



CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN (Part 2): *Is woman equal to man?*

Jesus, Paul, and the early Church broke the social and traditional rules that kept women silent, secluded and subservient, by treating women equally. Women held positions of responsibility in the early Church, they were highly regarded and often more active than the men. Historian L. Zscharnack wrote: *“Christendom dare not forget that it was primarily the female sex that for the greater part brought about its rapid growth, and later won the weak and the mighty.”*

Sadly, after that time, some of the church leaders began to revert to the practices and attitudes of the Romans relating to women, and over the next three centuries, they incorporated views of the inferiority of women into general Christian understanding.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 215), a so-called “Father of the Church”, taught that *“every woman should blush because she is a woman.”* Tertullian, “Father of Latin Christianity”, added: *“And do you not know that you are Eve? God’s sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. Woman, you are the devil’s gateway, you are the gate to hell.”*

Needless to say, these attitudes were misguided and wrong, and contrary to Scriptures. Humanity, as presented to us in Genesis at the time of its creation, emphasizes gender equality rather than male domination. It teaches that man and woman are created in the image of God and together they dominate the earth. The story of Creation culminates in the creation of women, responding to men's need for a partner who corresponds to them (Gen. 2:18, 20). The text describes the creation of the woman by designating her as the man's *ezer kenegedô*, literally, *“a force that corresponds to him.”* Unfortunately, the word “ezer” here is often translated as “help”, which implies the idea of subordinate or servant. However, never in the Bible does the word “ezer” suggest such a meaning, but almost always describes God as the help, strength or power of His people. The word “ezer” has the same meaning in all authoritative biblical Hebrew dictionaries: *“help, assistance, power and strength”*, never help in the sense of “servant”. The concept of an “ideal partner” seems to convey the thought best.

Was the apostle Paul a male chauvinist? Jesus was for women. He included women in His ministry, His teachings, and as His disciples. In every interaction, Jesus lifted women up. In 1st Corinthians, many have interpreted Paul’s message to mean that women are to live under male authority and understand that they were created to serve men. How could an apostle of Jesus go against what Jesus stood for? Is it feasible that the man who wrote much of the New Testament would believe women may not belong, when his teacher invited women in?

1st Corinthians 11:2 states: “God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and man is the head of woman.” Recent studies into the background of the Greek word “kephale” that is translated “head” in our English Bibles, have clearly shown that, in Paul’s day, the word “kephale” did not carry any meaning of authority, dominance or leadership. Instead, it literally meant “source”

or “*origin*,” especially “*source of life*”. Man was formed from dust, by God. Woman was fashioned from the rib of man. Thus, Adam was the source of Eve's creation.

Dr. David Scholer, the late professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, wrote that the latest research “does not support the traditionalist or complementarian view of male headship and female submission. This data supports a new understanding in Christ by which men and women are viewed in a mutually supportive, submissive relationship.” (Scholer, “Women, Authority & the Bible,” 44.)

The apostle Paul affirmed the equality of all Christians and captures this vision of the Kingdom so compellingly in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” There was no difference based on birth, status or gender. All had the same privileges and blessings as children of God. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12: “In the Lord, however, 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.”

But Paul seems to contradict some of his other teachings: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate... And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home.” (1 Corinthians 14:33-35) We know from other passages in the Bible that women were allowed to pray and prophesy. We also know that many women were prominent teachers in the churches and that Paul approved and encouraged them.

So let's have a look at what the church in Corinth was like: Corinth was the largest and most diverse city in Greece. Greek was the common language, but there were various dialects heard in Corinth and communication was limited by a speaker's accent. The way Paul spoke in church was not necessarily the way people spoke to one another in more casual settings. In fact, only a small percentage of individuals in the Mediterranean world in the first century were literate, and most of them were men. Therefore, women who were not fully literate in the Greek language were asking for clarification, or losing interest altogether and talking with each other. In fact, the Church in Corinth seems to have been pretty chaotic.

So this passage is directed at a specific problem, probably some women disrupting church services with noisy discussions, by talking or asking questions. There are many possible explanations, but it is enough to know that Paul could not have said that these words were a general prohibition since he had just explained how women could both pray and prophesy in public gatherings.

Paul would be appalled that so many of his letters, set in particular situations, are being generalised centuries later and people say, 'This is the rule for ever.' There is a line to be drawn between what is for the occasion when it was written, and what is a message for all believers and all time.

Throughout the Bible, we see clearly that God believes women and men, even though different from each other, are equal when it comes to the treatment and value they should receive. However, it is important to keep in mind that equality does not mean “sameness.” Men and women have some inherently unique giftings and abilities, but this is no excuse for either of them to be valued more or less than the other.

Spiritually, men and women are equal. Physically, of course, they are different. They have different anatomy, different hormones, different muscle mass, and more. Man and woman complement each other. They are different, but one is not superior to the other. Both are unique creations of God; He views both as equally valuable.

