

The Biblical Roles of Men and Women

By Ben Jones

The gender roles described in Scripture can be somewhat controversial. A misunderstanding of these passages can be detrimental to both sexes. Upon a misinterpretation, men could develop an overly dominant spirit, or worse, use them to take advantage of women. Likewise, women could inappropriately choose to disregard these Scriptural passages altogether due to their nature. It is also important to differentiate between the roles laid out for a husband and wife as opposed to those of men and women in general.

The roles of men and women (and more accurately, husbands and wives) exemplify the relationship between Christ and His Church. The direct correlation is made obvious in Eph. 5:22-33, and 1 Cor 11:3. The church is subject to Christ, but Christ gave His life for the church. The two are one.

Eph. 5:22-33

²²Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. ²⁴But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, ³⁰because we are members of His body. ³¹FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³²This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. ³³Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

Col. 3:18-19

¹⁸Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

1 Tim. 3- Some responsibilities of man

1 Tim. 2:9-15

⁹Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, ¹⁰but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. ¹¹A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. ¹²But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. ¹³For it was Adam who was

first created, and then Eve. ¹⁴And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. ¹⁵But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint.

Women are active members of the church as is stated in numerous locations in the Bible. Paul wrote that there are not distinctions between genders in Christ.
Gal. 3:28- “neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”

Equality must be emphasized, but no gender should be mistaken for the opposite gender- God has appointed different tasks and roles for each, which must be respected because God put them in place. No differentiation was made on the importance of a man and woman in Kingdom work (i.e. Priscilla and Aquila)

The key to the beginning of this passage is a necessity to uphold any customs that show distinction between men and women. Instruction due to this is based on specific customs of the day that did just that. As seen in 1 Cor. 11, having short hair or a shaved head is not the sin; the sin is having a characteristic of ones who are known to be immoral.

A key to understanding v. 11 is what is translated as “discreetly” in v. 9. It is the word *sophrosune*, which basically signifies a voluntary limitation of one’s freedom of thought and behavior. Since women became equal to men in Christ, the danger was that this newfound freedom would be misused and taken beyond the limitations that God had placed in appointing man as head over woman in the marital relationship. Paul is simply warning women not to try to look or act like men and usurp their position so as to maintain the parallel of the Church as the bride of Christ.

This does not imply male superiority- it simply means that to function properly, every unit needs a ‘head,’ including a family. This is exemplified best in the Trinity.

John 10:30 – “I and the Father are one”
1 Cor 11:3 – “God is the head of Christ”

In marriage, two people are a single unit, but two personalities. They must have a headship and that head is man according to God’s creation and ordinance.

Big distinction here! 1 Tim 2:11 does not mean “women”, but “a woman” which should be translated as “a wife.” The Greek word is *gune* and when it stands in opposition to the word *Andros* (meaning “husband”), it must be translated as such. In these verses, as well as verses we will look at in a moment, it is important to note that this does not refer to “subjection of women to men,” but “subjection of wives to their own husbands.”

The word translated as “quietly” is the word *hesuchia* which means “peaceable” or “tranquil, not disturbed.”

The word “submissiveness” is *hupotage*, a combination of the preposition *hupo* (“under”) and the verb *tasso* (“to place in proper order”).

The real translation of 1 Tim. 2:11 should be

“Let the wife learn in tranquility in her positioning under”

At this time, only men had the privilege of education- how could a wife learn (which was encouraged by Paul) if she could not ask questions? “To be in subjection of” is simply to recognize one’s position in relationship to one’s husband.

The first part of v. 12 should be translated as “I do not want a wife to constantly teach” when translated directly from the Greek words (in home, assembly, etc). If she did, it would undermine her husband’s position as head of the household. A wife should place limits on her liberty in Christ in both dress and speech.

The second part “exercise authority over” is the word *authentia* which means “absolute sway or authority.” In other classical Greek, this is the most extreme form of authority. Obviously this type of authority would usurp the role of the husband.

V. 13 is again just stated so as to exemplify the order of things as God created it, not that one is more intelligent or more worthy.

“Self-restraint” in v. 15 is again the word *sophrosune* (limitation of one’s personal freedom).

Titus 2:2-8 – *Responsibilities of older and younger men and women*

[3-5] ³Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, ⁴so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, ⁵to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.

Here is an example of when a woman should teach, so we know that the previous verse doesn’t mean that women cannot teach at all. One of the reasons for these instructions is so that men will not be placed in a position of temptation by teaching or counseling women in private.

1 Pet. 3:1-7

¹In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, ²as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. ³Your adornment must not be merely external--braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; ⁴but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. ⁵For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; ⁶just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. ⁷You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker,

since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.

The word in Vs.4 translated as “quiet spirit” is the same word in its adjectival form, *hesuchiou*, which is translated in its substantive form, *hesuchia* in 1 Tim. 2:12 as “quiet.” Peter certainly did not mean by a “quiet spirit” that a woman must be silent; he simply meant a tranquil, gentle spirit.

1 Cor. 11:3-16, 14:33-35 (notes) (“woman” means “wife”)

³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. ⁵But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. ⁷For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; ⁹for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. ¹⁰Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

This was written to the Corinthian Christians living in Greece. The Greek tradition here was for men to have heads uncovered, and for women to cover theirs. This was against Jewish custom. Paul’s advice is to examine the symbolism of the custom, and if it is not contrary to God’s word, accept it (v. 16). He goes on to show that the custom also demonstrates God’s “order of creation.” Why oppose something that demonstrates this? But Paul left it up to the believers- v. 13 literally means “decide in regard to it your own selves.” In v. 10, “because of the angels” is literally “on account of the angels,” which probably refers to ‘heaven’s approval.’

Another reason for women to cover their heads was to differentiate them from the priestesses, who were prostitutes, at the nearby Temple of Aphrodite in Acrocorinth. These women never covered their heads and had short hair. Due to the culture, Paul wanted to be sure Christian women did nothing that resembled those of low moral character, even if the custom in and of itself was not a sin.

Verses 14 and 15 reemphasize the necessity of men and women to be distinguished from one another and not attempt to look like the opposite sex.

³³for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. ³⁴The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. ³⁵If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

Obviously, this does not mean a woman should always be silent in all churches. 1 Cor. 11:5 makes reference to women praying and prophesying in church.

Compare with previous verses → 1 Cor. 14:27-30

In these verses, anyone speaking in a tongue was commanded to keep silent in the church if there was no interpreter or if another person was prophesying. This was to prevent confusion within the church, as v. 33 states. Immediately afterward is the command for women to be silent in the church, and this was given for the same reason. Notice that this was not a rule given in any other church. This was because of the cultural context: Across the bay from Corinth was Delphi, Greece's most famous center of oracles and commerce. What happened in Delphi directly influenced Corinth. One of the primary practices in Delphi was consulting the Delphic priestesses. The practice was this: A person who had questions would wait their turn in the inner shrine and hand over their questions written on tablets. The priestess would sit on a tripod over a great chasm and become intoxicated. She would then utter incoherent sounds which were interpreted by waiting poets. The interpretation was usually obscure and only served to confuse the inquirer.

Just as the widespread practice of sacrificing to idols probably caused Paul to focus on that sin in 1 Cor. 8, the predominant participation of women in this Delphic practice may very well have influenced these verses. Paul would have addressed a practice, such as speaking in tongues, that seemed closely related to such paganism, just as the practices of the Aphrodite priestesses influenced proper customs (head coverings, etc). The key verse is v. 33.

It is a shame for a woman to bring confusion into the church, even as it is for any man to do so. It is not an issue of men vs. women, but of confusion vs. order. Again, "women" in v. 34 is the word *gunaikes*, which should be translated as "wives." Just as with the submissiveness of a wife to her husband (not a woman to a man), a husband also has the responsibility to guide and teach his own wife so she does not cause confusion or disturbance in the church. Paul expects the same of himself: he says he would rather speak five understandable words than 10,000 which were not understood, not only for the sake of fellow believers, but for sake of strangers who may see him and believe that he and others are mad or maniacs (1 Cor 14:19).

Another aspect is the usage of two separate words. In this discussion, when Paul says the word "speak," he uses the word *lalein*, the infinitive of *laleo*, instead of *lego*. *Laleo* is exclusively used because it refers to the mere utterance of sounds without the speaker necessarily knowing what he is saying or others understanding. *Lego* refers to saying something that is a product of one's thought. *Lalein* is the word used for "speak" in v. 34. So basically there are three circumstances in which a person

should be quiet in the church given here, the first two deal with men and the third with women: 1) If a man speaks in an unknown language without interpreter, 2) A man speaks and someone else gets up to speak, and 3) A woman begins to act like a Delphic priestess speaking in an unknown tongue.

It is very important to differentiate between God's intended role for all men and women for all time, and the gender roles due to the culture and time period.

1 Cor. 7:1-6

[4-5] ⁴The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

⁵Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

This is just a great verse to use when married!