

A Biblical Equality Approach to Three Controversial New Testament Passages

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1. Introduction: The topic of the seminar is “A Biblical Equality Approach to Three Controversial New Testament Passages.” First, we will examine the principles biblical equality scholars use in interpreting the Scriptures. Second, we will apply these principles to the interpretation of three passages that are at the center of the debate between “complementarians” and “egalitarians”.

Complementarians believe that women are equal to men spiritually and in their being, but unequal in the roles God has ordained for them. When it comes to living out the meaning and purpose of manhood and womanhood, women are required among other things to submit to their husbands in the home and are not allowed to carry out some governing and teaching roles in the church. This distinction between equal being and unequal roles is the lens through which complementarians interpret the Bible.

Egalitarians believe that the differences between men and women do not justify granting men prerogatives of leadership and authority over women. They deny that God has ordained a hierarchy of roles based solely on gender. They base their position on the biblical teaching that women and men “are made equally in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27), are equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (John 3:16, equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17)” (*Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, pp 13-14).

2. Biblical Equality Approach to Interpreting the Bible

1) Five Principles of Interpretation Biblical Equality Scholars Use

- The belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and the authority for our faith (what we believe) and practice (how we live and relate to one another as followers of Christ).
- The belief that the Bible does not contradict itself. If the Bible is interpreted correctly, a coherent and consistent message emerges. In other words, they allow the Bible to interpret itself. When they find apparent contradictions, they look for problems created by poor translations or interpretations.
- The practice of starting with the clearly understandable passages and then moving from these to those that are more obscure and difficult to interpret. Difficulties may arise because of the use of rare words or odd sentence structures in the Hebrew and Greek texts.
- The importance of understanding the context in which the passage occurs. This is particularly true in the letters of Paul, in which he addresses issues that have arisen in the churches he has planted. Knowing the context helps in interpreting a passage correctly.
- Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Scriptures. As Manfred Brauch says in *Abusing Scripture: The Consequences of Misreading the Bible*, “The cross of Christ is the ultimate key to interpreting the Scriptures.” What did Jesus teach? How did he relate to people? What example did he set for his followers?

2) Three Ways to Read the Bible. Alan Padgett in *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* says evangelicals need to read the Bible in three different ways.

- **The Conventional Way** is to discover the plain, historical, or literal sense of Scripture. This is done through careful historical and linguistic research. Those who do not know Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are dependent on English translations in studying the Bible. They need to be aware that translators can be influenced by their culture and preconceived ideas.
- **The Canonical Way** is to discover the central theme of the Bible as a unit and understand it in the light of this theme. If Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, the Word of God come to us in human form, then we must read the whole Bible in the light of Christ, his life, teaching, death, and resurrection. The Bible is God’s story of redemption. As Padgett says, “The unity of the books of the Bible in one canon is itself a faith statement grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ” (p. 27).
- **The Contemporary Way** is the Christian community searching for the truths of the Bible and how these truths apply to our worship, discipleship, and witness today. We desire to love and know God above all else, and we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Bible in doing this. The Bible comes alive for us when God speaks to us through it.

3) The Importance of Correct Interpretation

- How we interpret the Bible is a serious matter. We claim it is the written word of God. If we misinterpret the Bible, we are not only deceiving ourselves, but we are deceiving others.
- We believe that the Bible is God’s message to the whole world, not just to Christians. 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” We believe that God wants the church to set all his people, both women and men, free to use the gifts God has given them.
- If we misinterpret the Bible, we are distorting God’s message. It is no surprise that in 2 Timothy 3:15 Paul urges Timothy to do his best to correctly handle the word of truth. I am afraid that the hierarchical stance of some churches on gender roles is turning many young men and women away from the gospel. For them, not allowing women to use their gifts is a justice issue.
- The stakes are high. There are serious consequences in the spiritual lives of men and women when the message of the Bible is misinterpreted. Not only does it have consequences for individuals, it also has consequences for the future of Christianity. This is why biblical equality scholars take the Scriptures very seriously.

3. First passage: 1 Timothy 2:11-15

1) Learning before Teaching: 1 Timothy 2:11-12

- 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are central to the debate between complementarians and egalitarians. Complementarians believe that these two verses forbid women from teaching and preaching. Egalitarians understand these two verses differently.
- Understanding the Context of 1 Timothy 2:11-12: Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus as his personal representative to deal with the false teachers, whose teaching was threatening to destroy the church in Ephesus. The letter is written to Timothy, Paul’s “true son in the faith” (1:2), giving him advice on how to handle the situation. The false teachers were taking advantage of some women, perhaps new Christians, who had not been thoroughly instructed in the faith, and were encouraging them to spread the false teaching (5:11-15; 2 Timothy 3:1-9).
- Paul’s solution to this situation was that women should learn. The only verb in these two verses in the imperative tense is the verb “learn.” They should learn in quietness and full submission. Quietness indicates a teachable spirit, not disputing with or ridiculing their teachers. They

should be willing to submit to God and his Word. They should learn with the intent to obey the truth of God.

- The use of the present indicative tense in verse 12 suggests, “I am not now permitting a woman to teach,” that is, until they have been instructed in God’s truth.” The overall purpose of 1 Timothy is to deal with false teaching, not to forbid teaching.
- The Greek word *authentēin* occurs only here in the New Testament. Philip Payne says that the meaning of this word has changed over the centuries. He could not find any use of it meaning “having authority over” until 100 years after Paul’s time. What he found was “assuming authority for oneself” or “to take authority into one’s own hands.” The issue is about assuming authority to preach and teach before being thoroughly instructed.

2) Lessons from Genesis 2 and 3 in 1 Timothy 2:13-15

In these verses Paul reminds Timothy of the lessons to be learned from Genesis 2 and 3. Paul’s abbreviated form of communication in 1 Timothy was not a problem for Timothy, but it can be for us. Paul had been Timothy’s mentor and instructor. As a result they understood one another.

- Adam was created first, then Eve. Because woman was made from man, women should respect men rather than trying to dominate them (v. 13).
- Eve was deceived by Satan with terrible consequences for all humanity. In the same way the women of Ephesus were being deceived by the false teachers, and their passing on this false teaching was having serious consequences in the churches of Ephesus and beyond (v. 14).
- There are translation problems in v. 15. First, the singular “she,” a clear reference to Eve, is often translated “women.” Second, what is the relationship between salvation and childbearing? Third, the Greek word “saved” here always means “spiritual salvation” in Paul’s writings. I believe that the verse is a reference to Genesis 3:15. In the Greek text there is a “the” before “childbearing” or “childbirth.” All humans will be saved through “**the** childbirth,” i.e., through the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Third, Paul is doing what he often does. He is balancing the consequences of Eve’s sin with the birth of the Savior from a woman. See Galatians 4:4-7 and 1 Corinthians 11:11-12. The last part of the verse is a warning to the women of Ephesus, who were being taken in by the false teachers.

4. Second Passage: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

1) The Meaning of *Kephalé* in 1 Corinthians 11:3

- The Greek word *kephalé* usually means the head of a person or an animal. *Kephalé* can also be used in a metaphorical sense to mean “source” as the head of a river or to mean “one having authority over”, as a leader, master, or boss. Paul uses *kephalé* metaphorically eleven times in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. Most translations simply translate *kephalé* as “head” in these places, leaving it up to the reader to decide what it means. This is misleading for English speakers because when we hear the word “head,” our minds immediately go to ideas like “having authority over” or “being in subordination to.” However, it is much more likely that it means “source” here.

Philip Payne in his book *Man and Woman, One in Christ* lists fifteen reasons why “source” fits better than “authority” in this passage. First, the Hebrew translators of the Old Testament into the Greek of the Septuagint translated “leader” as *kephalé* in only 6 of 171 instances. In contrast, the literal “head” is translated as *kephalé* in 226 of 239 instances. Second, authority was not a well-established meaning of *kephalé* at the time Paul was writing, whereas “source” was. Third, Paul clearly refers to Christ as the *kephalé* of the body, the church, in the sense that

he is *the source* of its spiritual life and nourishment. Note especially Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16. These verses remind us of John 15:1-15, where Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Without being connected to me you can do nothing.”

- Translating *kephalé* as “source” makes sense of v. 3 and explains the order of the clauses in this verse. It is a chronological order. In creation, Christ is the source of man. In Gen. 2:21-22, man is the source of woman. In the incarnation, God is the source of Christ.
- Verse 3 is not about “headship” or “authority over,” but about origins.

2) Men and Women Leading in Worship: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

- In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul deals with how men and women are to wear their hair when leading in worship.
- We need to note that both men and women may pray and preach. This is made clear in verses 4 and 5. The issue is how they present themselves in the culture of their time and place.
- 1 Corinthians 14:3 indicates that prophesying was really Spirit-led preaching. “Those who prophesy speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.”
- Verses 9 and 10 gives us a good example of how presuppositions can affect translation. The Greek preposition *dia* occurs four times in these two verses. The common meaning of *dia* is “because of,” but in most translations the two *dia* in v. 9 are translated “for” and the two in v. 10 are translated “because of.” Notice how the meaning of v. 9 changes, when we translate *dia* as “because of.” “For the man was not created because of the woman, but the women because of the man.” Compare this with “for the man was not created for the woman, but woman for man.” The first fits much better with Genesis 2:18.
- In verses 11-12, Paul makes sure that his readers do not misinterpret this passage in a hierarchical way. “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”

3) Message of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 for Today

- Men and women have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to use in the building up of the church. Prophesying or preaching is one of them (Acts 2:17-18).
- Both men and women, who have been given gifts for the building up of the church, should be allowed to participate in leading worship and preaching. In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, where Paul discusses spiritual gifts, nothing is said about gender playing a role in the use of the gifts. Later in the same chapter, Paul says it is wrong for one part of the body to say to another part, “I don’t need you.”
- When men and women lead in worship, they should dress and do their hair up in a way that does not detract from their task. In fact, I think this is what Paul is writing about in all the more obscure verses in 11:2-16. If we have time and you want me to, I can explore this issue further at the end (See *Study Guide on Biblical Equality*, pp. 22).
- Both men and women are created in the image of God. When they lead in worship, the focus should be on God, not on them. They are equals. They are mutually interdependent. We need one another.

5. Third Passage: Ephesians 5:18-33

1) Our Responsibility to One Another: Ephesians 5:18-21

- Ephesians 5:18-21 begins with the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- Paul then lists four results of being filled with the Spirit. If we are filled with spirit, we will:

- 1) Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit,
 - 2) Make music in our hearts to the Lord,
 - 3) Always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, and
 - 4) Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.
- Mutual submission is an evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit.
 - Joining “submit” to “one another” makes clear that Paul is not talking about hierarchical relationships but about serving one another as Christ serves us. In this regard I would recommend Alan Padgett’s book *As Christ Submits to the Church*. Arndt and Gingrich in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, use the phrase “of submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love” to describe what submission means in verses 21-24.

2) Responsibility of Wives to Husbands: Ephesians 5:22-24

- It is important to note that in Greek, v. 22 is closely tied to v. 21. In fact, the word “submit” in v.22 is borrowed from v. 21. Literally translated, the two verses would read, “Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ, wives to their husbands as to the Lord.” This dependence of v. 22 on v. 21 brings mutual submission into v. 22, which eliminates hierarchical relationships. In verse 23, we need to pay close attention to the use of the word *kephalé*. If it is translated as “source”, the verse would read, “For the man is the source of the woman as Christ is the source of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” This fits with 4:15-16 where Christ is described as the source (head) for the whole body. It is from him and through him that the church grows and builds itself up in love. As noted before, this reminds us of Colossians 2:19 and John 15:1-17.
- In verse 24 we are told that wives should submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Our relationship to Christ is not a ruler-subject one. We submit to Christ in awe of and response to his self-giving, redemptive, life-giving, and life-sustaining love. The relationship between wives and husbands should be modeled after the relationship between Christ and his church. He serves the church and we serve him. In the same way, husbands and wives serve one another. The wife’s side of the relationship is described in 5:22-24 and the husbands in 5:25-33.

3) Responsibility of Husbands to Wives: Ephesians 5:25-33

- Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church – a self-giving and self-sacrificing love (vs. 25-27). This is the love that moved Christ to give his life on the cross, so that we might be saved and transformed into his radiant bride.
- Since woman came from man’s side, he should love her as his own body, nourishing and caring for her as Christ does the church (vs. 28-30). I believe that this is a reference back to Genesis 2:21-25.
- It is clear that vs. 28-33 are based on Genesis 2:18-25. Husbands are to love their wives as their strong partners in life, not as servants or weak persons. Wives are to respect their husbands because the first woman came from the side of the first man. There should be a strong, interdependent relationship between women and men. We are designed to be partners, not to be rivals or to dominate one another.

6. Conclusion: These passages teach biblical equality and mutual submission, and correspond with the example and teaching of Jesus (Philippians 2:1-21; Mark 10:35-45; John 13:1-17).