

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH:
A Biblical Study**

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I. The Culture Factor

Probably for most of those who oppose the ordination of women as elders or pastors in the church, the debate is viewed as a struggle between conservatism and liberalism. Conservative forces are allegedly defending the primacy of Scripture against the rising tide of a liberal culture sweeping the church. In other words, the opponents of women's ordination tend to believe that those who advocate it have been influenced by the modern women's movement in Western (especially American) culture. Furthermore, this alleged liberal bias has led these supporters of women's ordination to the conclusion that the apostle Paul and other Bible writers were biased against a major role for women in the church because of their own culture's negative view of women.

The viewpoint described above is appealing because our modern liberal society has indeed flooded the church with worldliness, often in the disguise of Anew and improved (enhanced)≡ styles of worship that seem to emphasize entertainment rather than spiritual worship, a de-emphasis on dress, adornment, and health standards as allegedly being legalistic, and even a hermeneutical approach to the Bible that undermines inspiration and revelation. Adding to the appeal is the fact that *some* supporters of women's ordination do indeed sound more like militant feminists than Christians using "sanctified reason".

Nevertheless, a Christian's position on this, or any other, issue must not be based on a blanket categorizing of one side in the debate, for that tends to blind us to an objective study of the Scriptures by giving us a bias that prejudices the issue before we really examine it closely. We should also note

that cultural bias works *both* ways on this issue of women's ordination. Some of the most strident opponents of women's ordination are scholars of recent European or African descent, who might also be accused of having been influenced by an old traditional cultural bias against an expanded role for women in either society or the church. And in at least a few cases, a good argument might be made that there are those whose family roots run deep in the American South who seem to reflect the Old South's traditional view that women should be kept "barefoot and pregnant". The point is not to escalate emotional appeals, but to make the reader aware that cultural bias almost certainly affects the attitudes of some church members on *both* sides of the women's ordination issue, not just within the pro-ordination camp. Furthermore, there are many (I hope most) on both sides of the issue who are sincerely attempting to base their views on the Word of God rather than allowing their cultural heritage to determine them. Thus, it behooves each of us to stop throwing mud at the other side.

There can be little doubt that the modern women's movement in American society has played a prominent role in raising the issue of women's ordination within the church; the timing itself suggests this. Likewise, the modern black civil rights movement helped raise the issue of race relations, both socially and politically, within the church. Do these facts mean that those church members who then studied and began to advocate certain changes in the church are automatically to be dismissed as Fifth Columnists (or Jesuit priests) working for a liberal political agenda rather than as sincere believers who just might be Biblically right? Regardless of some politically or culturally motivated members on both sides of the women's ordination issue, the reality is that this is *not about women's rights* per se—pro or con—but *about being right with the Word of God!*

Being right with the Word of God means, among other things, that Christians should be careful how we use terms such as "conservative" and "liberal". As these terms are applied to the

relationship between culture and the Bible writers, the conservative interpreter correctly understands that inspired writers were *not* biased by cultural factors in determining the truths they taught. Otherwise, inspiration by the Holy Spirit would mean nothing. At the same time, this does not mean that culture never has a legitimate role in the application of a divine principle. Divine principles are eternal, but standards—which are the applications of principles—*may* vary with the culture. For example, modesty in dress is a Bible principle. Serious church members in most Western countries today would certainly agree that it would be a violation of that principle for a mother to publicly and openly breast feed her baby so that her breast is clearly exposed to others. The reason is obvious: in Western culture, women’s bodies, including their breasts, are widely thought of primarily in sexual terms, even more so with that culture’s explicit sexual exploitation of women. Thus, in these countries it would be a proper Christian dress standard that mothers should not engage in that practice. However, in some cultures today, this practice attracts no attention and has no sexual connotation; therefore, it would not be a violation of the principle of modesty. Although the standard is different, based on different cultures, the principle of modesty remains the same.

A liberal hermeneutical approach to the Bible, on the other hand, emphasizes the humanness of the Bible writers, and allows for their personal biases (based on culture or other factors) to influence what they wrote and taught in the Word of God. This approach is both wrong and dangerous because it makes the inspiration of the Holy Spirit inadequate to protect the writer, and thus the reader, of the Bible from spiritual error, and it thereby undermines confidence in the Bible. It is certainly true that in *some* areas of the church, this approach is employed by supporters of women’s ordination. However, it is equally true that most advocates of women’s ordination do not adopt a liberal approach to the Bible. Therefore, it is both inaccurate and unfair to blanket label the

supporters of women's ordination as liberals or militant feminists whose agenda is to spread the liberal culture of modern society. Those who do such labeling often appear to confuse that which is traditional and old-fashioned automatically with what is right. On that basis, Western society would still practice black African slavery, the so-called divine right of kings would allow them to be as tyrannical as they wish, church and state would be united and religious dissenters burned at the stake, and there would be no such thing as democracy, the U.S. Constitution, or the Bill of Rights. But the bottom line is that believers should determine their position on the issue only after a careful study of the Scriptures, based on conservative principles of interpretation. And if that study leads you to the conclusion that it is proper to ordain women as elders or pastors in the church, then so be it; or vice versa. It is far more important to be right with the Word of God than to be either conservative (as in traditional) or liberal (as in new) on a specific issue!

II. Creation and the Fall

At the heart of the debate over women's ordination is the issue of the "headship" principle. Both sides agree that the Scriptures teach the headship of the husband over his wife. But nearly all opponents of women's ordination maintain two crucial positions concerning the "headship" principle: (1) that the husband's headship over the wife existed from Creation (rather than from the Fall into sin); and (2) that the husband's headship over the wife also translates into male headship over all females in the church. This section deals with the first point, and the next section discusses the second one.

There are at least five specific elements of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 that have relevance concerning the relationship between the first man and woman. Two of these elements are

present in Genesis 1:26-28. Verses 26-27 clearly state that mankind, both male and female, was created in the image of God; in other words, it took both the man and the woman to fully reflect God’s image. This might be called a “corporate singular” because two genders (corporate) are required to make one (singular) image of God. This merging of two genders to make one image of God strongly suggests equality between the man and the woman; certainly there is no hint of one being subordinate to the other. Closely linked with the “image of God” concept in the Creation account is the idea of dominion, or rulership, of the earth and its other living creatures (Genesis 1:26,28). Notice that verses 26 and 28 both refer to “them” (nearly all English translations)—meaning the male and female—as having this “dominion”. The relationship between these two themes of “image of God” and “dominion” can be seen more clearly in the following diagram:

- A “Let Us make man in Our *image*...” (v. 26a)
- B “let them have *dominion* over...” (v. 26b)
- A¹ “So God created man in His own *image*...male and female” (v. 27)
- B¹ “fill the earth and subdue it; have *dominion* over...” (v. 28)

The interweaving of the “image of God” and the “dominion” themes in alternating references (as shown in the above diagram) indicates that the reason mankind was given dominion, or rulership, over the earth and its living creatures was that mankind was created in the image of God. In other words, because mankind was in the image of God, they could safely be appointed rulers of the earth as the Creator’s fit representatives. Thus, the need for both man and woman to jointly represent the image of God points to an equality of *nature* between the sexes, while the joint headship (dominion or rulership) over the earth points to an equality of *function*.

A third element in the Creation account that illuminates the relationship between the first

man and woman is the timing of Eve's creation. Opponents of women's ordination generally view the significance of Eve's creation *after* Adam's as implying that God intended for woman to be subordinate to man from the very beginning. Did the order in which things or persons were created suggest that what was created later was automatically subordinate in some way to that which was created earlier? If that were true, then would not all human beings be subordinate to all animals because Genesis 1:24-28 clearly says that the land animals were all created earlier than man on the sixth day of Creation? Of course, man could not be subordinate to animals because animals were not created in God's image. But the serious point is that we must be careful about assuming a headship-subordinate relationship just because of the order of creation.

The second account of mankind's creation, recorded in Genesis 2:4-25, does indeed tell us that Adam was created before Eve. However, the manner in which this story unfolds does not lead to the conclusion that the woman was therefore subordinate to the man. In verses 18 and 20b, the point is made that Adam needed a "helper" (NKJV). Between those comments, God is described as bringing the various animals to Adam for him to name. This literary relationship may be diagrammed as follows:

- A God said that Adam is alone and needs a helper (v. 18)
- B God brought all the animals to Adam for him to name (vv. 19-20a)
- A¹ "But for Adam there was not found a helper..." (v. 20b, NKJV)

This description (just outlined above) strongly suggests that God brought the animals to Adam for a naming session in order to get Adam to realize that he did not have a mate like all the animals did. Therefore, by creating Eve immediately after Adam's realization of his need for a mate (vv. 21-23), God highlighted the creation of woman as a special creation. Like each of the animal species, Adam was then made complete too. In fact, theologians often refer to the literary structure of the Creation

account in Genesis 2 as a Aring construction \cong because it connects and completes the circle of the development of the creation of mankind. In simpler language, the Creation account in Genesis 2 proceeds from the incomplete to the complete *rather* than from the superior to the subordinate. A fourth element in the Creation story which pertains to the relationship between the first man and woman is the reference in Genesis 2:18, 20 to Adam's mate as a "help meet for him" (KJV). Opponents of women's ordination argue that this means that woman was created to be subordinate to man because she was made for his benefit—a type of servant (although they would add that she was an *honorable* servant). But the Hebrew word translated as "help meet" in the KJV does not imply a subordinate helper; it is derived from another word that means "to surround" as for the purpose of protecting or coming to another's aid. Moses could have chosen other words to denote a servant-like subordinate person if that were the concept he wanted to express, but he did not. Instead, the word he selected appears more than 20 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, with the great majority of those having reference to God in His capacity as bringing physical, military, *and spiritual* help to His people. And no one argues that He was a subordinate Helper to mankind! Indeed, this word emphasizes that the *receiver* of this help is *dependent* upon the giver for it. Furthermore, Adam's helper is also described in Genesis 2:18, 20 by another Hebrew word whose basic root meaning contains the idea of prominence or conspicuousness; its form there in Genesis essentially means "as that which [prominently/conspicuously] corresponds to" Adam.

Thus, the author's choice of words cannot be used to imply that Eve occupied a subordinate position relative to Adam. Instead, they reinforce the idea that Adam was dependent upon her for help; note that both references to her as Adam's "help meet" in Genesis 2:18, 20 form part of the diagram (see above) which emphasizes her creation as the special (longed-for) completion of both

Adam and mankind generally. She was a helper prominently corresponding to Adam—his equal partner.

The fifth element in the Creation story which is relevant to the issue of woman's relationship to man is the account in Genesis 2:21-23 of Eve being created from one of Adam's ribs. The opponents of women's ordination usually cite this fact as evidence that woman is subordinate to man because she originated from him, not him from her. Humorously (again), one could ask which symbolism better illustrates a subordinate origin—having been created from the *dirt* (i.e., Adam, 2:7) or having been created from another *human being* (i.e., Eve, 2:21-23)? Probably neither side in this debate really wants to go in that direction. In a more serious direction, the fact that the first woman was created from the first man does suggest her dependence upon him. But that just makes them even because both the timing and the designation of Eve as Adam's "helper" (NKJV) suggest that he was also dependent upon her. Thus, there is a mutual dependence between the first man and the first woman.

The fact that she came from one of Adam's ribs means that she originated from his side. If the origin of woman had come from his head, no doubt some would argue that she was to be his head. And if woman had been created from his feet, this would suggest that he was free to trample on her as he wished. However, like all the other evidence examined in this section, Eve's origin from Adam's side is fully consistent with the premise that she was to be his equal partner, neither to be his head nor his subordinate. In fact, the evidence, especially when viewed cumulatively, points overwhelmingly toward that conclusion.

Our analysis is further supported by the fact that only after the Fall (into sin) is there a clear change in the husband-wife relationship. Sin brought a series of curses from the Lord upon the

serpent (Genesis 3:14-15), the woman (3:16), and the man (3:17-19). Part of the curse that fell upon Eve was that “he [her husband] shall rule over you” (3:16c, NKJV). If Adam had been the head of Eve from the beginning of creation, the Lord’s statement after the Fall would have been meaningless.

In addition to the post-Fall Divine pronouncement that the husband would “rule over” his wife, it was only after the Fall that Adam *named* his wife (Genesis 3:20). In the Hebrew Old Testament, one who names another person or an animal thereby demonstrates the right to exercise authority over that person or animal. In a sense, that is still true. Do not parents, who name their children, have authority over them? And does not a person who gives a name to a pet generally have authority over that pet? A thorough check of the Old Testament with a good concordance will confirm the fact that whenever a superior named a subordinate, the word for *Aname*≡ is always present. Thus, we may speak of a naming formula.¹ Notice that this naming formula is present in Genesis 3:20, where Adam named his wife Eve.

Many opponents of women’s ordination argue that Adam showed his authority over his wife when he called her “woman” in Genesis 2:23, before the Fall. However, the word “name” is absent from the entire section dealing with calling (as opposed to naming) his helper “woman” (2:21-23). The argument that Adam “called” (v. 23) her “woman” means that he “named” her, or the fact that he had just been naming the animals implies that he named her, fails to take note that an official formula requires all the precise, specific elements in the immediate context. This element (i.e., the word “name”) is specifically missing in the account of Eve’s creation before the Fall; therefore, the passage cannot be used to demonstrate a headship-subordinate relationship at the time of creation.

¹ The only alleged exception to this rule is Genesis 35:18, but the word for “name” is implied in the second clause as carrying over from the first clause; both clauses refer to the same person being named also.

Furthermore, the word *woman* is really a category rather than a name or a proper noun. It is only after the Fall, in Genesis 3:20, that Adam gives his wife an actual name (i.e., Eve).

Although Genesis 1-3 *does* teach that the wife became subordinate to her husband as a result of the Fall, the reason or reasons are not explicitly stated in those chapters. Nevertheless, the implication is clear that it was largely because Eve was deceived by the serpent (3:13) and exercised a “spiritual leadership” role of encouraging Adam to sin also (3:6,12). The point seems to be that since sin entered the world, the human family unit was quite vulnerable to Satan’s attacks because he could play one marriage partner off against the other much easier than he had the first time in Eden. In other words, because of sin, if the husband and wife both remained equally responsible for exercising the proper spiritual leadership role in the family, the new natural (i.e., sinful) tendency would be for neither one of them to exercise it. Therefore, the Lord wisely recognized that He would have to appoint one of them to be the ultimate authority for exercising such spiritual leadership in the family unit. And at least partly because of Eve’s behavior in the sordid affair of mankind’s Fall, the Lord chose the husband for this leadership (headship) role.

Despite the overwhelming nature of the evidence in Genesis 1-3 that the husband-wife relationship was an absolutely equal partnership until *after* the Fall, questions arise and arguments are made on the basis of the apostle Paul’s references to the Creation-Fall account and its effect on human relationships. The apostle Paul gives four specific reasons for the headship-subordination relationship between husbands and wives.² They are as follows: (1) woman was created *from* man (I Corinthians 11:8); (2) woman was created *for* man (I Corinthians 11:9); (3) man was created *before*

² Opponents of women’s ordination interpret this to include all, or at least, most men and women in general. However, we deal with that controversy in the next section.

woman (I Timothy 2:13); and (4) woman was deceived and fell into sin (I Timothy 2:14).

As we seek a proper interpretation of Paul's inspired writings on the subject, there are two fundamental principles of interpretation that must be kept in mind. First, although a later inspired writer may certainly clarify and/or provide additional applications of earlier inspired writings, the earlier material must either demand or allow for such clarification or applications. In other words, because true inspiration cannot contradict itself, a later inspired author must be guided by the original text and its context in his/her own comments about it; he/she is not at liberty to completely rewrite its meaning.

For example, in Acts 2:16-21, the apostle Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32 as that which was then occurring on the Day of Pentecost. Part of Joel 2:28-32 refers to blood, fire, smoke, and phenomena involving the sun and moon, none of which either the Bible or history records on the Day of Pentecost at the time of Acts 2. However, the context in Joel 2:28-32 is the last days because it is associated with "the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord" (v. 31b). The Old Testament speaks only of a single coming of the Lord, and therefore only one period of the last days. However, the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews as a whole meant that He would have to come back again at a later time; thus there is a first and second coming of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the New Testament authors may, and do, speak of Christ's first coming as the last days (Hebrews 1:1-2, etc.), as well as the unspecified brief period just before His second coming too (II Timothy 3:1; James 5:3,7). Furthermore, the outpouring of the Lord (and gifts from Him) is compared to rain (Hosea 6:3; 10:12, etc.), and Joel 2:23 refers to an early, or former, rain and a latter rain. On this basis, then, Peter could properly assert that the prophecy of Joel 2 was being fulfilled in their hearing—as the early, or former, rain, which would then not require that everything in the original prophecy (i.e.,

blood, fire, smoke, etc.) be fulfilled on that occasion. Of course, this means that there must also be a second, or final, application (i.e., the latter rain) sometime just before the second coming of Christ.

This first fundamental principle of interpretation means that even the apostle Paul could not contradict the Genesis account as to the headship issue, which clearly relates that Adam did not occupy the headship position over Eve until after the Fall. The second basic principle of interpretation that should be remembered as we seek a proper understanding of the apostle Paul's comments on the subject is that the reader must carefully analyze what he does *not* say as well as what he *does* say. While he does say that the location, purpose, and timing of the first woman's creation are part of the reasons that Eve was subordinate to her husband, he does not specifically state that she was subordinate to him before the Fall. In fact, in I Timothy 2:14, Paul includes the fact that Eve was deceived and fell into sin as part of the reasons for her assuming a subordinate position. Well, if part of the reasons for her subordinate position was the fact that she was deceived and thus sinned, then her subjection to Adam could not have occurred until after she sinned.³ Therefore, Paul's statements about the location, purpose, and timing of Eve's creation as being part of the reason for her subjection to Adam must have applied only after the Fall. They were given as additional reasons since the Lord had to appoint one of them to assume the headship role in the family. Thus, Paul is entirely consistent with the account in Genesis 1-3.

Some opponents of women's ordination interpret Adam's role as the corporate head of the human race, detailed in Romans 5:12-21 and I Corinthians 15:21-22, as meaning that he must have held this position since his creation. That is allegedly why Jesus Christ is called "the last Adam" (I

³ If she were already subordinate to Adam before she sinned, then the fact that she sinned could not put her into further subjection to him—unless you interpret her subjection to Adam as having two stages, something that has absolutely no support in Scripture.

Corinthians 15:45) rather than the last Eve. Thus, if Adam was the corporate head of the human race from the time of his creation, then not only all husbands, but all men generally, must be the head of all women generally. However, Genesis 1-3 does not support any headship of Adam over Eve whatsoever until after the Fall, as we have demonstrated. So what made Adam the corporate head of the human family? If it were not his creation, then what about his sin? Indeed, both Genesis 3 and the apostle Paul make a clear distinction between the nature of Eve's sin and the nature of Adam's sin. Both indicate that Eve was deceived into committing sin (see I Timothy 2:14), while Adam was not. Therefore, his sin was even more grievous than hers because he committed it in full knowledge and with full mental capacity. His conscious, willful sin was like handing the rulership of the earth to Satan, who became known as "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, KJV) and "the god of this world" (II Corinthians 4:4, KJV). Because Jesus Christ came to reclaim the heavenly kingdom's dominion of the world from Satan, Jesus naturally is referred to as "the last Adam" rather than the last Eve. Thus, the nature of Adam's sin, as opposed to his wife's sin, is the reason that Adam can be called the corporate head of the human race whose place Jesus took during His first coming to the earth. And, therefore, Adam was not the corporate head of the human race until after he sinned; furthermore, it was not an honorable badge of headship when he "earned" that title, but rather a mark of humiliation that his particular sin was responsible for the earth being temporarily sold out to the devil! As such, it certainly has nothing to do with the headship of husbands over their wives or any alleged headship of males over females.

III. The Headship Principle and the Church

As was stated in the first paragraph of the last section, an important premise of the opponents

of women's ordination is that God established an order from the beginning in which He regarded Godly *men*, as opposed to women, as the spiritual leaders to occupy the headship positions among His people. For that reason, it is maintained, only men could become priests in the Old Testament "church". Furthermore, this law of allowing only male priests is alleged to have been based on the family structure, in which the husband/father was the priest of his home. Thus, the headship of the husband in the home was the model for the headship positions in the church. These claims raise a number of questions: (1) Does the Bible in general, or the apostle Paul in particular, specifically teach the headship of men over women in the church?; (2) Does the Bible teach that the headship principle in the home is the model for the headship principle in the church?; (3) What is the nature of the headship principle in the family and in the church?; and (4) Is the male headship found in the Old Testament "church" necessarily evidence of God's master plan for His people? The first three of these questions are the concern of this section; the last question is addressed in the following section.

Although the practice of the Old Testament "church" certainly reflected an overwhelmingly male-dominated structure, there is no specific law or instruction that declares that positions of spiritual headship must be occupied by men in contradistinction to women. The only statement of headship, or rulership, involving the two genders among God's people is the Divine declaration to Eve that her "husband...shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16, NKJV). The context there confirms that "husband" is the correct translation of the Hebrew. Thus, the only headship principle explicitly taught by way of a specific instruction in the Old Testament is the headship of the husband over his wife; the family unit is the clear focus of the passage.

In the New Testament, the following seven chapters clearly speak about some kind of subordinate relationship between the genders among God's people: (1) I Corinthians 11; (2) I

Corinthians 14; (3) Ephesians 5; (4) Colossians 3; (5) I Timothy 2; (6) Titus 2; and (7) I Peter 3. The words variously translated as “man,” “woman,” “husband(s),” and “wife(ves)” in those chapters are swing nouns, which means that they may be translated as *either* “man” or “husband(s),” or as “woman” or “wife(ves)”. The context should determine the translation. Remember that translators were and are not inspired persons in the Biblical sense of inspiration; thus, we should examine the passages for ourselves to determine the correct meaning of those swing nouns.

The context is so obvious in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, Titus 2, and I Peter 3 that the passages are speaking about the relationship of husbands and wives that there is no controversy on that point. In addition, those four chapters do not provide any reasons for the headship of the husband over the wife, but merely state that as fact, with most of them illustrating at least partially *how* that principle should actually work. However, the other three chapters *do* offer some rationale for the headship principle, and there is less unanimity among translators over how to translate the swing nouns. Therefore, our focus must of necessity be placed on I Corinthians 11, I Corinthians 14, and I Timothy 2, to determine whether they are speaking about the relationship between husbands and their wives or between men and women generally in the church.

In I Corinthians 11, the only specific command which the apostle Paul gives because of the headship principle is that women (or wives) should cover their heads. Historically, we know that in the 1st-century Jewish culture, the wearing of a veil was a symbol of the wife’s subordinate, or submissive, relationship to her husband, and not to any subordinate relationship to all men in general. This is strong evidence that the swing nouns in that chapter should be translated as “husband(s)” or “wife(ves)” rather than as “man (men)” or “woman (women)”. This conclusion is reinforced by evidence in chapter 14 of the same book that points clearly to the husband-wife

relationship. I Corinthians 14:34-35 obviously refers to that husband-wife relationship for two reasons: (1) the reference to the “law” in verse 34 as the basis for women (or wives) not speaking in church can only mean Genesis 3:16's statement to Eve that her husband would “rule over you” because, as we saw above, it is the only specific law or command in all of Scripture that mandates any subordinate relationship between the genders—and its context is specifically the husband-wife relationship; and (2) the key clause of verse 35, “let them [women or wives] ask their own [husbands] at home,” makes it obvious that the husband-wife relationship is intended rather than a general man-woman relationship.

In I Timothy 2:11-12, Paul admonishes a “woman” (or “wife”) to “learn in silence with all submission....[and] not...to teach or to have authority over a man [or “husband”].” The same swing nouns are employed, with the context determining the translation. In this case, I Peter 3:1-6 represents a substantially parallel passage to it. In I Peter 3, the passage discusses the wearing of jewelry and other adornment by women/wives in an undisputed context that refers to the submission of wives to their husbands. The fact that I Timothy 2:9-12 also discusses the wearing of jewelry and other adornment by women/wives, and then immediately follows with Paul’s statements about the same gender learning in silence and not exercising authority over a man, means that here too the husband-wife relationship is in view rather than the more general man-woman relationship.

Therefore, it is our conclusion that in all seven New Testament chapters that explicitly refer to the subordination of one gender to another, the common sense rules of conservative Biblical interpretation mean that, in each case, the subordination of the wife to her husband is the context. Thus, the answer to our question above, “Does the Bible in general, or the apostle Paul in particular, specifically teach the headship of men over women in the church?” is “no,” they do not.

Now for the second question, “Does the Bible teach that the headship principle in the home is the model for the headship principle in the church?” That is a question which the opponents of women’s ordination answer in the affirmative. But does it really? The only passage in the entire Bible that explicitly compares the headship principle in the church and in the home is found in Ephesians 5. That chapter strongly implies that Christ, as head of the church, is the husband of it (or her). And because verses 22-24 state that wives should submit to their husbands “just as the church is subject to Christ” (verse 24), some argue that thereby the apostle Paul placed men as the head of all women in the church. However, let us not get lost in Paul’s analogy. He clearly declares that “Christ is the head of the church” (verse 23), not men. When he refers to the duties of Christian husbands, notice that they are to follow the model of Christ: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church...” (verse 25). After explaining all that Christ did and does for the church (verses 26-27), he admonishes that “So husbands ought to love their own wives...” (verse 28). Plainly, Christ’s headship over the church is the model for the husband’s headship over his wife, not the other way around. To make the husband’s headship over the wife in the home the model for headship in the church is to violate the teaching of Paul’s analogy. It cannot be done without wresting the Scriptures!

By necessary implication, Ephesians 5 teaches something positive about the relationship of men and women in the church. Since Christ is the husband (or head) of His bride (i.e., the church), and she (i.e., the church) consists of both men and women, then both men and women equally make up His bride (i.e., the church). Therefore, both men and women in the church are equally subordinate to Christ. How, then, could this passage of Scripture mean that men are to exercise all headship positions in the church over all women? Obviously, it could not—unless, of course, one taught that, while all are equal in the church, some are more equal than others!⁴

⁴ This is an echo from George Orwell’s classic book, *Animal Farm*, which was a spoof of communism.

Not only does the Bible *not* use the husband-wife relationship as a model for the headship principle in the church (in either the Old Testament or the New Testament), but the existence of several women in Scripture chosen by God Himself to exercise authority in the Old Testament “church” proves that no follower of God should use it in that way either. Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (II Kings 22:14) were all prophets (or prophetesses) of the Lord in Israel. This means that they all possessed the authority to teach spiritual matters. Deborah, in particular, stands out because she was also a judge in Israel, which means that the people—both men and women—came to her for judicial rulings in legal and other matters (Judges 4:5). Thus, she exercised a judicial, or administrative, authority over men also.⁵ This is especially pertinent when we note that this was during the period of the judges, when there was no king in Israel; the judges were the highest human authorities in the nation-church. Certainly, these facts add proof to our earlier conclusion that the apostle Paul’s statement in I Timothy 2:11-12 (about not teaching or otherwise exercising authority over men) is *not* a statement of Divine eternal principle, but a specific standard which fit the culture of that time and place.⁶

The opponents of women’s ordination, however, generally counter that the women who exercised leadership roles in the Old Testament “church” did not occupy any headship positions within the spiritual organization of God’s people. They insist that a prophet, or prophetess, was never appointed to an official decision-making position in Israel or the New Testament church. They were merely God’s spokespersons who sometimes counseled the spiritual and political authorities to

⁵ Note also that Judges 4-5 tells the story of how Deborah had to lead Barak, a man, into battle.

⁶ See Section V for a conclusive statement of why Paul’s particular commands were given.

do certain things, but that it was up to those appointed authorities to heed the Divine counsel or not. As for Deborah, again the opponents stress that she never exercised her authority within the *spiritual* dimension of Israel; that was left to the priests, who were all men.

These objections raised by the opponents of women's ordination deserve serious attention. Could there be merit in them? The serious question which they raise is, "What is the nature of the headship principle in the family and in the church?" Again, the only passage in the entire Bible which explicitly, and most thoroughly, discusses *how* the headship principle should work in the family and in the church is Ephesians 5. If the critics of women's ordination are correct, we should find evidence that headship primarily involves authority, and that in the church, the emphasis is on submission to that authority through obedience to an official head.

However, when one reads and carefully examines Ephesians 5, one is struck by the *absence* of what human beings usually think of as authority and obedience to it. Instead, the basis for headship—both Christ's over the church and the husband's over his wife—is love and servant-hood. There are the initial statements about wives submitting to their husbands and being subject to them in everything, but when the headship-submissive relationship is defined, the focus is on the husband loving his wife just as Christ loved the church and "gave Himself for her" (verse 25, NKJV). This is a call for humility, not the exercise of kingly authority—the same kind of humility which Christ demonstrated in emptying Himself of the glories of heaven in order to bring salvation to a lost planet (see Philippians 2:5-11). In other words, Christ put Himself beneath and before His bride (i.e., the church) to serve her in order that she might be beautiful and saved. Likewise, the husband's headship is to be exercised in the same self-sacrificing manner. If exercising headship in the church meant occupying an official decision-making position within it, one would have expected Paul to call

for obedience to Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords—One who ruled from His heavenly throne with the Father. Instead, He exercises His headship over the church by loving it in humility as a servant in order to draw it ever closer to Himself and His character. That is Bible headship!

Now it should be clear that Bible headship in the church does not necessarily involve the occupation of a particular office, in which decision-making is a key component. So now let us go back to Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. As prophetesses, their spiritual counsels to men and women did indeed constitute spiritual headship in the Old Testament “church” because such counsels were given to either keep God’s people close to Him or to woo them back into a closer relationship with Him. Just as Christ, acting in His role as the Head of the church, woos His people by His loving appeals and acts of humility, so did true prophets and prophetesses. And Deborah, the judge, also exercised spiritual headship in the same “church” because her rulings, as well as her military leadership against Jabin (the Canaanite king), were spiritually led by the Holy Spirit through her gift of prophecy. It should be obvious, then, that it is an artificial, man-made distinction to maintain that only those who occupy actual decision-making offices within the church are exercising spiritual headship in the church. To believe that is to misunderstand the nature of spiritual headship as taught in the Word of God, for headship is not necessarily the occupation of a particular church office, but a spiritual leadership role in calling people to love and obey the Lord.

IV. Literalistic Versus Holistic Hermeneutics

Opponents of women’s ordination point to the male-dominant structure among both the Old Testament and New Testament people of God as evidence that such male dominance is God’s will. For example, the Old Testament priesthood was reserved only for men; only men served as elders or

deacons in the New Testament Church; and only men assumed the visible leadership role in evangelism and establishing new churches (Paul, Silas, Barnabas, etc.).

There is no dispute about the obvious fact that men held a virtual monopoly of the leadership (headship) roles and positions among God's people in both testamental periods. However, the real issue here is whether this historical fact represented God's express will or merely a reflection of the culture in which they lived. In other words, should we make the assumption that what God *allowed* is what He *willed* for His people? Many sincere believers have made this assumption in dealing with other issues. For example, nowhere in Scripture is human slavery condemned or prohibited among God's people. On the contrary, the Old Testament even provided for certain regulations of slavery in the Hebrew nation. And in the New Testament, the apostle Paul instructed a runaway slave to return to his master in the book of Philemon. These facts were viewed by most white Southerners during the pre-Civil War period as positive proof that God emphatically approved of slavery. It cannot be denied that such an interpretation was the result of a literalistic approach to the Bible, one in which it was assumed that what God permitted and gave instructions about He approved of in a positive sense. Historically, what many anti-slavery American Christians countered this view with is the same holistic hermeneutical approach to the Bible that answers our question about the role of men and women in the church.

Clearly, the Bible does *not* teach us that everything that God permits He also commands. The history of this earth is full of murder, mayhem, disease, natural disasters, and other sordid tragedies. But these cannot rightfully be charged to God. Sin has contaminated the population of the earth, and Satan has been exercising the principles of *his* kingdom to the universe. And while God has *permitted* Satan and his human followers to do much wickedness, it is certainly *not* His will that

these practices exist!

As far as the practices among His own professed people are concerned, Scripture indicates that the Lord must sometimes take His people where they are and move them slowly toward His ideal for them. For example, in I Corinthians 10:13, the apostle Paul encourages Christian believers by telling us that God never allows us to experience a temptation which is beyond our ability to bear. The Greek word translated “temptation” in that passage is much broader than merely being tempted to sin; it also means to experience troubles or adversity in general. This principle was perfectly illustrated much earlier in Biblical history, when God led the Israelites out of Egypt via a longer route in order to avoid warfare (Exodus 13:17-18); He did not wish to discourage them because they were not ready for warfare so soon after their experience as slaves. In John 16:12, Jesus told His disciples that He had many things to say to them, but they could not bear them at that time; the same thought is implied in Mark 4:33. Thus, it is clear that God did not correct every misunderstanding among His people in the past. But He took them where they were, and when He knew they were ready, He showed them His ideal so that they would eventually reach it.

Anti-slavery American Christians reminded their countrymen during the days of slavery that the character of God certainly makes human slavery contrary to His will, and that in their ignorance, He *tolerated* it in Biblical times. Now that Christian history had advanced their understanding of God’s ideal, slavery could not be justified on the basis of a literalistic reading of certain Bible passages. Few today would challenge the truthfulness of the anti-slavery response to those believers who attempted to use the Bible to defend slavery in early American history. This, in fact, may have a parallel to the issue being addressed in this study. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to inquire as to whether or not the Lord has given any evidence of His fundamental will concerning the relationship

of men and women to each other in the church. If He has, and if it is contrary to the idea of excluding a believer from any role or position in the church on the basis of gender, then there can be no theological justification for prohibiting the ordination of women.

Although volumes could be written on this subject, there are at least two outstanding, clear statements of God’s will concerning the relationship of men and women, generally speaking, in the Bible. First, Genesis 1:26-28 uses the unambiguous terms “male” and “female”—words which *cannot* be translated as “husband” and “wife”—to tell us that both genders were created in God’s image. Furthermore, the literary positioning in these verses (see Section II) points to the conclusion that the fact that both are created in God’s image is the very reason they are *both* given “dominion” (or headship) of the earth and its creatures.⁷ It is true that sin resulted in this dominion being given to Satan temporarily, but the Divine ideal was clearly stated there, and it (the ideal) does not change because of sin. Indeed, although sin has marred the image of God in humanity, and their dominion is not as complete as was originally intended, human beings are still obligated to rule the earth as God’s stewards according to the capacity they still have.⁸ Thus, outside the marriage relationship, Scripture regards men and women as equally responsible for what might be called diminished dominion. In other words, Genesis 1:26-28 fundamentally points to the equality of headship, an equality that was

⁷ The nature of this headship over creation is different from headship in the home or church, however, because plants and animals cannot reason or make intelligent decisions; and they are fundamentally lower life forms than human beings. Therefore, creation headship must of necessity consist of procedures that *control* plant and animal behavior to the fullest extent possible. This “control” headship, however, is not the model for spiritual headship in the home or the church, as we have already established from Scripture. However, it *is* a type of headship in another sphere, which still makes its equality between men and women highly significant.

⁸ If this were not true, then the Lord would not hold people responsible for destroying the earth, as He clearly does in Revelation 11:18 (last part).

not altered by sin, as was the case of headship in the home.

Second, and probably the most magnificent statement on human relations in all the Bible, is the clear statement in Galatians 3:28:

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. (NKJV)

Obviously, this text does not abolish the actual distinctions among people. There are still different nationalities, different social classes, and the two different genders. However, the church is not to use these differences to determine how members should be treated. Supporters of women's ordination view this passage as sweeping aside all theological justifications for denying ordination to qualified women on the same grounds that ethnic, racial, and social class differences should not be used to deny spiritually qualified persons ordination. Opponents of women's ordination, however, tend to interpret Paul's declaration in the more restricted sense that every genuine Christian believer is equally saved in Christ, regardless of the national origin, race, social class, or gender of the person.

Which view of Galatians 3:28 is correct? Is the passage a broad statement of equality among believers, or is it merely emphasizing the reality that all persons, regardless of other differences among them, are eligible for salvation in Jesus Christ?

To answer that question honestly, first we must ask ourselves if it is really possible for an equal status in Christ to exist without a corresponding equal status among all believers. In other words, can the vertical relationship (with Christ) exist without having any meaningful effect on the horizontal relationships (with humanity)? Hardly. If Christianity means anything, it means that Christ changes the heart so that a person becomes a new person in his/her relationships with others. Note that in John 17:11, 21-23, Jesus prayed that His followers would be "one" among themselves

just as He and His Father were “one” with each other. The gospel always makes this difference!

Second, this very principle is illustrated in the same book. In Galatians 2:11-13, the apostle Paul relayed a previous incident concerning the apostle Peter, in which Paul scolded Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles in the company of other Jews. So Paul is trying to say that we should not treat other believers differently because of their ethnic background. The relationship with Christ translates into an equality of standing with others, especially within the church.

Third, there is a fascinating relationship between Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28 and the prayer of Pharisees in his day. Pharisees typically thanked God in prayer that they had “not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” As a former Pharisee, the apostle Paul must certainly have prayed that Pharisees’ prayer himself. Notice that the three classifications of people in that prayer---Gentiles, slaves, and women—appear in the same order in Galatians 3:28. The difference, however, is that in the Scripture, all barriers between people are obliterated in Christ. Is this a mere coincidence? No. Here Paul is specifically repudiating his former belief that free Jewish men were superior to Gentiles, slaves, and women.

Does this fact have relevance for the subject of our study? At this point, critics of women’s ordination usually argue that, of course, every child of God should be treated with dignity and respect. However, it is alleged that this does not mean that God did not give men and women different roles and positions in the church. But a conclusion that Christians should treat all people with dignity and respect as children of God falls far short of the impact of Paul’s statement. With each human category, the apostle uses the phrase, “there is neither...nor....” The most obvious point of this phraseology is that believers should not take into account the fact that another believer is a Gentile, a slave, or a woman, because as far as God is concerned, these distinctions do not matter.

This implies that no one should be denied a role or position in the church simply on the basis of nationality, social class, or gender. In other words, the passage strongly appears to be a sweeping statement of the equality of all believers in the church.⁹

This conclusion is emphatically confirmed by the careful way in which the apostle Paul wrote the last clause of the verse: “for [because] you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Please notice that he did *not* say that the reason for the “neither...nor...” statements is because “you are all in Christ Jesus.” Nor did he say that it is because “you are all one *with* Christ Jesus.” Either alternate wording would have made it very clear that Paul was simply stating that each individual believer is equally in a saving relationship with Christ. In other words, the passage would then clearly point to the vertical relationship between each believer and Christ *without* specifying a corresponding equality among themselves—respect, yes, but equality, no. But Paul did not write it that way. Instead, he declared that “you are all *one* in Christ Jesus.” That is the same thing as saying that they are all one *with each other* because of their position in Christ Jesus! Therefore, the evidence overwhelmingly testifies that Christ’s ideal for His church is that it should reflect the equality of all believers by refusing to use ethnic, racial, social class, or gender differences as a basis for anything—including the selection of officers or pastors.

Thus far in this section of our study we have established the principle that God does not always *desire* what He sometimes *permits* His people to do. Rather, in His own infinite wisdom, He sometimes allows them to practice less than the ideal because they are not ready to face the full

⁹ As far as the gender issue is concerned, please note that Paul used the highly *unusual* terms, translated properly as “male” and “female” in this passage. By doing so, he could and did stress the absolute equality of all believers in the context of the church while, at the same time, leaving intact the headship-subordination relationship between husband and wife, respectively, in the context of the family unit. Oh, how beautifully consistent is the Word of God!

impact of a particular Divine truth yet. But sooner or later, His actions and statements provide glimpses of the ideal for His people. And when the time is right, they move in the direction of the Divine ideal. These facts, therefore, make it dangerous to assume that the virtual male monopoly of “headship” roles among God’s people in the Old and New Testament times actually reflects God’s express will. Indeed, when we examined evidence of His ideal regarding the relationship between men and women outside the family unit, we discovered that it reveals a complete equality in which gender should play no factor in determining activity, office, or position within the church. We also noted that, at times, women assumed roles of spiritual headship as prophetesses and/or judges in Biblical times. Although such times were rare, the fact that God Himself called them to serve in those capacities at all proves that there is no Divine, eternal principle mandating that only men may exercise the role of spiritual headship in the church.

These same facts also argue that Christians must view the entire Bible in a holistic way rather than interpreting specific texts in a literalistic manner that ignores God’s ideal. This does not mean that we should not interpret the Bible literally in most places. If we did not interpret the Bible literally except where it is obviously using poetic or figurative language, then we could make the Bible say anything we want it to. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the forest for the trees either, for this is how pro-slavery Americans once used the Bible to defend slavery. When we do that, then we are guilty of using the Bible against itself! And we certainly do not want to find ourselves in that untenable situation. Thus, when we speak of a literalistic interpretation, we do *not* thereby open the proverbial “can of worms” for us to make up our own truth; the Bible itself must be our guide—but it must be the *entire* Bible (including statements of His ideal), not an isolated part.

A literalistic approach to Scripture results in another problem, which is illustrated concerning

our present subject. I Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 lay out the qualifications for a bishop (or elder or pastor) and a deacon in the church. These passages refer to men as holders of both church offices, and as such, they are often used by opponents of women's ordination as alleged proof that women are forever prohibited from spiritual headship roles in the church. Once again, however, we need to ask ourselves whether this is God's express will for His church, or whether the apostle is simply assuming, in the context of his culture, that only men will be given serious consideration for those positions (or that the husband-wife headship principle would appear to be violated in that culture if women were sometimes placed in those positions). Given the evidence from Scripture about God's ideal for His church, and our belief that all Scripture is consistent with itself, it seems clear that this is a presumption rather than a command of God, as far as eternal principle is concerned. This conclusion is considerably enhanced when one reads in the same two passages that men who serve in these positions must be the husband of one wife and must have obedient children. Now does that mean that an elder or deacon—and a pastor, for an elder is the equivalent to a pastor—must be a married man with more than one child? If so, then what are the theological reasons for these circumstances? You may search the Scriptures forever, and you will not find any theological rationale, by command or otherwise, that a leader among God's people must be married, let alone have children (in the plural or the singular). Indeed, if that were true, then the apostle Paul himself would be disqualified because he was not married at the time of his apostleship (I Corinthians 7:7-8)! Furthermore, in I Corinthians 7, Paul actually recommends the unmarried lifestyle for believers. Was he thereby prohibiting an entire class of church members—even unmarried men—from serving in those positions? What if everyone in the church took his advice and remained single? Then, from a literalistic viewpoint of Scripture, no one could serve in these church offices. How ridiculous! The

apostle was simply assuming, in the context of his culture, that only men would be chosen to serve in those capacities. He further assumed that a man of maturity would (despite Paul's personal convictions on the matter) be a married man, and that as such, he would probably have children. The focus on the husband of one wife is an obvious reference to a moral issue; and the focus on children being obedient is on the behavior of any children. In other words, if the man has a family, which is most likely, then his entire family should represent Christ as well as his own life.

A related issue is the matter of consistency of practice in the church. *If* Christians are supposed to ignore God's ideal for men and women in the church and interpret the apostle Paul's statements about women's behavior in the church in I Corinthians 11, 14, and I Timothy 2 as expressions of God's eternal will (which they should not), then consistency demands the following practices be strictly obeyed: (1) women (or at least wives) should cover their heads with a veil whenever they are in church; (2) women (or at least wives) should remain absolutely silent, never speaking a single word, in the church; and (3) women (or at least wives) should never teach in the church, at least not if men are present. If interpreted literally as binding upon all Christians in all ages, then women (at least married women) could not lead out in one single activity in the church. Presumably, this would include leading out in children's ministries too, if one took the command to remain silent as an absolute command. Yet the great majority of churches today do allow women the right to lead out and teach in all parts of the church, including when men are in their Bible classes. Now we are not using the current practice of the church to define what truth is. However, the fact is that very few opponents of women's ordination actually believe that the above prohibitions should be applied in the church today. Yet those same believers vehemently oppose the ordination of women. What does that tell us? It tells us that they too recognize that culture played the determining factor in

Paul's specific counsels about women in the church. And although the critics usually admit that the veil, silence, and prohibition of teaching are not valid or necessary in the church today (at least in the Western part of the world), they still cling to the view that women are to be subordinate to men with regard to certain offices in the church. But as we have seen in this section, the evidence is not there to support that belief.

V. Applying the Headship Principle in the 1st Century A.D.

In Section III we learned that the New Testament in general, and the apostle Paul's writings in particular, strongly support the concept of the headship of the husband over his wife. We also learned that in the controversial passages about women in the church—I Corinthians 11, 14, and I Timothy 2—the apostle Paul was speaking about the husband-wife relationship, not the more general male-female relationship. And concerning the admonition that wives wear a veil in the church, we noted that this was a sign of a wife's subordination to her husband in the culture of Paul's day.

In a time and place when women, both married and unmarried, were to be seen (partially) but not heard publicly, it is perfectly understandable that the apostle would prohibit wives from speaking or teaching in the church.¹⁰ If they had done so on a regular basis, surely this would have sent a message to the people of that culture that Christian wives did not respect their husbands as the heads of their homes. Would not this have unnecessarily hampered the spread of the gospel? The same apostle Paul showed great concern for the principle that believers should, within the limits of God's specific requirements, act in a way that promotes acceptance of the gospel rather than on insisting

¹⁰ Although the passages instructing these things (I Corinthians 14; I Timothy 2) refer specifically to wives, undoubtedly it would have made gospel proclamation more difficult if unmarried women regularly engaged in public speaking and teaching as well (although those

upon one's own rights. In I Corinthians 9:19-23, he makes this principle unmistakably clear. Thus, whatever hinders the work of saving souls should be avoided among God's people even if it is legitimate in its own right.

At the same time, however, wherever a culture permits it, the church should move toward the Divine ideal as enunciated in Scripture. Regarding this issue, then, the church has an obligation to seriously consider spiritually qualified women for positions of spiritual leadership at *all* levels of the church *if* a particular culture permits this practice—in other words, if by doing so, the church does not cut off its influence on behalf of the gospel.

VI. The Meaning of Ordination

An integral part of the entire issue of the role of women in the church is the issue of ordination. The church ordains—or publicly and formally sets apart—certain members to serve as elders and full-time pastors. But what is ordination? It should come as no surprise to anyone that the two different perspectives on the role of women in the church also differ about the meaning, or at least the emphasis, of ordination. Opponents of women's ordination generally emphasize that, in ordination, the church exercises its authority to bestow certain functional authority upon a person who assumes that particular office. On the other hand, supporters of women's ordination generally emphasize that, in ordination, the church exercises its authority by officially recognizing a person's spiritual gifts as evidence that the Holy Spirit has called that person to a special office of ministry. Most advocates of the first view will acknowledge the second view to be a correct statement, but the difference in emphasis is what makes the difference between these two perspectives. In the first

reasons would have had nothing to do with a headship principle).

view, the emphasis is on the authority of the church and the prestige of the office to which a person is ordained, while in the second view, the emphasis is on the yielding by the church to what the Holy Spirit has already done in the life of the person to be ordained.

Which of these two perspectives does the Bible endorse? First, we must note that the modern use of ordination in the church is based on the New Testament practice of the laying on of hands to consecrate persons to certain ministries, which in turn, had its origins in the Old Testament. Thus, a brief exploration of this Biblical usage should enable us to answer this question about the essential meaning of ordination.

The Old Testament mentions the practice of the laying on of hands to set persons aside for a special work only a few times. In Numbers 8:5-19, the Levites were dedicated to their priestly ministry by having hands laid upon them; verse 14 makes it very clear that this ceremony separated them for this work of ministry. Deuteronomy 34:9 refers back to the time when Moses laid hands on Joshua to inaugurate him as his successor. The text first appears to suggest that Joshua was full of the Holy Spirit precisely because Moses had laid his hands on him. However, in Numbers 27:18-19, which describes the Lord's instructions to Moses about laying his hands on Joshua, it is made quite clear that Joshua already possessed the Spirit before Moses actually performed the ceremony. The ceremony of laying his hands on Joshua is called an inauguration, or commissioning, in verse 19. In this way, it becomes obvious that the Lord Himself, through the work of the Holy Spirit, initially set Joshua apart for his work. Moses only carried out the will of God by publicly laying his hands on his successor in order for the people of Israel to have confidence that *God* had chosen Joshua.

The New Testament continued, and apparently enlarged, the practice of commissioning certain individuals for specific ministries. In Acts 6:1-7, seven men were selected to devote much of

their time to the temporal needs within the church in order to allow others to spend full-time attending to spiritual needs. These were undoubtedly the forerunners of what the New Testament later called deacons. Verse 3 sets down the criteria that they must be “full of the Holy Spirit” (NKJV); then after they were chosen, the apostles prayed and laid hands on them, and thus they began their ministry.

In Acts 13:1-3, Saul and Barnabas were set apart by the laying on of hands for a missionary ministry. Notice that verse 2 declares that the Holy Spirit expressed His desire that these two men be set aside for this special work: “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The church merely carried out the will of the Spirit.

Timothy, a young pastor, was also set apart for his ministry by the laying on of hands, as the apostle Paul reminded him in I Timothy 4:14. That verse superficially might suggest that Timothy received the actual spiritual gift for pastoral ministry as a direct result of the laying on of hands, as though to place the primary source of the authority to “ordain” him upon the church. However, the phrase “by prophecy” (NKJV) there was already defined in 1:18 in the same book as the fact that Timothy’s ministry had already been prophesied. Because the author of prophecy is the Holy Spirit, this means that Timothy was actually, and primarily, set apart for his pastoral ministry by the Spirit; the church simply obeyed the Holy Spirit in ordaining him.

By this brief examination of the Biblical practice of laying hands on those ordained for certain ministries, it should be clear that the inspired record is consistent in placing the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who really sets aside a person for ministry first. Then He directs the church, through His influence, to publicly commission, or ordain, the individual in order to make his selection visible and authoritative within the church. Members accept the choice as a Divine one,

and the person is then free to do his work without being challenged. In this beautiful way, both the authority of the Holy Spirit and of the church is maintained, while ensuring that the church is subordinate to the Spirit in the process.

Lest there be any doubt about the relationship of the church to the Holy Spirit, please consider the testimony of Acts 10:44-48. Although this passage does not concern ordination to a specific church office of ministry, it is relevant because it illustrates the only proper reaction of the church to the work of the Spirit. After meeting Cornelius and his household, the apostle Peter witnessed strong evidence that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon them. Peter, and the other Jews who were with him, were astonished by this because Cornelius and his family were Gentiles. Nevertheless, Peter asked in verse 47, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (NKJV)? A short time later, when Peter was explaining what had happened there, he declared, “who was I that I could withstand God” (NKJV)? Notice the reaction of the church in verse 18: “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God...” The lesson is crystal clear. The church (even an apostle) has no choice but to recognize what the Holy Spirit has already done in the lives of people! After all, it is He who gives spiritual gifts in the first place “as He wills” (I Corinthians 12:11).

The answer to the above question, then, is obvious. The view of ordination that emphasizes the church’s submission to the Holy Spirit in objectively recognizing what the Spirit has already done in the life of a believer is the more correct emphasis. Yes, the church has authority to grant ordination, but that authority must be subject to the Spirit of God. Therefore, the church has no authority to automatically exclude any spiritually qualified member from ordination on the basis of gender—any more than it has the authority to use race, nationality, or social class to exclude people

from special ministry. To do so is to declare, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that a person cannot possibly possess the spiritual gifts necessary for the ministry because of her gender, or because of his/her race, nationality, etc. Such an attitude is blasphemy because it purports to take the place of the Holy Spirit and to call Him a liar!

VII. Women's Ordination and Church Unity

The focus in the previous six sections of this study has been on the theology of Scripture regarding the role of women in the church in general, and ordination to full-time ministry in particular. We discovered that, despite God's ideal for the full equality of men and women within the context of the church, cultural barriers may often prevent the church from implementing such equality. To insist upon it under these circumstances would undoubtedly hinder the work of carrying out the gospel commission. Therefore, God's people must be willing to delay His ideal for the church and recognize that we live in an imperfect world.

One other practical condition might also properly justify delay in the establishment of a gender-free environment for the selection of persons for all roles, offices, and positions in the church. That condition would be the necessity of maintaining church unity. Certainly, if the New Testament teaches anything, it is that unity is not the same as unanimity. Some have argued that until the entire world church agrees on the matter it should not sanction any geographical, or cultural, part of the church to ordain women as elders or pastors. But that is not Biblical unity. The church recognizes cultural differences affecting public worship, dress, protocol, etc., and it generally allows different practices in different places as a result. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul's attitude on this subject reflects the view that complete gender equality outside the home context, although God's ideal, is not

a moral imperative on the order of one of the Ten Commandments. Obviously, the apostle did not demand immediate compliance with this principle. It is also relevant to remember that the Lord is in ultimate control of His church even though that often does not appear to be the case. He is leading a movement, and movements often change slowly. But if time persists, will He not move upon more of His people to understand this truth so that the church will act upon it? In the meantime, if the world church cannot accept the ordination of women in *any* of its geographical divisions, the matter should not be agitated to the point of causing disunity among God's people. How foolish it would be for the church to tear itself apart on this matter of who may preach the gospel full-time so that the result becomes a diminished proclamation of that same gospel!

None of our conclusions means that the issue should be buried and forgotten. The Lord usually uses human beings to bring truth to others, after all. This requires further discussion in the church. And we probably ought to make the case, which has not been done in this study, that opening the doors of full-time ministry to women has the potential of enhancing the church's ability to meet all people's spiritual needs better. But those of us who support an equally accessible role for women in full-time ministry also have a responsibility to carefully choose the times and places for these fuller discussions, and to promote more light than heat on the subject as well. When we observe that disunity appears to be imminent over this issue, then we should take the initiative to back off for a time to allow things to "cool down". Keep it in proper perspective. Consider the progress that has already been made in this area. And remember that some day, if the Lord does not return first, this glorious truth of complete gender equality outside the home context will prevail. In the meantime, work wisely to use your influence on its behalf. His truth is marching on!

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