

EXTRACT

WHAT CAN WOMEN DO IN CHURCH?

A STUDY INTO THE SCRIPTURES CONCERNING
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND
MINISTRY

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Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	4
2. Why study this subject?	
3. Rules of biblical interpretation.....	
4. Universal New Testament teachings	
4.1 Romans 12: 4 – 8.....	
4.2 1 Corinthians 12: 4 – 13, 27 – 31, 14: 1 – 5, 26	
4.3 Ephesians 4: 11 – 13	
4.4 1 Peter 4: 10 – 11.....	
5. What did women do in the early Church?.....	
5.1 Women apostles	
5.2 Women prophets.....	
5.3 Women teachers and evangelists	
5.4 Women deacons and ministers.....	
5.5 Women leaders.....	
6. Exceptions to the rule?	
7. A discussion about “authority”	
8. 1 Corinthians 11: Does “head” mean “person in charge”?	
8.1 Context rules: “person in charge” or “source” in verse 3?	
8.2 Other contextual evidence supporting <i>kephale</i> as “source” in verse 3.....	
8.3 The only mention of “authority” in 1 Corinthians 11: 3ff	
8.4 How did early Christians understand the use of <i>kephale</i> in verse 3?.....	
8.5 Male Headship objections to defining <i>kephale</i> as “source” in verse 3.....	
8.6 Final observations on 1 Corinthians 11: 3.....	
9. 1 Corinthians 14: Women in the Church – seen but not heard?.....	
9.1 Verses 26 to 40: total silence or orderly conduct?	
9.2 Verses 33 – 34: punctuation matters	
9.3 Verses 34 – 35: general cultural background.....	
9.4 Verse 34: to whom at Corinth was Paul speaking?.....	

9.5 Verse 34 continued: to whom were the women to submit?

9.6 Verse 34 continued: to what “law” was Paul referring?

9.7 Verse 35: what were the women doing and what was Paul’s remedy?.....

9.8 Final observations on 1 Corinthians 14: 33 – 35

10. 1 Timothy 2: What activity does the passage really prohibit?

10.1 Interpreting the passage – which rules apply?

10.2 The reality of women as teachers

10.3 Ephesian society and culture

10.4 Trouble at Ephesus

10.5 Setting of the passage: public or private?

10.6 Verse 12: what type of teaching is prohibited?.....

10.7 Verse 12 continued: the meaning of *authentain*.....

10.8 Verse 12 continued: objections by Male Headship proponents

10.9 Verses 13 to 15: Adam, Eve and the women at Ephesus

10.10 Verse 13: man’s creation before woman.....

10.11 Verse 14: the woman’s deception

10.12 Verse 15: “she”, “they”, “childbearing” and “salvation”

10.13 Final observations on 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15

11. Ephesians 5: A model for male/female relationships generally?

12. 1 Peter 3: What does the “weaker partner” reference mean?.....

13. Conclusion.....6

References.....9

Appendix.....

1. Introduction

The role of women in the Church and ministry has been the subject of much study and discussion. Two main opposing views have come to dominate the debate: Male Headship¹ and Egalitarianism. On the one hand, the Male Headship view holds that man's purpose is to lead while the purpose of woman is to follow man's leadership.² This view contends that although men and women are equal in value before God they nevertheless have different divinely-ordained roles³ with women confined to the performance of auxiliary functions under the authority of men.⁴ On the other hand, Egalitarianism holds that it was always God's intention for man and woman to share equally in His worship and service. This view contends that gender is not a divinely appointed consideration upon which individuals' spiritual roles and responsibilities are allocated or exercised.⁵

This study will undertake its own investigation into the role of women in the Church and ministry by considering current research into the issue, and in some cases building on that research, as well as offering some new insights.⁶ Particular consideration will be given to passages such as 1 Corinthians 11: 3, 14: 33 – 35 and 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15 which are commonly cited by Male Headship proponents to support their position. The study will show that the Male Headship interpretation of these passages contradicts their original intent. It will be seen that such passages were written in response to the specific situations of the particular communities concerned and were never intended to be applied to circumstances beyond those they were originally written to address. Consequently, in the absence of the relevant original conditions the passages in question should not be used to diminish or limit the meaning and application of other passages which indicate that the role of women in the Church and ministry should be broader than that proposed by Male Headship proponents.⁷

1 Some writers refer to this view as the Complementarian position (for example Grudem 2006, p. 13) while others identify it as the Hierarchicalist or Traditionalist position (for example Blomberg 2001, p. 330n4; Osburn 2001, pp. 19 – 20; Grenz 1995, pp. 17 – 18). Given the diversity of labels for this view, the term "Male Headship" will be used as a descriptor throughout this study since it is considered to succinctly encapsulate the basic philosophy and intent of this particular approach.

2 Belleville 2001, p. 79; Schreiner 2001, p. 200

3 Schreiner 2001, p. 228; Grudem 2002a, pp. 19 – 23; Grudem 2006, pp. 13, 20 – 21

4 Knight 1985, pp. 2, 28, 87; Grudem 2006, p. 21. The following comment from two prominent Male Headship proponents is representative of views in this regard: "... *male authority and female submission are integral to the 'deeper differences', the 'underlying nature' and the 'true meaning' of manhood and womanhood*" (Piper and Grudem cited in Groothuis 2004, p. 301).

5 Groothuis and Pierce 2004, p. 13

6 This is the latest edition of a continuing study by the writer. By its nature, all biblical study should be an ongoing process of learning due to the new findings and understandings that are constantly occurring or being developed. This has certainly been the writer's experience in undertaking this study into the role of women in the Church and ministry, which originally began out of a desire to understand biblical teachings in this area more fully. As a "living" document this study will continue to develop over time with this latest edition incorporating some new material as a consequence of further research that has occurred in this field.

7 Such universal passages are discussed in section 4 of this study. In accordance with the principles of biblical interpretation, which will be considered in section 3 of this study, the universal passages should be used to interpret and enlighten one's understanding of the situational passages, not vice versa.

From the outset it is important to dispel any notion that the purpose of this study is to assert homogeneity between men and women. There are noticeable areas of difference between the genders that would render any such argument untenable.⁸ Rather, the underlying premise of this study is that God purposely created men and women to be different, intending not only that the differences between male and female be honoured but also celebrated for enriching human experience and allowing members of the respective genders to complement each other.⁹ As this study progresses it will become evident that He never intended for these differences to be used to institute or justify hierarchical distinctions between men and women.¹⁰

Martin Luther (1483-1546), a leading figure in the Protestant reformation movement, is known to have said, “*A woman’s place is in the home.*”¹¹ Contrary to such views this study will conclude that faithful Christian women may, indeed they should be encouraged to, exercise the gifts and abilities they possess for building up their fellow believers irrespective of whether this involves them in “public” (whole-of-church) or “private” (outside whole-of-church) activities. Furthermore, the study will conclude that women may share fully with men in all aspects of the life, worship and organisation of the Church. These conclusions will be seen to be supported by the teachings of the New Testament and the practices of the Church during the first century AD.¹²

8 Brizendine (2006) writes, “*More than 99 percent of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same. Out of the thirty thousand genes in the human genome, the less than one percent variation between the sexes is small. But that percentage difference influences every single cell in our bodies – from the nerves that register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. To the observing eye, the brains of females and males are not the same. Male brains are larger by about 9 percent, even after correcting for body size. In the nineteenth century, scientists took this to mean that women had less mental capacity than men. Women and men, however, have the same number of brain cells. The cells are just packed more densely in women – cinched corsetlike into a smaller skull. For much of the twentieth century, most scientists assumed that women were essentially small men, neurologically and in every other sense except for their reproductive functions. That assumption has been at the heart of enduring misunderstandings about female psychology and physiology*” (pp. 23 – 24). Another writer, Groothuis (2004) remarks, “*Male and female are not identical. Sexual differences exist, and these differences make a difference. Sexual roles, therefore, are not interchangeable between men and women*” (p. 307). By way of clarification Groothuis included the following footnote: “*A sexual role has to do with sexual functions (marriage, parenthood, etc). Ministries such as teaching the Bible and shepherding a church are not sexual functions*” (p. 307n20).

9 Groothuis (2004) notes that “*... the differences between men and women are complementary and mutually beneficial*” (p. 307).

10 Groothuis (2004) has observed, “*The existence of gender role differences neither entails nor justifies a permanent hierarchy of male authority*” (p. 314). In the division of household tasks and labour, for example, members of the respective genders should be able to agree to specialise in different tasks and functions according to their respective skills and abilities rather than such matters being determined on the basis of “male=authority” and “female=submission”. Interestingly, there is evidence from the first century AD Roman world that this was the approach taken in relation to the allocation of household management tasks (Torjesen 1995, pp. 55 – 56, 80 – 81).

11 Spake

12 Claims have been made that Church tradition and practice throughout succeeding centuries, in which Church leadership roles have generally been denied to women, is a strong indication of support for the Male Headship position (for example Schreiner 2001, pp. 178 – 179; Schreiner 2005b, pp. 266 – 267; Grudem 2006, pp. 52, 53, 262). However, later tradition and practice are not necessarily a good guide to,

(Note: Sections 2 to 12 omitted from Extract)

13. Conclusion

This study has found that in the early Church of the first century AD no distinction was made between men and women in the allocation and exercise of spiritual and ministry gifts and abilities. Indeed, gender was neither identified as a consideration in this regard nor were limitations imposed on the type of setting in which an individual's gifts and abilities could be exercised (viz., "public" vs. "private"). What mattered most was that those who possessed such gifts and abilities would use them to build up and edify the Church. There are notable instances of faithful Christian women during the New Testament period exercising gifts and abilities. In fact, there is strong evidence from this period of women functioning as apostles, prophets, teachers, ministers and leaders.

In some quarters nowadays it is fashionable to regard the Apostle Paul as the quintessential misogynist and arch defender of patriarchy. However, this view of Paul is entirely undeserved with this study finding no evidence that would justify or support such an understanding. Indeed, what the study has found is that Paul highly valued women and actively encouraged them to fully utilise their God-

or decisive in, the interpretation of Scripture since such have not always been correct in a scriptural sense (Keener 2001, pp. 65 – 67; Keener 2005, pp. 242 – 244; Henrichsen and Jackson 1990, pp. 170, 171). On this point one Male Headship proponent has also observed, "*Writings from the early Fathers contain a great deal of teaching on men and women and not all of it is the clear handing on of a tradition going back to Christ and the apostles*" (Clark 1980, p. 318). Similarly, another Male Headship proponent has noted, "... *we must remember that Jesus and the New Testament apostles gave much more affirmation to women's ministries and to women's value in the church than many churches have done historically*" (Grudem 2006, p. 159). Regarding arguments in favour of women participating fully in the life, worship and organisation of the Church, other claims have been made that such arguments lack credibility because they have appeared only relatively recently and have not been part of the Church's historic approach (for example Grudem 2006, pp. 269 – 271). With respect to such claims it should be noted that "recency" is not of itself sufficiently compelling to dismiss or reject the validity of any particular argument (Keener 2001, pp. 65 – 66; Beck and Blomberg 2001a, pp. 167 – 169; Beck and Blomberg 2001c, p. 324; Blomberg 2005, pp. 178 – 180). If it was then even Male Headship arguments based on the alleged "order of creation" principle, which holds that man has authority over woman because man was created first, could be challenged simply on "recency" grounds since use of this argument does not appear in any commentary or book prior to World War II (Giles cited in Osburn 2001, p. 236). Also, such claims are highly questionable given the evidence of women having in fact undertaken public ministry and leadership roles during the subsequent history of the Church (Fraser 1984, pp. 274 – 297, 402 – 425; Grenz 1995, pp. 36 – 62; Keener 2001, p. 66; Tucker 2004, pp. 23ff; Hassey 2004, pp. 39ff; Blomberg 2005, p. 179). Nevertheless as noted above, irrespective of later Church history or practice the question that should be asked in relation to the role of women in the Church and ministry is: What do the Scriptures allow for? On this point a basic principle of hermeneutics is that, "*The believer is free to do anything that the Bible does not prohibit ... The Bible sets boundaries on what cannot be done, not on what can be done. All things are lawful unless specifically prohibited*" (Henrichsen and Jackson 1990, p. 163) (emphasis in text). (NB: It is noted that the scriptural basis for this conclusion is reflected in passages such as Romans 3: 20, 4: 15, 5: 13 and 7: 7). If this was not so then post-New Testament innovations such as hymn/song books and specially constructed church buildings, which are now widely accepted by Christians, could be called into question simply on the grounds that use of such innovations is not provided for in the Scriptures. In consideration of the principle that "*all things are lawful unless specifically prohibited*" this study will show that the Scriptures do not prohibit faithful Christian women from exercising their talents and abilities for the benefit of the Church publicly or otherwise.

given gifts, skills and abilities for the benefit of the Church and in spreading the Gospel message. Notably, he frequently worked alongside women to achieve these very ends. Also, he strongly exhorted Christian men not to treat women in the way that would have been accepted or expected under the cultural conventions of the time (i.e., as secondary beings).

This study has given extensive consideration to Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16 (particularly verse 3), 14: 26 – 40 (particularly verses 34 to 35) and 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15 which have been interpreted by Male Headship proponents to mean that only men are divinely appointed to lead and exercise authority in the Church with women confined to the performance of auxiliary functions. However, what the study has found is that when these passages are understood in accordance with the well-established rules of biblical interpretation, they do not prohibit or preclude faithful Christian women from actively participating and sharing with men in the life, worship and organisation of the Church. Two points in particular may be highlighted.

Firstly, the passages lack explicit, divine endorsement that Church leadership and ministry is a male-only prerogative. As noted in relation to 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15, the concern in this passage is with a unique and unusual situation then apparent in the church at Ephesus – as indicated by the presence of the uncommon Greek word *authentain* – which called for Paul to expressly write about what the women of the Ephesian church should not do (viz. teach a man in a domineering way), not what men can do. Indeed, the passage is completely silent about the claimed male-only Church leadership role. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 14: 27 – 35 specifies and proscribes several unedifying behaviours by certain members of the church at Corinth (i.e., tongue speakers, prophets, married women) during their Assemblies. Regarding verses 34 to 35, the particular concern is with married women who had breached an important prevailing social protocol by asking questions during church gatherings of men other than their own husbands, thereby causing offence to others and bringing their own morality into question. Not only is the passage not concerned with the active participation of women generally in other respects during the church's gatherings – which from the overall context of the passage was permitted, indeed encouraged – but it contains absolutely no mention of the alleged exclusive Church leadership role of men. Likewise, there is no indication from 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16 that only men were anointed by God to hold leading positions in the Church. While Male Headship proponents focus on the Greek word *kephale* (translated as “head”) in verse 3 and insist that it establishes the man's leading role, the contextual and other indicators are strong that the meaning Paul intended to convey by using this word was “source”. This understanding (“head” as “source”) is not novel, having historical precedents and even some contemporary usages. In any event, the overall context of the passage shows that Paul's primary concern was not with establishing gender hierarchies but with articulating the reasons why the women of the Corinthian church should observe another important prevailing cultural norm (viz. the wearing of head coverings) when participating in congregational worship

activities. To wear a head covering was a practice which a respectable woman in that society was expected to follow whenever she appeared in public. As Paul did not want the Christian women of Corinth to cause offence to others or give misleading signals about their morality, so he encouraged them to observe this particular social convention during church gatherings. Notably, the only time the Greek word for “authority” (*exousia*) is mentioned in the context of 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16 is in verse 10 where Paul’s use of the word in its active sense indicated that complying with this practice provided the women themselves with the authority to participate and engage in the church’s corporate worship activities. Thus, since 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16, 14: 26 – 40 and 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15 contain no mention, or give no indication, of male exclusivity for Church leadership roles they cannot be regarded as an approval or delegation from God for only men to exercise authority and leadership in the Church.

Secondly, when the rules of biblical interpretation are taken into account and consideration is given to other relevant Scriptures in which no gender caveats or distinctions are mandated, the situational rather than universal nature of 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16, 14: 34 – 35 and 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15 quickly becomes evident. Although general principles relating to appropriate Christian conduct can be perceived to underlie these passages, such as the need for Christians to conduct themselves in an edifying and respectful manner and not to cause offence to others (Romans 14: 19; 1 Corinthians 10: 32), the principles are applied in such a way as to delineate particular remedies that specifically cater to the issues and problems – outlined in the previous paragraph – then confronting the Christian communities in question. Consequently, while the principles’ broad nature ensures their continued relevance, it is inappropriate for the particular remedies to be applied in circumstances where the original issues and problems (and consequently the need for the remedies) do not exist. Even in the first century AD it was not standard for situational advice to one Christian community to necessarily apply to the circumstances of another. This is evidenced, for example, by the differing (targeted) advice Paul gave about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Timothy 5: 11 – 14. Thus, a contemporary application of the particular remedies prescribed in 1 Corinthians 11: 3 – 16, 14: 34 – 35 and 1 Timothy 2: 12 – 15 should only be considered in the event of the recurrence of the original issues and problems the remedies were designed to address.

The study also gave consideration to the argument of some Male Headship proponents that the husband’s “headship” of his wife (with the assumption being that “headship” implies “having authority over”) provides a model for relationships generally between Christian men and women. However, in examining relevant passages (viz. Ephesians 5: 21 – 33 and 1 Peter 3: 1 – 7) the study found that the passages neither substantiate such arguments nor do they even make this link. In fact, what the study found was that the passages operated primarily to mitigate the impact of cultural attitudes engendered under the prevailing Aristotelian family code which held women to be secondary to men and promoted the “aristocratic rule” of husband over wife. Furthermore, the study found that the references to “head”, “submission” and “weaker partner” in such

passages were not suggestive of support for a God-ordained hierarchical ordering of husband over wife. Indeed, what is striking is the lack of an explicit delegation from God for husbands to unilaterally “exercise authority” over their wives. It is important to note that for Paul, contrary to the accepted social conventions of the time, wives held equal status with their husbands (for example refer to 1 Corinthians 14: 35 – definition of “ask”). Again, contrary to prevalent cultural norms, the only time Paul specifically mentioned “authority” in the context of the marriage relationship was when he referred to the mutual authority of husband and wife (1 Corinthians 7: 4). The clear New Testament ideal then is for the relationship between marriage partners to be based on a voluntary, mutual submissiveness, not on a hierarchical, one-way exercise of authority by one over the other. If there is any model that applies to male/female relationships generally in the Church it is that God similarly intends for Christian men and women to be mutually submissive towards one another with no hierarchical ordering between them (Matthew 20: 25 – 28; Mark 10: 42 – 45; Luke 22: 25 – 26; Ephesians 5: 21; Philippians 2: 5 – 7).

As children of God, Christians are heirs of the Kingdom and priests in His service (Romans 8: 16 – 17; 1 Peter 2: 5, 9; Revelation 1: 6, 5: 10, 20: 6). Setting up functional/role differentiations and hierarchies among Christians on the basis of gender divides and distinguishes between the heirs and priests of the Kingdom in ways that God has neither sanctioned nor condoned.

From this study of the Scriptures it is evident that faithful Christian women may, indeed they should be encouraged to, exercise their various gifts and abilities to build up and edify the Church. The Church will be all the more effective in its ministry when its members, regardless of gender, are able to fully use their gifts and abilities in its service. On the basis of the research conducted for this study, it is reasonable to conclude that anything less was never God’s intention.

(Note: References and Appendix omitted from Extract)