 4:17), presumably Paul wrote in this way to give his written authority to the instructions Timothy would give in Ephesus.

The "household of God" (KJV "house of God") means the believers as a community, not the church building or a meeting of the ecclesia. It was necessary for these believers to be given (or given again) correct standards of behaviour. Although it is often assumed that Paul was giving instructions on how to run meetings of the ecclesia, this is an assumption which cannot be demonstrated from the text. The contents of the letters to Timothy and Titus refer mostly to everyday behaviour and the personal morality of believers. Paul dealt with issues of immediate concern in the critical situation at Ephesus: the men were to stop quarrelling; women were to behave modestly; an overseer was to be faithful to his wife, not to be a drunkard, not to use violence, not to be quarrelsome or a lover of money; deacons were not to be addicted to wine; younger widows were to re-marry properly and use their energies running a household; only widows aged 60 or over were to be put on the list; elders who ruled well were to receive double pay; no unsupported accusation was to be heard against an elder. The pursuit of wealth had already ruined the lives of some, and Paul warned of greed, and trying to use religion to make a financial profit.

Such things as these are not written unless each one mentioned is an existing problem which requires a solution. On a more personal level, Timothy was told to drink some wine for his health. These details indicate how much of Paul's letter was directed towards specific situations in Ephesus. There are eternal principles behind Paul's teaching, but much of the detail is specific to the occasion and the need. It is difficult to imagine ecclesias in a worse state than those described here.

False Teaching, False Teachers, and False Authority

The precise errors are not clearly specified, but the evidence suggests:

(a) Both male and female teachers were giving false teaching.

... charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine...

(1 Timothy 1:4)

“Certain persons” is inclusive language (as also in 1 Timothy 1:6).

(b) There was emphasis on myths and genealogies. These led to speculation rather than godliness.

... charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith.

(1 Timothy 1:4)

(c) The Jewish Law was involved, though those desiring to be its teachers did not understand it properly, and pursued Jewish myths.

Certain persons ... have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. (1 Timothy 1:6-7)

... there are many insubordinate men [“rebellious people”, NRSV], empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party...

... giving heed to Jewish myths or to commands of men [“those”, NRSV] who reject the truth. (Titus 1:10-14)

... avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. (Titus 3:9)

(d) There was a major problem of people expressing an abusive authority in teaching others. The NRSV translates as follows:

There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. (Titus 1:10-11)

“Insubordinate men” in RSV is translated “rebellious people” in NRSV. “Insubordinate” is the opposite of “submissive”. It suggests a dominating attitude and a direct rejection of accepted Christian teaching, behaviour and practice. The word “men” does not occur in the Greek in the above phrases. Again, this is inclusive language, covering male and female. These teachers, both male and female, “must be silenced”, instructs Paul.

(e) It was not understood that immoral behaviour was incompatible with the new life in Christ.

Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully ... understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers ... and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

(1 Timothy 1:8-10)

(f) Moral behaviour was rejected and God was blasphemed.

By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:19-20)

(g) They paid attention to “deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons”.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons....

(1 Timothy 4:1)

(h) Marriage was forbidden. Various foods were not to be eaten.

... [they] forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Timothy 4:3)

(i) These false teachers were keen on controversy, and saw a chance in their religious activities to make financial profit.

... a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among men [“those” NRSV] who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Timothy 6:4-5)... they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach. (Titus 1:11)

(j) Myths or fables were attractive to some people.

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths.... (RSV)

... refuse profane and old wives’ fables.... (KJV 1 Timothy 4:7)

(k) Some of this false teaching was taught by younger widows.

... they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.... (1 Timothy 5:13)

(l) Some have been drawn away from the Faith.

... some have already strayed after Satan. (1 Timothy 5:15)

God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

(m) Some claimed to have special knowledge, though “knowledge” was not a true description of it.

Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (*gnosis*), for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. (1 Timothy 6:20-21)

Turning Christian Teaching Upside Down

The closing comment by Paul gives a useful clue to the probable nature of some of the false teachings, for Christianity was challenged for several centuries by various brands of heresy which came to be known as Gnosticism. Certain believers claimed to have superior knowledge (*gnosis*) beyond ordinary believers. Gnosticism flourished as a heresy particularly from the second to fourth centuries. There is debate as to when it began, but ideas such as were developed in Gnosticism do not spring suddenly out of nowhere, and a first century AD (or even BC) origin makes good sense.

A vast amount of literature from the ancient world details the various teachings of Gnosticism. The discovery of many Gnostic writings at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 has thrown more light on the subject than was previously available.^[2]

Gnosticism had connections with Jewish thought, but pagan and Jewish stories and myths became mixed together. A distorted interpretation of the Old Testament was the result. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures was considered evil because He created a material world. He was regarded as an inferior demi-god, which could explain why Paul uses the word “blaspheme” of the activities of Hymenaeus and Alexander. The Gnostics were greatly interested in origins (“myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations”). They believed in a series of intermediate powers (“deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons”). Gnostic speculations involved a re-write of Genesis. The serpent, regarded as an embodiment of ‘the female spiritual principle’, was regarded as a benefactor of the human race by helping Adam and Eve to discover true knowledge (*gnosis*) contrary to the ‘false’ teaching of their Creator. Eve (“the mother of all living”, Genesis 3:20) was identified with Artemis (whose great Temple was in Ephesus) and with Isis (salvation goddess from Egypt) and with Cybele (‘the great mother’ of pagan fertility religion). Eve was considered, therefore, as having a primacy over Adam. She played a key part in giving him life and in instructing him.

The spirit-filled woman came to him and spoke with him, saying “Arise, Adam.” And when he saw her, he said, “You are the one who has given me life. You will be called ‘the mother of the living,’ because she is my mother, she is the female healer, and the wife and the one who gave birth.”
(Nag Hammadi Codex II, Tractate 4

The Hypostasis of the Archons, 89.11-16)

It was believed that Cain was good, Abel bad. If, as some maintained, the God of the Old Testament was evil, then commands like “Thou shalt not commit adultery” should be deliberately disobeyed. Morality was therefore reversed. These myths were not simply “old-wives’ fables” of a traditional folklore, but involved a direct challenge to Christian belief.^[3] Hence the description: “godless” or “profane”.

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths.... (RSV)

... refuse profane and old wives’ fables.... (KJV 1 Timothy 4:7)

Differing and contradictory views were held among the false teachers. Not only were they leading believers astray but, as could be expected, they were indulging in bitter wrangling with each other.

In addition to this context which can be deduced from the content of Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, two aspects of the pagan world are also relevant.

Artemis and the City of Ephesus

Ephesus was a centre for the worship of Artemis (“Diana of the Ephesians”) – “she whom all Asia and the world worship” (Acts 19:27). According to Greek mythology, the city of Ephesus had been founded by the Amazons, famous women leaders who had slain their men-folk. Hence they had the epithet “manslayers”. Artemis herself was a huntress and had engineered the death of the hunter Actaeon who came across her when she was bathing. According to mythology she slew many others. Originally Artemis to the Greeks was a different goddess to Artemis in Ephesus, but the qualities attributed to each became assimilated. Paul’s criticism of prevailing attitudes at Ephesus echoes these myths. Is it simply a coincidence?

... the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers.

(1 Timothy 1:9)

“Manslayers” is the exact word used of the Amazons who gloried in their defeat of the men. In mythology Artemis exercised power over men. Artemis was also the goddess to whom women appealed to save them through childbirth.

It is not surprising that believers in Ephesus risked being influenced by this pagan atmosphere, nor that problems arose over women dominating men.

The ‘New’ Woman

In the Roman world of the first century, some women were adopting a new lifestyle, caring more for pleasure outside marriage than for husband, home, or children. Roman legislation sought to control such behaviour which was rightly considered damaging to society. The type of clothing which women wore indicated more than wealth and personal taste. By wearing gold or jewellery a woman was seen as sexually promiscuous.

It is necessary for the free and modest wife to live with her lawful husband adorned with quietness ... she ... must reject garments shot with purple or gold. For these are used by hetairai [prostitutes] in soliciting men generally. ... the ornament of a wife is her manner and not her dress. And a free and modest wife must appear attractive to her own husband, but not to the man next door, having on her cheeks the blush of modesty rather than of rouge and powder, and a good and noble bearing and decency and modesty rather than gold and emerald. For it is not in the expenditure on clothing and looks that the modest woman should express her love of the good but in the management and maintenance of her household, and pleasing her own husband.

(Melissa to Clearete, P. Haun, II, 13 lines 1-42)^[4]

The reference to clothes and decoration (1 Timothy 2:9) is not simply to do with extravagant expense or personal self-image. This adds further background to the problem confronting Paul and Timothy.

With these kinds of context in mind, and with the reservation that we nevertheless know very little about the actual events in Ephesus, let us examine 1 Timothy regarding the work of brothers and sisters.

^[1] “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *ad hoc* Documents” by Gordon D. Fee, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol 28, No 2 (June 1985) pages 141-151.

^[2] “The manuscripts were produced in the fourth century, but all of the texts are clearly translations from Greek originals. The original Greek compositions date most likely from the second century and the early third century, although there are debates over whether some texts might have originated in the first century, e.g. The Gospel of Thomas.” *Dictionary of Later New Testament and its Developments, Gnosis, Gnosticism*, 3.4.1. (IVP, 1997)

^[3] The descriptions of Adam, Eve and the Serpent are complicated in the Gnostic literature, and they vary from book to book. We have given only a brief explanation above. For the full context and a further translation see *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, edited by Bentley Layton, Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Vols. 1 & 2 (1989), published by E. J. Brill under the auspices of The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity.

^[4] *Roman Wives, Roman Widows – The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities*, Bruce W. Winter (Eerdmans, 2003), quoted from pages 72-73. This is a letter from the Pythagorean School of philosophy. It is a copy on a 3rd century AD papyrus of a letter which is reckoned to be much earlier.

Paul's Teaching in 1 Timothy Prayer, Quarrelling, Dress

Paul's Teaching in 1 Timothy Prayer, Quarrelling, Dress

In 1 Timothy chapter 1 (verses 3-7) Paul outlines what he wants Timothy to do: "... remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine". The aim of our "charge", he says is "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith", in contrast to which "certain persons ... have wandered into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions".

1 Timothy chapter 2 begins with the word "therefore" or "then", following on from these declarations of purpose in chapter 1. We are dealing with specific remedies against specific major problems, but need to read between the lines since we are hearing, as it were, only one half of a telephone conversation.

Problems in Prayer

First of all, then, I urge that supplications and thanksgivings be made for all men (*anthropoi* = "all people").... (1 Timothy 2:1)

This instruction was necessary because the false teachers and the quarrelling factions were not praying properly. What are the possible problems? They were either not praying much at all, or praying against others, or praying only for their own group. Whichever it was, Paul corrected it, stating:

This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men (*anthropoi*) to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

Problems Caused by Behaviour of the Men in Ephesus

After this general instruction on prayer, Paul in verse 8 gave more specific detail.

I desire that in every place the men (*andres*) should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling. (1 Timothy 2:8)

The word *anthropoi* is used in 1 Timothy 2:1 and 2:4 (quoted above). The Good News Bible translates *anthropoi* as "all people" and "everyone". But in 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul writes *andres*, i.e. "men" as distinct from "women".

Where does the emphasis lie in this verse? Is it on men (*andres*) or is it on the *behaviour* of the men when at prayer?

A traditional interpretation has been that Paul was emphasising that men, not women, should offer public prayer in the assemblies.^[1] If this was Paul's intention, it is surprising that he did not specifically state "not the women", but added "without anger or quarrelling". Paul shows

obvious approval of sisters praying aloud in 1 Corinthians 11. It seems unlikely therefore that Paul should be interpreted as now reversing the position. When Paul wished to forbid a practice he was usually clear and definite, e.g.

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain. (1 Timothy 3:8)

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. (1 Timothy 4:7)

Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father.

(1 Timothy 5:1)

As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches.... (1 Timothy 6:17)

If, therefore, Paul wished to forbid sisters from praying, it is strange that he did not say so precisely, rather than leaving people to deduce it.^[2]

Paul would not have given this command if prayers were being offered in a Christ-like fashion. In 1 Timothy 6:4-5 he mentions “envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling”. He therefore specifically ordered the men to pray in every place^[3] without anger or quarrelling. The need to give such a commandment is reinforced in 1 Timothy 3:3 where “not quarrelsome” was one of the **qualities essential in a “bishop”**.

If it is asked “Why does he not instruct the women to pray without quarrelling?”, it can be answered that this specific problem had been reported to Paul about the men not the women. But some translations consider that Paul’s instructions also refer to women praying.

Problems Caused by Behaviour of the Women in Ephesus

Paul in verse 9 begins to deal with the problems caused by the women at Ephesus.

... also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire, but by good deeds as befits women who profess religion.

(1 Timothy 2:9-10)

The section begins with the word “also” or “likewise” and the verb “I desire” has to be brought in from verse 8. There are two ways the verse could be translated:

(a) “I likewise desire the women to dress modestly....” or

(b) “I likewise desire the women to pray [without quarrelling], to dress modestly....”

Most English translations choose (a) but (b) is possible, and several commentators consider it preferable.^[4] The Dibelius and Conzelmann Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles offers the following translation:

As far as prayer is concerned, I wish that men everywhere would raise holy hands, without a thought of anger and strife. And the women should do likewise, in modest deportment with chastity and prudence, (and) should not decorate themselves with braids and gold, (nor with) pearls or expensive clothes....^[5]

The Jewish New Testament translates:

Therefore, it is my wish that when the men pray, no matter where, they should lift up hands that are holy – they should not become angry or get into arguments. Likewise, the women, when they pray, should be

dressed modestly and sensibly

(Jewish New Testament by David H. Stern)

The Emphatic Diaglott (Greek text with English translation beneath each word, plus an English translation where words considered emphatic in Greek are capitalized) gives:

I appoint, therefore, the MEN to pray in every place, lifting up Holy Hands without Wrath and Disputing.

In like manner, the WOMEN, also, in becoming Attire, with Modesty and soberness of mind, not decorating themselves with Wreaths, or Gold, or Pearls, or expensive clothing. (Diaglott by Benjamin Wilson)

The Latin translation by Jerome (c.347-420) called the Vulgate is very similar. It, too, considers the verb “pray” applies to both men and women:

I wish therefore that the men should pray in every place, raising pure hands, without anger and dispute. Likewise also the women in modest dress, adorning themselves with reverence and temperance, and not with twisted hair, or gold, or pearls, or with expensive clothing. (Translated from the Latin.)

Jerome translated the New Testament into Latin at a time when New Testament Greek was still a spoken language. Both he and the Greek-speaking translators of the modern Greek New Testament consider that Paul refers to both men and women praying:

I desire, then, that the men should pray in every place of prayer, without anger and dispute, and I desire that the hands which they raise to heaven should be pure. Likewise also that the women should pray in modest dress.... (Greek Bible Society, 1989, translated from modern Greek).

Why, then, is there this variety in translation? The verses can be translated, as in most English versions, as two separate statements, the one about men at prayer, and the other about women’s dress. But when the Greek is read directly, the word “pray” seems most easily to apply to both men and women, joined by the word “likewise”. That is the most natural way a Greek would understand the words. It is interesting that the Greek speakers (Jerome and the Greek Bible Society) both see it as referring to men praying, and women praying. And this fits directly with 1 Corinthians 11 rather than appearing to contradict it. Is it not, therefore, a better choice?

Whichever translation we follow, Paul's instructions would have been given because he had received adverse reports from Ephesus. The instructions to men are that they should not quarrel when they pray. The instructions to women are that they should not be showy or extravagant or sexually provocative when they dress – whether when they pray in the meeting or in everyday life, in contrast with the widows who “grow wanton ... gadding about from house to house” (1 Timothy 5:13-15).

The common assumption that 1 Timothy 2:8 precludes sisters from praying in the assemblies is not justified. Paul's teaching here as elsewhere makes no distinction as to whether prayers in the ecclesia are offered by brothers or sisters. His concern is to correct the wrong spirit in which prayer was being offered.

Prayer, when properly practised, is a great leveller. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12), “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). In prayer before God, there is no place for human pride. There is no place in prayer for looking down on others, or for exalting ourselves. We are all guilty of sin, and need to esteem our brother or sister as greater in God's sight. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

Recent studies suggest that some women in the first century had more opportunities of independent thought and action than before the Roman Empire spread to the east. This had a beneficial effect in enabling the activities of women like Priscilla, but other women took the opportunity instead to neglect family responsibilities and to pursue extra-marital relationships. The comments about dress suggest that Christian women in Ephesus were affected by the promiscuous attitudes in the world around them.^[6] Their approach needed to change if they were to pray acceptably.

Paul's instructions on learning and teaching follow on directly from what he has said about prayer and dress, and in the same context of abuses which need to be corrected.

^[1] For example, the footnote commentary in the Roman Catholic “Knox Translation of the New Testament”, 1961 edition, page 218, says: “St Paul is probably teaching here that women are to abstain from offering public prayer, as well as from teaching (in the sense of giving instructions at public worship).” Christadelphian commentators frequently say much the same, but tend to drop the word “probably” and assert that Paul *definitely* teaches that men should pray in the meeting, not women, despite Paul's approval of women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11.

^[2] The fact that the second part is connected by a participle (“*lifting* holy hands without anger or quarrelling”) does not diminish the likelihood that this is where the real point lies. The Greek language is fond of participles (verbal adjectives, such as words ending in “-ing” in English, e.g.

“lifting”). The important teaching in Romans 12:9-13 is given in a string of participles. So too in 1 Peter 3:7.

^[3] “in every place” On the basis of the use of the same phrase in passages like 1 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul may mean “in all ecclesias throughout the world”, but as already noted, Paul stated that he was addressing a specific situation. In Crete there were ecclesias in each town, but in a large city like Ephesus it is likely that there were several ecclesias, such as the one that met in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (1 Corinthians 16:19). Further evidence is suggested by the comment in 2 Timothy 3:6 about those “who make their way into households”. Ecclesias at this time met in houses. When therefore Paul said “in every place” an alternative and likely possibility is that he was being more specific and meant “in every one of the assemblies in Ephesus” – of which he had received such alarming reports.

^[4] “When men pray, they should do so in the absence of contention or anger; *when women pray* they should dress modestly. The reference to women praying is often missed by male commentators but it should be noted. In v. 9 the words addressed to women lack a verb which must be supplied from v. 8. In v. 8 there are, however, two verbs ‘to desire’ and ‘to pray’, which the adverb at the beginning of v. 9, *hosautos* (= in like manner) shows are both carried over (so Chrysostom, Calvin, Spicq, Barrett, Dibelius and Conzelmann).” *The Bible and Women’s Ministry*.

^[5] *The Pastoral Epistles*, by Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, (Fortress Press, 1972).

^[6] Bruce W. Winter in *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, (Eerdmans, 2003).

Paul's Teaching in 1 Timothy Learning, Teaching, Authority

Paul's Teaching in 1 Timothy Learning, Teaching, Authority

After enjoining modesty and good deeds, as distinct from expensive adornment and its potentially provocative message, Paul continued to specify how the women were to behave. We need to remember that he is writing to correct an immediate problem, and so should consider his words in that context.

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 2:11-15, NRSV)

“In silence with full submission”

What did Paul mean when he said that a woman was to learn “in silence with full submission”?

It is noticeable that Paul instructed that a woman should *learn*, a distinct difference from many attitudes to women in the ancient world.

“In silence” means “in quietness” (*hesychia*), the same basic word used in verse 2 “a quiet life”. It is not the word *sigan*, “refrain from speaking”, used in 1 Corinthians 14 when speakers in tongues, prophets and the women are told to be silent. “Quiet” in verse 2 means “free from disruption or persecution”, and it has been suggested that Paul meant the same in verse 11, i.e. that no attempt should be made to disrupt the process of a woman being taught. Pagan and Jewish comments can be quoted which object to women being educated. However, the close linking of “in quietness” and “with full submission” suggests that “in quietness” more likely refers to the woman herself. The word does not mean “without speaking”. The intention is that the woman should be co-operative and eager to learn, listening to her teacher rather than making out that she knew everything already. Such an approach to learning is essential for any student, male or female, but this was evidently not being followed in Ephesus. Plutarch (c. 100 AD) wrote:

How wise a thing, it would seem, is silence [*hesychia*]. In particular it serves for studying to acquire knowledge and wisdom, by which I do not mean the wisdom of shop and market place, but that mighty wisdom which makes the one who acquires it like to God.

(*On Quietude*, Fragment 143)

Behaving with *hesychia*, with quietness, is a basic characteristic which applies to all believers, not just women. It is part of acting with “submission” as all believers are to do to each other: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). Paul exhorted the Thessalonians “to aspire to live quietly” (*hesychazein*, the verbal form of *hesychia*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, while in 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 he said:

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness (*hesychia*) and to earn their own living.

“In full submission” may mean to the Scriptures, or to the teaching of the apostles, or the elders (3:2) or to the teaching given by her husband, or to that given by an older sister (Titus 2:3). It is the attitude required by someone who needs to learn, as did these women in Ephesus.

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man”

Various Translations

Apart from whether *gyne* means “woman” or “wife” and whether *aner* means “man” or “husband”, other possibilities of translation depend on how the words are fitted together according to translators’ assessments of the rules of Greek grammar and the translation of other key words. Is “teach” (*didaskein*) to be taken on its own or as a verb governing “man/husband”? Does *authentain* mean “have authority over”, or “dominate” in an undesirable manner? Should “teach” be linked with *authentain* so as to qualify what is meant by “teach”?^[1] There has been much debate over the meaning of *authentain*, and we discuss this in the next chapter, pages 94-98.

To simplify, we will use the translation “man” and “woman”, rather than “husband” or “wife”, and translate *authentain* as “have authority”, though everyone should be aware that there are alternative possibilities.

Possibilities of translation include:

- (1) “I do not allow a woman to teach at all. Nor do I allow her to have authority over a man”.
- (2) “I do not allow a woman to teach a man nor do I allow her to have authority over him.”
- (3) “I do not allow a woman to teach or dominate a man.”

We have already observed that Paul encourages all believers to teach, e.g. Colossians 3:16, and that he regards women who teach as his fellow workers. In Titus 2:3 he specifies that older sisters are to “teach what is good”. He goes on in 2 Timothy 2:2 to say that “faithful people” are to teach. How, then, are we to understand this apparently contrary statement?

There are at least four possibilities: Paul differentiated between teaching in private from teaching in public; or he had a specific individual in mind in the emergency situation he was addressing; or he was referring to husbands and wives; or he intended to ban only teaching of an immoral, misleading type.

And since he approves of women teaching elsewhere, is his ban here intended only for the immediate crisis? Does he mean that once the crisis is solved, and when the women have learned “in full submission” and therefore been properly trained, then women should teach?

(A) Private and Public Contexts

One suggestion is that Paul approved of sisters teaching in a private context, such as when Priscilla taught Apollos at home, but did not permit a woman to teach in public. In both the Greek and Jewish worlds the idea that women could be teachers was not generally acceptable. Pagan writers in the ancient world objected to women taking public roles in a number of areas,

including teaching.^[2] Respectable women were expected to stay at home and look after the household.

Not only the arm, but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped.... ... she should speak to, or through, her husband. (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 31-32)

We need to take account of this background when we observe the favourable references in the New Testament toward women teaching. It is difficult, however, to differentiate between public and private when ecclesias met in homes, and Colossians 3:16 is obviously referring to a meeting. It may be that as Christianity spread and the movement became larger, the issue of private versus public became more acute.

(B) There was a Problem with One Particular Woman at Ephesus

The text in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is in the singular. This may be a general manner of speaking; or perhaps there is one particular woman of whom Paul has heard but whose name he does not know or whom he prefers not to specify, just as he does not specify who the “certain persons” are (1 Timothy 1:6) – yet presumably he knows, judging by the detailed criticism of the content of their teaching. The passage can be translated with a more immediate reference as “I am not allowing a woman to teach”, i.e. in the situation and circumstances of which Paul had heard. If he imposed a blanket ban at this stage, he could sort out who could teach and who could not when he arrived personally, as was his intention (“I hope to come to you soon”, 1 Timothy 3:14), and as he does in 2 Timothy 2:2.

(C) Husband and Wife

Most translations interpret verse 12 in a general manner (“man” rather than “husband”):

I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority (*authentēin*) over a man.

The word “submissiveness”, however, suggests a husband/wife context, for Paul had already taught that “wives are to be subject to their husbands” (Ephesians 5:22). The switch from “women” in the plural (verse 9) to “woman” (*gynē*) and “man” (*aner*) in the singular in verses 11 & 12, and the reference to childbearing in verse 15, likewise suggest a marriage context. Translating these words as “wife” and “husband”, they then read:

Let a wife learn in silence and in all submission [to her husband]. I do not allow a wife to teach (*didaskēin*) or to dominate (*authentēin*) her husband. (1 Timothy 2:12)

What background could have required this teaching from Paul?

There are several possibilities:

(1) In the ancient world women were usually married as teenagers (14 years old) to men who were considerably older (20s to 30s). In this situation, it is obvious that wives, who were little

more than youngsters at first, should learn quietly from their husbands when being instructed in Christian teaching.

(2) Bossy, domineering wives are not unknown today. It may well be that among the false teachers were some such women.

(3) Most women in the ancient world received little education other than in housekeeping from their mothers.^[3] Many women could not read or write. In such a situation the wives were in no position to teach their husbands. The frequent references by the apostle Paul to the Old Testament Scriptures indicate the assumption that his readers would have an awareness of the Old Testament. A proper understanding is impossible without literacy, and uneducated wives therefore needed to be taught both literacy and the Scriptures. Relying on old-wives' fables taught in the nursery (1 Timothy 4:7) – such as Greek myths and other stories from pagan backgrounds – would not give them any basis for understanding the way of Christ. Titus 2:4 indicates that younger wives needed to be given spiritual and moral education, and this would be given either by older women as in Titus 2:4-5, by ecclesial leaders or by husbands.

(D) Paul sought to stop Immoral, Misleading Teaching

Paul was writing in a situation where those who were spiritually uneducated were teaching others:

Certain persons ... desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. (1 Timothy 1:6-7)

Immodest dress suggested sexual promiscuity (2:9); some widows were living for pleasure (5:6) and younger widows whose commitment, and morality were in doubt, were going from house to house (ecclesia to ecclesia?) “saying what they should not” (5:11-13). Paul instructed the deacons' wives (or “women deacons”) to be “serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things” (3:11). The need to give such instructions shows that some, perhaps many, perhaps the majority of the women were light-headed, slanderers, immoderate and unfaithful (to Christ or to their husbands). The crisis facing Paul and Timothy was a major one. Such women were in no position to teach, or exert any influence. The linkage of “teach” with *authenthein* suggests activity which at its mildest was dominating in an unhelpful manner; at its worst it was immoral and was undermining the Scriptural basis of the Christian gospel, like the woman Jezebel, in Revelation 2:20 “who is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise immorality”.

“She is to keep silent”

“Silent” is the same word on which we have already commented in verses 2 and 11 (*hesychia*). It makes more sense to translate it literally, “in quietness”, not “in silence”. She is not to be disruptive, a comment which fits well if *authenthein* means dominate, for “in quietness” is directly contrasted with *authenthein*. Alternatively it could mean that she is to refrain from speaking and teaching false proto-Gnostic ideas, and instead be in harmony with the Scriptures, which would fit with the immediately following references to Genesis.

Adam and Eve

Paul next refers to the Garden of Eden, connecting this to the foregoing by the word “for”.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Timothy 2:13)

“Adam was formed first, then Eve”

We discuss the evidence from Genesis in Chapter 18, but the question which needs to be asked at this point is: What does Paul mean to convey by this reference?

Three ways of understanding his wording have been suggested.

(A) Because Adam was formed first he was given the divine right to lead, teach and rule over his wife.

If Paul intends this, he certainly does not state it, nor does a careful examination of Genesis 2 bear this out, as we show in Chapters 17 and 18. The idea that being formed first thereby entails authority over what was formed later is an assumption, not stated here nor in Genesis. The animals were formed before mankind according to Genesis 1, but this does not imply that the animals were in authority over mankind. Sometimes reference is made to the special privileges allotted to the first-born (Genesis 48:18, Deuteronomy 21:15-17), but Adam was not “born”, and Paul makes no reference to this practice.^[4]

(B) The problem addressed here is of women giving men false teaching. This is against God’s purpose. He created man first, and then the woman, the purpose being that she would be a suitable companion to him, someone who would help him live as God intended. This is not what the women at Ephesus were doing, so Paul cites Genesis to remind them of how men and women were created to work in unity. They were to rule over the earth together in partnership (Genesis 1:28, 2:23), not over each other. But in Ephesus the women were exerting authority wrongfully over men and were leading them into sin, just as had happened with Adam and Eve.

The relevance of saying that Adam was formed first, then Eve, is that Adam was instructed by God and had the job of passing on God’s commandments to Eve. Adam as the senior had greater experience of life, and especially of working with God before Eve was made. In the context of Ephesus, the position was the same. The wives of whom Paul was thinking in Ephesus were comparatively uneducated; it was important that they listened to their educated Christian husbands. Paul therefore drew a parallel between the original needs in Genesis and the needs in Ephesus.

(C) Paul says that Adam was formed first, then Eve, because **the false teaching in Ephesus, as seen later in Gnosticism, **gave priority to Eve**. Gnostic writers conflated Eve with the Mother Goddess – Isis/Cybele/Artemis. We gave one example on page 76. Here is another:**

After the day of rest, Sophia sent Zoe her daughter, who is called Eve, as an instructor so that she should raise up Adam, who had no soul in him, so that those whom he would beget should become vessels of the light. When Eve saw her co-likeness lying flat, she showed pity upon him and said, “Adam, live! Rise up upon the earth.” Straightaway her word became a deed. For when Adam had risen up, he immediately opened his eyes. When he saw her, he said “You will be called ‘the mother of the living,’ because you are the one who has given me life.”

(Nag Hammadi Codex, II, Tractate 5

On The Origin of The World, 115.85-116.86)

Paul therefore repeats the original Bible teaching as given in Genesis and instructs that believers should hold firmly to the warning it gives.

It is traditionally suggested that Paul objects to a woman teaching on the grounds that this is contrary to the order of creation. We need to ask: Why, then, did he not stop at “For Adam was formed first, then Eve”? Instead he continues with a second reference “and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor”. The answer, we suggest, is that there were problems concerning deceptive teaching in the first century circumstances in which this was written.

“Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived.”

There are at least three possible interpretations of this statement:

(A) All women are easily deceived like Eve and are therefore not fit to teach or have authority.

There are several reasons for doubting this interpretation.

(1) Sisters seem no more prone to be led astray or to lead others astray than do brothers. It is only *some* women who are a problem (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:13). Others like Timothy’s mother and grandmother are spoken of with approval for their faith and their work (2 Timothy 1:5 & 3:15).

(2) If Paul regards sisters as by nature unfit to teach, why does he instruct them elsewhere to do so, e.g. Titus 2:3-4, where the older women are to be “teachers of good things”? And why do we allow them to teach our children?

(3) Believers, male and female, are in the process of transformation into a new nature, so to say that women *en bloc* are easily deceived like Eve (or to say that all men sin deliberately like Adam) is to deny our renewed life in Christ:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col. 3:9-10)

A second interpretation is this:

(B) Paul was drawing a parallel between women at Ephesus who were teaching false doctrines (and had been deceived into these, such as in 2 Timothy 3:6-7) and Eve who similarly was deceived and then misled Adam.

This conforms with the manner in which Paul drew a parallel from Genesis in 2 Corinthians 11:3.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Paul’s reasoning, according to interpretation (B), is this: Adam was formed first and therefore received the commandments from God, but Eve was deceived by the snake and led him astray just as was happening in Ephesus in the situation to which Paul was addressing his warnings. By referring to an Old Testament incident his hearers knew well, Paul was drawing a parallel to

reinforce his message, this being that a spiritually misled sister should not mis-teach or dominate her husband.

There is a third possibility:

(C) Paul is reminding the church at Ephesus that Eve was a sinner, not the bringer of enlightenment and salvation. This next comment in Timothy therefore follows on to reinforce the rejection of the idea that Eve was originator of life and the one who revealed true knowledge:

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Timothy 2:13)

“Saved through bearing children”

Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:15)

Paul’s approval of childbearing (obviously within marriage, which helps to indicate that this section may be specific to married couples) is a suitable rejoinder to the false teachers who forbade marriage (1 Timothy 4:3), or to the ‘new’ women who rejected marriage or treated their vows lightly. Some of the Gnostics had a strong aversion to childbirth, rejecting anything to do with the material body which they regarded as evil, while the ‘new’ women preferred promiscuous relationships and measures to prevent pregnancy or childbirth.

But this is an obscure verse for several reasons. Sisters are saved by being in Christ just like brothers, and various suggestions have therefore been made as to the meaning of “saved through bearing children”.^[5] What about sisters who do not have children? Translation is a problem too, for the second part is plural, though the sentence begins in the singular:

Yet a woman (or wife) will be saved through bearing children, if *they* continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim. 2:15)

This verse once again illustrates the difficulty of understanding and applying comments when we do not know, and cannot properly discover, the situation Paul was addressing. This much is clear, that Paul endorses faith, love, holiness and modesty, qualities desirable in us all but sadly lacking among the false teachers in Ephesus and Crete.

We suggest, as one of a number of possible positive approaches, that the passage could be paraphrased and expanded to read as below.

“Wives who need to be instructed in the Christian faith should learn quietly and submissively. I do not allow a wife, who herself needs to be taught, to teach or to tell her husband what to do. She must keep quiet and learn. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, not the other way round as some people are saying in Ephesus; and we can draw a lesson from what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. She was deceived because of her lack of experience and by false teaching – just like the women in Ephesus. I am anxious that women in Ephesus shouldn’t do as Eve did and use their influence to lead their husbands astray. And mindful that Eve was deceived, don’t go along with the idea being promoted by some people that woman is the creator and the all-virtuous revealer of truth. Yet, though Eve was deceived, a wife will be saved, and there will be

no deception and no sin, if she lives a proper married life, bearing children and continuing in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

Concluding Comments on 1 Timothy 2:12

This passage contains sufficient uncertainties of context, translation and interpretation that it should be viewed in the light of clearer teaching elsewhere. It should *not* be used as a key passage in any discussion on the role of sisters in the ecclesia. Nor should it be quoted in writing or speech without the qualification that both translation and meaning are open to considerable debate. Doubtless the meaning was clear to Timothy, as required by the circumstances and his mission. But we cannot simply quote words from the past and apply them to our own context today when their original meaning and application are uncertain.

Teaching Today

Paul did not define (in 1 Timothy) the position of a woman who *had* learned properly, like Priscilla, or like his female “fellow workers” who were therefore in a position to teach. But if the prevailing attitude of society made it difficult for women to teach in the first century, it is not so now. Acceptance of the Gospel is more likely to be hindered today by any attitude which says that capable sisters may not teach. In fact, our community has always permitted sisters to teach – in print, which is much more public and has a wider impact; we have thereby acknowledged, if unwittingly, that teaching by a woman is not inadmissible in itself; when properly done, it is a positive good.

^[1] Each time the verb “teach” occurs in 1 Timothy it is linked with another verb which helps to explain the type of teaching: “not to *teach* any different doctrine, nor to *occupy* themselves with myths and endless genealogies” (1:3-4); “*Command* and *teach* these things” (4:11); “*Teach* and *urge* these duties” (6:2); “If any one *teaches* otherwise and *does not* agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:3). Similarly in Revelation 2:20: “Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is *teaching* and *beguiling* my servants to practice immorality.” It has been suggested therefore that in the expression “to *teach* or to *have authority* over men” (2:12), the type of teaching is explained by the other word in the couplet, *authentain*. If, as some evidence seems to show, *authentain* has a bad meaning, then the type of teaching to which the apostle objects is wrongful teaching, not good teaching.

^[2] “Public Roles for Women in the Pauline Church: A Re-appraisal of the Evidence” by James G. Sigountos and Myron Shank, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 26, No. 3, September 1983 pages 283-295. This article argues that the perception in the ancient pagan world was that women who taught were not being submissive, whereas women as prophets or as priestesses (e.g. at Delphi) were acting acceptably.

^[3] Some women, especially in important cities like Ephesus, did receive a high level of education. But, as the context in 1 Timothy indicates, what is lacking is spiritually educated women. Hence Paul’s command that they are to learn, not teach, and not exercise authority.

What could be worse than for worldly, spiritually uneducated women teaching others and telling them what to do?

^[4] Thomas R. Schreiner writes:

The readers of 1 Timothy would not have scratched their heads with perplexity and amazement when Paul says that women should not teach because Adam was created first. The priority of Adam in creation would have naturally suggested his authority over Eve to the original readers. Paul does not endorse primogeniture per se in 1 Timothy 2:13; he appeals to the creation of Adam first in explaining why women should not teach men. (*Women in The Church – an Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, eds. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, second edition, 2005).

If Paul had referred solely to the creation of Adam first, then Eve, there might have been cause to think that “priority of Adam in creation would have naturally suggested his authority over Eve to the original readers” – despite the fact that no such statement is made in Genesis, and the opposite is stated: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). But Paul does not leave it there. He immediately follows with comments about deceit, which (we suggest) puts the whole reference to Genesis in the context of the problems in Ephesus – along with the instructions that women should learn in quietness. Women who were not spiritually fit to do so were teaching and expressing authority over men; they were deceived, and were deceiving others both by what they taught and the manner in which they dominated the men. See our comments on Genesis in Chapter 18, pages 122-126.

^[5] Suggestions include that the woman will be kept safe through the dangers of childbirth; or that it refers to Mary and the salvation brought by the birth of Jesus. Or it may refer to the dangers caused to their health by the ‘new’ women who don’t “continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” and seek to avoid childbirth by abortion – at considerable danger to their lives. Each suggestion presents difficulties of its own. Another context may be a reference to the worship of Artemis who was believed to protect women in childbirth. Christian women look to God, not Artemis, for their salvation in Christ.

Translation Issues

Translation Issues

Alternative Translations?

In the search for an explanation in harmony with the rest of New Testament teaching, we offer several alternative translations. Some are indicated in standard versions like KJV, RSV, NIV, NRSV; some are suggested in commentaries and books. The bringing in of alternative translations may seem a neat, but deceptive way of sliding round an unacceptable statement: re-translate it to one's preference and the problem is gone! This, of course, is not our aim – nor, we hope, anyone's. In many cases no one particular translation is correct, or several may be correct. Where words have a range of meaning, there can be many possibilities. Which one adequately conveys the meaning of the author cannot be known with certainty. In presenting various translations, we have not sought to say: "This one is correct, and this alone, and this solves the problem." We simply aim to show that various translations are possible, and that different outcomes are reached depending on how one chooses.

The Greek Words "*Anthropos*", "*Aner*", and "*Gyne*"

There are two words in Greek which can be translated "man". *Anthropos* generally means "man" or "mankind" (as distinct from God). The plural is *anthropoi* which usually means "men and women" or "people", or "human beings". The other word is *aner* (plural *andres*) which usually means "man/men" as distinct from "woman/women". It also is the Greek word for "husband". *Gyne* means "woman" or "wife". Whether *aner* should be translated "husband", or *gyne* "wife" depends on the context and (as indicated by the translations) this is often a matter of opinion, dependent on the translators' understanding.

For example, in 1 Timothy 2:12 the NRSV offers the following:

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man.

But the footnotes indicate the translation could be:

I permit no wife to teach or to have authority over her husband.

If the first is correct, the context is wider, and presumably in a church setting. If the second, it appears to be restricted to a home setting, or to a husband and wife matter within a church setting.

"Have Authority" or "Dominate"?

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority (*authentein*) over a man.
(1 Timothy 2:12, NIV)

There is disagreement among scholars as to the meaning of the word *authentein* which occurs only here in the New Testament. Suggested translations are "have authority" in a good sense, or "dominate" in a bad sense.^[1]

Authentein contains within it the Greek word “self”, and self-assertiveness in an undesirable sense is one of the meanings attributed to it. The King James Version translates it as “usurp authority”; NEB “domineer over man”; RSV, NRSV, NIV and GNB “have authority”; the Jerusalem Bible “tell a man what to do”; Revised English Bible (1989) “dictate to the men”. W. E. Vine, in *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (1940) defines it as:

to exercise authority on one’s own account, to domineer over.... In the earlier usage of the word it signified one who with his own hand killed either others or himself. Later it came to denote one who acts on his own authority; hence to exercise authority, dominion.

The difficulty is that an answer cannot be sought by simply looking up the word in Greek dictionaries or in word books (as in W. E. Vine, quoted above), because they derive their definitions by deduction from usages elsewhere in Greek literature. The discussions tend to be circular, because some subjectivity inevitably creeps in when scholars examine the context and draw conclusions. Translators in turn base their translations on the results of academic research. Over the last twenty years the existence of the TLG (*Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* = Treasury of the Greek Language) – a computer database with as many Greek texts as can be found – has made a wider analysis possible, but this has not settled the matter.

By typing *authentein* into any internet search engine (like Google), many hundreds of entries will be listed, many copying from one another, and some repeating material many decades old.

The most recent analyses using the TLG seem to be by H. Scott Baldwin (1995)^[2] and Albert Wolters (2000), repeated in the 2005 edition of *Women in the Church – An Analysis and application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, by Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner (editors)^[3]. H. Scott Baldwin, studying the verb *authentein*, considers “the one unifying concept is that of *authority*” and he lists the following as possible meanings in 1 Timothy 2:12: “to control”, “to dominate”, “to compel”, “to influence someone”, “to flout the authority of”. Which is the appropriate meaning has to be decided by context. Albert Wolters, after examining the associated noun, *authentēs*, considers that “there seems to be no basis for the claim that *authentein* in 1 Tim. 2.12 has a pejorative connotation, as in ‘usurp authority’ or ‘domineer’”. He would approve, therefore, the translation “have authority”. But the meanings given by H. Scott Baldwin do seem to us to be pejorative (e.g. “dominate”, “compel”) and we should not assume that “the one unifying concept is that of *authority*” is the same as saying that *authentein* basically means “have authority” in a good sense. Other writers continue to maintain the word has a negative meaning. I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (1999), writes: “Ideas such as autocratic or domineering abuses of power and authority appear to be more naturally linked with the verb in view of the cognate nouns *authentēs* and *authentēia*”.^[4] Bruce W. Winter (2003)^[5] concludes his discussion on *authentein*: “... it seems that here the term carries not only the connotation of authority but also an inappropriate misuse of it.”^[6]

In view of the authority which Paul elsewhere considers acceptable for sisters such as his fellow workers (1 Corinthians 16:16), it seems reasonable to think that the word *authentein* bears the meaning of exercising a dominating and therefore undesirable influence or authority. The normal word for “authority” in an acceptable sense is *exousia*, the verb being *exousiazein*. Paul uses it several times: “... the wife does not rule (*exousiazein*) over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule (*exousiazein*) over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Corinthians 7:4); “... the authority (*exousia*) which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Corinthians 13:10).

It seems strange therefore if Paul had intended to say that a woman should not exercise authority as such over a man that he does not use the normal word *exousiazein*, the meaning of which is comparatively straightforward.

Authority, in a good sense, is rightly possessed by God alone. Jesus said:

He who speaks on his own authority [literally: “from himself”] seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. (John 7:18)

For I have not spoken on my own authority [literally: “out of myself”]; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak. (John 12:49)

When authority is rightly exercised by Jesus, by Paul or by any human being, it is a delegated authority. If *authenthein* suggests an authority which is not delegated but seized (KJV “usurp authority”), or exercised in a dominating manner, this would reasonably explain Paul’s objection to a woman exercising it over a man, or a wife over husband – or, of course, vice-versa.

If, on the other hand, *authenthein* does simply mean “have authority” in a neutral sense (as urged by scholars like G. W. Knight III, and given in various translations), the context of 1 Timothy – the crisis of false teaching and practice which Paul commissions Timothy to sort out, problems in the behaviour, attitude and dress of women in Ephesus, their need to learn rather than to teach – all these need to be borne in mind when assessing this comment in the light of Scripture elsewhere, and before seeking to make any modern application.

It will be interesting to see if research on Greek usage comes to any agreed conclusion in years ahead. At the moment, looking at the debate in books and on the internet, those who favour the wide involvement of women in church work tend to argue that *authenthein* means “exercise a dominating authority”, while those who consider it unscriptural for women to take any leadership or teaching positions, argue that *authenthein* means “exercise authority” in a good sense (and that Paul forbids this to women). The issue is not settled, therefore, by debate over the usage of *authenthein* in Greek literature. The position we adopt in this book is to consider Scripture as a whole, and on that basis we consider the Bible does support teaching and leadership by women, as by men, provided they are properly taught and behave in a Christ-like manner.

^[1] *I Suffer Not a Woman – Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, Richard & Catherine Kroeger (1992). This book has been much quoted and much criticised. The writers aim to give detailed background and analysis, to compare parallel grammatical usages in the New Testament, and explain how translation alternatives are reached. They suggest (page 103) that 1 Timothy 2:12 should be translated, “I do not permit woman to teach nor to represent herself as originator of man.... For Adam was created first, then Eve.” **We quoted this in our**

1996 draft version of this book. Their suggested translation of *authenthein* as “claim to be the originator” has received some, but not general, acceptance.

In their notes they also refer to a fourth possibility which relies on understanding *didaskein* (“to teach”) as governing a dative case rather than the usual accusative. This construction is used in Revelation 2:14: “Balaam, who taught Balak [dative] to ...”. This would then produce something like: “I certainly do not permit people to teach a woman that she is superior to a man but she is to behave quietly. For Adam was created first, then Eve.” If such a translation is correct, Paul is objecting to what is taught *to* women, not *by* women, but we would like to see some definite support amongst reputable scholars before advocating a translation like this.

The Kroegers’ book has been critically reviewed by S. M. Baugh in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol 56, 1994, pages 153-171, “The Apostle Among the Amazons”. S. M. Baugh disagrees with their grammatical analysis and their claims about Artemis and the influence of the priestess of Artemis.

(www.cbmw.org/resources/reviews/suffernot.php).

Several aspects of S. M. Baugh’s review has been critically reviewed in turn by Dennis McCallum in 2006 (www.xenos.org/essays/role_of_women.htm) and by Alan G. Padgett “The Scholarship of Patriarchy (on 1 Timothy 2:8-15)” (see www.cbeinternational.org).

^[2] See *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds, Baker Books (1995). Also in this book, Andreas J. Köstenberger argues that for reasons of Greek syntax, if “teach” has a positive meaning (as often in the New Testament), so too should *authenthein*. But in the Pastoral Epistles “teach” can have a negative connotation (Titus 1:11, 1 Timothy 1:7, 1 Timothy 6:3), so by Köstenberger’s argument, this could lead to *authenthein* as also having a pejorative meaning in the context. The 2nd edition of this book in 2005 claims repeatedly to have established the meaning of *authenthein* and its usage along with “teach”, but careful examination indicates that this claim has not been substantiated.

^[3] See “A Semantic Study of *authenthes* and its derivatives,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000), 145-75. For a review of studies on *authenthein*, see “The Evangelical Debate over Biblical ‘Headship’” by David H. Scholer, available on <http://www.godswordtowomen.org/scholer.htm>

^[4] I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (1999), page 457.

^[5] Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows* (2003) pages 116-119.

^[6] It is also worth noting how Jerome rendered the word *authenthein*, for he was familiar with New Testament Greek as a living language. Jerome in the Latin version gives “*dominari*” which has a range of meanings, some pejorative: “to be or play the master, to have dominion, bear rule, tyrannise”. Jerome uses “*dominari*” in his translation of Luke 22:25, where Jesus instructs his disciples that they are not to do this. TNIV (2004), the latest update of the NIV, gives: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man”. In the footnotes it points out that “woman” and “man” may mean “wife” and “husband” respectively, and it also offers: “I do not permit a woman to teach a man in a domineering way” or “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise (or have) authority over a man.”

Paul's Teaching on Bishops, Elders, Deacons

Paul's Teaching on

Bishops, Elders, Deacons

It is not clear what kind of leadership existed when ecclesias were first started. There is no New Testament mention of elders or overseers in Corinth or Rome or Syrian Antioch^[1]. On their return journey to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting” (Acts 14:23), probably copying the organisation of the synagogues where elders were responsible for seeing that the Law was observed and for representing the Jewish community in any dealings with the local Roman magistrates. When Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus, he advised them:

Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopoi*), to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son. (Acts 20:28)

Paul asked Titus to appoint elders in Crete. Presumably the ecclesias there had not had elders previously and he considered that the lack of responsible leadership was at the root of the problems there.

I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. (Titus 1:5, NRSV)

In Philippians 1:1 he wrote to

... all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops (*episkopoi*) and deacons....

The word for “elders” is *presbyteroi*, which gives us the English words “presbytery”, “presbyterian” and “priest”. Paul described the elders as “overseers” (*episkopoi*), the word translated as “bishops” in Philippians; so too in Titus 1:7 the word *episkopos* (“overseer”) is used in describing the character of elders. Paul lists either overseers and deacons or elders and deacons, which suggests that elders and overseers were, for the most part, interchangeable terms.

The elders at Ephesus had not successfully heeded Paul's warning about men (*andres*) arising from their number who would lead them astray. Paul, therefore, in 1 Timothy 3, had to spell out to them the qualities of character necessary for those who held positions of authority within the ecclesia. The specifications for elders or overseers in 1 Timothy 3:2-6 and Titus 1:6-9 indicate a considerable background problem of drunkenness, greed and lack of self-control. That they are men is shown by the comment “husband of one wife”. Since the elders would have a public profile in dealing with authorities, we would not expect a woman to be appointed among them.

The deacons in verses 8-10 are also men (verse 12 “the husband of one wife”), but verse 11 can be read in two ways as many translations indicate. It can be translated as “their wives” (i.e. the wives of deacons). There is good reason, however, to translate it as “the women deacons”. The behaviour of the wives of elders would be as important as the behaviour of the wives of deacons, but no comment is included on the wives of elders (verses 3-7). This section of 1 Timothy is specifically about office-bearers in the ecclesia, rather than the behaviour of

believers in general. There is no word for “their” attached to the word “women”. If there had been, there would have been a strong case for translating “women” as “wives”. Translations often add “their”, but it does not exist in the Greek text. The specifications are almost exactly parallel, except that “not greedy for gain” is omitted for the women:

Deacons (verse 8) must be:

- (a) serious,
- (b) not double-tongued,
- (c) not addicted to much wine,
- (d) not greedy for gain;
- (e) they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

The women likewise (verse 11) must be:

- (a) serious,
- (b) no slanderers, but
- (c) temperate,
- (d) —
- (e) faithful in all things.

The adjective “faithful” can mean “reliable, trustworthy” but it regularly means “believing” which is similar to the phrase used of the male deacons. The women should be “believing in all things”.

The two descriptions are therefore closely parallel. This parallelism, introduced by the word “likewise” (verse 11), and the fact that the whole section in verses 8-13 is about deacons, strongly suggest that we should understand Paul to be giving instructions here about women deacons rather than the wives of deacons.^[2]

The REB translates “Women in this office”, and many modern translations add a footnote which says “or, deaconesses”. TNIV (2004) puts the footnote: “Probably women who are deacons, or possibly deacons’ wives”. Since Phoebe in Romans 16 was described as a deacon, there is precedent for this. So too later. When Pliny wished to acquire information on the Christians about 112 AD in Bithynia, he interrogated two slave-women who were described as *ministrae*, the Latin translation of “deaconesses”.

The word “deaconess” (i.e. a feminine form of “deacon”) is not used in the New Testament. Phoebe is called a *diakonos*, “deacon”. When, therefore, the word “deacon” occurs, as in Philippians 1:1, it is quite probable that some of the deacons were women, such as Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3). It is easy, but incorrect, to assume that the word *diakonos* does not include women.^[3]

The Work of Bishops, Elders and Deacons

There is little direct information on the precise duties of an *episkopos* (translated “bishop” or “church leader”), *presbyteroi* (“elders”) and *diakonoι* (translated “deacons” or “church

helpers”). Nor is it known how those described as “workers” and “fellow workers” fitted in. Did their work overlap, coincide, or was it additional?

Teaching was part of the work of overseers/bishops.^[4] It was important that an overseer (“God’s steward”, Titus 1:7) should be a good teacher (*didaktikos*, 1 Timothy 3:2), because of the false teachers.

...he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9)

The elders had a pastoral responsibility to “care for the church of God” like shepherds looking after a flock (Acts 20:28). They are described as ruling^[5], but not all were involved in preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17). They also are described as acting collectively to lay their hands on Timothy, a way of dedicating someone to a God-approved task, as happened to Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13:2-3.

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you. (1 Timothy 4:14)

A single word (*presbyterion* = “presbytery”) is translated here as “the elders”, suggesting that they especially assembled together for the purpose. In James 5:14 the elders were encouraged to gather together to anoint a sick person and pray for him.

The institution of deacons is often attributed to Acts 6:1-4 where Stephen and six others were chosen to help with the daily distribution (*diakonia*) to widows, so that others could devote themselves to prayer and “the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word”, rather than serve (*diakonein*, the verb) tables. But Stephen also preached, and since *diakonia* was used either of practical service like providing food or of “the ministry of the word”, which is preaching and teaching, or of the work of Jesus (Mark 10:45 – *diakonein*, again), the work of the deacons should not be thought of as restricted to practical activities. In later centuries the work of deacons tended to be more practical, but this is not indicated within the New Testament. When financial support was sent to Jerusalem, it was to the elders it was delivered (Acts 11:30), not deacons. Deacons are not mentioned in the Jerusalem church, despite Acts 6:1-4, though “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (to quote a saying from archaeology).

Some commentators consider that the instructions about widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-15 do not refer simply to welfare but to a particular arrangement where, in return for support, the widows would undertake certain duties for the ecclesia. Good character is particularly specified, as in the case of bishops, elders and deacons:

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. (1 Timothy 5:9-10)

“Teachers of What is Good”

In Titus 2 Paul tells Titus that he is to “teach what befits sound doctrine”. This “sound doctrine” is explained in the instruction he then gives about the behaviour and character of the “older men” and the “older women” in the ecclesias. Older sisters, though not included as “elders”

(*presbyteroi*), are given an important teaching part. The instructions to the older men (*presbytai*) are:

Bid the older men be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in steadfastness. (Titus 2:2)

Similar instructions are given to the older women (*presbytides*), but with the significant addition that they are to be “teachers of what is good” (*kalodidaskaloi*), or the word may be translated as “good teachers”. It is often assumed (and translations sometimes give the impression) that they are to teach what is good only to the young wives, and as a consequence they are not to teach brothers.

Bid the older women likewise to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands.... (Titus 2:3-5, RSV)

The word “so” does not appear in the Greek, nor is there any particular reason to put a semicolon after “drink” and to add the words “they are”. These have been added because the RSV translators have decided to presume that the older women were to be “teachers of good things” solely in order to train the young women. Paul’s actual command is that the older women are to be four things:

- (a) “reverent in behaviour”
- (b) “not slanderers”
- (c) “not enslaved by drink”
- (d) “teachers of good things”

These are qualities of character in their own right, and need diligent attention and careful application to achieve. The older women are to be all these things, for two reasons: firstly, as given in Titus 2:1, because this “befits sound doctrine”, and secondly so that they can train the young women “to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited.” Only if they have the qualities described, are they in a position to train the young women. The KJV and the NIV indicate this better than the RSV:

The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given much to wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober....

(Titus 2:3-4 KJV)

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women.... (Titus 2:3-4 NIV)

“Teachers of good things” suggests a wider teaching role than to the young sisters. How do they become “teachers of good things” other than by actually teaching? And there is no reason to suppose that brothers may not also in the process be taught “good things”. This passage does not support the commonly held view that sisters may not teach brothers but may only teach other sisters or children.

In some households women were kept separate from the men. Teaching by brothers would be difficult in such circumstances, and therefore teaching by older women would be the most acceptable way for them to be taught.

Obviously the young wives are to be engaged in a domestic role (Titus 2:5), but this does not exclude other roles of service within the ecclesias for sisters in general. The young women would eventually become older women, and in turn, it would be hoped, “teachers of good things” – to the benefit of all who would listen to their teaching.

Paul’s concern was that the leaders in the ecclesias should behave in a sober, upright manner. His stress was constantly on *behaviour*, not the gender of the leaders, which was incidental to the main aim of good quality service. It is not stated that women should not be leaders, and it is not stated that only men should be leaders. In view of the general male leadership which existed in society in the first century, and in view of the problems in Crete which Paul was aiming to tackle, it is not surprising if the elders there were all male, for believers had to conduct themselves in a manner which was, as far as possible, beyond reproach in the opinion of pagan society. One reason given why wives had to submit to their husbands was “that the word of God may not be discredited” (Titus 2:5). Titus was told to be “in all respects a model of good deeds ... so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us” (2:7-8). Slaves were told to obey their masters “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour” (2:10). The intention expressed is that Christian commitment should be seen as creditable, a positive help towards the smooth-running of society. Specific organisational arrangements were therefore made as necessary in the male-dominated environment of the first century, but these should not be thought to be setting the scene for ecclesial arrangements for all time.

^[1] Although absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, it is surprising that elders (if they existed there) are not mentioned in the case of these three ecclesias, especially when we have considerable detail about Corinth, the only one of the three to have been established by Paul.

^[2] “Women in the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View”, Kenneth E. Bailey (1994)
– see www.cbeinternational.org/new/pdf_files/free_articles/kebaileynt.pdf

^[3] “Since Ro. 16:1 clearly demonstrates that a female could be called *diakonos* (the masculine word), one can argue on linguistic grounds that the *diakonos* of Phl. 1 could be male or female. In Ro. 16, the masculine *diakonos* is used in conjunction with the feminine *prostatis*. *Diakonos* need not be limited to males in any passage on linguistic grounds unless the context indicates that only males are implied.” J. Stephen Sandifer, *Deacons: Male and Female?* (1989), page 35. This book provides a very detailed examination of the work ascribed to deacons from pre-Christian times up to the 20th century.

^[4] By the 2nd century a distinct hierarchy had developed: one bishop in a city, under whom were elders, then deacons. This must have emerged from the practice begun in the 1st century, but is not evident in the New Testament where there can be several bishops/overseers in the one place, as in Philippians 1:1

^[5] Not “ruling” in a worldly sense obviously. The word is *proestotes*, from *proistemi*, which has a range of meanings: “be a leader, have authority over, manage; care for, give help, engage in (good works), practice (good deeds). “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour” (RSV); “The elders who direct the affairs well...” (TNIV); “Elders who are good leaders should be paid double” (Tom Wright, Commentary), “The elders who do good work as leaders...” (GNB). Literally *proistemi* means “stand before”, hence “to lead, attend to (indicating care and diligence)”, W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

2 Timothy: Faithful People are to Teach

2 Timothy:

Faithful People are to Teach

2 Timothy is considered to be the last letter written by Paul, about 64 AD shortly before his execution. Paul was aware that his death was at hand:

...I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. (2 Timothy 4:6)

This second letter is a more personal letter to Timothy than was the first, and although false teachers were still a problem and would continue to be, Paul was not writing to Timothy to deal with an immediate crisis. He was nevertheless using this personal letter as a means of conveying a message to the ecclesias among which Timothy worked.

The reminder therefore in 2 Timothy 3 is significant in its approval of the role sisters had taken in teaching Timothy:

Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

Timothy no doubt learned from many people, including Paul himself, but the reference here “from childhood”, the mention of Timothy and his mother in Acts 16:1, and the reference in 2 Timothy 1:5 to his mother and grandmother suggest that Paul is thinking primarily of the instruction Timothy received both as a child and as a young man from his mother.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. (2 Timothy 1:5)

This background is worth bearing in mind when considering the comments about a woman teaching in 1 Timothy 2.

Since this is Paul’s last letter, if we are looking for Paul’s final words on ecclesial teaching activities, they are to be found in 2 Timothy rather than in 1 Timothy. In chapter 2 Paul specifically gives instructions for the future:

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men (*anthropoi*) who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim. 2:1-2)

The force of this verse has frequently been missed, or misunderstood, because of the translation of *anthropoi* as “men”. *Anthropoi* generally means “people”, “men and women”, just as the word “men” is often used in that same general sense, though less so in modern English. If anyone is inclined to doubt this, note how *anthropoi* is used in a general sense in 2 Timothy 3:2 and *anthropos* (the singular) in verse 17. The Good News Bible makes this clear:

Take the teachings that you heard me proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people, who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2)

... and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.

(2 Timothy 2:2, NRSV)

This, then, was Paul's last word on the subject. He ordered that his teaching should be passed on to reliable people ("faithful people" NRSV) who would in turn teach others.^[1] The criterion is reliability and faithfulness to Christ, not gender. If Paul had intended to restrict this to *men*, the word to use would have been *andres* as in 1 Timothy 2:8. And if we insist that 2 Timothy 2:2 should be translated "men" (as distinct from "men and women") we are saying that in this instance Paul is using *anthropoi* in a way he uses it nowhere else!

In Paul's final comment, therefore, on teaching, we have reinforced for the future the same as he taught two decades earlier:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:27-28)

And it is *people*, faithful people, which Paul specifies. Paul does not state that teaching is to be given only by elders or bishops (though, of course they would be included within the term "people"), but by ordinary people, ordinary members of the body of Christ – provided they are reliable and faithful and have learned the teachings proclaimed by Paul.

^[1] The argument against taking *anthropoi* as "people" is that women (it is claimed) did not teach in the early ecclesias and therefore *anthropoi* in this context must be translated and understood as "men". George Knight III, for example, in his commentary on the Greek text of the Pastoral Epistles (Paternoster, 1992) refers to the teaching role of elders and bishops (in 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:9) and says "it is certain" that Paul means "men". The word *anthropos* can indeed be used to mean "man" as distinct from "woman" and is so used in Matthew 19:5, 1 Corinthians 7:1, and Ephesians 5:31, as cited by George Knight. All these are examples of *anthropos* in the singular, and there is no ambiguity in these three examples. Elsewhere *anthropoi* can be used

where it obviously applies only to men, since it is only men who are under discussion, for example, when the magistrates refer to Paul and Silas in Acts 16:35:

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men (*anthropoi*) go."

But the most frequent use of the plural *anthropoi* is general and means "people". In fact Paul uses *anthropoi* over fifty times, and each time it means "people, men and women", with only one exception: Acts 14:15 where Paul and Barnabas say "We also are men, of like nature with you", i.e. human beings, not gods like Zeus and Hermes. "We are mortals just like you" (NRSV). In 2 Timothy 2:2, it is a matter of exercising judgment, based on one's assessment of the whole issue, as we commented on page 6 at the beginning of this examination. Like George Knight III one can cite male teachers and elders, and say that Paul must have meant men, even though he used the general word. Or one can refer to passages where Paul accepts and encourages women to teach (Colossians 3:16 and Titus 2:3), and say that Paul was looking to the future and deliberately spoke in general terms of passing on the message to "faithful people", in accordance with his practice of using both brothers and sisters as circumstances best permitted. Had Paul meant to specify "men", he could have done so unambiguously by saying "*andres*".

The Remaining Books in the New Testament

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Only some of these letters indicate relationships between brothers and sisters and we give the relevant passages below. As in Paul's letters, believers are addressed in the masculine as *adelphoi* "brothers" or *agapetoi* "beloved", but unless we are to conclude that there were no women in the ecclesias it is necessary to take this as a general address to both brothers and sisters.

Hebrews

Hebrews is addressed to "... holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call", i.e. to all believers ("... brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling," NRSV). Instructions are given, without distinction of roles, that believers should exhort (*parakaleo*) one another daily (Hebrews 3:13). They ought to have become teachers (*didaskaloi*, 5:12) but need to be re-taught in order to become teachers as they were "dull of hearing".

... though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.
(Hebrews 5:12-14)

The intention is that they should be properly trained, and then they can be teachers.

Believers ought to meet regularly together for mutual encouragement.

... let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging (*parakaleo*) one another, and all the more, as you see the Day drawing near.
(Hebrews 10:24-25)

No distinction is made between activities (like exhortation) in everyday life and activities at meetings of the ecclesia. This passage in Hebrews 10 is prefaced by comments which indicate the new position of all believers in Christ compared to the position of those who had been under the Old Covenant.

Therefore, brethren (*adelphoi* = brothers and sisters), since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near....
(Hebrews 10:19-21)

This passage indicates that the former divisions under the Old Covenant no longer apply. It is not priests alone who can enter the presence of God; all believers can, male or female. The purity laws which previously restricted women's worship no longer exist.

In Hebrews 13 the same teaching is reinforced by the comment that all believers (not just male priests) offer sacrifice.

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

In Hebrews 13 leaders are mentioned in the masculine, but as elsewhere the masculine terminology can include feminine.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith.

(Hebrews 13:7)

One of those in the early ecclesias who taught the word of God was Priscilla, and she could therefore be considered among the leaders here mentioned, leaders whose life and faith are commended as examples.

Obeys your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. (Hebrews 13:17)

The word “men” gives a misleading impression, for the word “men” does not appear in the Greek. The GNB translation avoids this addition.

Obeys your leaders and follow their orders. They watch over your souls without resting, since they must give God an account of their service.

(Hebrews 13:17)

The same Greek usage of masculine to include both masculine and feminine is clearly illustrated by the closing greeting.

Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. (Hebrews 13:24)

“Leaders”, “saints”, and “those” are all in the masculine gender. If Christianity had been a male-only religion, like the cult of Mithras, it would be natural to take these masculine terms as referring exclusively to men. But since in the ecclesia there are both brothers and sisters, the words “saints”, and “those who come from Italy” include male and female. In view of the description elsewhere of people like Phoebe, Priscilla, Euodia and Syntyche, “leaders” should similarly be understood to cover both male and female.

James

Not many of you should become teachers (*didaskaloi*), my brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. (James 3:1, NRSV)

Again, “brethren” (RSV) equals “brothers and sisters” (NRSV). If not many brothers and sisters should become teachers, this implies that some brothers and sisters should. No male/female distinction is shown.

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up.
(James 5:14-15)

The elders are masculine, as elsewhere, but this passage further illustrates the manner in which masculine language is used to include feminine. "Is *any* among you sick?" "... let them pray over *him*...". Such comments presumably apply equally to a sick woman.

1 Peter

In this letter believers are described using terms once applicable only to Jews but now applied to all who believe in Jesus:

... like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
(1 Peter 2:5)

... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people.
(1 Peter 2:9-10)

These verses express the fundamental truth known as the priesthood of all believers. It is on this basis that we, as Christadelphians, do not ordain priests or clergy. This does not mean that there may not be different fields of service within the ecclesia, but this passage describes the equal position of all believers and makes no male/female distinction. *All* are priests, *all* are to "declare the wonderful deeds".

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution....

(1 Peter 2:13)

The need to submit to the recognised human authority structures is emphasised here. This list involves believers being subject to the government, slaves to masters, wives to husbands. The same vocabulary is used, as it is when young men are told to submit to the elders in 1 Peter 5:5. Other than in the willingness of each believer to submit to the other, this teaching has no direct bearing on roles within the ecclesia nor on how the ecclesia itself should be organised.

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives when they see your reverent and chaste behaviour.
(1 Peter 3:1-2)

These instructions are to Christian wives, including those with pagan husbands. This is of particular interest because by being baptised they were inevitably not submitting according to generally accepted pagan ideas of how wives should be submissive. Part of submission was that the wife should follow the husband's religion instead of having a mind of her own on such matters.

It is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in.
(Plutarch: *Moralia*, 140D)

It was particularly important, therefore, that sisters married to unbelievers should do their best to show that they *did* accept their husbands' normal legal authority according to pagan law.

In the pagan world where women were denied most opportunities to use their talents, lavish and expensive self-adornment was often the only means of self-fulfilment. In the new life in Christ, however, many opportunities of service were opened up and it was to these that the Christian sister's attention was to be directed.

Let not yours be the outward adorning ... but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed^[1] Abraham, calling him lord. And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you.

(1 Peter 3:3-6)

Christian husbands are addressed in verse 7, demonstrating the typically Christian emphasis on reciprocal care and respect shown elsewhere in the New Testament in instructions on married life. The equality of both husband and wife before God is stressed:

Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.

(1 Peter 3:7)

Women are "the weaker sex" in muscular strength, and are therefore more prone to being physically abused by unChrist-like husbands than vice-versa. They were also weaker in ancient times from a legal point of view. They were at the mercy of the men who owned them by law. But in Christ they are "joint-heirs" with their husbands, and are to be treated with honour and consideration. Without recognition of the wife's spiritual equality with her husband, joint prayer would be impaired.

The spiritual equality within the ecclesia, already taught in chapter 2, is repeated in chapter 4.

Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practise hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service (*diakonein*), as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:8-11)

There is no male/female distinction shown in these gifts: "whoever speaks", "whoever renders service".

"Elders" (masculine) are addressed in chapter 5. They are warned against domineering over the brothers and sisters.

Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2-3)

The word “domineering” is *katakyrieuein*, not the same word as *authentain* in 1 Timothy 2:12, but along with the reference to “shameful gain” it suggests an interesting parallel to the problems which had arisen in Ephesus.

The younger brothers are told to be subject to the elder brothers, and all are to show humility towards one another, another way of describing mutual submission:

Likewise, you that are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another. (1 Pet. 5:5)

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you, be subject to one another, and be clothed with humility.

(1 Pet. 5:5, KJV)

There is nothing incompatible with being “subject to one another”^[2] and also taking an active part in ecclesial work such as described in the previous chapter:

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies. (1 Peter 4:10-11)

A comparison with 1 Corinthians 14:26-35 is instructive, for it is not speaking as such (in the presence of others to whom we should be submissive) that is forbidden, but speaking in a way that does not show submission. Otherwise 1 Peter 5:5 would forbid younger brothers speaking in the presence of older brothers.

Jude

Jude addresses his letter:

To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.... (Jude 1)

He calls for action to defend the true faith:

Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

After explaining how the faith is under threat, he instructs them all:

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And convince some who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire.... (Jude 20-23)

If we take Jude’s words seriously, he is calling on all believers, all brothers and sisters, to active participation: contending for the faith, building up, praying, convincing doubters of the truth of the gospel and saving people from the evils of the world. The commands are to all believers, not just leaders, not just elders, not just deacons, not just brothers, but to “all the saints in Christ Jesus” without any distinctions of class, age, gender or race.

Revelation

The Revelation to John was likewise directed to all believers: they are described as “servants” (1:1) and blessings are declared on those who read, hear and obey the words of the prophecy (1:3). As is usual, those addressed are spoken of in masculine terminology which includes the feminine.

Praise is given to Jesus Christ:

... the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5-6)

No distinction of roles is made. All believers are a kingdom, priests to God, in the same manner as described in 1 Peter 2:4-10.

In the letter to the ecclesia at Thyatira there is criticism of a woman teacher.

But I have this against you that you tolerate the woman called Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. (Revelation 2:20)

Several points are worth noting:

- (1) The objection is that she *calls herself* a prophetess. There is no objection shown to prophetesses as such.
- (2) There is no objection to the fact that she teaches. The objection is to what she teaches.
- (3) Her teaching involves immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols.

The objections are to this particular woman and to her particular teaching. It is interesting that no objection is made on the basis that it is wrong for a woman to prophesy or teach.

In the last chapter of Revelation there is an invitation:

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come”. And let him who hears say, “Come”. And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.” (Revelation 22:17)

“Him” is, of course, inclusive language, referring to male and female. “Come” here is not asking Jesus to come in his Second Coming (as in verse 20), but it is an appeal to people to come to Jesus, to accept the Gospel. The appeal is made by the Spirit, which in this context seems to mean “the Spirit of Christ”, i.e. Jesus speaking through the author of this book, as in Revelation 2:7 & 11. The Bride is the ecclesia.

So the text is stating that Jesus and his ecclesia invite people to come to believe in him. And in turn the converts are to invite others to believe in him: “And let him who hears say, ‘Come’.” And the last part of verse 17 connects with Revelation 21:6 and John 7:37.

... Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”
(John 7:37-38)

Here then is further authorisation of disciples, male and female (“the Bride”) to preach and teach.

The Spirit and the Bride, say “Come!”

Everyone who hears this must also say, “Come!”

Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it.

(Revelation 21:4, GNB)

^[1] Sarah is presented as an example of submissive conduct, but nowhere are wives in the New Testament instructed to *obey* their husbands. “Obey” means “submit to the authority of someone”, as children and slaves are told to do (Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20-22). Those who refuse to obey can be punished. The New Testament never says that husbands should issue commands to their wives, or punish their wives; nor that wives should *obey* their husbands. There is an important difference between obedience and submission. A look at the accounts of Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament indicates a wider picture than mere obedience. She was voluntarily submissive. And when she told Abraham what to do, God approved (Genesis 21:12). Submission is more than obedience and different from obedience; it is a willing putting of oneself second, and the other person first, as Sarah did (Genesis 16:2).

^[2] A problem with mutual submission only arises if it is misunderstood to mean: “Do what the other person orders you to do.” There is no difficulty if we understand it as: “Put the interests of the other person, the other member of the ecclesia, your husband or your wife, ahead of your own. Do your best to serve them, following the pattern of Jesus.”

Various Conclusions on the New Testament

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on the New Testament

General Conclusion on Paul's Letters

There is a tendency for people to base their assessment of Paul's teaching on the three passages: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2. We have examined Paul's letters in chronological order and conclude that these three passages are specific to specific contexts. Each contains difficulties of interpretation. Further, Paul elsewhere in describing the practice of ecclesias and in the teaching he gives does not specify different male/female roles in the ecclesia. Both brothers and sisters are shown to teach, pray, and encourage one another provided this is done by people who uphold proper Christian virtues.

However, since first century society was largely male-orientated, it seems likely that many of these activities were done by the brothers to a larger extent than by the sisters. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23), and when Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders in every city in Crete, presumably they were masculine also. It would be difficult for anything to have been done otherwise in the male-dominated culture of the Roman empire, though there is evidence that deacons were male and female. But a new start had been made and the new equality in Christ within the ecclesia had set a pattern for the future even if it could only partially be realised in the first century.

General Conclusion on The New Testament from Hebrews to Revelation

These books confirm our findings elsewhere: the believers are addressed in general without male/female distinction and there is no differentiation of roles in exhortation and teaching. Elders (*presbyteroi*), however, are assumed to be masculine, though the masculine terminology may mask feminine involvement. Instructions are given that wives are to be subject to their husbands and husbands are to show proper consideration for their wives. The context is a growing Christian community within the pagan world. Specific relevant problems are therefore dealt with, such as domineering elders, and how slaves and masters should behave towards each other.

Is the Traditional Interpretation Biblical?

There is a long tradition of interpretation (inherited from centuries of Christendom) which interprets the role of sisters in a restrictive manner. This approach works as follows:

(a) 1 Corinthians 11 is quoted to show that women are to be submissive. (Marriage customs about veils are re-interpreted to mean hats, and the fact that women speak in 1 Corinthians 11 is disregarded.)

(b) 1 Corinthians 14 is cited to show again that women are to be submissive, and “they are to be silent” is chosen as an absolute command in itself. (The context clues about disorder or the encouragement to all to speak in verse 31 in this same chapter are differently interpreted.)

(c) 1 Timothy 2:11 is quoted as an absolute statement: women are to learn in silence, and not to teach or exercise authority over men.

The conclusion is thus chosen that women are to keep silent, permanently, and the wearing of hats is regarded as a Biblical sign of this.

But the overall context of the New Testament suggests we should choose a different understanding as follows:

(a) 1 Corinthians 11 shows that women were to wear veils *when speaking* so that their married status would be acknowledged.

(b) 1 Corinthians 14 approves of *orderly* speaking by men and women; when speaking leads to disorder, prophets and the women are told to be silent.

(c) The letters to Timothy and Titus indicate that women are to be quiet and receptive *when learning*, and are not to dominate over men; but once the women have been properly instructed in the faith and have become faithful people, they may teach. Women are to be teachers of good things. Teaching is not permitted if it involves a domineering authority (by female or male) or the promotion of unbiblical doctrine, but is a matter of sharing spiritual knowledge. Each one should seek to be a good servant of the Lord:

... the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

(2 Timothy 2:24)

All should act in a gentle, Christ-like manner. All who have the ability from God to teach and to encourage others, should do so in all humility. And all should pray with an appropriately modest and devotional spirit.

How Do We Choose?

Which approach seems more in keeping with the attitudes shown by Jesus? Which is more in tune with the teaching that we are all one in Christ Jesus and that we must all submit to one another?

In the thoroughly male-dominated world of the first century, the Christian gospel brought a radical change to relationships. Nevertheless, there were limitations imposed by what was possible or advisable within the society in which the gospel spread. When examining the New Testament on the issue of the roles of brothers and sisters, as with slavery, this type of context needs to be taken into account. This means that we cannot arrive at God's intention for today by a direct application of what happened in the first century. There is no justification for us to reintroduce slavery, for example. Nor should we seek to return to the male-orientated world of the Roman Empire.

The Spirit of the New Testament

What of the spirit of the New Testament? Is it in accord with the spirit of Jesus to say: “You have abilities from God, but you must not use them because you are a Gentile, a woman or a slave”? Jesus was opposed to the regulations which restricted people: “... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” He preached a positive message: “... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31); “So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Jesus said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed...” (Luke 4:18); “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Paul said: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1); “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

To love God with all one’s heart soul strength and mind, to love one’s neighbour as one’s self, to do to others as we would wish them to do to us, is liberating not restricting. True freedom is freedom *from* sin and freedom *for* service. It is properly following the spirit of our Lord when we give to God in service the abilities we have “according to the grace given to us.” Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, to give an example. Paul asked us to follow his example also: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).

Conclusion

Our examination of the books of the New Testament suggests a strong approval of the participation of sisters in an unusually prominent manner compared to the prevailing attitudes and values both of Judaism and paganism. Within the confines of what was possible, sisters were encouraged to play a full part in all aspects of ecclesial work. Where, as in the case of elders, it is assumed that they are masculine, this should be seen within the ancient context. There is no specific divine teaching that such positions of responsibility are *per se* inapplicable to sisters, and we would do well to seek to attain the general spirit of New Testament teaching that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. This applies to all aspects of ecclesial life and activity. Occasional restrictions arose in New Testament times from specific problems in society’s expectations or in the outworking of ecclesial life. The background is often no longer clear. But now that in our society women do not labour under restrictions of the type that existed in the first century, it should be possible to realise the fundamental spirit of New Testament teaching in ecclesial life also. And that should be our aim: to apply *appropriately* Bible teaching for today.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Those who disagree with this analysis argue that the Bible makes a clear differentiation between the roles of brothers and sisters. It is sometimes said that while some passages in the New

Testament may appear ambiguous, the issue is finally and clearly decided by the teaching of the Old Testament.

In examining the Old Testament we need to enquire precisely as to the original meaning of the text, consider some of the varying interpretations people have given, and compare observations and comments made in the New Testament on the Old.

Male and Female in Genesis

Male and Female

in Genesis

On several occasions writers in the New Testament refer back to Genesis when commenting on male and female relationships. For this present study we are concerned with how brothers and sisters in Christ should cooperate together in the ecclesia. It is sometimes argued that male leadership and female silence is taught as God's intention from the beginning. What do the early chapters of Genesis say?

Genesis 1

Creation takes place in six days, culminating in the creation of human beings. The important verses for our study are:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:26-31)

Points of special relevance to our study are as follows:

(a) "Man" ("*adam*" in Hebrew) means mankind, i.e. both men and women.

(b) Both male and female are in the image of God. Whereas everything else in Genesis 1 was created simply by God saying "Let there be..." and it was so, for mankind it was different: mankind was to be in the image of God. First God announced His intention (verse 26), then He brought it to pass (verses 27-28).

(c) Authority of greater over lesser is clear throughout this chapter, in particular God's authority over the elements of creation. Within creation God also assigns authority:

And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:16-18)

Mankind is placed in specific authority over the animals:

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

This dominion by male and female over all creatures is stressed twice, in detail, as God's intention. But despite the emphasis in this chapter on dominion and authority, no authority is given to one human being over another.

This is a surprise if authority by the man over the woman had been intended.

(d) Now that He had completed creation with mankind, God declared it not only "good" as He had done on the previous days, He pronounced His work "very good".

To sum up our observations on Genesis so far: Chapter 1 shows God's approval of the world He had created, presents both men and women as uniquely in His image, and allocates to them responsibility in managing the world and its resources. No differentiation in basic nature nor in roles between men and women is specified. Both are in the image of God^[1] and both are placed in authority over other forms of life. There is no suggestion that the man is placed in authority over the woman, nor vice-versa.

Genesis 2

In this chapter a man (not mankind) is created first, placed in the garden of Eden "to till and keep it" and told that he can freely eat of every tree except for "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." The account continues that it is not good for the man to be alone. Animals and birds are created, but none supplies suitable companionship. A woman is therefore formed from the man's rib and she is a suitable companion because, as the man says:

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

(Genesis 2:23)

The conclusion is drawn that this unity is the ground for marriage;

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

How are we to understand the relationship here between the first man and the first woman? Two conflicting arguments have been presented. Some people argue that this chapter teaches the subordination of the wife to the husband, and that this position is fundamentally built into the whole scheme of things. Others argue that no such subordination is implied but that subordination is one of the evil consequences of the fall.

^[1] Augustine (354-430 AD) argued that women stand in the image of God only through their husbands (*De Trinitate*, 12:7), despite Genesis 1:26-27. Can Genesis 1 be understood to indicate that the man is in the image of God, not the woman? It is argued that this can be done by attaching “male and female he created them” to verse 28, instead of its being connected to the end of verse 27.

The rearrangement makes it read:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.

Male and female he created them, and God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

The intention is to allow for the events in Genesis 2 to be inserted in between the two sections, thus also explaining 1 Corinthians 11:7.

It is, however, contrary to the spirit and intention of Genesis 1 to suggest that woman is not made in the image of God. It is precisely this aspect which differentiates men and women from the animals, as both Genesis 1 and 2 indicate.

The rest of the Bible also considers both men and women to be in God’s image.

When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. (Genesis 5:1-2)

So too Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9.

See further our booklet *First Corinthians 11:2-16 – Headcovering in Bible Times and the Application Today*.

Arguments for Subordination in Genesis

Arguments for

Subordination in Genesis

People have argued that subordination of the woman to the man is indicated in Genesis 2 in four ways:

- (1) The wife is to be a “help meet”, i.e. a subordinate assistant.
- (2) She is named by the man, something done by a superior to an inferior.
- (3) She was made from his rib, and is therefore beneath his head.
- (4) She was made second, and is therefore subordinate to him.

Are these arguments supported by the text?

Help Meet

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone;

I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

The King James Version used the term “help meet for him”, and the term “helpmeet”, or even “helpmate”, has entered the English language by a misunderstanding of the phrase. Some people, on reading the text, tend to imagine that the phrase means an assistant, a subordinate helper. The Hebrew word is *ezer* and can mean a helper of any kind, whether superior or inferior. *Ezer* occurs 21 times in the Old Testament. Frequently the word refers to God as the helper, a stronger helping a weaker.

Our soul waits for the LORD;

he is our help [*ezer*] and shield. (Psalm 33:20)

The word “helper” is neutral: it does not in itself indicate that the woman should be inferior or superior to the man. The man’s need was for someone suitable in the work God planned for him. The animals were unsuitable precisely because they were not on a level with himself: he couldn’t discuss with them, receive advice from them or be encouraged when he felt inadequate. And it was God’s intention, as Genesis 1 indicated, that men and women should be in authority over the earth and the animals.

The point of Genesis 2:18 is that the man needed a human being like himself. The animals were not suitable helpers (Genesis 2:20). They were not in the image of God. The preposition “for” in the phrase “a helper fit for him” can be translated as “corresponding to” or “equal and adequate to”. The most suitable companion for any task is one who has either the same abilities or abilities complementary to those lacking in oneself. And this is what God supplied: a human being. And because the woman was human like the man, she too would not find animals to be suitable companions for the task in hand. She too needed a “suitable helper”. It is no better for a woman to be alone than for a man.

It has been suggested that God, though superior, acts out an inferior role when He in His grace stoops to help mankind. We all do this when we help someone: we put their needs ahead of our needs or our convenience. In this sense, the woman as a “helper” was to be supportive, as Adam would need to be to her. As the New Testament says: “Be subject to one another” (Ephesians 5:21). But the stress in Genesis 2 seems more to be on a *suitable* helper; both were to be God’s helpers in God’s work: as Paul says of himself and others using the similarly supportive term “servant”:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. (1 Corinthians 3:5)

... through love be servants of one another. (Galatians 5:13)

“God is the helper superior to man; the animals are helpers inferior to man; woman is the helper equal to man.”^[1] In His divine foresight and planning, of course, God no more had the intention of creating a man without a woman than a woman without a man. There is no point in making a key without a lock. If the man in Genesis 2 was (as we believe) biologically a man, then it presumes that God’s intention was also to create a woman. Only thus could they be fruitful and multiply (1:28). Genesis 2 reinforces the teaching of chapter 1 that God made man and woman suitable for each other so that jointly and complementarily they should carry out His work on earth for which He created them.

Naming

Since there are a number of instances where God who is superior names or renames people, it is argued that the man’s naming of the animals indicates his superiority over them.

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. (Genesis 2:18-20)

When, therefore, the man says, “She shall be called Woman” (Genesis 2:23), it is argued that this indicates an inherent hierarchy in creation: man is superior to woman, woman is subordinate to man.

However, neither the text here nor any other passage in the Bible draws such a conclusion from the naming of the woman; rather the opposite. A careful reading of the text shows that authority or rule is not the point of this passage; it is companionship. Man has power over the animals (as does the woman, Genesis 1:28). By contrast, the woman is on a level with him because she is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). God suggested the need for a partner. In His foreknowledge, God no doubt knew what He planned, but the need for a suitable companion was demonstrated for human benefit by showing the unsuitability of animals. Animals can be companions for humans but not to the full extent of other human beings. The woman was created not only to be a companion for man but also to be a vital part in the process of creating more humans – mankind. The man couldn’t do this on his own, nor could the woman. They both needed each other.

Naming in the Bible *can* express authority. But naming can also be a way of acknowledging the work of God. In Genesis 4:25, for example, Eve named her third son Seth.

And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel ..." (Genesis 4:25)

The stress is not on Eve's authority but on the purpose that Seth was to fulfil: "Seth" means "given" or "appointed." Likewise when Hagar named God in Genesis 16, she was not expressing authority over God:

... she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Genesis 16:13)

So she named the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'

(Genesis 16:13, NRSV)

In human terms, the one who names another expresses some authority simply by being there first, as the man was before the woman was created. But in Genesis 2:23 the man does not give the woman a name. "Woman" is not a name but a generic description, and it is one already used in the description of God's action (of taking the man's rib and making it into a woman) in the previous verse.

and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman (Genesis 2:22)

Further, there is a substantial difference between the way the man named the animals and calling his new partner "woman". Of the animals it is recorded: "...and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (verse 19). The name for each animal was entirely a matter of the man's choosing. When, however, the man called his new companion "woman", he was acclaiming the action of God:

Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;

she shall be called Woman [*ishshah*],

because she was taken out of Man [*ish*]. (Genesis 2:23)

As the text explains ("because she was..."), these names arise from the action of God not from the action of the man. As well as calling her woman (*ishshah*) he mentions himself by a new generic description for the first time: "man" (*ish*). Hitherto man has been *adam*. If naming is always expressing authority, is he, by describing himself in this new way, also expressing authority over himself? It is consistent to consider that in both cases he is exclaiming at the sameness and mutual suitability which exists between them.

Finally, there is the conclusion drawn by the text itself. It is not "Therefore a woman leaves her father and mother, cleaves to her husband and he rules over her." It is the opposite:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.
(Genesis 2:24)

We conclude, therefore, that there are no adequate grounds for thinking that calling her “woman” indicates in itself any intention that she was to be subordinate to him or that he was intended to rule over her.^[21]

Made from the Man’s Rib

It has been argued that the woman was not made from his head which would indicate that she would be equal or superior to him, but from his side and therefore she is inferior to him.

Matthew Henry (about 1700) quaintly and attractively commented in reply:

The woman was ... not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.

(Commentary on Genesis, page 12)

Matthew Henry’s sentiments go back at least as far as to Calvin (1509-1564), and are probably a reply to some of the many elaborations made in earlier times on the account in Genesis. Though attractively expressed, they are, nevertheless, being read into the text by the commentator. The reason according to Genesis for creation in this manner is that the woman should, unlike the animals, be a human being like the man: “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”.

Man Made First

It is argued by reference to 1 Timothy 2:13 that because Adam was formed before Eve, man therefore ought always to be in authority over woman, husbands over wives, brothers in the ecclesia over sisters. We discuss possible interpretations of 1 Timothy 2 and its use of Genesis on pages 89-92.

In Genesis 2 itself, there is no suggestion that the order of creation has any bearing on who should teach or lead whom. On the basis of the general use of *ezer*, helper, it could be argued that the intention was that the woman should lead the man, where necessary, in the right direction, just as God (superior) helped Israel (inferior).

On the other hand, the fact that the man had received commands from God before the woman was formed (Genesis 2:15-17) would have given him some superiority, at least of knowledge and experience. It would be his responsibility to pass this information on to his wife, as presumably he did (unless God spoke to her directly also). By the time she encounters the serpent (Genesis 3:1-4) she knows the command. Both man and woman are considered responsible in the garden of Eden, but there is no indication of leadership based on the order of creation.

^[1] P. Trible, quoted in *Women in Ancient Israel*, by G. I. Emmerson.

^[2] See pages 257-262 in *Beyond Sex Roles – What the Bible Says About a Woman’s Place in Church and Family* by Gilbert Bilezikian (Baker Books, 1985 & 1999). This book gives a critique of James Hurley’s *Man & Woman in Biblical Perspective* (IVP, 1981) upon which Michael Lewis draws for *Man & Woman – A Study of Biblical Roles* (The Testimony, 1992). Bilezikian, page 261: “We conclude that there is no support to be found in Genesis 2:23 for the theory of male rulership over woman within the creation model.”

Arguments for Male Leadership in Genesis 3

Arguments for

Male Leadership in Genesis 3

After the fall, Eve was told that her husband would rule over her:

“... your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

(Genesis 3:16)

But was it intended that he should have ruled over her in the garden in the first place? Several arguments have been produced from the text of Genesis 3.

God Addressed Adam First

Some have argued from verse 9 that after Adam and Eve had sinned, God addressed the man first, thereby implying that He regarded the man as in charge.

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9)

There is a logical sequence in how God challenged each participant. He had given the prohibition directly to the man, so he challenges the man first.

“Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:11)

The man reluctantly admits his guilt, keeping his admission to the end of his sentence in which he first blames God for giving him the woman, and the woman for giving him the fruit.

“The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”

Next, therefore, God asks the woman:

“What is this that you have done?”

She passes the blame on to the serpent, before likewise admitting her guilt.

“The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.”

God turned to the serpent, then to the woman, then to the man, working back according to the order in which He had originally ascertained their guilt. The order is a logical one, but does not suggest we should conclude anything beyond this.

Was the Man Intended to Rule from the Beginning?

It has been argued that the events in Genesis 3:1-12 imply that God’s intention was that man should always take the leading role; the woman should always follow his lead. According to this interpretation, the woman wrongly took the lead and therefore led the man into sin, thus demonstrating how bad a thing it was and is for women to adopt any position of leadership.

It is difficult to see any reason to consider that Eve's fault lay in taking a lead as such. She was deceived by the serpent, and her fault lay in that she *mis*-led Adam, not that she led him. The usage of the word "help" (*ezer*) as we have already explained, suggests that support in a good direction was God's intention. She would be no suitable help if she could not discuss with him, advise him, and receive advice in turn. The point being made by the account in Genesis 3 does not appear to be that leadership by the woman was in itself wrong but that each sinned by eating the forbidden fruit. The man blamed the woman and God Himself, and the woman blamed the serpent, but God held each individually responsible. The intended harmonious partnership had been spoiled.

Eve Tempted by the Serpent

It has been argued that the serpent approached Eve because she was the weaker of the two and more susceptible to temptation. Some people therefore deduce that women by nature are more easily led astray. Accordingly, women in general should be ruled over by men.

The text does not draw such a conclusion. It comments that "the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made". Eve put up a reasonable defence, especially if she had not been given the instructions directly from God. She had no previous experience of temptation, nor had she been warned about the existence of the serpent or how cunning it was.

... the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"^[1] (Genesis 3:2-3)

Adam by contrast apparently put up no objection. Eve gave him the fruit and he ate it. Sometimes people argue that the serpent approached Eve knowing that she would be the harder one to persuade. If the serpent could defeat Eve, Adam would easily give way.

It does not seem reasonable, according to the text, to deduce that Eve was weaker than Adam or vice-versa. The only information given is that both knew the commandment. They gave way to an attractive temptation, and neither should have eaten the fruit; they both sinned.

After exclusion from the garden, the record shows a continued deterioration in relationships. In Genesis 4 we have the first murder when Cain kills Abel. Then we see demonstrated what the rule of a man over a woman meant. God's intention for marriage ("one flesh") was disrupted by Lamech:

... Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. (Genesis 4:19)

And before long Lamech was boasting of his prowess in murder, demonstrating his rule over his two wives and over anyone who interfered with him:

Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Genesis 4:23-24)

By the time we reach Genesis 6, God expressed extreme dissatisfaction:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6:5-6)

¹¹ It is sometimes suggested that by adding “neither shall you touch it” Eve is distorting the word of God. This addition could have been put in by Adam in passing on the command to Eve. Since, however, these words merely add to the definite sense of prohibition, they are if anything strengthening the command and it seems more than a little unjustified to suggest anything more than that.

Is it Wrong to Listen to a Woman's Voice?

Is it Wrong to Listen
to a Woman's Voice?

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife...” (Genesis 3:17)

Two arguments have been produced from this verse.

(a) It is argued that Adam was wrong because he listened to his wife's *voice* as such. The conclusion is then drawn that it is incorrect for men in general to listen to the voices of women, and therefore women should keep silent in the ecclesia.

(b) It is argued that the expression “listen to the voice of” means “obey an authoritative pronouncement”. Therefore, according to this view, when Adam listened to the voice of Eve he was allowing her to rule over him and to usurp his authority. Only men should make authoritative pronouncements, it is argued by some, and it is wrong for women to give advice to men or for a wife to give advice to her husband.

The expression “listen to the voice of” is used in a number of ways in Scripture. The word *qol* is translated “noise” or “voice” according to context. There is no stress on the word “voice”. It is part of the expression, and whether it means simply to listen to someone speaking or making a noise, or whether it means something stronger depends on the context. The statement “because you have listened to the voice of your wife” means the same as “because you have listened to what she said or advised.” It does not put any stress on her voice, nor does it in itself imply that she is being authoritative.

Obviously, when it involves listening to God speaking, we indeed have an authoritative pronouncement, but in other contexts it does not necessarily have any strong implication.

Evidence for this can be seen in the various ways in which the expression is used in Genesis and Exodus.

The expression (“hear the voice of” or “obey the voice of”) is used of man listening to God's commandments, and this is clearly authoritative:

“...because you have done this... I will indeed bless you... and by your descendants shall all nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”
(Genesis 22:17-18)

It can be used simply in the sense of “hear someone speaking” or “hear a noise”. For example,
When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted ... (Ex. 32:17)

On the other hand, the expression is also used of God listening to a request from human beings:

And God heard the voice of the lad. (Genesis 21:17)

Again, it is used of human beings listening to advice:

So Moses gave heed to the voice of (literally: “listened to the voice of”) his father-in-law and did all that he had said. (Exodus 18:24)

Does Genesis 3:17 mean that Adam’s fault was to listen to his wife as such? Or was his fault in listening to her giving *wrong* advice and acting on it? No command was given to Adam that he should not listen to the voice of his wife. What would be the point of a “helper fit for him” if he couldn’t converse, discuss and listen to her? If Eve had spoken to Adam as she had done to the serpent when she sought to reject the serpent’s misrepresentations, her advice would have been considered good; and this can reasonably be considered to be God’s intention when he made her as a suitable companion.

A further passage from Genesis has been quoted to argue that the giving of advice by a woman to her husband is in itself wrong:

Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. (Genesis 16:2)

The fact that Sarah’s recommendation on this occasion led to dissension and suffering does not indicate that God disapproves of a woman giving advice as such. This is clear from further details of this incident, where God expresses approval of advice given to Abram by Sarai even though her advice is contrary to what Abram wishes:

And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice. (Genesis 21:12, KJV)

The RSV translates “hearken unto her voice” as “do as she tells you”.

We conclude, therefore, that Genesis 3:17 does not imply divine disapproval of a wife giving advice to her husband; the objection is because she gave *wrong* advice. To draw any further conclusion (such as that because of Eve’s error, therefore women are not to give even good advice) is to read the idea into the text and to contradict Scripture elsewhere. As we shall see below (Chapter 24), God does approve of advice and leadership given by women.

When Paul referred to Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, it was in the context of irresponsible advice being given by women who were in no position to teach properly (see Chapters 10 & 11, above, pages 78-93). It is therefore appropriate to draw a parallel with what happened when Eve misled Adam. Paul’s teaching in other passages indicates that what matters is not *who* gives advice but whether the advice is good or bad.

The Disruption of God's Intention

The Disruption
of God's Intention

The account of the fall provides scope for various deductions about the role of Eve, her relationship to her husband, and the consequences pronounced upon them. As with Genesis 1 and 2, it is important not to read into the text our own presuppositions.

What Went Wrong?

Genesis chapter 3 explains how the world went from "very good", as God had created it, to the world of sin and suffering we know today. In observing how Adam and Eve fell, we see something too of ourselves, for we have all been in the position of the apostle Paul in Romans 7:19: "... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Genesis chapter 2 ends on a high note with the man and the woman in harmony with God. Chapter 3 introduces the serpent who challenges God's authority ("You will not die"), doubts the goodness of God's intentions ("God knows ... your eyes will be opened"), and falsely offers equality with God Himself ("... you will be like God").

It is a common human failing to doubt God's warnings, to prefer to decide according to our own judgment, and to rationalise bad actions into good. We see the same today: people scoff at God or deny His existence, prefer superficial materialism to spiritual values, and define wisdom by worldly criteria not by divine.

When the woman takes the forbidden fruit, three reasons are given in the text: the fruit was good for eating, looked attractive, and would bring wisdom, a wisdom like that of God himself.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.
(Genesis 3:6)

Being eager, it appears, to share the supposed blessings with her husband, she gave him the fruit too. According to 1 Timothy 2:14 "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." The woman was deceived by the serpent. The serpent apparently did not approach the man. The text simply says in Genesis 3:6, "... she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." We are left to assume that the woman had told him what the serpent had said (Genesis 3:17). Adam, though having heard directly from God the command "you shall not eat" (Genesis 2:17), sinned knowingly, a much greater sin than being deceived by the serpent which was "more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made" (3:1). Adam too, therefore, became a transgressor, and knowingly.

In both cases, the fault lay in doubting God's word, in judging by outward appearance, and in aiming to usurp the power of God himself, seeking to become "like God, knowing good and evil".

There is a paradox here. We are *all* supposed to become like God:

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Jesus taught us to be perfect like God:

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

But when Adam and Eve sought to be “like God, knowing good and evil”, they were not seeking moral goodness but power. They sought to take over from God, to run life by their agenda not by God’s. Philippians 2 marks the contrast between Adam and Eve and our Lord Jesus. He did not seek illicit power like they had done:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (Philippians 2:5-6)

When the man and woman had snatched at equality with God, they both promptly recognised what they had done: “Then the eyes of both were opened” (Genesis 3:7), and they sought to hide from the presence of God (verse 8).

The break down in the relationships is seen clearly as the man casts blame on the woman and on God Himself, and the woman blames the serpent. After questioning the man and the woman, God declares the consequences, holding each responsible:

To the serpent:

“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

To the woman:

“I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

To the man:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:14-19)

The harmony and the goodness which first existed in Genesis 1 & 2 had been marred. The world is no longer “very good”. Despite the increased pain in childbearing, Eve will still wish to be united to her husband.^[1] She will wish for the closeness they had before, but he will rule over her instead. Being ruled over by her husband is not regarded as a good or desirable thing: it is one of

the bad consequences of the breakdown that occurred when they sinned, and which we observed happening as soon as Adam began to pass the buck for his sin and blame both God and his wife. God's original scheme was that she should be a suitable companion, a position that was part of the creation that God pronounced "very good". The husband and wife's relationship had now become distorted by sin.

Adam was excluded from the garden to prevent him, now a sinner, from eating of the tree and living forever. Death subsequently came on all Adam's descendants, for they have a mortal father, and they too sinned, as Paul says:

... as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned

(Romans 5:12)

God had offered eternal life; this is His wish for mankind, not death. Already there were signs of God's grace: Genesis 3:15 looked forward to Christ's conquest of sin; the man named his wife Eve "the mother of all living", indicating that they would still be "fruitful and multiply", and God "made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them" (3:20). When Eve had her first child she expressed appreciation to God: "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."

God's message throughout the rest of the Bible concerns the way of salvation by which His first intention for mankind will be realised.

The Return in Christ to God's Original Intention

The history recorded in the Old Testament frequently demonstrates how far men and women have fallen from the high position which God planned for them. It is only with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant that God's original intention begins once more to be realised in practice. Yet, even after the coming of the New Covenant, such has been the nature of society and the sinfulness of human beings that men and women have continued frequently to fall well below that ideal. The Bible presents the ideal before us, and it is one at which we should continually aim. Christ reverses the conflicts involved in the fall. Jesus lived up to God's ideal:

... as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned ... death reigned from Adam to Moses ... if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

(Romans 5:12-17)

Being joined by baptism to Christ we take part in that newness of life now:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ... you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ... now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 6:6, 11, 22-23)

New Creation

In Christ creation begins again. We no longer live according to the human thinking of the old, fallen creation. We have a new start.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself

(2 Corinthians 5:16-18)

That the pre-fall condition is the Christian ideal is indicated by Jesus in his teaching on marriage. When questioned about divorce, where Jewish practice reflected the breakdown in relationships and where husbands had total control over their wives including the ability to divorce them, Jesus quoted the position before the fall as God's ideal:

He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one."

(Matthew 19:4-6)

It is significant that Jesus did not quote, "...your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you". This is not surprising since one-sided rule by one partner over the other is incompatible with proper companionship in marriage and incompatible with practising the Golden Rule:

... whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

(Matthew 7:12)

Hardness of Heart

How, then, are we to understand the relationships between husbands and wives and men and women that we find in the Old Testament? Again, Jesus provides the answer when questioned on divorce. The reason divorce was allowed under the Law was because of human hardness of heart:

"For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

(Matthew 19:8)

It was not God's original intention, as Jesus indicated by his reference to creation. Jesus did not take the post-fall situation as his guide; neither should we. When, therefore, we look at the relationships between husbands and wives and when we note the manner in which husbands have mistreated their wives, used concubines, and treated women as of little account, it is obvious that sinful human beings have not lived up to God's standards as set at creation. This is not because God willed or decreed that they should not do so but because, like Adam and Eve, on account of human sinfulness they have not followed God's original intention.

The apostle Paul gives a helpful parallel to this in Romans where he shows how sin works and how God allows it to work:

... although they knew God, they did not honour him ... Claiming to be wise, they became fools ...

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity ...

... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. (Romans 1:21-28)

Paul prefaces this with the description that the “wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men.” This is how it is revealed. God makes plain what He wishes, He teaches righteous conduct to mankind, but if people turn away and ignore Him, He allows them to proceed with their wicked conduct (“God gave them up”). A broken relationship with God frequently leads to broken relationships among people. It is not that God wills this, but it is the result of sin.

The present state of the world is not what God planned for it. In the end “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9, Habakkuk 2:14). And “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

^[1] Some pain in childbirth is inevitable, and childbirth was intended from the beginning (“be fruitful and multiply”, Genesis 1:28). How was the pain to be “increased”? The text does not say, but Adam’s post-fall dominance over Eve can hardly have led to a happy experience in childbirth or any other aspect of married life together. It is doubtful whether pain in childbirth should be considered an application of Genesis 3:16 to all women, since many women do not bear children. The objections by male Victorian clergy to James Young Simpson’s use of anaesthetics for women in childbirth demonstrate an uncaring male insensitivity. Likewise, not all men engage in agricultural labour, despite the sentence on Adam.

Old Testament Society

Old Testament

Society

Much of the Old Testament illustrates how God's original intention for men and women was not fulfilled: the earth was troubled by violence; conflict was caused by evil people; the rich oppressed the poor; and women were treated as possessions of fathers, husbands, kings, or conquering armies. Abraham, for example, "the father of the faithful", had Ishmael by his slave girl, Hagar, at the suggestion of his wife Sarah. After Sarah's death he married again, and also had concubines.

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. ... Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. (Genesis 25:1-6)

When seen in the light of "the two shall become one flesh" or in the light of New Testament teaching that "each man shall have his own wife and each wife her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2), it is obvious that Old Testament society should not be held up as an example of the ideal. The quarrelling between different wives in itself demonstrates the problems of polygamy. But we should not, of course, judge Abraham or any other patriarch according to New Testament morality. Our comparison should be with the times in which they lived. In Abraham's era, pagan worship, polygamy and even human sacrifice, were regarded as normal. Abraham is honoured as "father of the faithful" because he obeyed God's calling. Through him God in His providence began the work of preparing a people whose standards and understanding (as revealed supremely in Jesus) are what God intended from the beginning.

How do we explain God's working with Abraham in a covenant relationship on the one hand, and, on the other, the apparent disregard by Abraham for God's intention in creation that "the two shall become one flesh"?

The same question arises when we see the position of women according to the Law.

Are we to consider that because these attitudes are included in the Law, that this represents God's intention and attitude to women now? The answer is that God was working from the position into which society had sunk. God was setting about restoring it to His original divine pattern. But He began where society was, and worked from there.

Women's Position in the Old Testament

Josephus said that according to the Law a woman was inferior to her husband in all things.^[1] This may be an exaggeration, but it is not difficult to illustrate the truth of this as far as ancient society was concerned. Women were regarded as property. A man could divorce a wife, but not vice-versa. If, instead, he married another, she had to put up with the humiliation of her husband preferring a new woman instead of her. A man could sell his daughters into slavery. A

woman could make a vow before God, but her father, or, if married, her husband could cancel this. These can easily be illustrated from the Law:

(a) A woman is property

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's. (Exodus 20:17)

(b) Damaged property

If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her; he may not put her away all his days. (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)

(c) Easily divorced by husband

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house (Deuteronomy 24:1)

(d) A man could sell his daughter into slavery

When a man sells his daughter as a slave ... (Exodus 21:7)

(e) A man could overrule a woman's religious vows

A father (before marriage) or a husband (after marriage) could exercise a veto. Here is the text concerning a father.

... when a woman vows a vow to the LORD, and binds herself by a pledge, while within her father's house, in her youth, and her father hears of her vow and of her pledge by which she has bound herself, and says nothing to her; then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father expresses disapproval to her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself, shall stand; and the LORD will forgive her, because her father opposed her. (Numbers 30:3-6)

We can also see other ways in which women were viewed as inferior to men and under their control.

Caleb's Daughter Given as a Prize

Caleb offered his daughter in marriage to whoever succeeded in capturing an enemy town.

And Caleb said, "Whoever smites Kiriathsepher, and takes it, to him I will give Achsah my daughter as wife. And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took it; and he gave him Achsah his daughter as wife. (Joshua 15:16-17)

Concubines

Men could take several wives, plus concubines. Concubines, often maidservants with whom the husband slept, had some legal rights, but not the same as wives.

Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. (Judges 8:30-31)

And David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron; and more sons and daughters were born to David.

(2 Samuel 5:13)

[Solomon] had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines.... (1 Kings 11:3)

There is a tragic account in Judges of how a concubine was multiple-raped and killed, but the account also illustrates how women were considered inferior to men:

As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, base fellows, beset the house round about, beating on the door; and they said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him." And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brethren, do not act so wickedly; seeing that this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do with them what seems good to you; but against this man do not do so vile a thing." But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them; and they knew her, and abused her all night until the morning.

(Judges 19:22-25)

This whole incident is deplorable, and is regarded as such in the Bible, but it shows how women were considered less to be protected than men.

Christian Understanding

How, from a Christian point of view are we to understand this control of women by men? Is this what God wanted then? Is it what God wants now?

The apostle Paul said that love sums up the Law.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

(Romans 13:8-10)

This teaching helps to answer these questions. In the Law we have an existing patriarchal society which is in the process of being regulated by a God of love.

Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully ... understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers ... and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

(1 Timothy 1:8-10)

The intention of showing love and humane behaviour is clear in many of the laws.

You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.

You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour.

You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand forth against the life of your neighbour: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

(Leviticus 19:13-18)

Jesus cites “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” as one of the two great commandments.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

(Mark 12:28-33)

Love may not at first seem apparent in some of the laws. Consider a very well-known law, “an eye for an eye”:

When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman’s husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Exodus 21:22-26)

The “eye for eye” sounds harsh, but the intention is that the punishment shall fit the crime, not go beyond it – such as by killing the guilty person or maiming him beyond the damage originally done.

So too, when we look at the laws given above, and examine them in their context, they also indicate an intention to apply a loving attitude in adverse circumstances.

Many laws are introduced by “If...” or “When...”, indicating that when bad behaviour happens, certain actions should be taken.

If, with this background understanding, we review some of the details given above, we can see that modification of people’s conduct in a humane manner is the intention.

Let us look again at these.

(a) A woman is property

You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour’s. (Exodus 20:17)

Although this places a wife in the category of property, it also serves to protect her against adultery and exploitation.

(b) Damaged property

If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her; he may not put her away all his days. (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)

This is a most inappropriate way to begin a marriage, but while the woman’s owner receives financial compensation, there is a limited provision to protect and safeguard the woman. Rape

and subsequent marriage is not to be considered in any way a desirable arrangement, and such forced marriage would rightly be considered an unacceptably abusive law today, but in a society where a woman who was not a virgin at marriage was likely to be stoned (Deuteronomy 22:20-21) this provided a better solution. The law also ensured that the man would take permanent responsibility for the woman “all his days”.

(c) Easily divorced by husband

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house (Deuteronomy 24:1)

This is not advocating divorce, but regulating it and seeking protection for the woman. After he has rejected his wife, he may not take her back again into his possession, if she is later divorced again, or becomes a widow. A divorced woman or a widow is thereafter free of male control, which in circumstances such as this could be a blessing. It is nevertheless, by Jesus’ standards, undesirably male-orientated and sees things only from the male point of view: “if ... she finds no favour in his eyes”. It takes later teaching to correct this.

(d) A man could sell his daughter into slavery^[2]

When a man sells his daughter as a slave ... (Exodus 21:7)

The Law begins with “When...”. This still happens today in some part of the world. Men sell their daughters because of extreme poverty or, sometimes, from greed. The Law is regulating what happens and it seeks to give the daughter protection.

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt faithlessly with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. (Exodus 21:7-11)

She will get her freedom without any payment being required of her.

(e) A man could overrule a woman’s religious vows

A father (before marriage) or a husband (after marriage) could exercise a veto. Above we gave the text concerning a father. The text concerning the husband gives a little more information:

And if she is married to a husband, while under her vows or any thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she has bound herself, and her husband hears of it, and says nothing to her on the day that he hears; then her vows shall stand, and her pledges by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if, on the day that her husband comes to hear of it, he expresses disapproval, then he shall make void her vow which was on her, and the thoughtless utterance of her lips, by which she bound herself; and the LORD will forgive her. (Numbers 30:6-8)

This would enable a vow made before the woman was married to be annulled, possibly offering protection if she had not thought her vow through adequately. This may seem demeaning from a modern viewpoint, but when women were less educated in a spiritual way than the men, it could be regarded as protective. Or a married woman could make a vow when experiencing severe pains in childbirth, but later regret what she vowed. It would also be relevant if the vow included giving away property, or in Hannah's case, giving her son Samuel to the temple (1 Samuel 1:11). Her action would involve others. It is one-sided, however, since men are not required to check if their vows are acceptable to the women. By contrast, in the New Testament, both husband and wife are asked to agree together on issues affecting them both (1 Corinthians 7:5).

On a more positive side, these religious vows were open to both men and women, which indicates a direct approach to God by both male and female.

Say to the people of Israel, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD (Numbers 6:2)

Forward to the Full Divine Intention

It is possible, therefore, to see that the Law moderates woman's lot, but the prophets and Jesus give us greater understanding as we read further.

Malachi objects to divorce.

So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. "For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless." (Malachi 2:15-16)

Jesus came to fulfil the Law, which meant following God's real intention for men and women. Jesus said that divorce was contrary to God's will; the Law permitted it only because of the hardness of men's hearts (Matthew 19:8), as described above on page 136.

An "eye for an eye" could easily be seen as prescribing cruel treatment rather than modifying something worse:

When a man causes a disfigurement in his neighbour, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has disfigured a man, he shall be disfigured. (Leviticus 24:19-20)

Jesus taught that the "Golden Rule" is the fulfilling of the Law:

So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

This is different from Leviticus 24 “as he has done it shall be done to him”. There is a great difference between treating other people as they treat you, and treating other people *as you would like them to treat you*. Jesus goes to the caring principle and elaborates it:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)

We can observe, therefore, that the Law brings in some softening, some humaneness to a harsh and often cruel situation. But the teaching of Jesus is not limited by the Law, and he advocates a very positive goodness.

Old Testament society is one where men normally ruled over women, and in the case of slavery, men ruled over men too. This is not a desirable state of affairs, and easily led to abuse. The Law gave limited protection to women who were controlled by men. It is only when we see how Jesus treated women (Chapter 4, pages 18-29) that we see God’s intention properly realised.

The same applies to slavery. Slavery existed, but its harshness was modified. Slaves had to be freed every 7 years, and married slaves had to be permitted to remain together (Exodus 21:1-6). Slavery existed in the New Testament world too, and Roman laws did not provide the humane treatment seen in the Jewish Law. New Testament teaching could only modify slavery within the fellowship of brothers and sisters. That does not mean that slavery was how God wished society to be organised, nor that in itself He wished it to be a permanent part of ecclesial life.

We should not, therefore, quote restrictive attitudes to slaves or to women in the Old Testament, and suppose that this gives us the appropriate understanding for believers today.

God’s desire is expressed in Genesis 1 & 2, not in the post-fall situation in Genesis 3. We can understand, therefore, why Biblical approval is given when women express good, guiding, leading influence over men.

Male and Female Roles in Old Testament Society

For reasons of biology it is natural that women bore, nursed and brought up the children. For a woman to be childless was felt, according to the understanding of the times, to be a cause of shame. Most women were therefore occupied in the home for at least part of their lifetimes. There is evidence, however, that women worked in fields (Ruth 2:21-23), fetched water (Rebekah, Genesis 24:11), tended flocks (Rachel, Genesis 29:9), were midwives (Genesis 35:17) and nurses (Ruth 4:16, 1 Kings 1:2), perfumers, bakers and cooks (1 Samuel 8:13) and singers (2 Samuel 19:35, Nehemiah 7:67).^[3] The daughters of Shallum helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem after the Exile (Nehemiah 3:12). Women served at the door of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:8), but there is no information as to what this involved. Eli’s wicked sons abused them (1 Samuel 2:22) at the temple in Shiloh. Hannah and her husband attended the temple at Shiloh annually, and her vow there is recorded (1 Samuel 1:11). With her husband’s approval, Hannah

acted with a fair degree of independence (1 Samuel 1:21-28). Both men and women were to teach and discipline their children (Deuteronomy 21:18).

In an age when armed conflict was frequent, the men's muscular strength naturally led them to military activities. But it was not just in military areas in which men were the leaders. Men led in most spheres of life: as leaders of tribes; as heads of families (with all the female members under their control) and in religious activities such as the offering of sacrifices and worship in the Tabernacle and later the Temple. At feasts, only men were obliged to appear (Exodus 23:17, 34:23), perhaps because men were mainly involved in the heavy work of harvesting while the women nursed the children. Only men could be priests. Yet we find that certain roles of leadership normally associated with men are on occasions undertaken by women, such as Miriam, Deborah and Huldah.

We need to consider, therefore, whether male leadership was an outcome of society in Old Testament times and therefore employed by God in appropriate circumstances, or whether it was specifically instituted by God. Where women exercised some leadership, was this with or contrary to divine approval? And since it appears from the New Testament that sisters can be involved in similar religious activities to brothers, why was the Old Testament priesthood exclusively male?

^[1] The law ... commands us also, when we marry, not to have regard to portion, nor to take a woman by violence, nor to persuade her deceitfully and knavishly; but demand her in marriage of him who hath power to dispose of her, and is fit to give her away by the nearness of his kindred; for, saith the Scripture, "a woman is inferior to her husband in all things." Let her, therefore, be obedient to him; not so that he should abuse her, but that she may acknowledge her duty to her husband; for God hath given the authority to the husband. A husband, therefore, is to lie only with his wife whom he hath married.... (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:25)

^[2] 2007 saw the 200th anniversary of Parliament's decision to outlaw the slave trade. But lest we feel too superior to people of the past, consider the Home Office estimate that 4,000 women were trafficked into Britain into enforced prostitution in 2003 (*The Guardian*, 13 January 2007, page 12). Women are still treated as property to be bought and sold.

^[3] *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (OUP, 1993), eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, page 809.

Why was the Priesthood Exclusively Male?

Why was the Priesthood

Exclusively Male?

Those in the Church of England who argue against the ordination^[1] of women put great stress on the fact that priests in the Old Testament were exclusively male. In our own community a similar argument has been used that the male priesthood indicates a divine pattern^[2] applicable in both Old and New Testaments.

When, however, we examine the qualifications for priesthood under the Law of Moses, it is evident that it is not being male in itself that is the criterion for a priest; indeed, maleness is never in itself specified, though it is assumed. The Bible does not state why those chosen in the Old Testament as priests are selected from males; therefore everyone should be cautious in suggesting reasons. This was the will of God at that time, and we could leave it at that.

Nevertheless, some suggestions arise from examining the criteria which are given. Only a select group of males from the Levite tribe/sons of Aaron could be priests; and amongst this set group the qualification was physical perfection:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles; no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God."
(Leviticus 21:16-21)

This perfection applied also to their marriage relationships:

"... And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or one divorced, or a woman who has been defiled, or a harlot, these he shall not marry; but he shall take to wife a virgin of his own people ..."
(Lev. 21:14)

There were occasions when they could not serve as priests:

"Say to them, 'If any one of all your descendants throughout your generations approaches the holy things, which the people of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has an uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from my presence: I am the LORD. None of the line of Aaron who is a leper or suffers a discharge may eat of the holy things until he is clean. Whoever touches anything that is unclean through contact with the dead or a man who has had an emission of semen ... shall be unclean until the evening and shall not eat of the holy things unless he has bathed his body in water.'
(Leviticus 22:3-6)

Bodily discharges were regarded as a sign of imperfection, and because women menstruate they were regarded as frequently unclean. In the light of that view, women could not be

considered perfect human beings. Just like the lepers, the lame, the blind, the handicapped, they were ineligible to be priests.

Pagan Religious Practices

A further reason why only males were chosen as priests may be seen in the background of Canaan, the land into which the people of Israel were to enter. Canaanite religion involved ritual prostitution, sexual activity being seen as worship in a religion which sought to encourage fertility rather than righteousness and justice.

No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine-prostitute. (Deuteronomy 23:17, NIV)

Hosea criticises those who deserted the true worship of God and switched to pagan fertility shrines.

... the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or kindness,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery;
they break all bounds and murder follows murder.

...they have left their God to play the harlot.

They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains...

Therefore your daughters play the harlot,
and your brides commit adultery...

... the men themselves go aside with harlots,
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,
and a people without understanding shall come to ruin. (Hosea 4:1-14)

Leviticus 21:9 is also in the context of the surrounding pagan sacred prostitution:

“And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot [i.e. acts as a priestess of the pagan type], profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.” (Leviticus 21:9)

It was easy, in this environment, to misuse sex and to abuse women under the guise of religious worship. Eli's sons “lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (1 Samuel 2:22). Their abusive behaviour may have been just that; or it may be they considered sexual activity as legitimate religious practice as carried out in pagan worship. It was important to distinguish clearly between the ethical worship of Yahweh and the practice of pagan nations.

The Bible does not provide much information about the women who “served at the entrance to the tent of meeting”.

They are mentioned in Exodus:

And he made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered at the door of the tent of meeting. (Exodus 38:8)

The same term is used of the service of the women as of the Levites in Numbers 4:23. In choosing perfection as the criterion, and assigning the women to serve at the entrance but not within the sanctuary, we perhaps see a means of separating the worship of Israel from the sexually orientated fertility worship of the Canaanites, amongst whom sexual prostitution took place within the sanctuary itself. One would hope that the moral emphasis in Old Testament worship would mean that the presence of these women would discourage immoral practices, even though Eli’s sons used the women’s service at the entrance as an opportunity for personal gain.

This background suggests further reason why at that time women were not called upon to be priests. Other practices were also restricted in that environment. In Leviticus 21:5, for example, the priests were not to shave their hair, or shave off the edges of their beards, or cut their bodies. These were practices of the pagans (cf. 1 Kings 18:28).

Important for us, however, is what the New Testament teaches about priests, for all we who believe in Christ are involved in priesthood.

New Testament Applications

According to the Law of Moses people were excluded from being priests unless they were physically perfect human beings in a select group from one particular tribe; they could not serve unless ritually clean. According to the New Testament none of this applies. Jesus dismissed rules about ritual, physical cleanliness as of no spiritual value (Matthew 15:17-20), and the early ecclesias followed his understanding. No one is excluded from membership or service in the ecclesia or participation in the Breaking of Bread because of physical infirmity, illness, tribe, nationality or genealogy. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptised despite his being a eunuch (Acts 8:34-39). Why then should it be considered that only one of the aspects of priesthood (being male) remains applicable? The argument that because priests were always male in the Old Testament, only males may speak in the ecclesia, is contradicted by the evidence of the New Testament itself (1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 1 Corinthians 14:26) where women take an active, spoken part.

Several applications of the priesthood are made in the New Testament: in Hebrews, in 1 Peter 2 and in Revelation 1.

The letter to the Hebrews shows Jesus as the perfect High Priest.

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

This suitability of Jesus to be our High Priest is because he knows what it is to be weak like we are, yet he was morally perfect (“without sin”).

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? (Hebrews 7:11)

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.... (Hebrews 8:1)

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

(Hebrews 7:26)

We should note that the emphasis is on Christ’s perfection, not on his being male; on moral character, not on gender. Perfection was the aim of the prescriptions for the priesthood, but it was unachievable except in Christ.

The application to us is likewise moral and spiritual. With Jesus as our High Priest, we can all, male and female, do what the priests alone could do in the Old Testament – enter the sanctuary, and offer sacrifices to God.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

(Hebrews 10:19-22, and 13:15-16, NIV)

In Exodus 19:6 the people were described as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”. And a system of priests was arranged distinct from the ordinary people. But the New Testament applications show Jesus as the High Priest, and all his followers as priests.^[3] 1 Peter continues the applications made in Hebrews. We are all “a holy priesthood”, we all offer spiritual sacrifices to God.

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Finally, Revelation teaches the same as regards the present position of believers:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.

Amen. (Revelation 1:6-7)

The manner, therefore, in which the Old Testament priesthood is understood under the New Covenant, concerns perfection of character, something to be achieved in Christ Jesus. It is not to do with being male nor with holding positions of authority in the ecclesia. Likewise, the sacrifices we offer are a Christ-like life, speaking praise to God, doing good, and sharing with others (Hebrews 13:16).

^[1] Christadelphian objection to women priests should be for the same reason as our objection to male priests. It is not due to the fact that they are women but to the concept of an ordained priesthood where a division is created between clergy and laity. According to the New Testament, *all* believers (male and female) are priests (1 Peter 2:4-10, Revelation 1:6), and there is only one mediator between us and God, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5).

^[2] Whereas the Church of England and Roman Catholic Churches maintain that male priests represent Christ, some Christadelphians maintain that all brothers represent Christ but sisters do not. This is probably based on a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 11:7, following Augustine (354-430 AD) who argued that women stand in the image of God only through their husbands (*De Trinitate* 12:7), despite Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 5:1-2. Some brothers and sisters consider that a brother who presides at the Breaking of Bread represents Jesus, and therefore only a brother can preside at the Breaking of Bread. There is no New Testament evidence for this view, and no New Testament evidence for a president at meetings.

^[3] The concept that the offices of overseers/bishops, elders, and deacons is patterned on the Old Testament priesthood is not New Testament teaching. It was developed in the second and third centuries when a distinct division between the ordinary people and the clergy was being promoted, along with worldly authority structures.

[Bishops] are your high priests, as the presbyters are your priests, and your present deacons instead of your levites (Apostolic Constitutions, 2.25)

The same document describes the bishop in these terms:

The bishop is ... the keeper of knowledge, the mediator between God and you in the several parts of your divine worship. ... he is your king and potentate; he is, next after God, your earthly

god, who has a right to be honoured by
you.

(Apostolic Constitutions, 2.26)

The contrast between this and New Testament teaching is obvious.

See http://www.thenazareneway.com/apostolic_constitutions/book_1-VI.htm

Leadership by Women in the Old Testament

Leadership by Women

in the Old Testament

Leadership by women is less common than leadership by men, and we have suggested some reasons for this. We have already noted how, on one occasion, Sarah led Abraham, and this received God's approval. Other notable women who acted as leaders with divine approval were Miriam, Deborah and Huldah. It is worth examining carefully what the Bible says about each of these, especially since some of those who disapprove of women acting as leaders present these women in an adverse light.

Miriam

Hear what the LORD says:

“... I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of bondage;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” (Micah 6:1, 4)

“Sent before you” means “sent to lead you”, and many modern translations use the word “lead”:

“I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you.” (REB, GNB, NIV)

That all three were stated by God to be leaders should be borne in mind when we look at Exodus.

Miriam is shown as actually leading in only one place, and on that occasion she is leading the women in a song:

Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”

(Exodus 15:20-22)

Points to note about this account are:

(a) Miriam is described as a prophetess, i.e. one through whom God gave a public message to His people. There is no suggestion, however, that her activity in Exodus 15 consists of prophesying—she is leading in a song of thanks.

(b) On this occasion, after they had been saved from the Egyptians, Miriam led the women in timbrels and dancing. Exodus 15:1 shows Moses and the people of Israel singing a long psalm of celebration from which some writers have assumed that “Moses led the psalm, and gave it out for the men and then Miriam for the women” (Matthew Henry c.1700). This may have been

the case, although the text does not state this; it is adding to Scripture to assert that Moses gave out the words and Miriam merely led the women in a refrain.

In Numbers 12 Miriam and Aaron criticised Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. Verse 2 indicates, however, that this criticism masked jealousy of Moses' leadership and quite possibly an attempt to take over from him:

... and they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Numbers 12:2)

In His response God stressed the unique position of leadership which Moses held in His sight:

And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech..."

(Numbers 12:6-8)

There are three points to note from this account:

(a) Aaron and Miriam were punished not for aspiring to be leaders or prophets (for they were these already) but for attempting to overthrow the leadership of Moses.

(b) Both Aaron and Miriam were punished by God. It is often assumed that because Miriam alone became leprous that her sin was greater than Aaron's; it is then assumed that her sin lay in that, although a woman, she tried to be a leader.

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed; and when the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow.... And Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned..." (Number 12:9-11)

Note "the anger ... was kindled against *them*"; "do not punish *us* because *we*..."

(c) The text gives no indication as to why Miriam but not Aaron became leprous. Possibly she was the ringleader on this occasion since her name is mentioned first in verse 1. Nevertheless, the fault lay in their challenge to Moses' unique leadership. There is no suggestion in the text that it was wrong for her to lead because she was a woman. As we have seen from Micah 6:4, Miriam received God's approval as a leader.

Deborah

The Book of Judges records a cycle whereby the people desert God, suffer oppression, appeal to God for help, and are sent a deliverer.

Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. (Judges 2:18)

Amongst those whom God used to deliver the people was Deborah, and she is outstanding amongst the deliverers in that none of the judges in the Book of Judges is described as a

prophet. Deborah, however, is a prophetess who judged. The nearest parallel is Samuel who was a prophet who judged.

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. (Judges 4:4-5)

The English word “judge” obviously described the activity of settling disputes, something which Moses had undertaken and under pressure of work had devolved upon others (Exodus 18:22). In general, the judges were men. Deborah appears to have been an exception, but one approved by God, and the natural way in which she is introduced suggests no surprise that a woman should judge. However, in the Book of Judges the word “judge” has a wider meaning than merely someone who settles disputes. It means ruler, leader, or governor, the Hebrew word (*shopet*) apparently retaining the meaning which it had in the Mari texts and in ancient Canaanite Ugarit where it is used as a synonym for king. This can be seen in the manner in which Deborah acts with authority over Barak the military leader:

She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam ... and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you...” (Judges 4:6)

The same point is indicated in Ruth:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land....

(Ruth 1:1)

In 2 Samuel God said of the judges:

In all places where I have moved with all Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”

(1 Chronicles 17:6)

Further information is supplied when the elders wished to have a king instead of Samuel the judge:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” (1 Samuel 8:4-7)

KJV says “judge” here where the RSV says “govern”. The biblical explanation of “judge” at this time was one who governed, one who ruled, and one to whom God commanded to “shepherd my people.”

The Biblical text is entirely approving of Deborah and her leadership. This needs to be stressed because those who hold that it is against divine principles for a woman to be a leader attempt to downgrade Deborah. Some of the arguments used are as follows:

- (a) The fact that God had to use a woman shows how low Israel had sunk.
- (b) It is claimed that the lack of male leadership had been the cause of Israel's problems.
- (c) Deborah, it is argued, had come to the fore by her own power and intrigue.
- (d) Deborah, it is argued, was not a leader like Samuel and other judges because she did not go round on a circuit like Samuel but sat in one place and people came to her.
- (e) Deborah acted only in a private capacity.
- (f) Barak, it is argued, is the real leader.
- (g) It is claimed that the Song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5:2 indicates that male leadership is God's desire.

Each of the above claims is contrary to the Biblical text. Let us examine each of these claims in turn:

(a) There is nothing in the Book of Judges which suggests that spiritual life was worse at the time of Deborah than on previous or later occasions. Judges 4:1 says simply, "and the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD". Deborah, however, was obviously helping to maintain Godly standards. It would indeed seem that because of her influence, spiritual life was higher at this time. Compare this with the occasion before Othniel was raised up as a deliverer:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth. (Judges 3:7)

Likewise, compare Deborah's time with the position before Jephthah became judge:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. (Judges 10:6)

Before and after Deborah, it is stressed that the people of Israel worshipped other gods; such is not stated to be the case while Deborah was judging.

It can be commented in addition that the claim that God *had* to use a woman because 'Israel had sunk so low' is a denial of the power of God. God raised up male leaders before Deborah and after Deborah and it is not appropriate to suggest that God could not have raised up a male leader instead of Deborah had he wished to choose a man. Evidently God considered Deborah suitable and acceptable for His purpose.

(b) When the people lacked a leader for a considerable time, they began to worship other gods:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19)

It was not lack of a *male* leader that caused Israel's problems but lack of *any* leader.

(c) There is no evidence that Deborah had come to the fore by her own power and intrigue, but the fact that such a claim can be made indicates the bias with which this passage has been read by those who wish to assert that leadership by women is unacceptable to God.

(d) Two chapters in the Bible describe Deborah, whereas the first 25 chapters of 1 Samuel describe Samuel's activity. To compare Deborah with Samuel on the basis of such little description is an argument from silence. How do you know that Deborah did not also go round on a circuit? There are times when Samuel sat in one place and summoned people to him.

Look at the descriptions:

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD.

(1 Samuel 7:15-17)

So when Samuel was at Bethel, Gilgal, or Mizpah, or Ramah, what happened? Here is what the Bible text says about Samuel:

Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." So they gathered at Mizpah.... And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. (1 Samuel 7:5-6)

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah... (1 Samuel 8:4)

Compare this with the short report about Deborah:

... she used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. (Judges 4:4-5)

Do Samuel and Deborah go out to the people, or do the people come to them? Here are examples of both of them judging, i.e. ruling, governing. And the people come to them! And at other occasions Samuel goes to the people. It is simply an argument from silence in an attempt to downgrade Deborah to suggest that, because she is reported on this one occasion as sitting in one place, that therefore she did not do as Samuel did on other occasions.

(e) She is hardly working "in a private capacity" when the text says: "And she sent and called Barak" (Judges 4:6), Barak being the military leader of Israel. According to the Biblical information given above (1 Chronicles 17:6, Ruth 1:1, 1 Samuel 8:4-7) Deborah was a ruler, a governor, a shepherd of God's people. It would be strange if this could be described as "in a private capacity".

(f) Barak was the leader in war but he did not take any action until summoned by Deborah who gave him God's command. Barak declined to act unless accompanied by Deborah. Presumably he acknowledged, rightly, that Deborah was God's agent and felt that her presence gave him the support without which he would be unable to be successful.

(g) It is claimed that Judges 5:2 indicates that leadership should properly be male not female. This claim is based on the NIV translation:

When the princes in Israel take the lead...

Praise the LORD.

Since princes are masculine it is argued that *masculine* leaders are given divine approval, in contradistinction to female leaders.

The translation of this verse in particular, and the Song of Deborah and Barak in general, is uncertain because they contain many rare words and unusual grammatical forms. It is therefore unwise to base an argument about male leadership solely on the way this verse is translated in the NIV. Here is how other translations put this verse:

Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. (Judges 5:2, KJV)

That the leaders took the lead in Israel,
that the people offered themselves willingly,
bless the LORD! (RSV)

That warriors in Israel unbound their hair,
that the people came forward with a will,
for this, bless Yahweh! (Jerusalem Bible)

Praise the LORD!

The Israelites were determined to fight;
the people gladly volunteered. (GNB)

The whole song is celebrating the various groups of people who responded to the summons put by Deborah to Barak. Deborah herself is regarded as one of the leaders. Much praise, too, is given to Jael who on her own initiative killed Sisera, thus completing the rout begun by Barak.

“Most blessed of women be Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most blessed.” (Judges 5:24)

Heber the Kenite himself seems to have played no part in the battle.

It cannot therefore be argued that the Judges 5 indicates that God desires male leadership.

Huldah

Huldah was recognised as a prophetess and was consulted by King Josiah at a crucial point when the book of the Law had been discovered during repairs to the temple. In effect she was being asked to find out whether the book was the word of God or not.

And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found..."

So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum... and they talked with her. And she said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel..." (2 Kings 22:12-15)

Points of relevance to our study are:

(a) There seems to be no question about whether it was appropriate for a woman to be a prophetess. Not only King Josiah but also the High Priest, Hilkiah, accepted her as a true prophet.

(b) Although Jeremiah and probably Zephaniah were likewise prophets of God at this time, Josiah told his men to go to Huldah.

(c) These events took place during the series of reforms begun by Josiah when he came to power.

Now in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land and the house.... (2 Chronicles 34:8)

Although Huldah is only mentioned in this one incident, the reference to her as a prophetess suggests that she was one of the spiritual advisers in his reforms. Her prophecy accurately signalled the end of the monarchy of the kings of Judah.

Further Evidence in the Old Testament of the Approved Influence of Women

Religious teaching was to be passed on by the descendants of Aaron:

"...you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by Moses." (Leviticus 10:11)

It is not clear how or where they conveyed this teaching, but all Israel was in addition given this responsibility at home.

"...these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house...." (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

That this teaching was done by the women as well as the men is clear from Proverbs:

My son, keep your father's commandment,

and forsake not your mother's teaching. (Proverbs 6:20)

The Mother of King Lemuel

Proverbs 31:1-9 describes the teaching which King Lemuel was given by his mother. She warned him against sexual immorality and the misuse of alcohol. She advised him to protect the rights

of the helpless and to be a righteous judge. There then follows an attractive description of a good wife. She is hard working, looks after the family's needs, has the trust of her husband and has considerable independence of action:

She opens her mouth with wisdom,

and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household,

and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her blessed;

her husband also, and he praises her:

“Many women have done excellently,

but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,

but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands,

and let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:26-29)

Wise children and a wise husband will look to the teaching of a wife such as this. There is no clear, hard-and-fast distinction between men and women in the teaching done in the home.

Abigail

While the husband was obviously regarded as head of the family, in patriarchal times and in the Law, the independence the wife was able to exercise should not be underrated. There were times when the wife had to act against the wishes of the husband, one well-known instance being that of Abigail and Nabal.

The woman [Abigail] was of good understanding and beautiful, but the man [Nabal] was churlish and ill-behaved. (1 Samuel 25:3)

Abigail ignored her boorish husband, saved him and his men from slaughter and saved David from bloodguilt. Whereas Nabal scorned David, Abigail recognised that David was doing God's work and she respected David's future position as king.

“...the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live.” (1 Samuel 25:28)

David was grateful to her,

“Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging myself with my own hand! Go up in peace to your house; see, I have

hearkened to your voice, and I have granted your petition.”
35)

(1 Samuel 25:33-

David was correct to hearken to a woman’s voice.

The Wise Woman of the City of Abel of Beth-ma’acah

One of those who rebelled against the rule of King David was “a worthless fellow, whose name was Sheba”. He was pursued by David’s commander, Joab, into the city of Abel of Beth-ma’acah. The city was put under siege:

Then a wise woman called from the city, “Hear! Hear! Tell Joab, ‘Come here, that I may speak to you.’” ... “Listen to the words of your maidservant.” ...“I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel; you seek to destroy a city which is a mother in Israel; why will you swallow up the heritage of the LORD?” (2 Samuel 20:16-19)

After negotiation over Sheba’s life, it was agreed that the siege would be lifted if Sheba were killed:

Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and threw it out to Joab. So he blew the trumpet, and they dispersed from the city, every man to his home. And Joab returned to Jerusalem to the king. (2 Samuel 20:22)

The city was saved because Joab and the people listened to the words of a wise woman.

A Wife’s Wise Advice to a Frightened Husband

In Judges 13, Samson’s parents are visited by an angel. When Manoah, Samson’s father, realises this, he is afraid:

And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.” But his wife said to him, “If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a cereal offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.” (Judges 13:22-23)

Manoah is fearful, while his wife is calm and sensible and offers rational advice. She is not dismissed, either in the account or by her husband, on the grounds that advice from a woman should not be heeded. And events prove her right.

Women of Evil Influence

Just as there were men of evil influence, so there were women, whether women in power like Jezebel or Athaliah or the prostitutes against whom warnings are given in Proverbs:

... I have perceived among the youths,

a young man without sense ...

And lo, a woman meets him,

dressed as a harlot...

With much seductive speech she persuades him...

All at once he follows her... (Proverbs 7:7-22)

More often than not, however, women are the victims of men's power, such as Tamar (2 Samuel 13) who suffered premeditated rape, or the women who were concubines (Judges 19). All such behaviour was contrary to God's intentions for mankind "from the beginning".

Conclusions on Leadership and Influence by Women in the Old Testament

Because of the particular requirements for priesthood, most males and all females were excluded from being priests.

Domestic circumstances would frequently have made it difficult for women to be leaders, and in a male-orientated society this would probably be sufficient reason as to why there are only a few women leaders.

Leadership by women was the exception rather than the rule.^[1] This, however, makes their acceptance all the more notable. Miriam and Deborah were acknowledged as leaders without any surprise being expressed.

It is not correct to argue, as some do, that the occasions when women were leaders was when spiritual life was at a particularly low ebb. In Judges the evidence is that spiritual life was better when Deborah was judge; similarly Huldah was a prophetess during the spiritual reforms of Josiah, one of the few good kings.

There is no suggestion in the Old Testament that leadership by women is in itself wrong or unacceptable.

The criterion as to whether particular leadership or influence by a particular woman is approved by God is whether it is done in accord with His will. This is the same criterion that is applied to men. It is a matter of how the leader led, not the gender of the leader.

There is no divine principle by which men are always to lead. Male leadership was often the outcome of society, and was approved by God for that time. However, the approval given to the significant leadership by women suggests that God was equally approving of women leaders.

In Between the Old Testament and the New Testament

The Old Testament shows men and women sometimes behaving well, sometimes badly. It does not scorn women in a misogynist ("woman-hating") manner. Misogynist views are, however, expressed in some of the books written between the two Testaments, including what is known as the Apocrypha. There are three ways we can observe this:

(1) Jewish stories

Jewish stories elaborated on the account in Genesis 1-2, but in an anti-woman manner:

When God was on the point of making Eve, He said: "I will not make her from the head of man, lest she carry her head high in arrogant pride; not from the eye, lest she be wanton-eyed; not from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper; not from the neck, lest she be insolent; not from the mouth, lest she be a tattler; not from the heart, lest she be inclined to envy; not from the hand, lest she be a meddler; not from the foot, lest she be a gadabout. I will form her from a chaste portion of the body," and to every limb and organ as He formed it, God said, "Be chaste! Be chaste!" Nevertheless, in spite of the great caution used, woman has all the faults God tried to obviate. The daughters of Zion were haughty and walked with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes; Sarah was an eavesdropper in her own tent, when the angel spoke with Abraham; Miriam was a talebearer, accusing Moses; Rachel was envious of her sister Leah; Eve put out her hand to take the forbidden fruit, and Dinah was a gadabout.

(Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, translated from the German by Henrietta Szold, volume 1, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1937), pp. 64-69.)^[2]

The intention of these stories may be to warn against evil conduct, but they can easily be seen as a general statement that women behave badly. Even more so when men and women are compared adversely:

The voice of women is shrill, not so the voice of men; when soft viands are cooked, no sound is heard, but let a bone be put in a pot, and at once it crackles. A man is easily placated, not so a woman; a few drops of water suffice to soften a clod of earth; a bone stays hard, and if it were to soak in water for days. (Ibid)

(2) Adam was praised, Eve was condemned

The apocryphal book called Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, has much wise advice, but it also contrasts Adam and Eve so as to praise Adam and condemn Eve:

From a woman sin had its beginning,

and because of her we all die. (Ecclesiasticus 25:4)

but of Adam it says:

Shem and Seth were honoured among men,

And Adam above every living being in the creation. (49:16)

Contrast this with Paul's comments that "... by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

(3) Esther is downplayed in the Apocrypha

The book of Esther was translated into Greek, perhaps in 78 BC. Additions were made to portray Esther in a manner more suited to the understanding of Judaism in the first century BC Hellenistic world. Esther's beauty is emphasised, and her brains and skill downplayed. She is

depicted in the apocryphal version as a pious but passive girl.^[3] Josephus, in his retelling of Esther, downplays her active role even more.

Jesus and Paul

Being brought up in a Jewish environment, Jesus and Paul would have been aware of these attitudes in Jewish tradition. Significantly, unlike church writers in later centuries, they never used these in their assessment of women. Reference to Genesis is straightforward, not fanciful, and not in a manner to put women down.

^[1] A phrase sometimes quoted is: “The exception proves the rule.” In popular understanding, this is taken to mean that if you find one exception, it proves that a particular rule is normally true. There are two problems with this explanation. Firstly, “The exception proves the rule” is a proverb, not Bible teaching. Secondly, the phrase seems to be a shorter version of a Latin legal maxim from the 17th century, which (translated from Latin) reads: “Exception confirms the rule in the cases not excepted”. In other words, a rule applies except where it does not apply! However, there is no divine rule given in the Bible that leaders must always be masculine. God chooses leaders as He wishes. There is no rule stated in Scripture that judging, ruling and teaching are a male preserve.

^[2] <http://www.bible-researcher.com/eve-legend.html>

^[3] *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (OUP, 1993), eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, page 813.

“The Husband is Head of the Wife”

“The Husband

is Head of the Wife”

One of the views presented to our Christadelphian community seeks to explain male/female relationships in terms of a “God-given hierarchy in the household of faith”. “Hierarchy” is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as “a ranking system ordered according to status or authority”.

Men Are to Lead, Women Are to Be Led?

This view is based on the references in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2:

“man is head of the woman”

“let her be in submission even as the law says”

“I do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man”

It then goes to Genesis to the declaration to Eve (“he shall rule over you”), to the patriarchal society of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to the Mosaic Law and male priesthood, and through all of these it claims to discern a divine principle. This principle, it is declared, applies to both family life and religious life: men are to lead, women are to be led.

When these quotations are strung together as we have done here, they can look impressive. But they are taken out their context and therefore misused. Texts must be read in their context and in the context of the Bible as a whole.

Our comments, therefore, on this claim for a divine hierarchy in the household of faith, are as follows.

1 Corinthians 11

There is certainly a hierarchy here for Paul says:

I want you to understand that the head of every man (*aner*) is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband [*aner*, same word as just translated ‘man’], and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 the hierarchy concerns marital relationships, not ecclesial ones (“the head of a woman is her husband”, RSV). This can be seen because 1 Corinthians 11 does not put any restriction on the church activities under discussion (praying and speaking in prophecy), as long as the sisters honour their husbands in whatever they are doing.

Although Corinth is in Greece, it was a strongly Roman city. For a wife not to wear her marriage veil gave out the wrong message, according to values of the time.

[Paul] was, in effect, accusing the Christian wife who removed her veil when praying and prophesying of parading like one of the profligate ‘new’ Roman women. If she did this while

participating in a leading way in an open meeting, then she publicly dishonoured her husband....

(Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, pages 128-129)^[1]

This is the reason for Paul's writing this section of the letter. He is very anxious that the believers should not give the impression of abandoning their marriage relationships now that there was freedom in Christ for women to participate verbally in the meetings. If the wife felt the veil was a restriction on her independence, Paul points out that the husband too cannot act independently, for "the head of every man is Christ", and indeed so it is for Jesus, "the head of Christ is God". In Ephesians 5 Paul describes Christ as the head of the church. The church consists of both men and women, so there are no grounds for thinking that Christ is head of the man but not head of wife, or as Augustine thought only head of wife through her husband.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul refers to Genesis 2, that the woman was created as a suitable companion for her husband. Therefore independence of wives from husbands is not acceptable behaviour.

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (1 Corinthians 11:8)

But Paul immediately modifies this statement lest the wife should therefore be considered of less value or of less importance as a person:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. (1 Corinthians 11:11-12)

What, then, does Paul mean when he says that "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Does head mean "ruler", or "chief" or "boss"? That is certainly how Roman law at Corinth, and people in the ancient world would tend to understand the relationship of the husband to the wife. And it has often been understood in this manner since. We need to look at Ephesians to understand Paul's meaning.

Ephesians

Paul again says "the husband is the head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23).

The husband was head of the wife in an absolute manner according to secular laws. She was his property and he could do whatever he liked with her. He could tell her what to do and she had to obey. Aristotle (384-322 BC), who strongly influenced church thinking in centuries subsequent to the apostle Paul, said that the man's proper qualities were to command, the woman's proper qualities were to accept orders.

... tame animals are superior in their nature to wild animals... Also, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.^[2]

(Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b, 1260a)

In the Roman world Marcus Porcius Cato (234-149 BC) said:

Our ancestors thought it not proper that women should perform any, even private business, without a director; but that they should be ever under the control of parents, brothers, or husbands.

(Livy, *History of Rome*, Book XXXIV.2^[3])

So, when we see the apostle Paul declaring that the husband is the head of the wife, is this what he means? He is the ruler, and she is the subject? But Paul then qualifies his statement:

For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.... Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her....
(Ephesians 5:23, 25)

A completely different kind of headship is envisaged. Christ became head of the church by giving himself up for it, by being a servant even to death:

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)

Paul in Ephesians is not saying that the husband should be the head of the wife in the sense that he always or exclusively takes the lead or tells her what to do, but the reverse! He is saying the husband should do all he can to care for her, to serve her and to see to her needs. In Ephesians 4:15-16 we have the analogy of a body, and function of the head is explained and described: “the head ... from whom the whole body ... makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love”. The word head is used here to mean the one that feeds and makes grow.

In Colossians 2:19 Christ is described as “the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.” Paul in Ephesians 5 transforms the conventional understanding of male dominance. He turns it on its head! Husbands are to dedicate themselves to the nourishment of their wives just as Jesus does for the ecclesia: “nourishes and cherishes” “as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:29). Influenced by Aristotle and by pagan society, many interpreters have assumed that Paul was simply endorsing commonly accepted attitudes. A careful examination shows that Paul means the opposite. It is significant that nowhere in the Bible does it say it is a *good* thing for men to rule over their wives, though it was a commonly held view in the Jewish and pagan worlds that they should. Paul approaches very closely to a mutual relationship where husbands and wives work together as a unity. If the husband really loves his wife, he will not attempt to tell her what to do. They will consult one another, planning things out together, each serving the other to the utmost. He will not order her about. He will seek to walk with her in the ways of God – and this is, of course, mutual. If an unbelieving husband is consecrated through his believing wife, how much more will a Christian wife be able to help a believing husband, and vice versa (1 Corinthians 7:14-16). Being “head” is a position of service, of being an example of Christ-like behaviour, as indicated also by the comment that “husbands should love their wives as their own bodies” (verse 28). A husband who so loves his wife will seek to do the best he can for her, to attend to all her needs and concerns, physical and spiritual. Christian love (*agape*) means submitting to one another, not acting selfishly but looking to the interest and needs of the other.

The same is meant when wives are told to submit to their husbands in everything. All believers are told to submit to each other (verse 21). When wives are told to submit to their husbands in everything, Paul is instructing them to a positive attitude of service to their husbands. It is

notable that Paul does not instruct husbands to rule their wives nor does he tell wives to obey their husbands. He reserves the word “obey” (*hypakouo*) for children to parents and slaves to masters. The practical outcome of this teaching is effective equality, despite the slightly different manner in which it is described. Considerably more space is devoted to how husbands should treat their wives than vice-versa, which suggests a need to redress the male chauvinism of the pagan world where wives were only to produce children and run the household and were not treated as proper companions. By contrast, the Christian ideal, the pre-fall position, was that “the two shall become one” (Ephesians 5:31). Compared to the standards of the ancient world (and indeed compared to the standards prevalent in the modern world) Paul’s teaching is revolutionary in its reciprocity.

The principle, therefore, is of service to one another, service in which the needs and cares of each individual are fully understood and catered for by one another.

What, then, is the connection with the ecclesia? Is there a “God-given hierarchy in the household of faith” whereby men are to lead and woman to be led?

It is worth noting that in Ephesians 5:21-33 Paul did not lay down a specific role for the husband and another specific role for the wife, nor was he prescribing roles distinguishing brothers from sisters within the ecclesia. As we illustrated in Chapter 6 (pages 40-47), the different roles within the ecclesia were apportioned not on the basis of male or female but “according to the grace given to us” (Romans 12:6). In modern terms this means that we are to use our God-given talents according to ability.^[4] Of course different roles occur in marriage and in the ecclesia. Marriage roles (who does what) are worked out by each couple according to ability, inclination and personal circumstances. There is no reason to say that because the husband is head, in Paul’s sense, that therefore he should be in control of the money, or of the kitchen, or he should say grace at every meal, or should always make the final decision if the couple disagree. If he loves his wife in the manner described, final decisions will be arrived at by discussion and compromise, and everything will be shared by agreement.

Worldly Hierarchies and Ruling in the Ecclesia?

There are worldly hierarchies. Jesus instructed his disciples:

The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.”
(Luke 22:25-27)

This gives us the clue as to the kind of “head” that Jesus is. He expects his followers to be like him – “one who serves”.

Ruling in the ecclesia and in households is described and endorsed.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

(Hebrews 13:17, NRSV)

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour...

(1 Timothy 5:17)

I would have the younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households....

(1 Timothy 5:14)

Obviously some hierarchy is necessary. It is necessary for children; for slaves, in a society which owns slaves; in the ecclesia, to keep things organised and get jobs done. God has given Jesus “all authority on heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). He is our King. Within marriage, authority of man over woman or woman over man was not taught “from the beginning”. Rule by man over woman came in after the fall. In Christ, in the new creation, it is replaced by service to one another, and by companionship. And Paul’s teaching indicates how by service and by love, God’s original intention is restored.

Submission

Submission is something we are all asked to do to each other (Ephesians 5:21). Submission means putting oneself and one’s time and energy at the service of others, not of oneself.

How does this work if we have leaders?

Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men [=people^[5]] and to every fellow worker and labourer. (1 Corinthians 16:16)

Submit to such as these, and to everyone who joins in the work and labours at it.” (NIV)

The answer is that both leaders and those who are led are involved in joint service in supporting the values and teachings and practices of believers in Christ. True leadership is not a matter of dominating others, or telling them what they must do, but being prepared to organise, to listen, to discuss, to plan, to criticise if necessary, but all in a Christ-like spirit. Similarly authority is to be exercised in the marriage relationship:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer....

(1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

Christian marriage is not to be a matter of one partner dominating over the other but a relationship which works “by agreement” in which each shows consideration for the other.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)

If a Christian husband acts properly towards his wife it should be to appreciate her and all her abilities. He should encourage her to use her talents in Christian service of all kinds: according to circumstances this may involve bringing up children; writing to and visiting the sick; looking

after the elderly; teaching in Sunday School; giving Bible Class addresses; helping in house groups with food or with discussion. The possibilities are many and varied, just like the lists of jobs in the New Testament in passages such as Romans 12:4-13. A Christian wife likewise does her best to support and help her husband. By discussion, prayer, Bible reading together, they stimulate each other to service in Christ. It is a two-way process, not a matter of husband telling wife and the wife listening. That would be no “helper suitable to him”.

A Caution

Women being ruled over by men is the imperfect state of affairs after the fall. Paul seeks to correct it by balancing up how husbands and wives behave to each other. If the husband truly loves his wife as described in Ephesians 5, it is likely that the relationship will be a good one, though human sin and hardness of heart from either partner can cause the relationship to fail. If the husband takes a worldly view and aims to be head in the sense of being the boss, issuing orders, taking decisions as he sees fit without the consent and full-hearted approval of his wife, then this is an abusive relationship, and not at all a Biblical or a Christ-like one. According to the New Testament, the husband is “head of the wife” in the manner in which “Christ is head of the church”, and *only* in this sense.^[6]

Single Women

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 that the husband is head of the wife obviously does not refer to single women, whether unmarried or widows. In Roman society they might have had male guardians, but Paul seems to take no account of this. In giving his advice, Paul says that he does not wish “to lay any restraint” upon them at a time of anxiety (possibly famine in Corinth). His comments to both male and female unmarried believers is that not needing to worry about a partner frees them to concentrate on how to please God and lead a holy life, as in his own case (1 Corinthians 7:8-9 and 32-35).

^[1] *After Paul Left Corinth – The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, Bruce W. Winter (Eerdmans, 2001)

^[2] Aristotle deduced this from the society in which he lived and from his observations on nature. He considered that bees were ruled by a king bee, and it was not until centuries later that naturalists discovered the ruler was a queen bee.

^[3] Available at www.gutenberg.org/files

^[4] Much of this part is adapted from the section on Marriage in our booklet, *Principles and Practice* (1994).

^[5] The word “men” does not occur in the Greek. Paul’s instructions are “be subject to such people and to every fellow worker and labourer”. For a fuller explanation, see Chapter 6, pages 40-47.

^[6] There is scope for further analysis of the meaning of “head”. In Ephesians 1:21-22 Paul says that God has put Jesus “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” and has made him “the head over all things for the church” – a slightly different expression from “head of the church”. A considerable debate on the meaning and translation of “head” (*kephale*) in Greek has been taking place for several decades in the evangelical world, one group maintaining the word means “chief” or “ruler”, the other that it means “source” or “origin”. It is an argument that will continue, but as far as the practical application of the husband being head of the wife, and the consequences for ecclesial activity is concerned, we consider respectful, loving partnership is the application indicated.

To follow the arguments about the meaning of *kephale*, (and the discussions amongst evangelical scholars on the position of women according to the Bible) see the websites: “Christians for Biblical Equality” www.cbeinternational.org and “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” www.cbmw.org. See also “The Evangelical Debate over Biblical ‘Headship’” by David H. Scholer, available on <http://www.godswordtowomen.org/scholer.htm>, which summarises and critiques the various arguments about *kephale*.

Attitudes to Women in the Greek/Roman World

Attitudes to Women

in the Greek/Roman World

The Greek and Roman world was the environment in which Christianity spread. It contained a background of thought and practice in which the message of Christ brought freedom and salvation, but it also imposed constraints on what could be done. As the church strayed further from New Testament teaching, pagan attitudes, including pagan attitudes towards women, influenced Christianity. Some analysis of attitudes to women amongst the Greeks and Romans is therefore relevant.

It is difficult to give an adequate analysis of societies which lasted for centuries and covered the area from Syria to Britain. Different customs existed, according to place and date. Attitudes to women in Athens, for example, were different from those in warlike Sparta, at least in the well-known historical period of the 400s BC. It would be true, however, to say that women in general were controlled by male owners (fathers, husbands or masters), the prediction to Eve that “he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16) was almost universally demonstrated, and the attitude displayed by men towards women was frequently neither kind nor considerate.

According to Hesiod (c. 800 BC) Zeus, chief of the gods in Greek mythology, created a woman, Pandora, “an evil thing”, “a plague to men” an “inescapable snare”. She was given “lies and crafty words and a deceitful nature.” Out of curiosity she opened a jar which contained hard toil and diseases, and these spread to men:

... the tribes of men had previously lived on the earth free and apart from evils, free from burdensome labour and from painful diseases....

But then woman, raising the jar’s lid in her hands and scattering its contents, devised anguishing miseries for men.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 53-105)

All the ills of this world are therefore attributable to a woman, and by extension to all women. This was done by the will of Zeus who sent woman as a punishment to men for their arrogance.

Semonides (c. 7th century BC, or later) considered women to be lazy, greedy, slovenly, gossipy and adulterous: “... women are the biggest single bad thing Zeus has made for us”.^[1]

A woman was certainly not usually treated as a “suitable helper”, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:20-23). The fall from God’s original intention is well illustrated by men’s contemptuous attitude towards women.

Positive Attitudes, but Restrictive Roles

Some very positive descriptions of marriage have been handed down from antiquity, and these usefully provide a counter to the negative comments. There are few more attractive pictures of happily married life than that painted in the fictional account in the *Odyssey*, composed about 800 BC. Odysseus speaking to Nausicaa says:

“... may the gods grant your heart’s desire; may they give you a husband and a home, and the harmony that is so much to be desired, since there is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife...”

(Homer, *Odyssey* VI, 180-185)

Seneca, Stoic philosopher, tutor of Nero and brother of Gallio (Acts 18:12), advocated chastity in marriage for both husband and wife:

You know that a man does wrong in requiring chastity of his wife, while he himself is intriguing with the wives of other men; you know that, as your wife should have no dealings with a lover, neither should you yourself with a mistress. (Seneca, *Epistle* 94:26)

Pliny wrote in the 1st century AD to his wife Calpurnia, while they were apart:

I, too, am always reading your letters, and returning to them again and again as if they were new to me — but this only fans the fire of my longing for you. If your letters are dear to me, you can imagine how I delight in your company; do write as often as you can, although you give me pleasure mingled with pain.” (Pliny, *Letters*, VI, 7)

In the societies depicted here, amongst the “top” people in ancient times, women’s roles were considerably restricted. Men had a greater range of outside activities than their wives. In the same book of the *Odyssey*, the queen was “sitting at the hearth with her maid, spinning yarn stained with sea-purple”, while the king “was going out to join his princely colleagues at a conference to which he was called by the ... nobles” (*Odyssey* VI, 51-55). The *Odyssey* is, of course, a work of fiction, but nevertheless is evidence of ancient attitudes.

Pliny was a prominent Roman lawyer, landowner and government official. He wrote of his wife, Calpurnia,

She is highly intelligent and a careful housewife, and her devotion to me is a sure indication of her virtue. In addition, this love has given her an interest in literature If I am giving a reading [of my poetry] she sits behind a curtain nearby and greedily drinks in every word of appreciation. (Pliny, *Letters*, IV, 19)

The reading of his poetry was to his circle of male friends. Presumably it would be thought too much “in public” for his wife to be present, so she sat hidden behind a curtain. The date of this letter is about 100 AD.

We have already quoted Philo, writing in Alexandria a few decades earlier:

Market places and council halls, law courts and gatherings, and meetings where a large number of people are gathered, in short all public life with its discussions and deeds, in times of peace and of war, are proper for men. It is suitable for women to stay indoors and to live in retirement, limited by the middle door (to the men’s apartments) for young girls, and the outer door for married women.

(Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* III, 169)

The idea that women should keep a low profile was expressed in Athens by Pericles (the political leader behind the building of the Parthenon) about 440 BC. After a lengthy speech praising the Athenian men who had died in a recent war with Sparta, he addressed a few, succinct remarks to the widows on their duties as women:

Your great glory is not to be inferior to what God has made you, and the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you.

(Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, II, 45)

Similarly, in Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Meno, c.384 BC, Meno expresses the standard view of his time:

If you want to describe excellence in a man, it is easy. It is this: to be good at involvement in public affairs, ensuring that his friends do well and his enemies do badly,^[2] while taking good care that he doesn't suffer any such harm. If you want to describe excellence in a woman, it is not difficult: she ought to look after her house well, ensuring the safety of everything inside and being obedient to her husband. (Plato, *Meno*, III, 71E)

Public praise and activity was considered the role of men, activity in the home that of women, who were expected to be out of sight and out of mind. This would apply, primarily, to the upper classes; the lower classes could not remain at home: both men and women had to struggle to keep themselves fed and clothed, while slaves, male and female, had to do as their master or mistresses bade. In that respect, the Christian churches did offer some opportunity for slaves. When Pliny reported to the Emperor Trajan, c. 112 AD, about the activities of the Christians in the province of Bithynia, of which he was governor, he said he had decided it was necessary "to extract the truth by torture from two slave women, whom they call deaconesses" (*Letters*, X, 96). It is interesting that these unfortunate women evidently held a position within the church, though as with Phoebe (Romans 16:1), it is difficult to define what is meant by the word (*ministrae*) translated "deaconesses".

Wives held strong influence within the home, but were subjected to double standards:

Mistresses are for pleasure, concubines for daily service to our bodies, but wives for the procreation of legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of the household. (Demosthenes 59)

Husbands felt entitled to have sex in these three areas: mistresses, concubines and wives.

If you were to take your wife in the act of adultery, you could freely kill her without a trial; whereas if you were to commit adultery ... she would not dare to lift a finger against you, nor would it be right. (Gellius 10.23)

Cicero, top Roman politician and lawyer in the century before Christ, said in 56 BC:

Anyone who thought young men ought to be forbidden to visit prostitutes would certainly be the virtuous of the virtuous, that I cannot deny. But he would be out of step not only with this easy-going age but also our ancestors, who customarily made youth that concession. Was there ever a time when this was not habitual practice, when it was censured and not permitted, in short when what is allowable was not allowed? (Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 20)^[3]

Power and control were with the men, the very opposite to the sharing, caring, mutual relationship enjoined by the apostle Paul or envisaged by God "from the beginning":

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does

not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season ... (1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

Passages like this which show mutuality and equality were overlooked when the church moved away from New Testament teaching, becoming influenced by Greek philosophers such as Aristotle. Aristotle (384-322 BC) considered it part of the natural order that masters should rule over slaves, husbands over wives, fathers over children; and his reasoning has been followed for much of the last 2,000 years:

... the male is better fitted to command than the female ...

... there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, the female has it, but it is ineffective, and the child has it but in an undeveloped form. (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259b-1260a)

In other words, slaves cannot think rationally at all, women just a little, and children in an undeveloped form. Only Aristotle's assessment about children could be considered valid today, but this type of reasoning about women has held sway until recent times because of male prejudice, mistaken assumptions about biology, and the refusal to allow women to be adequately educated until the end of the 19th century.

Mistaken Medical Understanding

Attempts to understand medical matters were influenced by social understandings and vice-versa. Women were considered inferior to men in social terms. This was illustrated by medical explanations, which in turn were subsequently taken to prove that women were inferior socially.

Men's bodies were believed to be "hot" and therefore produced white hot semen which could carry the soul of a new human being; women's bodies were thought to be cold, and therefore could produce only blood, which did not have this ability to any appreciable extent.

Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male.

(Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 737a25-28)

A woman is a "deformed male" in that she can contribute so little a part to reproduction, and therefore (according to Aristotle) she is weaker!^[4] The coldness in a woman's body also means that she is intellectually inferior to man. And this was thought to have its parallel in character weakness.

Talking first of animals, and then of men and women, Aristotle says:

In all cases, excepting those of the bear and the leopard, the female is less spirited than the male the female is softer in disposition, is more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive, and more attentive to the nurture of the young; the male, on the other hand, is more spirited,

more savage, more simple and less cunning. The traces of these characters are more or less visible everywhere, but they are especially visible where character is more developed, and most of all in man. The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete and consequently in man the qualities above referred to are found most clearly. Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is furthermore more prone to despondency, and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment.

(Aristotle, *History of Animals* 608a32-b19)

Quite a muddle, but demonstrating why (from his understanding) women are and should be subordinate to men.

Galen (second century AD) was the most authoritative medical writer in antiquity, and his influence continued through the middle ages. He had a better understanding of biology than Aristotle, but still adhered to the hot and cold theory:

The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason: because she is colder. For if among animals the warm one is the more active, a colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer. (Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, XIV, 6)

Menstruation was not properly understood until 1908. Until then it was thought that blood was leaking from a weak womb, and other superstitious views were entertained. Pliny the Elder, who perished in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, wrote:

Contact with the monthly flux of women turns new wine sour, makes crops wither, kills grafts, dries seeds in gardens, causes the fruit of trees to fall off, dims the bright surface of mirrors, dulls the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory, kills bees, rusts iron and bronze, and causes a horrible smell to fill the air. Dogs who taste the blood become mad, and their bite becomes poisonous as in rabies. The Dead Sea, thick with salt, cannot be drawn asunder except by a thread soaked in the poisonous fluid of the menstruous blood. A thread from an infected dress is sufficient. Linen, touched by the woman while boiling and washing it in water, turns black. So magical is the power of women during their monthly periods that they say that hailstorms and whirlwinds are driven away if menstrual fluid is exposed to the flashes of lightning.

(Pliny, *Natural History*, book 28, ch. 23, 78-80; book 7, ch. 65)

This attitude came into medieval church teaching, with the same superstitious 'reasons' repeated, and women were forbidden to enter a church building during menstruation or after childbirth. The following dates from the 12th century:

For only a woman is an animal that menstruates. Through touching her blood fruits will fail to get ripe. Mustard degenerates, grass dries up and trees lose their fruit before time. Iron gets rusted and the air becomes dark. When dogs eat it, they acquire rabies."

(Paucapalea, 'Summa' on Church law, *Distinctio* 5, princ.§ 2. v.)^[5]

Such supposedly “scientific” arguments were influential in confirming that women were inferior to men. In reality they are a reflection of social attitudes and are devoid of any scientific or biological validity.

Modern Understanding

Modern biology observes the differences and similarities between male and female without making value judgments for or against either sex.

All embryos will develop into girl babies unless the male hormone testosterone is present – hence boys have nipples, although they do not need them. Male brains are physically distinct from female brains in several ways. The most obvious difference occurs where the two halves of the brain – the left and right hemispheres – communicate with each other through a large bundle of nerves that is known as the corpus callosum.

In boys, fewer cross-connections develop between the two hemispheres, so the communicating corpus callosum is significantly smaller than those of girls. At the same time, in male brains, the right hemisphere forms more internal connections and so works more independently than in female brains.

As a result, boys seem to tackle some types of problem using only one side of their brain, while girls use both. This may explain why boys tend to be more interested and proficient in right-sided brain activities, such as mathematics and spatial tasks Testosterone also produces more aggressive or assertive behaviour in boys, even as infants.

(Sarah Brewer, “It’s a girl – but she knows that already”^[6] *Daily Telegraph*, Friday 24th August 2001, page 24)

These changes in the brain may explain play preferences as expressed earlier in the same article:

If a group of one-year-old infants is dressed identically, their sex is often revealed purely by the items they choose to play with: girls spend more time playing with dolls and cuddly animals, while boys show a preference for plastic tools, lorries, cars and tractors. (*Ibid*)

In a society such as has existed throughout most of world history these differences suggest that men are better at heavier, physically tougher jobs like building, hunting for food or fighting, and women are better at rearing children. There is no reason to suggest, however, that either sex is inferior to the other: characteristics of both overlap, and the strengths of both are needed to support the weakness of the other. As far as service to Christ is concerned, both sexes are exhorted to serve God fully, with compassion and kindness, feelings sometime biologically associated more with one sex than the other. Nature is transcended in service to God in Jesus, but both male and female are needed in society and in the ecclesia.

^[1] *Women in the Classical World*, (OUP 1994) pages 42-43

^[2] Though presumably not referring specifically to this statement, we have by contrast the words of Jesus: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....” (Matthew 5:43-44).

^[3] Translation quoted from <http://www.hoocher.com/procaeliotranslation.htm>

^[4] This section relies heavily on *Women in the Classical World*, (OUP 1994) by Fantham, Foley, Kampen, Pomeroy & Shapiro.

^[5] Translation: John Wijngaards, <http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/sinful.asp>

^[6] Edited extracts from *A Child's World* by Dr Sarah Brewer and Dr Alex Cutting (Headline, 2001)

Attitudes to Women in Post New Testament Times

Attitudes to Women

in Post New Testament Times

In Chapters 5 and 6 we presented a picture from the New Testament where the evidence indicated sisters and brothers in Christ working together without any obvious male/female distinction in roles. The same kind of language was used of the work of each. Paul said of Euodia and Syntyche, for example, that “they have laboured side by side with me in the Gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:2-3). From Paul’s writings in general we have observed the manner in which he refers to all believers as *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”) and encourages them to use their gifts “according to the faith that we have” – whether speaking God’s message, serving, teaching, encouraging others, sharing, holding authority, or showing kindness (Romans 12:6-8, GNB). It is a delightful picture of brothers and sisters, leading new lives in Christ, liberated from the restraints of paganism or their previous religious affiliations, and working together harmoniously.

The question can reasonably be put: if this was the position in the early ecclesias, what happened? If sisters were taking part with the brothers, what happened next? Did they continue? Were they stopped? If they were stopped, was there no protest? What evidence is there?

What Happened to the Active Part Played by Sisters?

Answers begin to emerge from the New Testament itself, and from the surrounding environment.

The two passages usually quoted for the complete silence of sisters indicate problems. We have suggested how these can be explained within their context, but the active involvement of sisters evidently led to difficulties. This is not surprising, when viewed against the keep-women-restricted backgrounds as portrayed in our Chapter 3 (“Women at the Time of Jesus”) and Chapter 26 (“Attitudes to Women in the Greek/Roman World”). In Thessalonica the complaint was made against Paul and Silas that “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6). It was the nature of Jesus’ teaching and that of the early ecclesias to turn things “upside down” in numerous ways. Jews, Greeks, Romans all had something to lose. When people are turned to new ideas, the revolutionary movement can be sustained for a while, but it is difficult to maintain the change for long. This can be noted in three areas: the sharing of goods, freedom from the Law, and the active involvement of sisters.

“Everything in Common”

The early church in Jerusalem made a promising start in sharing.

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors

of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

But the good intentions soon began to go sour, as the sad incident of Ananias and Sapphira testifies. The believers continued to show concern and to share, but not at the original level. And not readily. Paul had to rebuke those at Corinth who thought only of themselves.

When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

“Every One that Believes is Freed”

Paul preached a freedom not available under the Law of Moses.

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39)

He taught, indeed, that literal circumcision was no longer necessary: circumcision of the heart (a spiritual change) being alone of real value.

He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God. (Romans 2:29)

Peter was given a vision in Acts 10, in which God revealed to him the same teaching. Peter explained to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his companions:

“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” (Acts 10:28)

And Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35)

There was a reaction against this teaching, a reaction within the fellowship of the believers.

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:5)

Even Peter, despite his vision in Acts 10, drew back when under pressure from those who wished to conform to former ways. So too did Barnabas.

But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. But when I saw

that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all... (Galatians 2:11-14)

There was a reaction in the opposite direction too. Some felt that all constraints were now to be thrown off. They were free from the Law. They could do as they liked.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:1-2)

“Neither Male nor Female”

Paul taught a new beginning in Christ, a new family.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

But here too lay major problems. The world inevitably put its pressures on the early church. Slavery couldn't be abolished, for the Roman economy was too dependent on it. Its severity could, however, be mitigated until times changed. “Neither Jew nor Greek” was a problem to the Jewish believers, but it *could* be implemented: the Roman Empire was very international anyway. But “neither male nor female” was up against strong society pressures.

Women had not been accustomed to the kind of freedom they were to enjoy in the ecclesias of Paul's day. Often ill-educated, some no doubt proved troublesome, hence passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, in whatever context we consider them. Others at places like Ephesus may have been better educated and felt they had a right to teach others because of their pre-Christian status even before they had learned Christian doctrine properly. Some became involved in gnostic-type speculation. Hence 1 Timothy 2:12. Not that sisters had the monopoly of causing trouble to the believers: brothers were far more often criticised.

Once persecution arose, a need was felt to be as conformist as possible to preserve the inner core of the faith.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing.

(1 Peter 2:13-18)

This is not the kind of environment where a new involvement of women could easily thrive. And once their new freedom had become restricted, it was easily restricted further by the influence of anti-women thinking imported from the pagan world. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 then became the normative texts, and the wider role demonstrated in the rest of the

New Testament, and the new attitude towards women shown by Jesus and the early believers, were ignored.

Moves away from New Testament Teaching

Several changes can be noticed which confirm the kind of trend we are describing here and which count further against an involved role for women.

Leadership was narrowed down to a male priesthood, the Breaking of Bread became ritualised, texts were altered to downplay the position of women, women were blamed for all the world's troubles, and Old Testament purity laws were reintroduced. Pagan teachings and attitudes began to be imported, especially when Christianity became state-supported under Constantine. All of these downgraded women, and all are contrary to New Testament teaching.

Leadership was Narrowed

Leadership was narrowed down to a single male bishop, and there came about a corresponding increase in distance between laity and clergy.

All of you follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as the Apostles; and respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist over which the bishop presides, or one to whom he commits it. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as, wheresoever Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not permitted to baptise or hold a love-feast apart from the bishop.

(Ignatius, c.112 AD, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, 8)

The Fellowship Meal was Ritualised

Instead of the Breaking of Bread being a meeting for communal sharing in memory of Jesus, the meaning was transferred to the bread and wine which were then regarded as sacred objects.

... we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus. (Justin Martyr, c. 150 AD, *Apology* 55)

Let every one of the faithful take steps to receive the eucharist before he eats anything else. For if he receives in faith, even if some deadly thing is given him, after that it shall not overpower him. Let everyone take care that no unbeliever eats of the eucharist, nor any mouse or other animal, and that none of it falls and is lost. For it is the body of Christ, to be eaten by believers, and not to be despised.

(Hippolytus, c. 200 AD, *Apostolic Tradition*, 36-37)

Anti-women Tampering with the Bible Text

We rely on a large number of handwritten manuscripts in Greek to provide us with our text of the New Testament. Interestingly, it can be observed that alterations were made in the second century in such a way as to downplay the reported involvement and importance of women.

Because these changes are not followed in the majority of manuscripts, the original text can easily be identified. But the changes suggest a climate in which some scribes were not happy to see women prominently involved.

The changes are slight, but significant in the thinking they betray. They indicate an anti-women swing in at least some circles in the early churches. In Matthew 14:21 it was reported “And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children”, but this was altered to read “besides children and women”, the supposed logic being that the children would include some males, so these should be given more importance in the list than women.

In Acts 17:4 the original text reported the converts as “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women”. This was altered to read “the wives of leading citizens”: it would not do to have *leading* women! Likewise, when the names “Priscilla and Aquila appeared”, these were reversed so as to put Priscilla second. Sometimes Priscilla was even dropped out, a fate which also happened to Paul’s single female convert at Athens mentioned in Acts 17:33: Damaris is omitted in the Bezae manuscript. One change could have been a scribal slip, but there are too many of a consistent type for this to be the case. In Colossians 4:15 Paul sends greetings to “Nympha and the church in her house”. This was altered to read “Nymphas and the church in his house”! Some of these changes came into the Latin text, the Vulgate, and into the text used to translate the 1611 King James Version, so those who altered the texts to diminish the role of women had considerable success in minimising the historically important involvement of women in the early Christian movement.^[1]

Women Blamed for Everything

Women were blamed for the world’s ills in a manner thoroughly contrary to the teaching Jesus and Paul. We have already quoted Tertullian, c. 200 AD:

You are the devil’s gateway; *you* are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree; *you* are the first deserter of the divine law; *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian, *On Female Dress* 1:1)

The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas ends with Mary being saved by becoming a man.

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Gospel of Thomas, Saying 114, Nag Hammadi papyri)

So much for Luke 1:48: “All generations will call me blessed.”

Return to Old Testament Purity Laws

In some areas a ban on women attending during menstruation was introduced.

Menstruous women ought not to come to the Holy Table, or touch the Holy of Holies, nor to churches, but pray elsewhere.

(Canon 2, The Canons of Dionysius, Archbishop of Alexandria, 247 AD)

This ruling was contrary to widespread previous practice, but was enforced further as time went by. Note too how holiness was transferred from people, to things: “the Holy table”, parts of the church building becoming “Holy of Holies”.

The teaching that women were to blame for all this world’s ills, added to the idea that they were unclean, was developed into a hatred for women as such and sex within marriage was disapproved of: the proper Christian approach was celibacy for men and virginity for women.

Those known as the “Early Fathers” adopted interpretations of Genesis from extra-Biblical sources such as the Apocrypha and from Jewish and pagan traditions. They mixed these with pagan anti-women medical understanding and constructed a strongly anti-women theology.

It does not profit a man to marry. For what is a woman but an enemy of friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a domestic danger, delectable mischief, a fault in nature, painted with beautiful colours?

(Attributed to John Chrysostom (347-407), Bishop of Constantinople)

Pagan Attitudes Imported

After Constantine (c.285-337), many aspects of pagan worship and of Roman Imperial Rule were adopted, including church buildings in the style of Roman temples (with platforms, altars, relics, and paintings), and special clothing for the clergy, imitating that of male Roman magistrates.

Pope Gregory (540-604), gave the following advice on how to convert the English:

...we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there.

Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, I.30

(Penguin translation, page 86)^[2]

With changes such as these, which indicate a move away from the original gospel and from New Testament ecclesial belief and practice, it is easy to see how the New Testament’s initial involvement of women and the freedoms granted them there were eliminated.

Recollection of Paul’s Original Teaching?

Memory of that original involvement – very clear from the apostle Paul’s letters – may, however, be preserved in a second-century apocryphal book *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. This is not an authentic historical account; it is a religious novel, extolling chastity and celibacy in a manner the apostle did not. But in its comments about the involvement of women, it seems to be in line with Paul’s letters. If it had been known at that early date that Paul did not allow and did not encourage women to teach, we might wonder why (when the climate seemed to have turned against women’s activity), the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* speaks as if such activity was normal for Paul and his companions:

Paul, taking her, led her to the house of Hermaeus, and heard everything from her, so that those that heard greatly wondered, and were comforted, and prayed over Tryphaena. She rose up, and said: I am going to Iconium. Paul said: “Go, and teach the word of God”. Tryphaena sent her much clothing and gold, so that she left to Paul many things for the service of the poor.

She went to Iconium. She went into the house of Onesiphorus, and fell upon the pavement where Paul used to sit and teach her, and wept, saying: “God of myself and of this house, where Thou didst make the light to shine upon me, O Christ Jesus, the Son of the living God, my help in the fire, my help among the wild beasts, Thou art glorified for ever. Amen.” She found Thamyris dead, but her mother alive. Having sent for her mother, she said: “Theocleia, my mother, canst thou believe that the Lord liveth in the heavens? For whether thou desirest wealth, God gives it to thee through me; or thy child, I am standing beside thee.” Having thus testified, she departed to Seleucia, and dwelt in a cave seventy-two years, living upon herbs and water. She enlightened many by the word of God.

(*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 41-43)^[3]

In Later Times

The Monastic System

Under the monastic system a leadership role for women was created, perhaps arising out of the position of deaconesses in earlier years. The most famous is probably Hilda, Abbess of Whitby, who died in 680 AD aged sixty-six.

Hilda ... undertook to organise a monastery at a place known as Streanaeshalch [Whitby], and carried out this appointed task with great energy. She established the same regular life as in her former monastery, and taught the observance of righteousness, mercy, purity, and other virtues, but especially peace and charity. After the example of the primitive Church, no one there was rich, no one was needy, for everything was held in common, and nothing was considered to be anyone’s personal property. So great was her prudence that not only ordinary folk, but kings and princes used to come and ask her advice in their difficulties and take it. Those under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and occupy themselves in good works. ... Five men from this monastery later became bishops

(Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, IV, 23)

Misogyny (Hatred of Women)

This positive attitude towards women was not shared by Gerald of Wales. In 1188 he went on a tour with the Archbishop of Canterbury to encourage Welshmen to go on the Crusades. He reported a selection of anti-women comments with approval.

It is not to be wondered at if a woman bears malice, for this comes to her naturally. We read in Ecclesiastes: "One man among a thousand have I found: but a woman among all those have I not found." Similarly we read in Ecclesiasticus: "There is no head above the head of a serpent; and there is no wrath above the wrath of a woman"; and again in the same book: "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman." Just as we may gather gooseberries from among the thorns or pick prickly pears from cactus plants, so, when he is describing the nature of woman, Cicero says: "It may well happen that men will be guilty of one sinful deed in an attempt to gain some personal advantage; but women will not hesitate to commit every crime in the calendar simply to satisfy a passing whim."

(Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, Book I, Chapter 2)^[4]

Off the coast of Anglesey lies "Priests' Island", so named because it was inhabited by hermits. Gerald of Wales reported: "No women are ever allowed on the island" (Book II, Chapter 7).

At the back of Durham Cathedral visitors are shown a line of stones, marking a pre-reformation barrier behind which women had to remain.

Misogyny reached its highest extent in the persecution of witches. There is a strong theological background. Pope Innocent VIII in 1484 enthusiastically approved a book *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of the Witches"). Thousands of innocent women were burned at the stake as a consequence of the type of thinking shown here:

What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours.

It should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. ...

(When Eve answered the serpent) she showed that she doubted and had little faith in the word of God. All this is indicated by the etymology of the word; for *Femina* (Latin for "woman") comes from *Fe* (=faith) and *Minus* (=less) since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith.^[5]

(Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, *The Hammer of the Witches*, page 43)^[6]

Protestant Leadership

After the Reformation, leadership amongst the Protestants was almost entirely male. Luther produced varying statements about women, some advocating their education, but others demanding the usual domestic role: "Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house, bear and bring up children."

John Knox (1514-1572), leader of the Reformation in Scotland, attacked any idea of leadership by women. His treatise is directed in particular to the then queen of Scotland, Mary Queen of Scots, cousin of Queen Elizabeth of England:

... God has pronounced sentence in these words: “Thy will shall be subject to thy husband, and he shall bear dominion over thee” (Gen. 3:16). As [though] God should say, “Forasmuch as you have abused your former condition, and because your free will has brought yourself and mankind into the bondage of Satan, I therefore will bring you in bondage to man. For where before your obedience should have been voluntary, now it shall be by constraint and by necessity; and that because you have deceived your man, you shall therefore be no longer mistress over your own appetites, over your own will or desires. For in you there is neither reason nor discretion which are able to moderate your affections, and therefore they shall be subject to the desire of your man. He shall be lord and governor, not only over your body, but even over your appetites and will.” This sentence, I say, did God pronounce against Eve and her daughters, as the rest of the scriptures do evidently witness. So that no woman can ever presume to reign above man.

(John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet*)

Note how John Knox uses a mistranslation of Genesis 3:16 and regards women as so mentally weak (“in you there is neither reason nor discretion”) that they have to be ruled over by husbands. His perception of what “the rest of the scriptures do evidently witness” displays a considerable lack of awareness of what they actually witness.

When Queen Elizabeth of England died, she was succeeded by the son of Mary Queen of Scots, James I of England and VI of Scots. It was this James who authorised the King James version of the Bible. He increased the persecution of witches. He was nearly shipwrecked, and accused witches of causing the storm at sea. He wrote a book, *Daemonologie*, in which he asserted that witchcraft appealed particularly to women. He considered that they were more susceptible to “the snares of the Devil as was ever well proved to be true by the Serpent’s deceiving of Eve at the beginning.” He concluded that there were twenty times as many female witches as there were male, and he introduced harsher penalties for witchcraft.^[7]

As is now well-known, almost all women who were tortured and killed as witches were innocent of any crime but once charges were made, anything they said in their defence was used instead by their accusers to incriminate them.

Anabaptists

Amongst some of the anabaptists, from whom in certain aspects Christadelphians take their descent, women again took an active part in church meetings.

... an order of worship beginning with prayer and ending with the admonition to steadfastness, a service in which, besides the *Vorsteher* [chief elder], all the members one after another rise to read the Scriptures or the communal writing, to discourse, and to prophesy.

(Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1st edition, page 795)

“Prophecy” here probably means what we mean by “exhort”.^[8]

The laity, both men and women, began to take over priestly ministries, preaching, celebrating communion and baptising. There is documentary evidence that women engaged in ‘corner’ preaching and evangelism. (Hans Jürgen-Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, page 115)^[9]

They did this because of their confidence in “the priesthood of all believers”, the same doctrine by which we as Christadelphians reject any laity/clergy division.

Christ is our high priest and head and all of us are his members. Now if the head is a priest, so the hands, fingers, legs, feet, toes, body and members are priests as well.

(Johannes Brötli, quoted in *The Anabaptists*, page 115)

Post-Reformation Times

In the post-reformation period some women took an active part in teaching and preaching. These tended to be in the nonconformist sects, but they did not do so without opposition. In the 1700s women took a leading part in the Quaker movement, and a pamphlet was written on the role of women by Margaret Fell. But as time went on and Quakers became more established, there were Quakers who criticised women for their speaking.

As a result of not being able to take a vocal part in church worship or an active part in church leadership, women put their energies into charity work and social involvement amongst the underprivileged.

The Sunday School movement got under way with the strong support of women – and again there was protest by some men against the involvement of women in teaching.^[10]

In 1859 Catherine Mumford Booth, wife of the founder of the “Salvation Army”, produced a spirited defence of preaching by women. It was reissued in 1861 with a reply added in response to a scornful pamphlet by the Rev. A. A. Rees of Sunderland who scoffed at a woman preacher as “impudent and mannish grown”, with discourse, gesture and appearance calculated “to shock one’s delicacy, truth or sense”. To which Catherine Booth replied: “At present, we are unacquainted with anything of the kind in a female teacher or preacher.” The main work deals with the usual texts in a scholarly manner and points out the bias with which they have often been used.

If commentators had dealt with the Bible on other subjects as they have dealt with it on this, taking isolated passages, separated from their explanatory connections, and insisting on a literal interpretation of the words of our version, what errors and contradictions would have been forced upon the acceptance of the Church, and what terrible results would have accrued to the world. ... In short, “there is no end to the errors in faith and practice which have resulted from taking isolated passages, wrested from their proper connections, or the light thrown upon them by other Scriptures, and applying them to sustain a favourite theory.” Judging from the blessed results which have almost invariably followed the ministrations of women in the cause of Christ, we fear it will be found, in the great day of account, that a mistaken and unjustifiable application of the passage, “Let your women keep silence in the Churches,” has resulted in

more loss to the Church, evil to the world, and dishonour to God, than any of the errors we have already referred to.

(Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry or a Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (1859), page 23)^[11]

Dr John Thomas, who was the founder of our Christadelphian community wrote that the woman was intended to be “a dependent creature”. We have suggested that Genesis does not teach this. Drawing on a mixture of ancient and modern thought, and mixing 1 Corinthians 11 (out of context) with Genesis 1 & 2, Dr Thomas says: “the woman’s companionship was designed to be intellectually and morally sympathetic with ‘the image and glory of God,’ whom she was to revere as her superior” (*Elpis Israel*, page 42, first edition 1849). It is an interesting comment, on the one hand saying that women are intellectually and morally at a level with men (something usually denied by church tradition and pagan teaching), but, on the other, stating the view of church tradition and pagan teaching that man is superior to woman. That women are intellectually and morally at a level with men is the meaning of a “helper fit for him”; the idea that she was created to be “a dependent creature” is church tradition, not the teaching of Genesis nor the position Jesus accords to women.

For much of the period above and up to the 20th century it was argued that women are intellectually and morally incapable of teaching or preaching. Once it was demonstrated that women could capably do both, the argument was switched to say that although they had the ability, it was not their role to do these things. The term “role” was only introduced towards the end of the 20th century, and although we and others have used it in examining the work done by sisters, it is worth being aware that it is not a Biblical term.

^[1] See Ben Witherington, “The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the ‘Western’ Text in Acts”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, CIII (1984), pages 82-84; also www.bibletexts.com, where this information is given and where it is suggested that 1 Corinthians 14:35 was added as an anti-women interpolation in the early second century.

^[2] See *Pagan Christianity* by Frank Viola and George Barna (2008), page 24, and throughout.

^[3] Text of this and other early sources from the “Church Fathers” can be found, in English, at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>.

^[4] Penguin Classics, page 90, translated by Lewis Thorpe.

^[5] This, of course, is fake etymology. The word *femina* means “one who brings forth”.

^[6] These quotes are helpfully provided on the web site run by those who would like to see the Roman Catholic Church reverse its historic opposition to women priests:
<http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/sinful.asp>

^[7] Ruth A. Tucker & Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Zondervan, 1987), pages 207-208.

^[8] As commented in an early Christadelphian constitution: “The Constitution of the Antipas Association of Believers in Nottingham”, *Ambassador of the Coming Age* (i.e. *The Christadelphian*), Vol. III, March 1866, pages 54-55, based on 1 Corinthians 14:31 (“Ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.”) “Exhortation is, therefore, part of prophesying. ... Exhortation is hortatory instruction of a consoling character, founded on the testimony of God. ... In consenting, therefore to suffer prophesying uninspired men, of ordinary talents and information, brethren will be expected to restrict themselves to fifteen minutes at the most....”

^[9] Hans Jürgen-Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, translated into English by Trevor Johnson, (Routledge, 1996).

^[10] *Daughters of the Church – Women and ministry from New Testament times to the present*, Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld (Zondervan, 1987), page 250.

^[11] Quoted from <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/booth/ministry.html>

Attitudes to Women in Christadelphian Writings

Attitudes to Women

in Christadelphian Writings

Anyone attending Christadelphian meetings will for the most part find them led entirely by men. In numbers, sisters will be slightly in the majority, though less so than in many communities. But most of the public activities are done by brothers, not sisters. Brothers are “on the door” to greet you and give you a warm welcome. They take it in turn to preside, speak, read the Bible publicly, and give the prayers. Brothers carry round the plate with the bread and the cup with the wine. A brother reads the announcements, and organises the collection bags. Afterwards, a brother counts the money and banks it. Behind the scenes, the main picture is similar. A committee called “The Arranging Brethren” (or sometimes “The Managing Brethren”), all male, oversee the general running of the ecclesia. They are responsible, however, to the ecclesia as a whole, and sisters have an equal vote with brothers in selecting office-bearers including The Arranging Brethren, and in voting by show of hands at business meetings. In many ecclesias, however, a sister may not comment in discussion other than by passing a note to her husband to read out.

Sisters often play the organ to accompany singing and to provide a voluntary to begin and end the meeting. Sisters generally set out the bread and wine on the table and clear away afterwards. During the meeting they stay silent, except that they sing hymns.

At Bible Classes or mid-week fellowship meetings, the picture is similar, though sisters at informal classes may participate in “reading round” (taking it in turns to read a few verses of the Bible) when a chapter is read through by the whole group one by one. Sometimes sisters may ask questions or contribute comments.

In other activities the sisters play a fuller part. As do brothers, they teach in Sunday School, act as secretaries on preaching committees or as booking secretaries for conferences. They teach by writing booklets and magazine articles. On preaching campaigns they distribute leaflets and speak from door to door about our faith. Food preparation for fraternal gatherings or ecclesial lunches, hall-cleaning, and putting flowers on display are usually but not exclusively done by sisters.

This is the general picture, readily recognisable. The question raised in this book, without demeaning the service offered by any brother or sister, is whether this male/female pattern is a truly Biblical way of arranging our activities. How much are we following Bible teaching, ecclesiastical tradition, or secular attitudes of previous centuries?

A Varied Picture

Though the male-orientated description given here is fairly typical, it is a long way from being the full picture. The position is not as uniform as it might appear.

In some ecclesias sisters preside, pray and give papers at Bible Classes; they read the Bible at the Sunday meeting, give preaching talks, and participate in Bible seminar presentations. In some ecclesias the treasurer is a sister. At conferences and gatherings sisters give talks and lead workshops. These practices have become increasingly usual in recent decades, but can be traced back to the 1800s. Those who participate in this wider manner defend it as a correct application of Biblical principles. Since their contribution to ecclesial activities is more than

that usually envisaged in many ecclesias, they do so with a conscious awareness of why their participation is Biblical.

Circumstances Alter Cases

Here is an account reporting what happened in the 1860s or 1870s when Christadelphians were becoming established in the Mississippi area of America. The number of believers was very few, and a sister wrote:

... I want to tell you of these humble, simple worshippers that I met with that summer. To begin with, I wonder if “circumstances alter cases” in matters of the truth as in everything else. Be that as it may, I do not see how that little ecclesia ever could have lived had the sisters not taken an active part in the worship.

....

Those eight, each and everyone, took a part in the meeting, and I have never since seen such zeal, enthusiasm, and devotion. One brother read the lesson, a second prayed, a third took charge of the table, and a fourth led in singing. One sister read from the *Christadelphian*; second, the thoughts she had noted down during the week, when reading her daily lessons; third, selection of hymn; and fourth, she always did the same thing—read a few verses from the Bible.

(“A Sister’s Narrative for Sisters, On Attaining the Truth Under Difficulties”, *The Christadelphian*, July 1, 1883, page 315)

The sister (a schoolteacher called Oriana Turney, identified here only by her initials O. L. T.) felt that the enthusiasm of the eight members of the ecclesia, and the value of their individual contributions, outweighed any consideration that sisters should be silent in the meeting: “circumstances alter cases”. This seems a reasonable deduction in itself, and more recently similar advice was given by the Bible Mission to an ecclesia in Africa where the sisters were more literate than the brothers. It was suggested that the sisters should read the Bible in the meetings – but only until the brothers became well enough educated to do so instead. Presumably in the case of the ecclesia in Mississippi, once numbers had increased the brothers took over and the sisters became silent. But if the sisters were able to contribute in an orderly manner, does it not seem a pity and a neglect of a God-given natural resource to restrict the sisters in this way – as well as depriving the sisters of the enjoyment of participation?

In Private or Public?

In 1884, in a reply to a correspondent, Robert Roberts (founder and editor of *The Christadelphian*) approved the involvement of sisters provided it was not at a public meeting:

Sisters taking part

H.T.J.R. – As regards the conduct of public assemblies, it is an imperative apostolic rule in harmony with the natural fitness of things, that women should keep silence. Paul’s words are

plain, "It is not permitted to them to speak" (1 Cor. xiv. 34). But as regards a private company of believers, such as you describe, especially where, as you say, the sisters are better qualified, and greater in number, than the brethren, it would be pedantic to apply Paul's rule to the exclusion of their useful help. Let them take part in the reading and other exercises you mention, and be thankful that you have sisters among you capable of making up your deficiencies. All Paul's precepts are prompted and governed by what is reasonable and seemly. Rules for public meetings do not apply in other circumstances. Paul mentions women who laboured with him in the Gospel (Phil. iv. 3), though he forbids their appearance before an audience.

(*The Christadelphian*, March 1884, pages 128-129)

But is this distinction between public and private valid in itself or one taught by the New Testament?

The issue of sisters' involvement kept being raised. Obviously some felt the position was not satisfactory. Robert Roberts gave the following answer:

WHY DO NOT SISTERS SPEAK IN PUBLIC?

—S. J.— The reasons why sisters do not take part in prayer and exhortation in Christadelphian assemblies, is because of the apostolic interdict, "Let your women keep silence in the churches," (1 Cor. xiv. 34); "I suffer not a woman to teach" (1 Tim. ii. 12). These words are very precise and clear, and they are in harmony with the natural fitness of things, which has some weight in the decision, as illustrated in Paul's question, "*Doth not even nature itself teach you?*" Paul's reference to women "praying or prophesying" must be understood in agreement with his other statements. They can be so understood. The gift of prophecy by the pouring out of the Spirit was not confined to brethren: The promise was "On my servants and on my handmaidens will I pour out in those days of my spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts ii. 18). But this prophesying, in the case of women, appears to have been privately performed, as in the case of Philip's four daughters (Acts xxi. 8-9). There is no case on record in the apostolic writings, of the public exercise of any office by a woman. Women are very visible throughout the whole work, but it is always in a private capacity. (*The Christadelphian*, January 1886, page 5)

A Wise Woman's Influence and a Wise Woman's Voice

Robert Roberts was no male chauvinist. He advocated listening to advice from sisters and wives, considering only that women were forbidden to speak and teach in public.

... there is another lesson in the 16th chap. of Rom., which comes as a counteraction to the ideas that some have drawn from Paul's remarks elsewhere on the position of woman in the ecclesia. Paul has said "Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law." There is a tendency with some to drive this doctrine to an extreme. I have heard some speak contemptuously of the sisters as "mere women, only fit to nurse babies, and look after the pudding." Against such a doctrine, every true brother will earnestly protest. It is not only degrading to her whom God has given us for "an helpmeet," but it is inconsistent with the spirit

of the gospel which teaches that there is neither male nor female in Christ: *that we are all one in Christ Jesus*. It is probably the natural extreme of the theory which flourishes on the other side of the water, and is equally to be reprobated in Christ. The one puts woman too high, and the other most certainly too low—so low as only tyrannical and selfish men would put them. Paul's allusions in the chapter referred to, help us to put the right boundary to Paul's doctrine of feminine subjection in the other case. He commends to the attention of the Roman ecclesia one Phoebe, a sister, whom he distinguishes as "a servant of the church at Cenchrea." This implies a prominent, active, if not official position on the part of the sister in question. He further distinguishes her by making her the bearer of the epistle to the Romans, of which, for a time, she was the sole custodian. He entreats the whole Roman ecclesia on her behalf, saying of her that "she hath been *a succourer of many, and of me also*." In the next verse, he mentions another sister Priscilla, as one who had with her husband, for Paul's life laid down her own neck. In verse 6, he sends love to "Mary, who bestowed much labour on him." Further down he salutes among others, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Julia and the sister of Nereus, and the mother of Rufus. This is a standing apostolic recognition of the high place which sisters may fill in the Lord, if in the grace of God, they have wisdom sufficient. True, there are not many such, but that is a misfortune of our times, and not a necessity of the thing itself. It may account for the cynical views of some, but ought not to be allowed to justify an unnatural, mischievous, and unscriptural theory. Sisters are never likely to develop into noble servants of Christ if the door is shut in their face, by a theory which would consign them to cradles, pots and pans. I do not mean to suggest that pots and pans are incompatible with higher duties, any more than the hammers, shoe lasts, or baking troughs of their rougher brethren, but a doctrine which would tie them all the time to these, is an offence and a mischief. It is the part of true nobility to shine in the performance of the humblest duties, we will not say "stoop," or "condescend," because there is no stooping in the case. These humble duties, which are most important in the economy of life, become exalted in the hands of intelligence and worth. But to insist on confining sisters to these, would be to ignore the fact that they have brains as well as bodies; and that men have other needs of help-meetship, besides those of knife and fork. Such a boorish doctrine would destroy companionship, where brethren need it most, and unfit their wives to fulfil the highest function of motherhood, which is to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In fact it is a doctrine to be opposed and detested as much as any hurtful doctrine may be. The man who holds, and much more the man who preaches it, deserves to be deprived of every social advantage and be shut up in a cave. This in fact, is his destiny at last. If a sister is an intelligent, active, useful, noble servant of Christ, her being a sister is no disqualification or barrier; it only precludes her from the act of public speaking and involves subjection to her husband. It does not shut her up to babies, pots and pans, though these will dutifully receive the right share of attention at her hands. She is a partner, a helper, a fellow-heir in all things pertaining to Christ, and the man who would degrade her from this position, is not fit for a place in the body of Christ.

(The Christadelphian, July 1874, pages 312-314)

Shortly before he died he made a preaching tour of Australia and New Zealand. He tried to settle disputes where they arose, and the role and influence of sisters was an issue of contention in Dunedin.

... it was what may be called old man-ism that was at the root of the trouble. The question, who should be chief, is the most destructive of all discords: "When pride cometh, then cometh contention." It is the Lord's express command to all who aspire to be his disciples: "Be servants: take the lowest place." "If any among you desire to be chief, the same shall be last of all." When the reasonable spirit of modest self-assessment prevails, dis-union is impossible; for each holds the other up instead of pulling him down. In this case, the affair was mixed up with the question: "Should women rule?" "Does not Paul forbid her to 'usurp authority over the man'?" If this question is treated in the spirit the Lord prescribes for all his brethren, there will be no danger or even question of the woman usurping authority over the man. If the last thing is for man to usurp authority over his brother—if, as Peter commands, "all are clothed with humility and all are subject one to another"—there will be no room for the usurpation of either man or woman to come in. But in point of fact, there was no question of usurpation, though Paul's interdict was quoted. It was in reality a question of whether woman's voice was to be heard in consultation or suggestion. There was no question of public speaking. All were agreed that the law of the Lord prohibited woman's voice from being heard in public assembly. The question really was whether in the non-public working or management of things, woman's voice might be allowed a place. The question seems an extraordinary one. The Lord's law is never directed to the prescription of impossibilities. You can no more suppress a wise woman's influence and a wise woman's voice, than you can suppress the law of gravitation. You may prevent her delivering a public address: but you cannot prevent her giving good counsel, and you ought not. Though woman, by divine law is in subjection, she is not to be extinguished. If man is her head, it is not to domineer over her, but to protect and cherish and serve her in honour "as the weaker vessel," content with the casting vote in matters of difference, which is the extent of his superior privilege. If the Scriptures appoint man as her head, they do not exclude her from partnership in all that concerns their mutual well-being. They show us women "labouring with Paul in the gospel" (Phillip iv. 3): as official servants of an ecclesia with business in hand, which the ecclesia was called upon to promote (Rom. xvi. 1-3): exercising the prophetic gift (Acts xxi. 9); prominently ministering to Christ himself (Luke viii. 2-3): sometimes leaders in Israel, like Deborah (Judg. iv. 4). The denial of public speech to women is as far as we are justified in repressing them. I have seen tyrannical and unsympathetic men wrongly using Paul's authority to put down and quench godly women more qualified than they themselves to exercise judgment and give counsel. Let women certainly be modest, but let her not be reduced to a cypher, which God never intended. She is intended as a comrade and a help which she greatly is, when enlightened and treated rightly. We ought to be thankful when women turn up who are able to help with wise suggestion. To object to such on the score of "ruling the ecclesia," is to evince either a shameful misconception of duty or an itch for headship which disqualifies for the true service of the ecclesia. No man who wants to be head is fit to be head. The headship that comes from service is the only headship that is either useful or tolerable, or, in the long run, possible. Where the spirit of exalting each other, instead of exalting ourselves prevails (as Christ commands) there is little danger of difficulty arising, and an easy settlement of them when they do arise.

(Robert Roberts, *A Voyage to Australia*, pages 141-142,

Saturday February 29th, 1896,

first printed in *The Christadelphian*, February 1897, pages 60-61)

It is evident that Robert Roberts held women in high esteem; in this he was in accord with the progressive atmosphere of the times.^[1] In the 1860s (at the same time as the Christadelphian community was increasing in numbers) there was a growing movement in support of women's suffrage. Voting by women, for instance, was introduced in municipal elections in Britain in 1869, and universal suffrage in New Zealand in 1893. When Robert Roberts drew up *The Ecclesial Guide* in 1883, sisters held the same position as brothers when voting for ecclesial offices and activities, but like the 1869 Act of Parliament, although women could vote for offices, they couldn't stand for election themselves.

His emphasis on humility, on being subject to one another, on listening to wise counsel whether spoken by sister or brother, contains the seeds to encouraging full involvement of sisters in every aspect of ecclesial life according to ability and spiritual maturity. In Wanganui he met a sister who appears to have been one of the "Arranging Brethren":

I was also introduced to sister Dexter, whose characteristics are described in many a Scripture specification of womanly excellence, and whose serving capacities are so highly appreciated that she has been appointed "a managing *brother!*" Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, was an excellent managing brother, to whom Barak naturally took the second place.

(Robert Roberts, *A Voyage to Australia*, page 117,

Monday January 20th, 1896,

first printed in *The Christadelphian*, November 1896, page 421)^[2]

Speaking in Public

The sticking point, however, seems to be speaking "in public". It is worth analysing, therefore, the explanation given in 1886.

The context of 1 Corinthians 14 suggests this should not be understood as an apostolic interdict on all speaking (see pages 52-62).

WHY DO NOT SISTERS SPEAK

IN PUBLIC?

"Natural fitness" tends to be subjective, varying from generation to generation.

Neither precise, nor clear.

This is also qualified by its context. Women acceptably teach elsewhere in Scripture.

Euodia and Syntyche “these women ... have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.”

“Always in a private capacity”?

–S. J.– The reasons why sisters do not take part in prayer and exhortation in Christadelphian assemblies, is because of the apostolic interdict, “Let your women keep silence in the churches,” (1 Cor. xiv. 34); “I suffer not a woman to teach” (1 Tim. ii. 12). These words are very precise and clear, and they are in harmony with the natural fitness of things, which has some weight in the decision, as illustrated in Paul’s question, “*Doth not even nature itself teach you?*” Paul’s reference to women “praying or prophesying” must be understood in agreement with his other statements. They can be so understood. The gift of prophecy by the pouring out of the Spirit was not confined to brethren: The promise was “On my servants and *on my handmaidens* will I pour out in those days of my spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts ii. 18). But this prophesying, in the case of women, appears to have been privately performed, as in the case of Philip’s four daughters (Acts xxi. 8-9). There is no case on record in the apostolic writings, of the public exercise of any office by a woman. Women are very visible throughout the whole work, but it is always in a private capacity.

Phoebe, “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae” and prophetesses in 1 Corinthians 11. Is this not “the public exercise of an office by a woman”?

Note the give-away word “appears”.

1 Corinthians repeatedly shows that prophesying is a public activity – and by both sexes, 1 Cor. 11 & 14.



1 Corinthians 11, from where this is quoted, approves of sisters speaking in the meeting.

Agreed, so reassessment is needed.

Is there any evidence or likelihood of prophesying being done in private?

Euodia and Syntyche “these women ... have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.”

“always in a private capacity”?

(The Christadelphian, January 1886, page 5)

We suggest that there are so many holes in the argument presented here by Robert Roberts that this passage alone gives strong reason why the position should be re-examined.

When is “in public” not “in public”?

When Jane Roberts (wife of Robert Roberts the editor) produced an address for a “Tea Meeting” of the “Young Women of the Birmingham Ecclesia” in the Athenaeum Hall, 29th December 1881, it was read by her husband. So too in 1883.

In Victorian times, even in the academic community, it was thought unseemly for a woman to address an audience:

... the Social Science Association (founded in 1857) admitted women to membership. Initially papers submitted by women had to be read by male colleagues – such was the contemporary abhorrence of women on the public platform... (Tom Begg, *The Excellent Women* – *The Origins and History of Queen Margaret College*, page 8)^[3]

But in 1893 there is “An Address Read at the Opening of a Sisters’ Bible Class” by C. H. J. (Sister Jannaway, probably) and this she read herself. However, the explanation is given:

Let us not suppose that our meeting is the Church, or that it is in any way public. It is simply a private gathering of sisters. We assemble in this hall as a matter of convenience, but the hall does not in any way affect the private character of our meeting.

(*The Christadelphian*, September 1893, page 332)

The advice and teaching given by these sisters is practical, sensible, spiritual, and well worth the attention of brothers too, which is no doubt why the texts of these addresses were printed in *The Christadelphian*.

‘Getting Round’ Scriptural Injunctions

The above occasion may not have been attended by any members of the public, and no brothers were present, but to speak to a large audience can hardly be described as *not* in public!

And we should ask:

(1) Is a meeting exclusively of sisters not a meeting of the Church?

(2) Should such a meeting from which brothers are excluded not be considered contrary to the unity of the ecclesia, or even an example of sisters usurping authority by not permitting brothers to be present?

(3) Does speaking to a meeting in a public hall, albeit a private meeting, not constitute public speaking?

The reasons for holding sisters’ classes are excellent in themselves: to enable sisters to speak and discuss aloud, and thus benefit from study, preparation and mutual interchange of views in the same way as brothers do at Bible Classes.

But on the other hand, if sisters should not teach because Eve was deceived, if they should keep silent, if they should ask their husbands at home if they wish to know anything, surely sisters classes are as much avoiding these commands as if brothers were present?

The assertions about public/private teaching were a way of justifying a course of action by arguing that there was no technical breach of a Scriptural injunction. Much the same has often been done since. Sometimes Bible Classes are opened in prayer, a talk is given by a brother, then the class is closed in prayer – so that sisters can then take part in the discussion. It is considered no longer a meeting of the ecclesia (the meeting having been closed in prayer), so rules that sisters must remain silent no longer apply. Likewise, those who consider sisters shouldn't teach or give addresses do not mind sisters doing so at sisters' classes because (it is asserted) they are not meetings of the ecclesia. Or sisters can take part in discussions at ecclesial afternoon "fellowships", where the Bible is read round and discussed, but, again, this is not a meeting of the whole ecclesia, so the rule is considered not to count.

Sisters teach brothers and sisters by writing articles in Christadelphian magazines, but then, again, this is classified as not teaching in the ecclesia, and since the magazines are usually edited by a brother it is claimed that it is not really the sisters who do the teaching but the brother who publishes their articles. All such arguments seek to "get round" the prohibitions while claiming to uphold them. Would it not be better to say, as Robert Roberts said about female head-dress, that the issue was viewed one way in ancient times "considering the extreme seclusion of the female sex in the social customs of those countries" (*The Christadelphian*, April 1895, page 140), but should be seen in a different light today? Is it not better to argue that "circumstances alter cases", as sister Oriana Turney in Mississippi said (*The Christadelphian*, July 1, 1883, page 315)? Restrictions listed in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are applicable not to the cases of sisters giving addresses (as did Sister Jane Roberts and Sister Jannaway), but to cases of disruptive, uneducated women who were causing the problems in Corinth and Ephesus.

The message restricting women (as given to and for *some* of the ancient ecclesias) was appropriate in the situations to which it was applied. But in different situations, a different application is right and necessary. If we read 1 Corinthians 14 in its context, being aware that it is addressed to *all* the brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians 1:2), it is clear that "circumstances alter cases" there too, for in his description of how ecclesial meetings were organised in Corinth, Paul expresses his approval of both brothers and sisters speaking in an *orderly* fashion. He objects only if too many people speak at once.

This is what I mean, my brothers and sisters [*adelphoi*]. When you meet for worship, one person has a hymn, another a teaching, another a revelation from God, another a message in strange tongues, and still another the explanation of what is said. Everything must be of help to the church. ... All of you may proclaim God's message, one by one, so that everyone will learn and be encouraged.

(1 Corinthians 14:26, 31, GNB, 1994 edition)

The Good News Bible correctly translates *adelphoi* as "brothers and sisters", just as "Christadelphians" means "brothers and sisters in Christ". And Paul quite specifically writes "All of you...". Is not the Mississippi description very close to that of Corinth at its best?

Support for Christadelphian Sisters' Involvement in Public Speaking and Teaching

When we look at writings of others within the Christadelphian community, we find that many have examined the issue and have supported fuller involvement for sisters.

Thomas Nisbet of Glasgow for many years published a Christadelphian magazine called *The Investigator*, to which leading brothers in Britain and overseas contributed articles and comments. His Editorial for January 1895 discussed “The Disabilities of Women as Teachers in the Church”.

He said:

It has hitherto been generally assumed that Paul at least did not suffer a woman to teach in church ; but the matter seems to me one which calls for reconsideration, and I propose to examine here in detail those passages of scripture which are regarded as having a bearing upon the question. ...

There are but two such passages in the New Testament....

(*The Investigator*, Vol. X, No 37, January 1895, page 2)

He examined 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and considered that this passage referred to wives who “talked or chattered in church, which, of course, Paul forbade.” On the second passage, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, he wrote:

The next passage reads:—“Let a wife (*gune*) in quietness be learning, in all submission ; and I am not permitting a wife (*gune*) to be teaching nor to be domineering over a husband, but to be in quietness.” The “church” idea is not present to the mind of Paul here ; he is not talking of any particular gathering, but of apparel (see verse 9), and general deportment. As far as I can understand Paul here, it appears to me that he says it is (or should be) the man’s place to teach his wife, not the wife’s place to teach the man, nor indeed to obtrude herself in any unbecoming manner where husbands are concerned. As to what is unbecoming, custom will largely determine, and husbands will doubtless differ as to where the line is to be drawn. (*Ibid*, pages 2-3)

We have indicated in earlier chapters that the range of possibilities on these two passages is considerably greater than Thomas Nisbet examines. He does not pick up on the positive New Testament passages which encourage women to teach:

The answer to the question “Are women permitted to teach in church?” is to be answered according to the evidence thus:—She is not specially forbidden. The evidence which is supposed to exclude her is found irrelevant. It speaks about something else ; and not of women as such, but of wives.

He then advocates sisters’ active participation in Christadelphian meetings and his conclusion deserves acceptance:

The wise will learn from any and every source, losing sight of the instrument in the message itself ; and if the women can teach us men in any direction, by all means let them begin at once in the church. I think we might learn much from women if they would express their views upon things more, in all our meetings. It would be so much more pleasant to have the monotony varied by the softer tones of a woman’s voice speaking to edification, than to be subjected

always and everywhere to the harsher tones and harsher thoughts of one of the sterner sex. And a man, it must be confessed, does not always speak to the edification of his hearers. From this point of view, our teaching must always be more or less defective—so long as woman is excluded from the privilege of publicly expressing her view of things, since we are thus without the advantage which comes from “hearing the other side”; and woman—and it must be confessed not without advantage to the man—does not always look at a matter as a man would do.

Thomas Nisbet considered that women’s “disabilities” were of a positive kind:

Domestic duties and maternal cares preclude the wife from situations where the man is fit, and the sentiment of the age, although it is changing with the advent of the New Woman, is still strongly against being taught by women—married or single. Whether woman may ever come to teach in the church or not, she must always have her special work in the moulding, by means of home teaching of much raw material in the young, and fill a place where man cannot for a moment compete with her.

Interestingly and perceptively, Thomas Nisbet was aware of prejudice in himself, despite his advocacy of women as teachers:

But I must, when all is said, confess to a share of that miserable feeling which seems, generally speaking, to possess the sterner sex regarding woman’s sphere and influence, for I have a measure of antipathy to women as public teachers, but why, I don’t quite know—a mere prejudice, I presume.

(All quotes from *The Investigator*, January 1895, page 3)

The position taught by Thomas Nisbet is the logical continuation of that held by the sister from Mississippi, as it is of the encouragement by Robert Roberts in 1896 of “a wise woman’s influence and a wise woman’s voice”. When we no longer live in the same situation as that to which the two restrictive passages are addressed, the way is clear for the full involvement of sisters.

Prayer

The following account appeared in 1895 about the new meeting room for Dudley, Queen’s Cross, Christadelphian Ecclesia:

The builder engaged for the work requested us to select some one to lay the first stone. This was a new idea to us as Christadelphians, but after some thought we decided to invite our aged sister Clements to perform the office, she being the first-fruits of Dudley some twenty-four or

twenty-five years ago, and the oldest Christadelphian in this district at the present time. Our sister having consented, the stone was duly laid on Monday, October 28th, in the presence of myself and others, our sister Clements offering up a short prayer to the effect that God would grant all who should worship in the building to be erected on that stone, might themselves be as lively stones growing up into a spiritual house, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. The site is at Queen's Cross. "Dudley Christadelphian Church" will be cut on stone at the front, and we hope to be ready for our opening services on the first Sunday in the new year, if the Lord permit.^[4]

(The Fraternal Visitor, Vol X, No 122, November 1895, page 346)

Christadelphian Mutual Improvement Societies

That sisters could speak and teach to both brothers and sisters as early as the first decade of the 20th century is evidenced by printed reports of the meetings of the Christadelphian Mutual Improvement Societies Union. For example:

BIRMINGHAM ... We had a very pleasing change on May 2nd, listening with much gratification to an excellent essay on "the Authenticity of the Four Greater Epistles of the Apostle Paul," from the pen of our fellow-member, Sis. May Hadley. At the conclusion of her reading our sister was very warmly thanked for what was considered an extremely concise and well-reasoned statement of the subject.

(The Fraternal Visitor, Vol XX, No 236, May 1905, page 145)

Further on in this report from Birmingham these meetings are described as "seasons of help and instruction".

In December 1906 it was reported:

In connection with the arrangements for the proposed Conference of the Mutual Improvement Societies' Union at Birmingham next Whitsuntide, the question has been raised of whether the participation of female members in the discussions of these societies is in contravention of the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who commands: "Let your women keep silence in the churches."

The editors pointed out the arguments used by both sides; in favour of the participation of sisters the editors gave the following justification:

... the whole context shows that the apostle is writing about the orderly conduct of meetings of "the churches" ; that his counsel is fully honoured by all the modern Ecclesias, and that in an outside assembly, such as a mutual improvement society, a female member may contribute her information to the common stock of the company, so long as she does not do so in any dictatorial spirit tending to violation of the Divine appointment respecting the relation of the sexes.

By calling the mutual improvement class “an outside assembly”, the same argument was being used as that involved in closing a meeting in prayer so that sisters may then speak. A better justification needs to be presented if the practice is to carry conviction.

On 1 Timothy it was commented:

Women are, and ever have been, “teachers,” but apostolically it must be in a way which does not involve unwomanliness, or usurpation of dominion over a man.

The editors invited comment and concluded:

... there are other Scriptures also bearing upon the matter ; and what we would have our readers turn their attention to is whether in the light of all of them the procedure of the mutual improvement societies is in violation of Divine rule. Upon this we should be glad to hear from them. If it can be shown that it is, or even that a grave doubt relates to it, we have every confidence that the societies affected will be ready to amend their rules. But in all these questions we have need of forbearance and patience one with another, and an avoidance of sitting in judgment on our fellows.

(*The Fraternal Visitor*, December 1906, pages 359-360)

Replies from brothers L. G. Thirtle (Clapham), W. D. Jardine (Birmingham), Kirkland (Derby), and W. H. Forty (Cheltenham) defended the participation of sisters, though with varying explanations. (*The Fraternal Visitor*, “Our Mutual Improvement Societies – Participation of Lady Members” February 1907, page 43-46.)

Arguing against the participation of sisters, Bro F. Udale of Derby wrote:

When a mixed number of persons meet together for edification in the things that belong to God, there must first of all be order according to the law of God, and the law in this case is (I Cor. xiv. 34 and 35; I Tim. ii. 11 and 12). Why try to wrestle with the plain declaration? Let your women keep silence in the churches. “Adam was first formed, then Eve,” and Paul’s advice to Timothy (I Tim. iii.) excludes women altogether from taking a prominent part in preaching the Word.

Man is for strength, judgment, and achievement. Woman is for grace, sympathy, and ministrations.

(*Fraternal Visitor*, “Our Mutual Improvement Societies – Participation of Lady Members” March 1907, page 80)

These arguments (which ignore context so noticeably) are not Christadelphian in origin but those of centuries of Christendom beforehand, while the last of these statements could almost have come directly from pagan authors. To assert that “grace, sympathy, and ministrations” are intended to apply to women and not to men can hardly be considered fair Biblical exposition.

C. C. Walker, by then editor of *The Christadelphian* magazine, no doubt in response to the practice at Mutual Improvement Classes, gave the following reply in "Answers to Correspondents":

"WOMEN KEEP SILENCE IN THE CHURCHES"

A. B. asks: "Does Paul mean keep silence only in the assembly for breaking of bread? or will it include other meetings: take, for instance, a Bible class?"

ANSWER.—No such restriction as named is contemplated in the apostolic injunction. It would be manifestly improper for a woman to preach or pray in public at any other meetings than those for the breaking of bread. The expression "under obedience" indicates the spirit of the matter. No woman worth the name of a sister would insist on breaking silence in face of the apostolic writing. In a Bible class, a sister might put questions through a brother or in writing. Paul's regulation was not intended to discourage women, but to eliminate the disorders that were current in the Corinthian ecclesia. It requires careful handling nowadays.

(The Christadelphian, November 1904, pages 502-503)

It is interesting to observe how much the major content of 1 Corinthians is missed, and two words are chosen as "the spirit of the matter". Note the heavy pressure on women: "No woman worth the name of a sister...". Note how women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 are ignored, and there is no recognition of the participation of sisters in 1 Corinthians 14:26. There is an awareness, however, that these restrictions on women are under challenge: "It requires careful handling nowadays."

A further negative note was introduced:

The following resolution was passed on March 5th, at a meeting of managing brethren in Birmingham:—"That in view of a feeling of offence given to some of our brethren, the Managing Committee do hereby add to their previous declaration [*i.e.*, affirming that women ought not to take part as speakers in meetings of the church] an expression that we have no desire to see women taking part in public assemblies ; and we recommend the female members of Mutual Improvement Societies not to participate in discussions under circumstances which may be open to misconstruction."

(Fraternal Visitor, "Our Mutual Improvement Societies – Participation of Lady Members" March 1907, page 80)

Participation by sisters did continue, however. And this was not only in the Suffolk Street fellowship. The 1914 Programme for the Sheffield Christadelphian Mutual Improvement Society (Temperance Hall Ecclesia meeting in Devonshire Hall) lists three sisters as speakers.^[5] Likewise at Derby (Temperance Hall) sisters prepared and delivered papers.

Approval of Wider Participation by Sisters

In 1929 Estella Blackmore of Bournville Ecclesia, Birmingham, wrote an article on “The Position of Women in the Church” as part of a series titled “Let us Reason Together”:

Our religious contemporaries overcome the difficulty of lack of time by appointing a paid minister, who gives the whole of his training, time and energy to the work of his Church. This may appear to be a satisfactory solution of the problem, but it has its drawbacks, and we prefer not to adopt it. What have we in its place? A system by which practically all ecclesial work is done by a few selected from just two-fifths of the community—the male section. We attempt so much and achieve so little, probably because we curtail the number of our workers. Surely when we attempt so much, and are so handicapped for time, it behoves us to use all the workers available. Our assembly consists of two brethren to every three sisters, and of these, the one brother does practically all the work of any moment, the other four-fifths are, to a large extent, inactive. How can we expect to achieve the best which is possible?

Amongst our sisters there ... is ... a small section who appear to be quite content to leave all the work to others, and find their pleasure in trivial things. ... A far larger section is filled with a keen desire to serve, but find themselves hindered and prevented by the influence of a few mistaken brethren who have tried their hardest to suppress the sisters in many directions. To these sisters one would say: Do not be discouraged: the younger generation are awakening to their responsibilities, they are learning to think for themselves, and are moving to co-ordinate all that is good and logical and true. We need the help of our sisters in the work of the truth. They are of equal value to us as our brethren, and it is a duty of the brethren to see that they do not drift from us for lack of opportunities for exercising their gifts.

The last and largest section of the sisterhood consists of those who are quite willing to do what they can, but owing to the uninformed criticism of some brethren in the past they have retired into their shells, afraid of giving offence. They will require much persuasion before they can enter into a fuller life in the Truth.

... It has been assumed by some brethren that the suppression of women within the Church was the express teaching of the apostles. No doubt these brethren have been quite sincere in their convictions, but it is possible for them to have been mistaken.

Many have read letters which were written by Christ's early followers, to certain sections in their own day, as though they were written to all types of present day people. The passage I. Cor. xiv. 34 is often quoted: “Let the women keep silence in the churches...” This verse has nothing to

do with women taking a proper part in a church service, but refers only to a disturbance. In the meeting places of the Jews, the women sat by themselves ; and as their service was the same ritual over and over again, during the service the women were often talking to one another. But the Christian assembly was in spirit, and so Paul instructed them not to be *chattering*.

... On the other hand we have the apostle making a definite inference in I. Cor.xi. 13, where he says, "Judge in yourselves ; is it seemly that a woman pray unto God unveiled?" This could only have reference to the public assembly, and if Paul did not countenance the participation of women in public services, the verse has no meaning.

In the light of the part played by women in Paul's days, and in view of his own teaching, one wonders how he would view things to-day if he could visit some of our meetings and hear how his words have been wrested from their context to support a contrary practice. Surely he would be very grieved.

Now the question naturally arises as to how much the sisters should attempt. As they are on a spiritual equality with the brethren, should they aim at doing all the duties which are now performed by brethren? This is neither necessary nor desirable. There is a sufficiently large scope for sisters to exercise their latent talent without necessarily undertaking every manly duty. The guiding principle should be suitability.

In visiting various ecclesias I have learned of many duties undertaken by sisters which are usually performed by brethren. In one ecclesia the Managing Committee consists of both brethren and sisters. Two ecclesias have a sister for secretary. One small ecclesia, for a fairly long period of time, depended on two sisters for the reading of the chapters at the Sunday morning services. Evidently these ecclesias considered that *the work* was of more account than *the worker*. And so it should always be. The work *is* the thing that matters. Where a sister can do a particular piece of work better than a brother, it cannot be *wrong* for her to do it. Where an ecclesia has three sisters to every two brethren, would it not be an advantage to have the sisters' help and their point of view represented on the committee which manages that ecclesia?

... The advantage to the brethren, if the sisters took a more active part in ecclesial work, is obvious. The advantage to the truth itself would naturally follow. It remains for the brethren to do their part by giving all the encouragement possible. For it takes a brave heart indeed to make a pioneer, particularly when the pioneer seeks no personal aggrandisement, but looks rather to follow an ideal in all humility of spirit.

("The Position of Women in the Church", E. L. Blackmore, Bournville,

The Fraternal Visitor, November 1929, pages 287-290.)

In December 1929, Estella Blackmore commented:

Since writing in the November issue of the *Fraternal Visitor* on the position of women in the Church, I have had expressions of opinion from various brethren, both by letter and by word of mouth. The consensus of opinion expressed by them is to the effect that the old prejudice on this subject has largely disappeared, owing to a more enlightened reading of the Scriptures during recent years.

(*The Fraternal Visitor*, December 1929, page 318)

On the same page, James Melville (Barrow-in-Furness Ecclesia), described by the editor as “a brother of long standing” wrote:

I have read with pleasure the article by Sister Blackmore ... relative to “The Position of Women in the Ecclesia,” as I have entertained such views for over thirty years.

In March 1930 Sister Blackmore commented further:

... I have had many more letters on the above subject from brethren of long standing in the Truth. Without exception, these all strongly adhere to the position upheld in the November issue. I have not heard one word of adverse criticism. What does this indicate? Do these brethren represent the trend of opinion throughout the brotherhood? If so, is the matter going to stop there? Writing and speaking are of little value if unaccompanied by deeds, for “by their fruits ye shall know them.” If it is wrong to hide our light under a bushel, it must be doubly wrong to force others to hide their light.

The sisters, generally, seem greatly desirous of taking a more active part in the work of the Ecclesias, but hesitate to cause offence to those brethren who hold to the attitude of fifty years ago. But, after all, why be so concerned about the displeasure of *man*? It is *God's* displeasure we should fear to incur, as it is *God's* work in which we seek to take part. Courage is needful; but that is quite a small matter when we consider that we have the Apostle Paul on our side, and when we contemplate the wonderful attitude of Christ Himself to the women of His day.

(E. L. Blackmore, *The Fraternal Visitor*, March 1930, page 72)^[6]

Disapproval of Wider Participation by Sisters

If Estella Blackmore and her approving brothers of long standing felt the attitude in 1930 had changed from 50 years previously, not all agreed. John Carter, later editor of *The Christadelphian*, had once been in Suffolk Street and had transferred to Temperance Hall in 1915. Forty years later he commented:

I always felt when I was in the Suffolk Street fellowship that sisters giving papers to mixed classes was a mark of laxity.

(John Carter, Letter to Ruth McHaffie, 1st May 1956)

Sister Blackmore, however, presented her view not on a basis of laxity but on a basis of understanding the context of Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy.

John Carter added in the above letter: "Please do not put me in the class of women haters, or anything like that" and he printed articles from sisters. However, sisters with the enthusiasm to write in *The Christadelphian*, and thereby to teach, were tackled over the years by two brothers, Viner Hall and Philip Hall. Their aim was to dissuade sisters from holding a position "on the platform of magazines". Philip wrote and complained to husbands of sisters who wrote articles in *The Christadelphian*, while Viner wrote directly to the sisters, in words such as the following:

Moreover, woman's nature and constitution is such that her character and disposition is marred when she enters the lists in competition with men in the conduct of public affairs; and especially so when she is allowed to occupy a position of equality (as a speaker) on the spiritual platform of a magazine which exists exclusively to teach in the churches. *It gives such sisters a prestige in the meeting (I have witnessed the evil myself) which is inconsistent with their God appointed position of humility and submission in which the Divine model of true femininity and beauty is manifested and sustained (1 Peter 3:1-6). [Italics his.]*

It would be reasonable to comment on the above that sisters who write and speak are not entering "the lists in competition with men" but seeking to offer their service to God. One wonders at the male mind which seems to feel threatened in that it talks of "competition". And if a sister who speaks well or writes well runs the risk of a little self-pride, do not brothers who write do likewise? Are not humility and submission to one another the virtues which brothers should also have?

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

'Getting Round' Inconvenient Verses

Viner Hall belonged to a small Christadelphian fellowship known as the Family Journal fellowship. His view that writing in *The Christadelphian* is the same as teaching is a valid one. The argument that it is not really teaching is an attempt to 'get round' the obvious in an effort to uphold the status quo (i.e. that sisters may write articles in magazines). At business meetings, in

ecclesias where 1 Corinthians 14 is considered an absolute ban on sisters even asking a question, another commonly used method of 'getting round' the prohibition is for a sister either to ask her husband to say something or to pass a written note to a brother.

W. G. Butterfield headed another Christadelphian subdivision called "The Remnant of Christ's Ecclesia". He wrote:

We believe the command that sisters must be silent in the Ecclesia is clear and definite, and to nullify this command by using slips of paper or a brother to express their views in the Ecclesia is a wicked attempt to make void the command.

(W. G. Butterfield, *Are Christadelphians Astray?*, page 17)

In the Temperance Hall fellowship Brother Barnard wrote in similarly dismissive terms:

Why then have the "oracles of God" been entrusted to men rather than to women? Because her Edenic sin has stamped the woman with its accompanying weakness, namely, susceptibility to deception. *In Divine things especially, women are more easily deceived than men.* There is, at bottom, a credulous mysticity, a proneness to superstition deeply ingrained in feminine nature... This predominant strain in woman's nature, combined with her strong material and affinitive tendencies towards emotion rather than reason, unfits her for any kind of leadership in Divine or even political matters. (*The Testimony*, April 1956)

This seems to owe more to pagan Aristotle or the Early Church Fathers or to the Scottish reformer John Knox than to the oracles of God. Eve at least put up an argument against the Serpent, while Adam apparently made no effort to follow the commandment he had been given. And insofar that women (if we can generalise) may show more readiness to emotion and sympathy, for example, should we not see this as part of God's creation declared to be very good (Genesis 1:31), part of God's purpose in creating a suitable companion because it was and is "not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18)? To demean sisters in the manner quoted above is also (though doubtless unintentionally) to criticise God's wisdom in creation.

The comments by brothers Butterfield and Barnard verge on misogyny. Observe the intimidating language: "wicked attempt". Statements like the above restrict and oppress women, and are merely dogmatic assertions. They fail to represent adequately the letter of the New Testament, and certainly fail to catch its spirit of freedom and service. We are back to the Pharisees and their rules and their heavy condemnation of others, of whom Jesus said:

They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.

(Matthew 23:4)

When is Teaching not Teaching?

The inconsistency of allowing sisters to teach publicly in writing, but objecting when they do so at meetings and conferences, was pointed out again in 1989 in the correspondence section of *The Christadelphian*:

... you condemn the inclusion of a sister as one of the three main Study leaders on Scriptural grounds, presumably on Paul's words of "I suffer not a woman to teach". Yet a few pages earlier in the magazine you include the teachings of a sister to be circulated to the entire brotherhood.... Maybe you can see a difference between the teaching of a sister by writing rather than by speaking, but to me this is the sort of argument which might well have been a teaching of the Pharisees.

(Frank Dilley, Totnes, South Devon)

Michael Ashton, editor, gave the following response:

There is no more an inconsistency in condemning the decision to allow a sister to take a leading part in a study weekend while publishing an article written by a sister than exists when 1 Timothy 2:12, "I suffer not a woman to teach", is compared with Titus 2:3, where the Apostle encourages "aged women" to be "*teachers* of good things". The context of the Apostle's words explains the situation. In his first letter to the Corinthians he states clearly: "Let your women keep silence *in the churches* ... it is a shame for women to speak *in the church*:" (1 Corinthians 14:34,35). The question does not turn on the thousands who can read a magazine article compared to the tens who may attend a study weekend, nor is it a legalistic view based on the difference between writing and speaking. God has ordained that *in communal worship* the errors committed in Eden by both man and women [*sic*] should be recognised by the attitude of their sons and daughters. Woman is not to usurp the man's authority as Eve did, and man is to proclaim God's Word as Adam failed properly to do. By conforming to this command, testimony is given to the fact that "Christ Jesus ... gave himself a ransom for all" (see 1 Timothy 2:5,6).

(*The Christadelphian*, April 1989, page 149)

If we examine this answer, we find as with that given by Robert Roberts, that different texts are run together and though context is confidently mentioned, the overall contexts are not taken into account. Note, again, how the word "clearly" is used (although the passage is obscure both in its context and in its position in the original text). A matter of interpretation is presented as fact: "God has ordained...". Note how "in the churches" or "in the church" has been changed into "*in communal worship*". Note how it is assumed that correct and Godly teaching by a sister can be described as "usurping authority", even if done with her husband's encouragement and approval. In Eden, the woman did not "usurp the man's authority": both tried to usurp God's authority. And the inconsistency is still there: if "man is to proclaim God's Word" (not woman) is

it not pharisaical to say that the woman may do so to thousands in writing in a magazine despite Paul's comment "I suffer not a woman to teach"? When questioned on another occasion about this inconsistency, a different answer was given: that since the editor is a man, the article though written by a sister is really the editor's.

Circumstances Do Change Cases

Such arguments rely too much on assumptions and fail to address the issues adequately either from a Scriptural position or from a textual one. Would it not be more logical to argue that women should not write articles? Since, however, the practice is well established, and it is agreed that their articles are profitable, would it not be better to agree with the sister who wrote to *The Christadelphian* in 1888 that circumstances change cases; the context of 1 Timothy is different from today; and sensible teaching by sisters (whether written or spoken) in no way usurps authority or undermines testimony to the saving work of Jesus. Nor does it undermine Paul's reference to Genesis if Paul is describing a *parallel* situation: ill-informed women (like Eve) should not teach. When properly educated in spiritual things ("let a woman learn", 1 Timothy 2:11), the matter is different. Hence such women can be "teachers of good things" (Titus 2:3), and serve the community acceptably by writing in *The Christadelphian* and edifying the ecclesia by their words.

In the reports of sisters' talks in *The Fraternal Visitor*, it is obvious that their work was appreciated, that they were not considered to be domineering over brothers, and that the sisters engaged in a valuable spiritual activity. The reports above are also valuable in that the magazine of a large section of the Christadelphian brotherhood was prepared to allow fair discussion of both sides of the argument, and itself give support in favour of the participation of sisters.

Sisters continued to give talks throughout the 20th century. With reunion of the two fellowships (Suffolk Street and Temperance Hall) in 1957, there was some drawing back in order to pursue unity by uniformity. Since reunion, though sisters have participated widely, most magazines have not been prepared to present the positive case for speaking by sisters but have regularly argued the case against. Even so, a more positive attitude is now shown to the character and abilities of sisters:

The qualities of care and compassion which are inherent in women are highly beneficial when directed towards spiritual ends. Often sisters have a sensitivity which brethren lack, and which can be advantageous to the edification of our community life.

(Michael Ashton, *The Christadelphian*, November 1993, page 425)

These same qualities would usefully enhance public worship and communal prayer, and 1 Corinthians 11-14 suggests that is what happened in the first century.

Different Interpretations of Biblical Practices

Those who involve sisters in speaking and teaching have been accused of “unbiblical practices”, but it would be more appropriately respectful to the Christadelphian brotherhood to speak of *different interpretations* of Biblical practices. Our review through the last 120 years shows considerable differences in approach. Sisters have always played a smaller speaking part than brothers, as was also the case in the earliest ecclesias, and the vehemence with which their participation is attacked even today helps to uphold this situation. Nevertheless, it remains true that the interpretation that sisters should remain silent is not universal Christadelphian teaching or practice.

^[1] When Robert Roberts moved to Birmingham in 1864 and was seeking employment he twice used a testimonial from Birmingham MP John Bright (*My Days and My Ways*, Robert Roberts, pages 128 & 132). John Bright voted in favour of John Stuart Mill’s amendment on women’s suffrage in 1867. His brother, Jacob Bright, MP, moved the amendment to the Municipal Corporation Bill which succeeded in 1869 in giving women the vote in municipal elections. Robert Roberts as a newspaper reporter was well informed on the thinking of his day and the enlightened attitude he shows towards women is in accord with those who sought reform. Just as Robert Roberts was influenced on slavery by reading “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, it is reasonable to think that he was influenced by the parliamentary reform speakers in his attitude to voting by both brothers and sisters in making ecclesial appointments. (We are grateful to Neil Hallett for supplying the historical background.)

^[2] It has been suggested that she was an “arranging brother” because there were no other brothers there at the time. According to details printed in *The Christadelphian*, by the time Robert Roberts visited Wanganui those recorded there were Brother and Sister Hayward, Brother Beaumont, Brother Henry Holmes, Brother and Sister Dexter, Brother and Sister Taylor and Brother and Sister Mays (6 brothers and 4 sisters). (Thanks to Peter Lawton for extracting this information from the electronic version of *The Christadelphian*.)

^[3] And it wasn’t only on the public platform:

“**New Rule** – The Duke of Cambridge has declined to fulfil an arrangement to preside at the approaching annual banquet of the Royal Caledonian Asylum on account of his objection to the new rule whereby ladies are allowed to dine in public with gentlemen.” (*The Scotsman*, 22nd March 1883)

^[4] Hannah Clements is the great, great, great grandmother of Rob Clements, Horley Ecclesia. In drawing this to our attention he wrote – quite rightly, we think: “I can’t help feeling rather proud of her!”

^[5] In 1885 the Christadelphian movement split into two fellowships, known as Suffolk Street and Temperance Hall. This division was healed in 1957.

The Fraternal Visitor was published by the Suffolk Street fellowship, *The Christadelphian* by Temperance Hall. On reunion, *The Fraternal Visitor* was discontinued and its editor Cyril Cooper (whose wife Mary had regularly spoken at classes in Watford Ecclesia) joined the committee of *The Christadelphian*.

^[6] Estella Blackmore (Stella) was a founder member of Bournville Ecclesia, Birmingham. She was secretary of “The Letter League” which wrote to brothers and sisters in isolation – like “The Isolation League” today. She was a school teacher, ran a choir, and was a keen weaver. She did weaving and sold it to raise money to build Bournville ecclesial hall.

What Should be the Position Today?

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the Position Today?

In a number of places throughout this book we have mentioned the ability of sisters being denied when the restrictive verses are applied in ecclesial life. This can be spiritually damaging to sisters, especially in today's world.

Both male and female receive the same education and when moving into the sphere of work they have and face the same expectations in professional life. Everyone is different but education today aims to bring the person's natural skills to their full potential. Many sisters are trained in skills of study, organisation, leadership, speaking, teaching and caring. All of these would be of benefit to the ecclesias if sisters were allowed to apply them.

The fact that many ecclesias do not adequately use sisters' talents or skills can be both damaging to them as followers of Jesus and as members of an ecclesia. Sisters may turn their interests instead to their jobs and other areas where they can be of more use. Preventing sisters from doing what they have the ability to do means they are not able to put into practice the lesson taught in Jesus' parable of the talents.

The Correct Use of Talents

Talent is an old word for a unit of money or weight and this is what was originally meant in the parable Jesus told as recorded in Matthew 25:14-30. The interpretation of the parable goes beyond the unit of money to the talents or skills of Jesus' followers and how well they had used them in Jesus' service. In the parable the followers have different talents/skills but are expected to use them wisely in the service of their master. The last servant did not use his talents and was condemned for hiding them. The application of this parable is wider than the work of sisters in the ecclesia. Nevertheless the lesson is there. We are to use our talents in God's service.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. (Romans 12:6)

These gifts could also be called talents or skills: they are from God to use in His service not to be hidden by us or to be forced to be hidden by others.

Applying the Golden Rule to Sisters

Paul said, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Jesus said: "... whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Do these teachings not apply in our attitudes towards sisters in Christ? How would you – any brother reading this – feel if told: "You are capable of doing this talk, offering this work for God, saying good public prayers, but we don't allow males to do this?"

James criticises those who show favouritism:

If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

(James 2:8-9)

If it is wrong to show partiality on ground of clothing or wealth, is it not also wrong to show it on grounds of gender?

Humility is from the heart and there is no reason that a sister should not use a skill she has been given with an attitude of humility just as a brother should do. But the fact that sisters have God-given abilities which do not necessarily fit with the role supposedly given to them adds a greater weight in the argument for using the talents they have “according to the grace given to us”. It is very obvious from life’s experiences that gifts/talents/skills are usually *not* gender based.

The Value of Participation

Research done on prejudice shows that stereotyping and expectations or non-expectations influence the way people view themselves. This affects their performance. It is true that many sisters do not want to give talks, are nervous of reading to the congregation or entering into discussions at Bible Classes and they should not be put under pressure to do so. However, when they have started to do these things they often feel more valued. Giving a talk gives a more focussed reason for studying. A woman entering a discussion or giving a talk can look at things from a female perspective which gives the balance intended in creation by God that men and women be complementary to each other. The imbalance of the anti-woman approach has damaged society and has damaged the ecclesias over the years.

Harm in Discrimination

In the first years of Christianity, there was pressure against equality in Christ in several areas: nationality (Jew or Greek), class (slave or free), gender (male or female). Despite the problems and errors of Western civilisation, it is acknowledged in law and to a considerable extent in practice, that discrimination against people in these areas is wrong. Society in the first century was inclined to oppose the new position given to women. In the 21st century, society is inclined to approve it, and to be considerably offended by organisations which discriminate. The practical implication of this is that we damage the spread and credibility of the Gospel if we follow our restrictive traditions. And if we seek to maintain that this is Bible teaching, by using anti-women arguments based on a few selective texts, we also damage trust in the Bible.

Putting Principles into Practice

So what does this mean in practice? We believe that it means different things in different places. Whatever happens, the aim should be that everything should be done in Christian love. It is so important that those with differing views respect those with whom they disagree. There should be no anger and unkind words. There should be an attempt to understand those who disagree. This should mean a tolerance of their point of view and an attempt at compromise so that all sides can have some satisfaction that their position is being accepted some of the time.

Where sisters are not doing things *any* of the time, we don't see Christ-like forbearance but domination of one point of view over another. Forbearing should apply to all issues where brothers and sisters disagree (Ephesians 4:1-3).

If sisters prayed and prophesied in the early ecclesias (1 Corinthians 11), should we not enable them to do the equivalent today? What about presiding? It is interesting that no such position is noticeable in the New Testament, and in the 1860s the majority of ecclesias in Britain held the Breaking of Bread without any president. This means that the idea of a president was probably introduced as a useful measure, but it cannot be claimed as a Biblical "office". Presiding is a matter of service to the ecclesia, not leadership or ruling; indeed, it is in many ways another aspect of prophesying in the apostle's sense of edifying the church (1 Corinthians 14:3): the president chooses appropriate readings and hymns and puts these together with spiritual thoughts and encouragement. As with other ecclesial activities, it should be done in the spirit of service, the same spirit as described by Robert Roberts in his *Voyage to Australia* (see quotation on page 187). Is there any reason (other than tradition) why a sister should not do this? In everyday life we are accustomed to women performing roles such as organising discussions on radio and television and reading the news. Many of us have attended committee meetings at work where women chair meetings and discussion groups, just as we have been taught at school by women teachers or lectured in university by female lecturers. Further, many of our sisters do teach in schools and lecture in universities. In New Testament times, such activities by women would have seemed scandalous. Today (in the West) it is regarded as normal.

For the first century world the early church set an example of excellent practice towards women. It exalted their status and as far as was possible it enabled sisters to contribute in service to the church in a manner similar to the brothers. If we are to carry forward that Christ-like spirit, we need to make the fullest possible use of sisters in our ecclesias today. To restrict sisters on the basis of church practice of the middle ages, or traditional anti-women interpretations of the Bible, is to fall below the standards set for us in Christ.

Is the Breaking of Bread Different?

Although at Bible Classes and Conferences sisters are often accepted as speakers, discussion group leaders or workshop organisers, fuller involvement, especially at the Sunday Breaking of Bread, seems to be a sticking point.

Part of the reason may be an anxiety not to disturb those who are uncertain about the Biblical validity of sisters' involvement. This is understandable because we rightly seek to put others before ourselves. But according to 1 Corinthians 11:28, being challenged to live up to Christ's standards, rather than sitting comfortably, is an important element in the Breaking of Bread.

Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

But there is another reason, perhaps, why people are more cautious about the Breaking of Bread. Although not supposedly part of our beliefs as Christadelphians, some people do seem to regard the Breaking of Bread in a similar manner to Roman Catholic or English High Church, that at the Breaking of Bread we are especially close to God, unlike in everyday life. It is a particularly holy occasion, and therefore women should not take part – or should only take part in silence (apart from singing). But is either view Biblical? We may *feel* closer to God because we are concentrating on Him in worship, but that is a feeling and a consciousness on our part. It

is not the reality: God is always with us, as is Jesus (Matthew 28:20); we are always in the presence of God.

And the suggestion that women shouldn't take part in what is holy, goes back to unbiblical attitudes to women. At the back of Durham Cathedral is a line across the building. Before the Reformation, women were kept behind this, far away from the supposedly holy end where the bones of Cuthbert lie! Can we ask ourselves whether the eagerness by some in the brotherhood to keep sisters out of active participation unwittingly owes something to this sort of tradition and attitude?

Ideally we suggest that sisters, like brothers, should have the opportunity to be involved in all areas of ecclesial service. Each should be using their "different gifts according to the grace given to us."

Is Change Possible?

Is Change

Possible?

We believe that it is Scriptural for sisters to be much more actively involved in ecclesial meetings. A change in this direction would not only bring us closer to New Testament teaching and practice, but would be valuable “for edification”. The benefits would be a more lively, more enthusiastic, more understanding and more balanced ecclesial witness. But is change possible?

The answer is “Yes”. Changes have taken place in a number of ecclesias over the last 20 or more years, but a number of factors create difficulty. We would identify, in particular, the following.

- (1) The traditional belief that it is not Biblical
- (2) We like what we are accustomed to
- (3) Causing offence
- (4) Women do not have the inclination
- (5) Women are considered unsuitable
- (6) Power and control

Traditional Belief that it is not Biblical

When Christadelphians began, the texts which are used to keep sisters silent were traditionally regarded as the key texts. This was generally taken for granted at the time Dr Thomas wrote, and his exposition in *Elpis Israel* followed traditional church teaching on the subjection of women. When he wrote about love in the married state he wrote positively that we should have the love Christ had when he died for us. But he inserted an unwarranted aside:

“... and this is the kind of love which Paul (who by the bye was never tried by a termagant wife) commends to the attention of the Ephesians.”

(Elpis Israel, 1849, page 45)

This is a surprisingly blanket condemnation of married women. “Termagant” means a harsh-tempered or overbearing woman. Where Paul comments that, unlike Peter and the other apostles, he doesn’t go about with a wife, he makes no adverse remark about wives (1 Corinthians 9:5). To remark “a termagant wife” implies that many, if not all, wives are termagant, a view that would be readily approved by the misogynist writers quoted earlier in this book, but should not be part of Christ-like thinking.

Dr Thomas was also scathing about women preachers of other churches:

It is the old ambition of the sex to be equal to the gods; but in taking steps to attain it, they involved themselves in subjection to men. Preaching, and lecturing, women, are but species of

actresses, who exhibit upon the boards for the amusement of sinful and foolish men. They aim at an equality for which they are not physically constituted; they degrade themselves by the exhibition, and in proportion as they rise in assurance, they sink in all that really adorns a woman.

(Elpis Israel, 1849, page 109)

Dr Thomas set out to encourage people to look at the Bible for themselves and not to follow church tradition.

O that men could be induced now to devote themselves to the study of the scriptures without regard to articles, creeds, confessions, and traditions! These things are mere rubbish....

(Elpis Israel, 1849, page 177)

In many areas he developed new and radical thinking but to a large extent he followed conventional attitudes towards women.

However, as can be seen from Chapter 28, our forebears did examine the Bible for themselves. On the basis of Scriptural teaching many valued and advocated the contribution sisters could play in the spiritual development of the ecclesia. But traditional interpretations still predominate, and simply quoting 1 Corinthians 14:35-35 or 1 Timothy 2:11-15, without context, seems to many to be an adequate rebuttal of any further involvement of sisters. This is disappointing in a community which set out to re-think Bible teaching across so many areas.

Since our community has a correct and enthusiastic desire to follow Bible teaching, change can only come about if enough brothers and sisters are fully aware of what the Bible actually says and can see the reasons why earlier expositions about women, such as in *Elpis Israel*, need to be reconsidered.

Over the last few decades, articles and comments have been printed in Christadelphian magazines, not to encourage examination of Bible teaching but to maintain the “let your women keep silence” approach. Those who hold to this view do not usually allow any discussion in print of the other side of the argument, and many brothers and sisters are therefore not at all aware that much more can and should be said. In reading the articles and books which supported the traditional approach, we concluded that the Bible was being misused. Texts which are neutral, or written for a specific purpose in Bible times, were being interpreted in an anti-women manner. After writing individual replies for some time, we decided to write up our responses positively, expressing how we consider all the relevant texts should be regarded in their context. This is how we came to be writing this book. We ask, therefore, that everyone should make their own examination of the Bible in context, not relying on traditional interpretations, nor on ours, but carefully reading the Bible and discussing it with others.

We like what we are accustomed to

Most ecclesias are still largely male run with male contributors, so many people have no experience of any other way. It is sometimes argued that since we have the Truth in Jesus this practice must be correct. But what practice? Christadelphian practice has varied, and still does vary. The male-only practice is the result of the continuation of church traditions of the 19th century and earlier. Ironically, we rejected many church traditions, but kept this one.

It is not only intellectual or Scriptural arguments which influence our thinking or the way we behave. We can be influenced just as much, or even more, by what we are comfortable with and what we are used to. Some of us enjoy being challenged by new thinking, whereas others feel more comfortable with what we have always been used to. It does not necessarily follow that we hold the same attitudes to change in every aspect of our lives. We may be happy to be challenged at work but feel unhappy at rethinking aspects of our study of the Bible or the other way round. Things being the same as they always have been in our church services is comforting to some brothers and sisters. They would strongly argue against change of any kind, whether it be the timing of the services, the seating arrangements or the hymns. However, there are others who find doing the same week after week dulls the thinking and actions become a habit. For them change can be helpful in stimulating spiritual thoughts and attitudes.

Being actively involved can be of great benefit to some sisters as those over the years who have been able to be involved have found. Sisters who have had a focus for their study, whether for Sisters' Classes or Bible Classes have gained benefit for themselves and for their hearers. Those who have been involved in open discussion have been able to enrich the discussion from their wider experience of life. Sisters who have taken an active part in preaching have helped to take the full burden from the brothers. Those who are interested in our preaching can see that Christianity is relevant to both men and women in all aspects of our lives.

There is a danger of responding on the basis of emotion and not on well thought out arguments. On the other hand we have experienced that as people become used to sisters being involved they do not find it so shocking and after a while are quite happy with it. It becomes normal. This should, however, be based on an informed Scriptural understanding.

Causing Offence

“Don't rock the boat”; “Brother or Sister is very upset by all this.”; “What will other ecclesias think?”; “I am offended by your actions”. All these are comments made by some who disagree when a more active participation by sisters is suggested. We all aim to be loving and show understanding. We do not want to hurt people but for the most part those who make these comments are not thinking what damage is being done to others by holding that their way, and only their way, is right.

It is difficult when people report how others feel. It is better for those who are upset to express their views directly rather than some one else doing it for them. Sometimes the report that “Brother or Sister is upset” has been found to be an exaggeration of the facts. We do need to be aware of what others feel.

“What will other ecclesias think?”

It may be reported that an ecclesia disapproves, when it may be only a few members or only the more vocal ones. Each Christadelphian ecclesia is meant to be autonomous and therefore although we may not agree with what others think or do, we should be tolerant and not interfere.

“Don’t rock the boat”

Having had numerous splits and divisions since Christadelphians began in the mid-1800s, brothers and sisters are naturally anxious not to ‘rock the boat’ in case this should occur again. But with Christ-like attitudes of understanding, love and tolerance, this should not be a problem.

Offence – What does it mean?

“I am offended.” When people hear these words our mind naturally goes to the words of Jesus:

And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.
(Mark 9:42, KJV)

However, we need to look carefully to find out what Jesus meant. “Offence” in the Biblical sense means “driving someone away from Christ”. It does not mean “being upset because someone has a slightly different understanding of Bible teaching or practice”. We are anxious to take Jesus seriously and are wary of causing offence. For many people, saying “You offend me” has the result the speaker desires, so ecclesias are reluctant to make any change. There is a danger here of spiritual blackmail: “You are offending me by advocating that women do things, therefore you should give way”. It is wrong to take offence, or to claim to be offended, as a means of silencing people with whom one disagrees. Christian love asks for respect for one another, so matters of disagreement should be discussed with a proper attempt to understand the other brother or sister’s feelings.

Unfortunately, offence in the Biblical sense of driving people away, does exist. Young people have either not joined an ecclesia, or having joined have left it, because of the ecclesia’s attitude to women. Others have moved to find an ecclesia where they can take a more active part but this is not always possible. Some who feel frustrated and depressed by the situation have put their energies into other areas where they feel more fulfilled, but there is then the danger of their commitment to other activities moving them away from their faith. It is obvious that people feel strongly on one side or the other of the arguments and that the only way forward is for each to have tolerance and deal sensitively with each other.

Sisters do not feel inclined to take part

It is quite true that some sisters do not feel inclined to have a vocal part. It is especially so if they have been “silent” in church services, apart from singing, for many years. Sisters normally work very hard and very supportively in all types of ecclesial activity and service to Christ, and (as for brothers) this is the main task for us all in following our Lord. But if sisters feel they would like to be involved in Bible Class talks and discussion, they should be encouraged. Today, many pupils in school (whether boys or girls) are encouraged to give talks and presentations. In adult life both men and women give talks and chair committees in connection with their work. Given

some encouragement many sisters will be capable of doing a good job to the benefit of the ecclesia.

Women are considered unsuitable

We are still influenced by attitudes from the past, including the idea that women by nature are either incapable or unsuited for position of responsibility in the ecclesia. But a similar list of objections can be made as to why men by nature are not suitable for ecclesial activities: men are aggressive, prone to fighting, easily distracted by sexual thoughts. It is said that after meetings, the sisters tend to discuss people and how they are faring; the brothers are inclined to discuss mechanical things: cars, or computers, or building-work!

Good qualities of character are enjoined on all believers. Some have talents for leadership, some are physically stronger, or spiritually stronger, than others, but the Christian response is to use all good qualities to build up the body of Christ. Contrariwise, all inferior or bad qualities should be avoided. Good and bad qualities are within each person, not a characteristic of one sex in particular over against the other.

Power and Control

There is a saying that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The principle is illustrated many times in the Bible, in the despotic rule of kings (1 Samuel 8:18), for example, or in the plotting of the chief priests and the scribes to kill Jesus (Mark 14:1). Elders are warned against the misuse of power by the apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:3), and it is a danger of which each of us needs to be aware in whatever power we possess, whether at work, at home, in the family or in the ecclesia. Because of men's superior physical strength and because women have usually been restricted by giving birth and caring for children, men have acquired power in most areas of public life. This position has understandably been one they have sought to maintain, not often by reasoned argument, but often by pressure.

At one Bible Class, the presiding brother asked if *anyone* would like to add a comment. His wife (with his prior knowledge and approval) read out a carefully composed comment. The consequence was that many brothers and sisters refused to speak to her for about six weeks.

A sister asked a question at a different ecclesia's Bible Class, and another sister therefore got up and walked out. The abuse of power is not only male against female!

A sister was invited to speak at a Christadelphian gathering. She spoke about humility, and her words were well received. But an ecclesia she visited on holiday heard about her talk and took exception. They told her she was no longer welcome and they refused to allow her to break bread. We should be ashamed that such behaviour does not receive strong disapproval from those in control of ecclesias and our publications.

We are obliged by our commitment to Christ to behave in a Christ-like fashion where there are different understandings on this issue. Discussion should, as far as lies with each believer, be in a calm, Christ-like spirit – not the worldly type of protest such as walking out of meetings or refusing to speak to a brother or sister who has an opposite understanding.

The use of power is a worldly thing and being creatures of this world, we all have some area of power. In Christ, however, we should seek not power but service, and those abilities and talents

we possess, from God, should be seen not as means to express control over others but as means of serving others.

Let us remember Jesus' words:

“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.
(Luke 22:25-27)

We need today to rediscover this teaching of Jesus and apply it to all our relationships. Hopefully, we generally do, for it is fundamental Christian doctrine: submit to one another. Yet for too long it has not been applied universally or consistently in our ecclesial organisations and ecclesial life. Most ecclesias in Britain have more sisters than brothers on the roll, but comparatively few sisters are on ecclesial decision-making committees nor are they encouraged to be. We therefore invite every brother and sister to reconsider the position, to reject the fallen attitudes of the past, and to aspire to the levels of service to which we are pointed by the New Testament and the Bible as a whole.

Brothers who have power should take action to change things concerning sisters.

Is Change Possible?

So is change possible? Our answer is “Yes”. In our experience, looking back over the last 30 years, there has been an increased involvement of sisters in many areas of ecclesial life. In some places it has been slower than in others. Even when ecclesias strongly hold to the texts on silence they have found other ways to use the talents of their sisters. It may have meant formally closing a meeting so that sisters can take part in discussion. It may have meant thinking that a meeting held in homes is not ‘a formal meeting’. Although many would think of this as avoiding the basic principle, it is a step on the road to valuing the spirituality and experience of sisters, and it indicates a willingness to seek for peace and to avoid giving offence.

In other places sisters are encouraged to be involved in discussion at the Bible Class and give talks and preside. More ecclesias now do have sisters taking part in ecclesial committees. There are many sisters who are involved in some way in preaching both here and abroad. When we started writing this book in the early 1990s we knew of no ecclesias where sisters read the Bible at the Breaking of Bread service. Now we know of a number where this regularly takes place. We also know of ecclesias whose managing committees have both male and female members.

Is Change Desirable?

Is change desirable? Again our answer is “Yes”. In our experience, and that of many others, sisters who speak and preside and pray, do so with sensitivity and spiritual perceptiveness. They helpfully promote the work of God. When a brother in 2001 first saw sisters fully and actively involved in Christadelphian meetings, he observed: “I had not realised before how much talent is lost by the practice of sisters not contributing.” We know of several prominent brothers who once opposed the participation of sisters and now approve. So why not take the positive

approach to the abilities that sisters possess, and advocate, on the basis of the Bible, that they should contribute, as Paul says, “according to the grace given to us” (Romans 12:6)?

There may well be those who after reading what we have written and then studying the Bible for themselves come to a different conclusion. We accept this, but would ask that they treat our study as genuine concern for the issues and not dismiss it with a label such as ‘liberal’ or ‘feminist’. We maintain that our presentation in this book is an accurate explanation of what the Bible teaches. We genuinely believe that it is God’s will and Jesus’ teaching that we all should use the gifts we have been given to the benefit of the ecclesia rather than having to hide them because of the attitudes of others. We ask for understanding and forbearance. Mutual respect and restraint are required from all of us.

Change is possible but it may be very slow and it has to be done with love and respect on both sides, which is not always easy. We need to pray about it and ask for God’s guidance in our study and in putting it in to practice.

Possible Positive Moves

We are all in different positions along the road towards change. For some there is a large amount of work to be done to convince others of the need for it. It may be helpful to initiate a discussion on the subject so that wider points of view can be aired. This could be raised as a subject on the Bible Class programme or in a less formal setting. Wherever it is, it may be useful to discuss the frustration and depression that sisters feel when excluded by dominant brothers or unconvincing Biblical expositions.

Progress is likely to be made slowly. Some ecclesias already have sisters taking part in discussion at the Bible Class. For them the next step forward could be having sisters give talks. Those ecclesias where sisters already give talks could move towards having sisters reading on a Sunday morning, or including sisters on various committees or the arranging committee.

For some, the only way forward may be some form of compromise. It may be necessary to have a separate occasion where, with the blessing of the ecclesia, sisters can take an active part. Those who are not happy to be at a meeting led by sisters do not need to be involved. We know of an ecclesia where this has worked well. In another there are Sunday afternoon events where things are done differently. Here sisters can be active participants, along with the brothers, choosing hymns, offering prayers, suggesting themes, contributing from their knowledge and spiritual understanding. This may be thought of as divisive but it is a lot less so than forcing capable sisters to sit silent whilst thoroughly disagreeing with the restrictions put on them. We suggest that compromise to suit a range of expectations is a way of putting into practice loving your neighbour as yourself.

Miscellaneous Issues

Miscellaneous

Issues

In this chapter we offer further comment on some of the interpretations we have seen suggested.

“God is masculine”

A mistaken view of the religions surrounding the Jews and the Christians was to see God as possessing sexuality. God is neither male nor female. Sexuality is a requirement for human reproduction, and pagan religion which saw God (or gods and goddesses) as having similar characteristics to human beings used to attribute sexuality to the divine. What then of the frequent reference in the Bible to God as “He”? This is metaphorical language, just as God is said to have a strong right arm, hands, breasts, eyes, ears. Since both men and women are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), image cannot refer to physical appearance but to something else, such as ability to think and reason and to engage in a spiritual relationship.

“Adam sinned deliberately to be with Eve”

It is suggested that Adam was willing to deliberately give up his own life to save his beloved spouse or at least to fall under the same curse in order to redeem her through God’s mercy. This is a fanciful reinterpretation of Genesis. It implies that Adam acted nobly, whereas the text demonstrates the opposite. When challenged by God he tries to deny his own responsibility, blaming his wife and then by implication blaming God Himself. Far from loving his wife he does the opposite.

“The priests had to be male because they represented God who is male.”

The priests according to Hebrews represented the people, not God, and people are both male and female. It was the priests’ human weakness, not their masculinity, that placed them in an appropriate position to do this.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. (Hebrews 5:1-32)

“Important sacrifices are of male animals”

The suggestion is that God prefers male to female because important sacrifices are of male animals. No reason is given in the Law as to why male or female are chosen. From the point of view of agricultural production, male animals are less valuable than female, and sacrificing them therefore puts less strain on the economy. One bull only is needed to produce many calves. Perhaps we should therefore see God's providential concern. But though the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) are male (a bull, two rams, two male lambs) and similarly on other occasions (Numbers 28-29), the important sacrifice of the Red Heifer (Numbers 19) is of a female animal. A heifer is a cow. The ashes of the Red Heifer were essential for cleansing any person who touched a dead body, or any tent in which a person had died. It is not true, therefore, that important sacrifices are always of male animals. See also the sacrifice of a heifer in 1 Samuel 16:2. The relevance is described in Hebrews, and is nothing to do with any preference for male or female animals:

... if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:13-14)

“Women are valued at less than men”

In Leviticus 27 different valuations are made for the purpose of giving money rather than animals or human beings or property to God. Women are given a lower valuation than men. No explanation is given, but in a male dominated society, a lower valuation is not surprising. The valuation may be related to how much physical labour could be expected. But is this relevant to us, or the subject of the work in the ecclesia of brothers and sisters?

You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

There is no suggestion in the Bible that under the New Covenant a different price was paid according to gender.

“Few wise men, and even fewer women”

The preacher sought to be wise, but without success (Ecclesiastes 7:23-24). He reports little success amongst men, and even less amongst women.

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices. (Ecclesiastes 7:28-29)

Given the Bible's comment about Solomon and his women (1 Kings 11:3), we should hardly dare to generalise from this to the nature of those who are “a new creation” in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“God rebuked the nation because women ruled”

My people—children are their oppressors,

and women rule over them. (Isaiah 3:12)

This verse is employed to argue that God rebuked the nation because “women ruled”. Therefore rule by women is unlawful.

Two comments should be made:

(a) The text is uncertain. Although several versions translate by the phrase “women rule over them”, other translations (including the Septuagint) say:

Moneylenders oppress my people, and their creditors cheat them. (GNB)

(b) If the reference to women is original, there is likely to be a specific context such as in the reign of king Ahaz. The Jerusalem Bible translates:

O my people, oppressed by a lad, ruled by women. (Isaiah 3:12)

A footnote says: “The ‘lad’ is possibly the young king Ahaz, at the start of his reign, 736.” The types of women who were exerting influence are described in verse 16:

... the daughters of Zion are haughty

and walk with outstretched necks,

glancing wantonly with their eyes,

mincing along as they go,

tinkling with their feet. (Isaiah 3:16)

Whichever of these two possibilities is the explanation of the first part of verse 12, the main point is made clear by the second part:

O, my people, your leaders mislead you,

and confuse the course of your paths.

It is the *misleading* by the leaders to which exception is being taken; not to the gender of the leaders. Mostly the leaders were men, and they ruled with disgraceful and culpable disregard for God’s standards. Micah, writing about the same time as Isaiah, said:

Hear, you heads of Jacob

and rulers of the house of Israel!

Is it not for you to know justice?—

you who hate the good and love the evil...

Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob

and rulers of the house of Israel,

who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong.
Its heads give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for hire,
its prophets divine for money...
Therefore because of you...

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.... (Micah 3:1, 3:9-12)

Male leaders often misled. The solution was not therefore to get rid of male leaders as such, but to get rid of misleading leaders.

“Speaking in the Spirit”

It is sometimes claimed that because prophesying is God speaking directly through the prophet or prophetess, they themselves in no way teach, explain the Word of God, or personally lead the people. Consequently, it is all right for women to prophesy because this does not conflict with the (supposed) God-given hierarchy that only men are to teach or lead. When, however, women are not speaking under the direct inspiration of God, the natural hierarchy applies and they should keep silent.

As we have indicated above, a hierarchy of this type is not taught in the Bible.

The fact that God spoke directly through the prophets or prophetesses does not mean that they personally played no part in the process as human beings. God said to Jeremiah:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:5)

Jeremiah was not simply some anonymous person who acted like a machine to transmit words from God. Jeremiah was intimately involved as a person. He had to stand up and oppose the false prophets. He was attacked and persecuted, and found this very difficult:

Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me.
(Jeremiah 15:10)

The same can be observed with Elijah. He is described as a “man of God” because of his every obedience to God’s commands and because it is recognised that God truly speaks through him. He therefore is recognised as a powerful leader, guided by God to confront king Ahab and the prophets of Baal. 1 Kings 18 shows Elijah in action, clearly as a man involved on God’s behalf in the struggle against paganism. His own comment is:

“I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19:10)

They had to be moral people in themselves or their witness would have been worthless. Hence Jesus can comment:

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12)

The prophets and prophetesses were indeed people through whom God spoke directly; but they were also therefore leaders and people of influence.

The Nature of Prophecy in the New Testament

It is often assumed that prophecy in the New Testament should be understood in the same manner as that in the Old, that it involves a direct authoritative “Thus saith the LORD” pronouncement from God. On this basis it is then argued that when sisters prophesied, such as on the day of Pentecost or in ecclesial meetings as in 1 Corinthians 11, they were mouthpieces for God, were doing no teaching or interpretation of Scripture, and accordingly it was permissible for them to speak. But (it is argued) when prophecy no longer existed the appropriate position for sisters was to remain silent because only brothers could legitimately teach or expound Scripture.

This is a complicated subject which requires detailed and extensive examination. We make here only a few brief points:

It seems possible and necessary to distinguish at least two types of prophecy in the New Testament:

(a) That of prophets like Agabus, Paul, Barnabas, and Silas. What they said was regarded as authoritative (Acts 11:28, 13:1, 15:32, 21:10).

(b) The kind of prophesying mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11 which required examination and analysis and was not regarded as authoritative in the same sense as (a).

The evidence for this can be seen in Paul’s comment:

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

(1 Corinthians 14:37)

Paul’s teaching as an apostle is “a command of the Lord”, whereas the comments by those in Corinth who prophesied needed to be evaluated. In verse 29 Paul wrote:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

Further indication that prophesying in meetings did not involve a direct authoritative pronouncement from God is then given:

If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent...

... the spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets. (14:30-32)

The use by Paul of the word “revelation” might seem to contradict this conclusion. Surely a revelation is a direct authoritative commandment from God? Nevertheless, Paul says: “the spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets” – in other words, the prophets have control over what they say.

Writing to the Thessalonians Paul also indicates the need to judge what is said in the prophecies.

Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything... (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21)

Questions for consideration are: What then was prophesying in the church at Corinth? Some versions translate prophesying as “speaking God’s message” (GNB). How different is this from exhortation today? How much was it a creative development of a theme, as happens today in discussions? How different was it from what happens when we pray and various themes (not premeditated) come into our prayers? What was the evaluation, and against what standard? – presumably whether the message was in accordance with the sound teaching they had already received from Paul and in accordance with Scripture. Was it therefore (in this sort of ecclesial situation) very different from what we do when we exhort?

“The church is the bride of Christ, and just as the church submits to Christ, a wife submits to her husband (Ephesians 5:21-33). This is a type (pattern) we must live out in ecclesial life, the sisters are submissive and remain silent, the brothers speak.”

In the analogy of the ecclesia as wife or bride of Jesus, we are all the bride/wife. There is no differentiation within the ecclesia, other than that we are all to be submissive to one another (Ephesians 5:21). It is a misuse of Paul’s analogy (as we explain on pages 58-59) to argue from it that sisters represent the ecclesia (and should be silent) and brothers represent Christ (and should speak).

Being submissive is active, not passive. It means putting one’s own interests below that of the other. When preparing food, if there are two bananas, one better than the other, if the wife is preparing the meal, she gives her husband the better one; if the husband is preparing it, he gives his wife the better one. In ecclesial activities, if organised according to this pattern, the church (brothers and sisters) do their best to put the requirements of Christ above their own personal self interest. Amongst other things, that means that the standards of Christ in the way he treated women should be followed by the church. And Jesus encourages women’s education and active involvement in his ecclesia, just as he encourages brothers. When sisters are told to be submissive in (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15) it is because they are not putting the interests of the ecclesia or their husbands first. In 1 Corinthians they are chattering and disruptively asking questions, and in 1 Timothy spiritually uneducated sisters are dominating the brothers. Christian submission means that they work at a level with their brothers, not over them. Brothers likewise should treat sisters at a level with them, not domineer over them by claims of any superior position in social status or brain power. A sister, therefore, who in humility encourages the ecclesia by wise words and Scriptural understanding,

with the support and approval of her husband, is properly submitting to Christ and to her husband. (See also pages 58-59.)

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15-17)

“Sisters are equal to brothers but God assigns a different role”

If sisters are excluded from decision making in the ecclesia, excluded from speaking, reading and praying, then they are allotted an inferior position even if this is claimed not to be the case. The argument that God has made them for different roles is, in our view, an attempt to mask a belief in the inferiority of sisters by giving it apparent intellectual or spiritual respectability. It is similar to stating: “I do not believe that black people are inferior. I simply think that God has assigned to them the role of servants and to the white people the role of masters.” Sisters are of equal value with brothers in the sight of God and should have an equal opportunity to serve Christ in the ecclesia, each according to ability. This is the teaching of the Bible and where sisters’ position in the ecclesia is restricted in the New Testament it is because of cultural considerations and immediate problems, not because of basic principles running through the Bible.

“Men are given a special gift of logic in order to fulfil their God-given role as leaders in the ecclesia. Women are given a different gift of compassion and nurturing.”

Such statements cannot be verified by reference to Scripture. There is some truth in male/female differences, as indicated in modern understanding of how human brains develop (see pages 175-176). But there is considerable overlap between men and women, and compassion and nurturing are fully required of brothers as they are of sisters. Human logic is not lauded in the Bible, and the Scriptures do not advocate the possession of worldly wisdom as being adequate criteria for leadership in the ecclesia. Compassion is most often exhibited as a *divine* characteristic (the attitude of God or of Jesus), not as a feminine trait. Paul mentions varieties of gifts, including wisdom, knowledge, faith, but these are not assigned by gender, and he emphasizes that despite the diversity of spiritual gifts received by the members of the ecclesia, it is the same Spirit working in many members of the one body. Logic involves thinking, in which case it is expected of both male and female: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought” (Romans 12:3).

All believers are expected to cultivate the “mind” of Christ, to be humble, compassionate, kind, lowly, meek, patient, understanding and forgiving. If these are thought to be feminine characteristics rather than masculine ones, we should look more closely at what the Bible teaches.

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of other. Have this mind

among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant....
(Philippians 2:3-7)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

(Colossians 3:12-14)

The comment: "Man is for strength, judgment, and achievement. Woman is for grace, sympathy, and ministration" (see page 203) might be intended to compliment sisters, but arises from pagan values and ideas, and boosts male claims in a manner which is contrary to Scripture. Having been school teachers all our lives and worked with male and female colleagues and growing young people of both sexes, we consider the claims that men have skill and logic and women have compassion and nurturing to be generalisations which are not true to experience. Some individuals have skill and logic more than others, some have compassion and nurturing abilities more than others, but the divide is not a male/female divide; and the Bible teaches likewise.

"In understanding be men" (1 Corinthians 14:20)

This verse should not be used to suggest that brothers think in a better or superior way to sisters. The contrast is between being children and being grown up. The King James Version reads:

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

Most modern translations say "mature or "adult":

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature. (RSV)

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults. (1 Corinthians 14:20, NRSV)

What People Say

What People Say

These are genuine remarks made to us either by word of mouth or in writing, or reported to us. We add our comments beneath.

“It says quite clearly that women shouldn’t speak.”

Comment: It is a principle of any valid Scriptural exposition that we must look at the context. We have sought to do that in this book. It can also be replied that “It says quite clearly that women *do* speak, and with Paul’s approval” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 14:5 & 26). Simply quoting a text, any text, without a context is likely to be misleading. What, for example, did Jesus mean when he said “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43)?

“Women have a presence [and therefore shouldn’t be on the platform].”

Comment: So, obviously, do men, and we become used to it.

“If you don’t like it here, go and join a church which does have women speakers.”

Comment: This is an argument from church tradition, and is not a relevant response to the arguments we have put that we should go by Bible teaching.

“Sisters don’t read at services.”

Comment: This is not an accurate comment, and again it seeks to go by tradition, not by Biblical exposition.

“I wouldn’t want to be exhorted by a sister.”

Comment: If exhortation is appropriate, we should be prepared to take it no matter from whom.

... exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

(Hebrews 3:13)

“We don’t want sisters taking over the Breaking of Bread.”

Comment: We are not in favour of anyone “taking over”. A male take-over could be said to be the fate the church suffered as it departed from New Testament standards and belief. We would like to see the sharing and partnership which was part of the unity in Christ of the New Testament ecclesias.

“My wife tells me what to do at home: I’m not having her telling me what to do at the meeting!”

Comment: Perhaps Ephesians 5:21 is the best comment: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

“Believers in Paul’s letters are addressed as brothers (*adelphoi*) because the letters are written to the brothers, who then taught the sisters. It is incorrect, therefore, to translate *adelphoi* as ‘brothers and sisters’ as is done in modern translations.”

Comment: This is based on 1 Thessalonians 5:27: “I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren” and on the similar passage in Colossians 4:16. It does not take long to examine the usage of “brethren” (*adelphoi*) and similar expressions such as “to the saints” to see that Paul is addressing everybody in the ecclesia by the term “brethren”, not just the males.

See Chapter 6 “‘Brothers and Sisters’ in the New Testament” pages 40-47. The common form of address “Dear Brethren and Sisters” is a mixture of old English and modern. To be accurate and inclusive we should say “Brothers and Sisters” as otherwise we imply that “brethren” does refer only to men.

“When we go there [to ecclesias where sisters are actively involved] we are impressed with the prayers and addresses given by some of those talented sisters. They are a real treat to hear and we appreciate the differences.”

Comment: People who have not heard Christadelphian sisters speak are rather afraid of the unknown. It is good to hear appreciation of the spiritual tone and value in meetings where sisters take an active part in services.

“A brother said to me that if a sister said anything at a business meeting the whole proceeding would be *ultra vires* [beyond legal authority]”

Comment: If this means that a sister may not contribute to discussion at a business meeting (though she is entitled to vote at it), it is a good example of misusing the Bible in an anti-woman manner to enforce male control. If it means that the whole proceedings of the meeting become invalid if a sister comments, it is an example of how extreme some brothers can be.

“Our meeting has just agreed to have sisters on the Arranging Committee.”

Comment: A sensible move, following the logic of New Testament teaching, and a wise move in a world where discrimination against women is more likely to turn people against the Gospel than towards it.

“There was a shortage of brethren and it was proposed that sisters should read the Scripture portions at the Breaking of Bread service. It has not yet been acted upon as we rely heavily on visiting speakers. The sisters themselves felt that inter-ecclesial harmony was more important.”

Comment: It is sad that inter-ecclesial harmony is likely to be disturbed by encouraging what many feel is a sensible implementation of Biblical teaching. On the other hand, many visiting speakers, if asked if they find it acceptable for a sister to read, say “Yes”. So one answer to this particular dilemma is to check with each visiting speaker first. There are better reasons, of course, for having sisters read, apart from a shortage of brothers. It helps to return to the all-inclusive nature of first century meetings as described in 1 Corinthians 14:27: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”

“I only had a year or two in ecclesia but became Mutual Secretary and gave several papers at the Mutual. I found it very hard when I went to ecclesia and could do nothing. They did eventually have one Bible Class a month at which we could comment or ask questions but it didn’t last long because one brother refused to come to the class on those occasions. They went through all the nonsense of sisters passing notes for brethren to read and sometimes closing the meeting in prayer before sisters could speak.”

Comment: This illustrates varied practices within the Christadelphian world. It also shows the frustration sisters are made to feel, especially when they can be prevented even by one brother who insists on his own understanding being implemented despite the wish of others to do things differently. Sometimes Sisters’ Classes are adopted as a solution, since this is considered Biblical as sisters are teaching sisters. But the reference in Titus 2:3 is to older women teaching younger women, and is strictly, therefore, not applicable to younger women giving talks at a Sisters’ Class.

“Advice I was given: If you want to get on well in the Christadelphian community, say nothing, do nothing.”

Comment: Sadly, this advice has more truth to it than we would like to believe. Those who study and say what they think are likely to be regarded with suspicion.

“How odd it is, that a seventeen year old brother is preferred to lead a discussion group which includes sisters older and more experienced than he! How crazy it is, that four senior sisters in isolation can run their own meetings for years, until one day they convert a young man, a ‘novice’, and thereafter he has to do everything, all the teaching, reading, praying, while they sit in silence, until, tragically, frustration and depression drives the little ecclesia apart!”

Comment: We can quote someone else’s remark to us as a reply:

“It has a bad effect on the brothers. It cannot be right that a young, newly-baptised brother should be encouraged to feel superior to an older, experienced sister. If a sister has taught the Truth to a man, her work should not cease just because he has been baptised.” To be truly and deeply Biblical we would agree with Stella Blackmore that “The work *is* the thing that matters.

Where a sister can do a particular piece of work better than a brother, it cannot be *wrong* for her to do it." See page 206 above.

"... the usual treatment of sisters has such bad effects, not only depriving the Lord of potential workers, but causing those brothers who are so inclined, to consider themselves above all sisters, regardless of their age and experience."

Comment: The bad effects of the unbiblical idea that any brother can regard himself as head of any sister has been seen in young brothers who feel entitled to tell older sisters off for wearing women's trousers or for not wearing a hat. This type of teaching unfortunately can encourage arrogance in young brothers, and is warned against in 1 Timothy 3:6, which although about bishops, warns about the danger of new converts becoming too full of themselves: "He must not be a recent convert or he may be puffed up with conceit."

"Paul would be chagrined; and I am sure that Jesus is grieved to see his ecclesias and missions run on half the staff, and so many sisters take the centre of their lives out of the ecclesia, to the work-place, to the shopping mall, into crafts, friends, kids, houses, holidays and a host of trivial but more rewarding distractions. Or as Sister observed to me 'They just get depressed'."

Comment: It is important that those with power, mainly the brothers, take this sort of problem on board. It is caused by an unbalanced, male-orientated view of the Bible. Although some brothers and sisters may feel upset when change is advocated, it is damaging to the brotherhood not to change.

"It used to bother me a good deal that sisters were not made full use of in service to the Truth. It was only my love for Jesus and his teachings that kept me going for many years!"

Comment: Jesus freed women from the restrictions of the society of his day, and it is sad when this is not followed through in a positive way in ecclesial teaching and practice today.

"For me, it is a real relief to know that my desire to increase the passion of my brothers and sisters for the Lord, is actually encouraged in Scripture, and not discouraged or forbidden, as we often hear."

Comment: It is sad that such willing involvement in service to Christ is actively discouraged. An unbiased reading of the Bible would correct this, but correction needs to be in practice, not just in theory.

“[Not to use sisters] is a terrible waste of our resources of skill and time and energy.”

Comment: We agree. However, keeping the bigger picture in mind, the overall aim is to lead a Christian life and to build up one’s brothers and sisters. If one avenue of service is forbidden, it is a Christian response to seek other ways in which we can serve our Lord. But everyone who has any power to bring about a change for the better should seek to do so. We bring disgrace to the name of Jesus if we hide behind tradition instead of re-examining Bible teaching and taking responsible action to improve the situation of sisters. Everyone should be saddened that sisters are not accorded the respect and encouragement that their talents and abilities Biblically deserve.

“As Christadelphians we consider ourselves to be ‘big picture’ people, so that we interpret the few difficult passages (i.e. ‘for’ the devil or trinity) in the light of the overall Bible teaching, harmonizing them to agree with the majority of texts. But strangely when it comes to sisters, we construct a whole position on just 2 ‘minority’ texts, 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, even when it is clear that sisters in the 1st Century were active in all aspects of preaching, praying and prophesying.”

Comment: We couldn’t agree more.

Questions for Discussion

Questions for Discussion

(1) If God's intention is that we should all work together, how do we account for the apparent masculine emphasis of the Bible?

(2) What moulds our personal attitudes?

(3) Have women changed in nature from Bible times? Have men?

(4) Is the modern emphasis on equal treatment contrary to the Bible?

(Document produced by the General Teaching Council for Scotland: *Gender in Education*: "The beneficiaries of an anti-sexist strategy will be all our children: sexist attitudes and assumptions constrain and limit boys as well as girls.")

(5) These questions were recently posed for discussion:

(a) How much is our ecclesia the creation of the World?

(b) How much is our ecclesia the creation of Tradition?

(c) How much is our ecclesia the creation of the Gospel?

(6) List the jobs which are done today within the category of "labouring side by side in the Gospel". How much is there a male/female division in these jobs? How desirable is it that there should be?

(7) Are there jobs that you would like to do but aren't allowed to?

(8) Are there jobs which you feel obliged to do but feel someone of the opposite sex could do as well or better?

(9) If jobs were distributed in our ecclesias on the basis of who can do them well, what would be the benefits, what the disadvantages?

(10) Many brothers find the work needed to prepare talks to be spiritually beneficial. They wouldn't necessarily do it, though, without the impetus of having to give a talk. Are sisters deprived of this stimulus? What solutions can you suggest?

(11) Is our preaching impaired by not making more use of sisters to give talks?

(12) Is our preaching impaired by the traditional attitude to women? We are a lay organisation, but then we have to explain that more than half our members may not speak!

(13) Is there anything in the argument about formality? It is all right for sisters to read round in Bible Reading Discussion on a campaign, or in a Breaking of Bread held at home, but not for them to read on a Sunday?

(14) If 1 Corinthians 14:35-36 did indicate a complete ban on sisters giving talks or presiding, is it correct to continue this application today?

(15) Examine the section from 1886 in *The Christadelphian*. How much can one see traditional church assumptions? How much is the basic argument valid?

- (16) Look at 1 Timothy 2. What does the passage say? What does it not say?
- (17) What positive work in New Testament times is not done by us today? Why?
- (18) The New Testament describes the husband as head of the wife. Is there any organised activity within the ecclesia which sisters could perform which would be in opposition to this? What, for example, if a capable sister writes her husband's exhortations?
- (19) Or is it that the men are head of the women? Are sisters under the control of the brothers collectively?
- (20) Were women at the Last Supper or not? If not, why do you think they were left out?
- (21) Why do you think Jesus did not choose at least one "representative woman" amongst the Twelve?
- (22) What was the purpose of the OT purity laws if Jesus swept them away?
- (23) Galatians 3:27-28, according to the male-orientated interpretation, refers only to salvation and not role. Is this a justifiable interpretation? Should we go further? How about slavery?
- (24) 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 all see the variety of Christian work as the work of God through His Spirit. How are these passages to be applied today?
- (25) Is it wrong for brothers to do jobs which are traditionally women's, e.g. cooking meals, cleaning the house?
- (26) Do you end up doing ecclesial jobs at which you are not particularly good?
- (27) Do you "put other people down"? Are you "put down" by others?
- (28) What advantages/disadvantages are there in having sisters do the same activities as brothers?
- (29) Is it right for a Christian to argue against equal involvement of women, or is this a worldly attitude?
- (30) Consider the following anomalies:
- | | |
|---|------------|
| (a) If sisters are not allowed to teach, is it consistent to teach by writing and magazine articles? | booklets |
| (b) If sisters are not allowed to lead, is it consistent to have a vote in elections? | ecclesial |
| (c) If sisters exercise authority by having a vote in ecclesial elections, is it not to have them on the Arranging Committee? | consistent |
| (d) Does it make sense that a sister can teach a man until he is baptised, but thereafter? | not |
| (e) Does it make sense that sisters can serve everyone at a Fraternal or ecclesial meal but cannot take round the Bread and Wine? | Gathering |
| (f) Does it make sense to prevent sisters being on the door when they are as capable as the brothers of greeting visitors? | capable |

(g) Sisters can canvass on campaigns, together or alone. This would have scandalous in the ancient world. Why do we accept it today?

been

(h) Girls can read at a Sunday School play, but sisters can't because they baptised and "women should keep silence in the churches".

have been

Conclusions

Conclusions

As servants of God and followers of Jesus we aim to live up to the standards set for us in the Bible. We do not always achieve this and frequently ask for forgiveness for our failings. It is up to us to regularly assess our lives and ask for guidance to improve. As part of this process we need to study the teachings of Jesus and compare his standards with the way we are doing things, in our personal lives, in our relationships with others and in our ecclesial lives.

The Old and The New

There is a clear contrast between the Old Testament and the New. The Old distinguishes between Jew and Gentile; the New between believer and unbeliever. The Old distinguishes between clean and unclean foods; the New between clean and unclean behaviour in the sense of moral conduct, not food. The Old has circumcision only for males; the New has baptism for male and female. The Old excludes the handicapped, the ill, and the women from full participation in worship in the Tabernacle or Temple; the New includes them, for perfection is not a matter of the outward appearance but of the heart. In the Old, participation by women is on a minor scale, in the New the women are much more involved.

The Old sets the background for the New, and in retrospect we can see how. It is after all in the Old Testament that we are first taught that "... the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Paul demonstrates that the change we see from Old to New is what God had in mind all through history.

When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ's grace which was given me by the working of his power. (Ephesians 3:4-7)

Historically there has been much conflict between nations, within societies, and between men and women. Jesus came to bring reconciliation:

... you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another.... (Colossians 3:9-13)

Here we have spelled out for us in practice the principles by which we are to behave towards each other – with compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and tolerance. The teaching of Jesus regards the Golden Rule as the universal guide to our actions: “... in *everything*, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12, NIV). In Christ we do not have a set of laws, which we analyse and dissect and apply like the scribes and the Pharisees. We have principles of how we treat people. If we apply these principles in relationships between brothers and sisters, there is no place for “putting others down”, for asserting that women are inferior to men, that sisters in Christ have to bear in themselves a particular responsibility for the sins of the world. It is Jesus who bore these sins, and he took them away – for all of us, male and female.

Different but Complementary

Men and women are different, but complementary. Their differences should be valued and appreciated. All our abilities should be regarded as God’s gifts to be used for the benefit of our families, our society and our ecclesias.

There is no place within the community of believers for discrimination on grounds of gender, race, or status. The New Testament describes gifts of service within the ecclesia, and these are described without male/female distinction. It was difficult to implement this egalitarian teaching in societies where social and class and gender distinction were expected and strongly emphasised. Worldly attitudes influenced relationships, and the misogyny in ancient societies – so noticeably absent from the Bible – was reintroduced into the Christian communities as they moved further and further from original Bible teaching. An anti-woman approach was imposed on interpretations of Genesis in a manner which distorted the teaching of the text. Because of the male-orientated nature of Old Testament society, it is easy to use the Old Testament to argue a case that this is how it should be. But it is not appropriate for believers in Christ to do this, any more than we should argue for slavery or polygamy.

When the Bible is read in its context, it produces a positive description of men and women working together in service. That is what we should aim at today. To refuse this is harmful to individuals, impoverishing to the ecclesia, and damaging to the cause of Christ.

Two Paths: Which will You Choose?

So, how are we to regard sisters in Christ? Do we select from the Old Testament and from pagan teachings, and treat them as underage children, property of fathers and husbands, disallowed from making decisions of their own, worth only half of what men are? Are their minds to be ignored, their abilities disregarded? Always to be told what to do by men? Always to learn but never to teach? Is this what God created women for? Is this the teaching of the Old Testament – or only of a selected series of quotations? This is how Aristotle rated women. But did Jesus take this view? Did Paul? Is this a wholesome or Christ-like view? Surely we should have a better approach and a mature, spiritual understanding.

We all, brothers and sisters, are a new creation in Christ Jesus. We are being transformed by the renewal of our minds. In Jesus we have a new and living way.

Jesus treated women as valued individuals, as disciples who should learn from him. He told women at the tomb to tell his brothers the good news of the Resurrection. He encouraged them to prophesy on the Day of Pentecost, to speak in exhortation and to pray with those who were gathered together in his name. He encouraged them to be submissive, as he had been submissive: to serve, rather than to be served; and he encouraged their husbands to do the same. He encouraged them, renewed in their minds, to teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, to be faithful people who were thereby qualified to teach others.

Which is a Christian position? Which is a sub-Christian position? Which will *you* choose?

A Special Obligation

There is a special obligation on us Christadelphians. We claim to go by the Bible and *only* by the Bible: “Back to the Bible” is one of our main stated aims. We claim to believe in “A Religion that Makes Sense”, as one of our pamphlets put it. We should not therefore shelter behind traditional interpretations or preconceived concepts, but choose and defend teaching and practice based on a comprehensive analysis of Scripture. We are often critical of other churches for going by tradition rather than by the Bible. It is a human characteristic, which we all share, to prefer to continue in traditions to which we have become accustomed. New interpretations are seen as challenging, and are automatically suspect. Our call in this book is for us all to go back to the Bible, to re-examine traditional interpretations (whether produced by our community or by other ecclesiastical traditions), and to be prepared to ask of ourselves what we also ask from others: “What does the Bible *really* say?”

Pressure for change thus arises directly from the Bible itself, not from changes in society around us. Our aim is not to be revolutionary, although Jesus and the early church were in many ways, but to be true to the teaching of God and Jesus and in working out how to put it into practice in the 21st century. We hope and pray that our book will stimulate discussion on what the Bible actually teaches – to the benefit of us all.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever.

Amen.

(1 Peter 4:10-11)

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All One

in

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