

BREAKING DOWN THE GENDER WALLS OF ANTIQUITY

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Sabbath in Jerusalem

Several years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Israel for the first time. I particularly looked forward to visiting two places: the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, on Friday evening; and a Sabbath worship service at the famed Hurva Synagogue. Friday night at the Wall was an amazing experience. I witnessed much joy and happiness flowing from the ancient ritual of welcoming the Sabbath and enjoyed joining in the festivities. It was an unforgettable experience to be part of a throng of singing and dancing worshippers, with a *yarmulke* firmly attached to my head with bobby pins. And the Sabbath morning worship service at the Hurva synagogue complemented my Friday evening experience in an unforgettable way. The service was majestic and beautiful, although barely comprehensible for a Christian visitor, with no discernible beginning or end and full of mysterious chants and baffling rituals.

What made both experiences startling was the absence of women. At the Wall, women had a separate, smaller space, divided from the men by an impenetrable fence, in which they prayed and celebrated the opening of the Sabbath. However, at the Hurva Synagogue on Sabbath morning I could not see any women worshippers, and so I assumed that perhaps they met elsewhere. At one point during the worship service, however, someone began throwing candy on the men gathered on the main floor of the synagogue. Surprised, I looked up, hoping for an explanation to this unusual expression of worship.¹ High up, on the back wall of the synagogue, I noticed a gallery, blocked from view by a partition (*mechitzah*),² which resembled a square-shaped lattice. The candy was coming from the opening above the *mechitzah*. The *mechitzah* covered the opening of the women's gallery (*ezrat nashim*), which had a separate entrance to the building. From the *ezrat nashim* women, themselves unseen, were able to witness the worship service but not actively participate in it. After the service, I asked an attendant for the reason for this separation. He told me that the Hurva Synagogue follows the ancient Jewish custom of separating the sexes during religious and public ceremonies, as the presence of women would distract male worshippers from worshipping God.³ Later, I discovered that some ultra-orthodox Jewish communities continue to observe strict separation between men and women in all areas of life, including such simple gestures as shaking hands, talking to or sitting next to a woman on public transport.⁴

¹Although I did not realize this at the time, the service on that particular Sabbath included a *bar-mitzvah*, the Jewish initiation ceremony for boys who have reached thirteen years of age. The ceremony signifies that the young man is ready to observe religious rules and is allowed to participate in public worship. During the ceremony, the young man is the last to read from the Torah. Afterwards, in some congregations, women shower the *bar mitzvah* with candy as a gesture of good luck and blessing.

²*Mechitzah* refers to a partition the purpose of which is to divide men from women in worship.

³See also Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Foreword," in Elana Maryles Sztokman, *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), ix.

⁴Joseph Spitzer, *Caring for Jewish Patients* (Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press, 2003), 59-60; Ayesha S. Chaudhry and Shari Golberg, "Policing Women: Virginity and the Sotah Ordeal Sites of Women's Agency," in *Islamic and Jewish Legal Reasoning: Encountering Our Legal Other*, ed. Anver Emon (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 116-117.

The walls separating men from women in orthodox Judaism today are a relic of the ancient gender walls that permeated society during Jesus' time on Earth.

The Situation of Women During the First Century AD

Scholars have documented that the Greco-Roman world was not a friendly environment for women. Because of their expected subordination and dependence on men, women were generally considered to have only slightly higher status than that of children and slaves.⁵ Plato, one of the most important Greek philosophers, expressed it this way: "Do you then know of anything practiced by human beings in which the male sex is not superior to the female in all . . . aspects? . . . The one sex is truly surpassed in everything . . . by the other." The souls of immoral or cowardly men, he believed, as punishment are "suitably reborn as women in the second generation."⁶ Similarly, for Plato's student Aristotle, women were "deformed males."⁷ In his *Politics* he stated: "so it is naturally with the male and the female; the one is superior; and the other inferior; the one governs; the other is governed; and the same rule must necessarily hold good with respect to all mankind."⁸ The superiority of male over female was extended into familial and marital relationships. Within Roman families, power (*potestas*), which was almost absolute, was exercised by the male head of the family (*paterfamilias*). Upon marriage, a woman could either remain under her father's authority or enter a *manus* (Lat. hand) marriage, an arrangement where she came under the authority of her husband's *paterfamilias*. It was necessary for women to always be under a man's authority, as they had few legal rights and depended on their male relatives to act on their behalf. Within a Roman *familia* (Lat. household), the main role of a woman was to take care of the household and to bear children.⁹

There is no doubt that the Hellenistic worldview augmented traditional Jewish perceptions of women. Thus, despite notable women leaders in the history of Israel, including Miriam and Deborah, Jewish attitudes toward women reflected the broader cultural views.¹⁰ As a result, during Jesus' time, women were often considered chattel rather than persons.¹¹ Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, expressed a typical

⁵Sandra R. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, eds. *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman culture: Differential Equations* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-2.

⁶Plato, *The Republic*, Book 5 (Cambridge: Harvard College Loeb Classical Library), 469; Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, tr. A. E. Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 98; cf. Prudence Allen, *The Concept of a Woman* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 728.

⁷Robert Mayhew, *The Female in Aristotle's Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 55.

⁸Aristotle, *Politics* (Los Angeles: Enhanced Media, 2017), 12; cf., Nicholas D. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle on Nature of Women," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (October 1983): 467-478.

⁹Paul J. du Plessis, *Borkowski's Textbook on Roman Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 126; Gary Forsythe, *A Critical History of Early Rome: From Prehistory to the First Punic War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 222. By the first century AD, the situation of women had somewhat improved and, in some cases, women could own or inherit property without a male relative's involvement. However, they were still not allowed to vote or exercise a role in the public life of the Roman Empire; and they were still expected to fulfill a traditional female role within the Roman *familia*.

¹⁰Leonie J. Archer, *Her Price is Beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine* (England: JSOT, 1990), 88. This book is highly recommended to those who are interested in understanding first-century Jewish attitudes toward women.

¹¹For an excellent review of women's position in first-century Palestinian society, see the book by a well-known Jewish scholar Judith Romey Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford:

conviction that women were inferior to men in all respects and should thus be submissive, “for the authority has been given by God to man.”¹² Likewise, Philo, a Jewish philosopher and an older contemporary of Jesus, believed that women were irrational and emotional creatures whose primary value was procreation. He wrote: “The masculine soul is that which devotes itself to God alone, as the Father and Creator of the universe and the cause of all things that exist; but the female soul is that which depends upon all the things which are created, and as such are liable to destruction.”¹³

Jewish Rabbinic literature of the first six centuries AD reflected similar sentiments. While one may certainly find opinions expressing the equality of women before God, for the most parts such postulations were drowned out by those advocating women’s inferiority.¹⁴ As such, much rabbinic literature of these early centuries was permeated by the idea that women held “a secondary place in the scheme of things.”¹⁵ Women generally functioned in a distinct sphere to men and had separate responsibilities. While men were encouraged to engage in the study of Torah, women’s education was generally limited to preparation for domestic life.¹⁶ Until her marriage, the father of a young woman exercised direct rulership over her. “It was a relationship of kinship and love, not ownership, and so she enjoyed a status higher than that of a slave.”¹⁷ At the same time, however, her status was significantly lower than that of her brothers, especially concerning education, worship and inheritance laws.¹⁸ The rabbis taught that married women did not have equal rights with their husbands, could not divorce their husbands, could not own property, and could not hold “official” religious or secular leadership roles within Jewish society.¹⁹ Their roles were primarily limited to running households and raising children.²⁰ Husbands expected their wives to submit to them in everything, and if they failed to bear children, they could be blamed and eventually divorced. The initiation of divorce was a right exclusively granted to

Oxford University Press, 1988); cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 372, which discusses the similarities in the acquisition of a wife and a slave.

¹²Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.24, in *Josephus*, vol 1, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976), 373.

¹³Philo Judaeus, *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, trans. C. D. Yonge, vol. 3 (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855 347; cf., Archer, 207-239.

¹⁴Erhard S. Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Woman and Man* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 130; Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 74.

¹⁵Judith R. Baskin, “Introduction,” in *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

¹⁶Baskin, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁷Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*, 73.

¹⁸Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*, 73.

¹⁹Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus’ Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-10.

²⁰While the status of women within Jewish society was rather low, there were notable exceptions. Allen Verhey notes that “within the patriarchal household, women could be praised and honored.” The chauvinism of the culture tended to be moderated “by real appreciation of women as wives and mothers.” Verhey goes on to suggest that even within first-century society, patriarchalism was not entirely unchallenged and that the sexual and social world of first-century Palestine was not entirely monolithic. Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 174; cf. Steven Thompson, “Was Ancient Rome a Dead Wives Society? What did the Roman Paterfamilias Get Away With.” *Journal of Family History* 31, January 2006, 3-27; cf. Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Ada: Baker, 2009).

men.²¹ Women’s participation in educational and religious opportunities was also significantly curtailed.²² As Jewish scholar Judith R. Baskin observed:

As long as women satisfied male expectations in their domestic roles, they were revered and honored for enhancing the lives of their families and particularly for enabling their male relatives to fulfill their religious obligations. The Talmud relates that women earn merit “by sending their children to learn [Torah] in the synagogue and their husbands to study in the schools of the rabbis, and by waiting for their husbands until they return from the schools of the rabbis.”²³

According to some early rabbinic traditions, men had the ability to fight the *yesev hara’*, or evil impulses, while studying Torah, whereas women did not only not possess the necessary self-discipline for studying the divine Torah, but it was believed that they would use the knowledge gained for evil.²⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that the *Mishnah*, a written collection of Jewish oral traditions, expressed these sentiments: “If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery.”²⁵ Similarly, the Jerusalem Talmud proclaimed: “May the words of the Torah be burned and not be delivered to women!”²⁶ For many rabbis, “being a ‘man’ [was] the opposite of being a woman. A man, unlike a woman, could exercise the kind of self-control that allow[ed] for a life of the mind, a life not constructed as open to women.”²⁷ For these reasons, women were forbidden to study *the Torah*.²⁸ A further obstacle for women was that only Rabbis could teach Torah and only men could become their disciples (*talmidim*), as it was socially and culturally unacceptable for a woman to become a rabbi’s disciple.²⁹

Thus, it is not surprising to discover that one Talmudic prayer—known as *birkhot ha-shahar* or the “dawn blessings”—stated: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a heathen. . . . a woman . . . a slave.”³⁰ The apostle Paul echoed this Jewish prayer when he wrote in Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek,

²¹*The Mishnah, Yebamoth* 6:6, and *Gittin* 8:1, tr. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 227 and 317.

²²Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 4-8.

²³Baskin, “Introduction,” 4.

²⁴Michael L. Satlow, “Rhetoric and Assumptions: Romans and Rabbis on Sex,” in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.

²⁵*The Mishnah, Sotah* 3:4, tr. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 296.

²⁶*The Jerusalem Talmud*, ed. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2005), 148.

²⁷Satlow, *Jews in Graeco-Roman World*, 142.

²⁸*The Torah* is the name given to the five books of Moses, which form the foundation for all Jewish law and life.

²⁹K. H. Rengstorf, “*mathētēs*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol., 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 433. During the first century, cultural conventions made it unacceptable for a rabbi to speak to a woman who was not his kin. For an extended discussion of why Jesus only invited men to be His disciples, see Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 235-236.

³⁰*The Koren Siddur*, ed. and tr. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 26; for the history and interpretation of this blessing see Yoel H. Kahn, *The Three Blessings: Boundaries, Censorship, and Identity in Jewish Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Yoel Khan, “On Gentiles, Slaves, and Women: The Blessings ‘Who Did Not Make Me, Historical Survey,’” in *My People’s Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Light Publishing, 2001), 17-27; Daniel Landes, “On Gentiles, Slaves and Women: the Blessings ‘Who Did Not Make Me, Halakhik Analysis,’” in *My People’s Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Light Publishing, 2001), 28-34.

slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” thus providing a direct Christian response to sentiments contained in *Birkhot ha-shahar*. Early Christianity’s message was not only the beginning of a religious revolution, but it also planted the seeds of a social revolution, which is yet to be completed.³¹

The Revolutionary Appeal of the New Testament Message

Many readers of the New Testament filter its message through a lens of contemporary culture, and thus see the New Testament’s descriptions and prescriptions of gender relations as too constrictive and irrelevant. Consequently, at best, they tend to downplay Paul’s statements regarding women, such as “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Cor 14:35), or the gendered language regarding a bishop’s qualifications (1Tim 3); at worst, they view such statements as later, non-inspired additions to the New Testament. As a result, they emphasize only those passages that fit their personal worldview, considering those passages they disagree with to be irrelevant, non-inspired and redundant. Such a position often leads to a low view of Scripture and, in some cases, to a rejection of the Bible as an inspired text. At the other end of the spectrum, others consider the difficult passages relating to gender relations as normative and transcultural, attempting to elevate the cultural and social conventions of the first century and equating them with their notion of “Biblical Christianity.” This approach often leads to bibliolatry,³² as well as a blurring of the lines between doctrinal and cultural teachings of the New Testament. It is my conviction that both positions miss the point. Rather, I am convicted that, vis-à-vis the cultural gender conventions of the first century, the New Testament presents a breathtaking new vision of what being a “new creation” in Christ might actually mean (2 Cor 5:17). Christianity 1.0 was genuinely a revolutionary movement. Let’s begin with Jesus.

Jesus’ Attitude Toward Women

Jesus’ life and teachings, as described in all four Gospels, give evidence of His respect for the cultural conventions of His times. For example, as mentioned above, Jesus did not call women as His closest companions, as such an action would be considered scandalous by His contemporaries. At the same time, however, Jesus was countercultural in His approach to women. Thus, He never disparaged women; He did not treat them differently to men or view them as a lower form of humanity; He did not discourage women from studying the Word of God or make remarks regarding who could or could not follow Him, on the basis of gender. Instead, He stood up for the downtrodden and oppressed within society,³³ including women, and He welcomed their friendship.

³¹The Greek-Gentile and Slave-Free dichotomy has been addressed by Christianity. The last coupling, Male-Female, awaits a final resolution.

³²Bibliolatry should not be understood as “literally bowing down and worshipping the Bible.” Instead, it is often identified with the attitude “the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it,” i.e., reading the Bible in an overly literalistic manner without paying careful attention to the readers’ own presuppositions or the historical and religious context within which the text was produced. It could thus be said that Christians who follow this line of reasoning “worship” the Bible rather than the God of the Bible. Bibliolatry is often associated with verbal inspiration and an inerrantist reading of the Bible. As an example, it would be bibliolatry to insist, on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:15, that women need to bear children in order to be saved.

³³The discourse on marriage and divorce in the Sermon on the Mount is one such example.

One way in which Jesus broke the walls separating men from women was by speaking with women and allowing them to become His followers. For example, from a cultural perspective, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26) was inappropriate – scandalous, even – as a bona fide, first-century Jewish rabbi would not voluntarily speak with a strange woman.³⁴ In fact, a self-respecting, Jewish rabbi would almost never speak with a woman who was not a member of his immediate family,³⁵ let alone a Samaritan woman of dishonorable reputation. But while Jesus often pushed against the social conventions of His time, He engaged the Samaritan woman in a culturally sensitive way. It was a one-on-one conversation, with no witnesses present to question Jesus' propriety. He entered into a prolonged theological conversation, which recognized the Samaritan woman's desire to know religious truth. In His own way, He taught her *the Torah*, and it was to this "unclean" woman that He ultimately revealed His identity as the Messiah. Understandably, upon their return, the disciples were perturbed by the scene they witnessed. It is worth noting that the Gospel of John places Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman immediately after the narrative describing His conversation with Nicodemus. Thus, according to John, Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman was just as important as was His conversation with a Jewish man. In this way, Jesus not only "[broke] down the partition wall between Jews and Gentiles,"³⁶ but He elevated a woman to the position of disciple and evangelist.³⁷

Jesus bestowed similar honor on Mary of Bethany. In Luke 10:39, we find Mary sitting "at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." Most modern readers of this narrative see nothing out of the ordinary in this. With Jesus, we commend Mary and frown on Martha for doing what she was expected to do. From a first-century cultural and religious perspective, however, the situation described by Luke was remarkable. The posture assumed by Mary was reserved for a Rabbi's male disciples. Paul used the phrase "at the feet" (Acts 22:3) when describing his formal training under Gamaliel. In the privacy of her home, Jesus allowed Mary to join in a teaching session with His disciples.³⁸ It was inappropriate for a woman to sit with men or to engage a Rabbi in conversation.³⁹ However, rather than disapproving of Mary's posture, Jesus tells Martha: "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10:42). "This was a shocking feature," writes René Laurentin "a rabbi, indeed, never accepted a woman as a disciple. And this woman chooses to listen to the Word at the very time when the duties of the household

³⁴In the *Mishnah* we find these words: "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at last will inherit Gehenna." *Mishnah, Aboth 1:5*.

³⁵Some first century Rabbis taught that a woman speaking with a man in public was grounds for divorce. *The Mishnah, Ketubbot 1.8, 7:6*, tr. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 245, 255.

³⁶Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 193.

³⁷White, *Desire of Ages*, 195.

³⁸Ellen White states that, in the home of Martha and Mary, Jesus "continued the instruction which he had been giving his disciples on the road, in reference to the qualifications necessary to fit men for the kingdom of Heaven. . . . Mary was charmed by the words of Jesus to his disciples, and, seeing a golden opportunity to become better acquainted with the doctrines of Christ . . . [took] her place at the feet of Jesus." Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 2 (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1877), 358.

³⁹An extreme version of this attitude is found in the statements of the first-century Rabbi Eliezer, who stated: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman . . . Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her obscenity." *Jerusalem Talmud, Sota 3. 4, 19a; Mishnah, Sotah, 3, 4*.

claim her attention. Jesus confirms the choice she has made in liberating herself from the constraints imposed on women at the time.”⁴⁰

Similarly, the fact that Jesus stooped to talk to a Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, and that He was willing to be influenced by her, was also extraordinary by first-century standards (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Through her conversation with Jesus, the disciples learned that “the blessings of salvation are for every soul,”⁴¹ and not just those with Jewish ancestry. “Cast is hateful to God,” wrote Ellen White, “He ignores everything of this character.”⁴² Not only did “the woman of Phoenicia [fling] herself against the barriers that had been piled up between Jew and Gentile,”⁴³ but Jesus allowed her to step over the traditional gender walls that separated women from men.⁴⁴

Throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, we find an antidote to the way women were treated in ancient society. He touched a ritually unclean woman and raised a dead girl (Mark 5:25-42); women accompanied Him with the twelve (Luke 8:1-3); women served as the subject of His parables and models of faith (Matt 15:28; Mark 12:40); He commended and defended women (John 12:7; John 8:1-11); He showed them respect and compassion (Luke 8:39); and, astoundingly, it was to women to whom He revealed His resurrected *Self* and asked them to be His witnesses (Matt 28:10; Luke 24:9-11).⁴⁵ Indeed, Jesus represented a different kind of first-century Rabbi: He viewed women as “persons for whom He had come . . . not in terms of sex, age or marital status;” He valued their “intelligence and faith;” He accepted women as “treasured members of the human family;” He admitted them “into His fellowship;” and He took “time to teach them the truths of the Kingdom of God.”⁴⁶ Throughout the New Testament, Jesus’ openness to women is reflected in the earliest Christian Church.

Early Christian Attitudes Toward Women

It is beyond dispute that the New Testament contains statements that are difficult to interpret. Peter acknowledged this when he wrote that Paul’s letters “contain some things that are hard to understand which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16). This reality is compounded for those reading the New Testament almost two millennia later. As a result, twenty-first century Christians interpret these problematic statements in various, sometimes contrary, ways. As suggested above, these interpretations may be grouped in two main categories: *restrictive* and *normative*.

⁴⁰René Laurentin, “Jesus and Women: An Underestimated Revolution,” in *Women in a Men’s Church*, ed. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 85.

⁴¹White, *Desire of Ages*, 403.

⁴²White, *Desire of Ages*, 403.

⁴³White, *Desire of Ages*, 403.

⁴⁴Ellen White stops short of recognizing the Syrophenician woman’s challenge against the gender walls. However, still on the same page (403), she quotes Galatians 3:28. Clearly, thus, Jesus encounter with the woman had implications on Jewish gender conventions.

⁴⁵Scholars have long contended that “the fact that it is women, whose testimony was worthless, rather than men who are said in the earliest narrative to be the discoverers of the empty tomb is best explained by the fact that the tradition here is reliable.” William Lane Craig, “Closing Response,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, ed. Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 177.

⁴⁶Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 1987), 47-50.

Those who embrace a *restrictive* hermeneutic tend to express astonishment that Paul would write ‘it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church?’; that he would insist women should wear head coverings; or that women should not have authority over or teach men but “learn in quietness and submission” (1 Cor 14:35; 11:13; 1 Tim 2:12). Accordingly, they view statements like these as not applicable to contemporary Christianity and dismiss them without much consideration. On the other hand, those who embrace a strict *normative* hermeneutic tend to argue that the cultural conventions of Paul’s times apply transculturally. Accordingly, women are required to be silent in church, to wear a head covering, and to never teach on spiritual themes when men are present. Some Christian authors go as far as to counsel women to never, in church or society, place themselves in positions that would compromise the masculinity and leadership of men.⁴⁷ Today, there are denominations that strictly adhere to such conventions; however, many Christians who embrace this *normative* position tend to be selective and inconsistent in their application of the apostolic instructions regarding women. For example, women may not be required to be silent in church or to wear head coverings, and yet may be prevented from teaching men.

As suggested above, however, there is a third, *transformative*⁴⁸ hermeneutics, to interpret the apostolic writings on gender relationships, which begins with an attempt to understand the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of the New Testament. Putting on first-century cultural glasses allows readers to recognize the profoundly countercultural message of the New Testament, and thus to make sense of the problematic statements. Yes, Paul did write that, in some circumstances, women should be silent in church;⁴⁹ however, these words indicate that, astoundingly, men and women were now worshipping together in the same place. Yes, in accordance with culture, Paul encouraged women to submit to men; however, he (and others) also encouraged women to study the Scriptures on their own, to pray publicly, to prophesy, and to teach others.

Within a first-century context, the New Testament was a revolutionary and dynamic set of documents, the authors of which expected Christianity to be a movement that showed the world how things were “in the beginning” (Mat 19:8). This is one reason why

⁴⁷For example, John Piper writes: “It is simply impossible that from time to time a woman not be put in a position of influencing or guiding men. For example, a housewife in her backyard may be asked by a man how to get to the freeway. At that point she is giving a kind of leadership. She has superior knowledge that the man needs and he submits to her guidance. But we all know that there is a way for that housewife to direct the man that neither of them feels their mature femininity or masculinity compromised.” John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 50.

⁴⁸I chose to name this hermeneutical method *transformative*, because it moves beyond the *restrictive* and *normative* hermeneutical approaches by providing a new way of seeing the text and providing a meaningful application for the church’s beliefs and practices.

⁴⁹It must be noted that men are also told to be silent in some circumstances. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:28 and 14:30. This alone indicates that Paul did not single out women to keep silent. For an excellent discussion on this issue, see W. Larry Richards, “How Does a Woman Prophesy and Keep Silent at the Same Time? (1 Corinthians 11 and 14)” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 313-333.

Paul refers to the church as a “new creation” (1 Cor 5:17)⁵⁰ We will now explore several examples of this major, transformative countercultural shift.

Wives’ Submission to their Husbands. The idea of wives’ submission to their husbands was a deeply ingrained aspect of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish social and familial conventions. Thus, when Paul wrote “wives submit to your own husbands” (Eph 5:22) he said nothing surprising to his readers. This was expected. What was revolutionary, however, was that Paul situated this statement within the immediate context of mutual submission (*hupotassomenoi allelois*, v. 21). While the idea of mutual submission is not a difficult concept for those of us living in the twenty-first century, to his first-century, non-Christian contemporaries, it would have been seen as *moria* (lit: foolishness; see 1 Cor 1:18) and thus both offensive and unworkable. To further emphasize the extraordinary and binding nature of this instruction, Paul added that mutual submission must flow out of “reverence for Christ,” thus indicating that all Christian relationships were to be grounded in Christ’s character and His accomplishments on behalf of humanity. Let us remind ourselves what Christ, the Head of the Church, accomplished. In Paul’s words: “Who, being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a slave (*morphen doulou*) . . . and . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on the cross” (Phil 2:6-8). Thus, according to Paul, Jesus took on the role of a slave, submitting Himself to God and to humanity as a whole. This ultimate example of divine submission is, according to Paul, an example for all Christians to follow (Phil 2:5).

Moreover, in order to ground the husband-wife relationship (verse 22) in mutual submission (verse 21), Paul leaves the verb *submit* out of verse 22. The oldest and most reliable manuscripts thus render this passage in this way: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” The absence of a verb in this last sentence indicates that the discussion in Ephesians 5:22-28 is grounded in the relational and theological framework of the *mutual submission* outlined in verse 21.

If, however, this pericope is grounded in *mutual* submission, where is the submission of the husband to his wife? This is found in verse 25, where Paul departs from familiar, first-century conventions and stands the familial system on its head. He begins by exhorting husbands to follow the example of the divine Husband, who sacrificed Himself for His bride. The text states: “Husbands love (*agapāte*) your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Within the broader context of mutual submission, Paul views *agapē* love as the greatest form of submission, and Christ as the great exemplar for human husbands, suggesting that, just like Christ gave His life for His Church, so husbands should self-sacrifice for their wives.

The first hint of this idea is found in Ephesians 5:1-2, where Paul encourages his readers to “follow God’s example . . . and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up (*paredōken*) for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” What does the Head of the church do for His bride? He gives Himself up (*paredōken*). Significantly, Paul uses this same word *paredōken* in v. 25 when describing the way in which husbands should love their wives. This perspective upturned the conventional, first-century notion of

⁵⁰It has been long recognized by commentators that, contextually, Paul’s reference to a “new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is a reference to the original creation of Genesis 1-3; cf. Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 160-161.

submission, i.e., obeying the orders of one's superior, and created a new, Christian paradigm for the marital relationship.⁵¹

Spiritual Gifting Rather than Gender. As noted above, first-century women in both Greco-Roman and Jewish societies had few legal rights and could exercise no leadership functions in public life or the synagogue; their lives were strictly confined to the household. Here again, the message of the New Testament is revolutionary, as it frames Christian leadership as a function of spiritual gifting rather than gender. The biblical evidence for this is fairly straightforward. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul begins his pericope about being a living sacrifice and about spiritual gifting by addressing the "brothers." He states, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers (*adelphoi*), in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." He continues with an exhortation for the "brothers" to not conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their mind. Similarly, in v. 6, Paul states: "We have (*echontes*) different gifts, according to the grace given us." *Echontes* is a masculine plural verb, rendering the phrase in this way: "We, men, have different gifts." Is it feasible to argue that, because Paul uses the masculine plural noun *adelphoi* and *echontes*, he was only addressing men in the Roman congregation? That only men should "offer their bodies as living sacrifices," avoid conforming "to the patterns of this world," or have spiritual gifts? Christians across the conservative-liberal spectrum could agree that such a conclusion would be nonsensical, as it is quite safe to assume that the entire chapter, indeed the entire book of Romans, was addressed to the church, which consisted of men *and* women. Thus, *Adelphoi* and *echontes* function here as a generic way of addressing the entire congregation.

If we accept this conclusion, however, we must embrace the position that all spiritual gifts are given equally to men *and* women. Paul lists these gifts: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy (vs. 6-8). It is the gifts of teaching and leading, however, that Christians disagree on. While all Christians accept that women can be recipients of the gifts of serving or encouraging, some draw the line when it comes to the gifts of teaching and leading. Herein lies the question that divides Christians: should women be allowed to fulfil teaching and leading functions in the church if elsewhere Paul does not permit a woman "to teach or have authority over a man" and asserts that "she must be silent" (1 Tim 2:12)? Should Paul's injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12 serve as the ultimate hermeneutical lens through which all other passages on women should be interpreted? Some Christians say yes to these questions, arguing that Paul cannot contradict himself. As a result, in some denominations, women are only allowed to exercise the gifts of teaching and leading within a circle of other women and children.

However, nowhere in his writings does Paul indicate that some gifts of the Spirit may be exercised by women, while others may not, i.e., there is no indication that any of the spiritual gifts are gender specific. Furthermore, Paul asserts that it is the Holy Spirit who determines the distribution of the gifts, not human beings: "All these are the word of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:11). This same theme is reiterated in these words: "But to each one of us grace has been given

⁵¹This was also the understanding of early Adventist pioneers. On the pages of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* we find this injunction: "The husband and the wife are one; the interests are the same and their obligations are mutual. Neither should set himself or herself up as lord or dictator over the other, but all their actions and course of life should be with complete understanding and mutual consent." May 24, 1892, 9.

as Christ apportioned it It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelist, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:7, 11-12). And while believers are called to recognize and affirm spiritual gifting within an individual, they are not to segregate spiritual gifts according to gender. Thus, Paul’s injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12 cannot be used as the ultimate hermeneutical lens, as this would render the passages dealing with spiritual gifts nonsensical and lead to all kinds of illogical approaches to ministry in the church.⁵²

This thesis is supported directly by the text. As noted above, one of the spiritual gifts mentioned in Romans 12:8 is the gift of leadership. The Greek word for this gift is *proistamenos* (lit: *pro*-before; *istamenos*-standing), i.e., the one who stands before, or in front of. Paul usually associates this verb with a leadership function. As such, it is found in various forms throughout his epistles. One instance is found in Romans 16:2, where Paul describes Phoebe using the term *prostatis*, a noun form of *proistamenos* and a feminine form of *prostatēs*,⁵³ which indicates someone prominent within a congregation, a leader.⁵⁴ The verb forms of the word occur again in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Timothy 3:4, 3:12, 5:17 and Titus 3:8 and 3:14. The way Paul’s uses the verb in 1 Timothy 5:17, however, is particularly intriguing. Paul states: “The elders who direct (*proestotes*) the affair of the church well are worthy of double honor.” Leadership in the church, including that of elders, is thus based on spiritual gifting.⁵⁵

This brief word study confirms the conclusion outlined above, i.e., that the spiritual gifts, including leadership, are not gender specific and that leadership is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and thus it is He who decides on the distribution of this gift. Thus, in an environment that was not friendly to women, the writings of Paul, which invited all believers, both men and women, to exercise their various gifts for the edification of the church, offered a revolutionary perspective.

Women as Co-Workers. For modern readers of the New Testament, it is not significant to read that Paul had female co-workers, as this is a normal part of our culture. However, in the first century this was nothing short of extraordinary. In his epistles, Paul names seventeen individuals as co-workers (Greek: *sunergo*, *sun*-with; *ergo*-work),⁵⁶ including fourteen men and three women: Pricilla, Euodia and Syntyche (Rom 16:3; Phil 4:2-3). Pricilla and Aquila receive special attention from Paul, not only as coworkers but as individuals who risked their lives for him (Rom 16:3). Whenever they appear in the New Testament, Priscilla and Aquila are always paired; however, some scholars see the ordering of their names as significant. As is the custom today, usually the name of the man in various

⁵²On the pages of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Adventist pioneers dealt with this issue over and over again. One of the most interesting and insightful articles on 1 Timothy 2:12 came from the pen of G. C. Tenney in the May 24, 1892 (p.8) issue of the magazine.

⁵³In the Septuagint, *prostatēs* is reserved for chief officials of a king’s court (1 Chron 27:31, 29:6; 2 Chron 8:10; 24:11). 2 Chronicles 8:10 states: “And these were the chief officers of King Solomon, 250, who exercised authority over the people.” When the word is used in the Septuagint, therefore, it tends to signify a leadership function. The Septuagint was Paul’s Bible, and thus he must have known the word and its meaning when he used it to describe Phoebe.

⁵⁴For more details, see Darius Jankiewicz, “Phoebe: Was She an Early Church Leader?” *Ministry*, April 2013, 10-13.

⁵⁵An emphasis on an inclusive use of language is a recent invention. In Greek, and for most of the recorded history of humanity, masculine nouns and verbs were often used to include both males and females.

⁵⁶Paul also uses the term to refer to himself. See, for example, 2 Cor 1:24; 6:1.

listings appeared first. Accordingly, when New Testament writers refer to the couple's occupation and ownership of their home, they refer to Aquila first (Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:19). However, when they refer to their ministry, they invariably mention Priscilla first (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3).⁵⁷ Might this indicate that she was the more dynamic teacher? Euodia and Syntyche, the other two women Paul mentions as his coworkers, "contended at [his] side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of [his] fellow workers" (Phil 4:3). The word "contend" (*synethlesan*) normally referred to athletes who strained to attain victory in games. This would seem to indicate that these women were completely dedicated to the cause of the Gospel.⁵⁸

But Paul also speaks of other women who joined in the work. In Romans 16: 6, 12, he refers to four women, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis, who "worked hard in the Lord." The Greek words used here, *kopiaō*, means to work hard to the point of exhaustion. Paul uses this word to describe his own hard work for the sake of the Gospel (1 Cor 15:10; 1 Thess 2:9); and, interestingly, in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 he uses two words, *sunergo* and *kopiaō*, to speak of those who labor in the Gospel: "You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, to submit (*hupotasso*) to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work (*sunergo*), and labors at it (*kopiaō*)." In other words, Paul urges believers to submit to "such as these" and to "everyone" who joins in the work and labors at it. Please note that Paul uses the same Greek word submit (*hupotasso*) when he writes of wife's submission to her husband.⁵⁹ How should we interpret these verses? Does Paul mean that believers should submit to all whom he considers coworkers and who join in the work? Does this injunction include female coworkers who worked hard (*kopiaō*) in the Lord?

Those who oppose women in leadership use 1 Timothy 2:12 as the primary interpretative lens for all other passages relating to women's work in the church. Accordingly, they explain away the evidence of Paul's female co-workers who "worked hard in the Lord" by suggesting that there were different types of co-workers, and that female co-workers did not function on the same level as male co-workers. Furthermore, they argue that being a co-worker did not mean that women functioned as elders or that they taught or led in any way; and that Paul's naming of women as co-workers does not mean that they held authority of any kind. In other words, they argue that some co-workers did things that other co-workers did not, and that the fact that there are no examples of female elders in the New Testament supports such an interpretation.

Such interpretation, however, misses the main point of Paul's message; namely, that the various functions in the New Testament Church, including that of bishop/elder, were

⁵⁷Linda L. Belleville, "Women Leaders in the Bible," in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 122.

⁵⁸W. Derek Thomas thus concludes: "The Apostle Paul would scarcely have used this strong word if they had merely 'assisted him with material help' and hospitality, while remaining in the background. The word [*synethlesan*] suggests a more active participation in the work of Paul, probably even a vocal declaration of the faith. How far this is true is admittedly a matter of conjecture; what can be said with certainty, however, is that they had contended with the Apostle in the cause of the Gospel and had gained a position of such influence as to make their present conflict a risk to the well-being of the church" ("The Place of Women in the Church at Philippi," *Expository Times* 83 (January 1972): 119).

⁵⁹For a discussion re: the biblical meaning of "submission," see the paragraphs above.

assigned on the basis of spiritual gifting rather than gender. In a culture that confined women to their households, the earliest Christian church engaged women, side by side with men, in the cause of the Gospel, with organizational functions filled by those who were specifically gifted by the Holy Spirit. This was indeed an extraordinary development and a major breach in the ancient walls separating men and women in their missionary work for their God.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the refreshing and *transformative* counter-culturalism of the New Testament. Against the prevailing Greco-Roman-Jewish worldviews, which placed women on a lower socio-religious level, the New Testament is an outlier in which women became equal participants in the mission of God on earth. Rather than ethnicity, social status or gender (Gal 3:28), functions in the church were determined by spiritual gifting. Consequently, the New Testament church encouraged, rather than discouraged, women's participation in the work of the Gospel. This is most likely the reason why Paul never ranks his co-workers according to gender.⁶⁰ Neither do we find a clear injunction against women serving as elders/bishops or deacons. Given the widespread involvement of women in the work of the Gospel, Paul could have stated that only men could fulfil the role of bishops and deacons.⁶¹ But he did not!

As a result, the most probable interpretation of the New Testament text suggests that women were considered partners in bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the World. No doubt, the inspiration for this was the chief wall-demolisher and, at the same time, Master Builder of His Church, Jesus Christ. Women, who had lived on the margins of the society, gladly filled the roles assigned to them by the Holy Spirit.

Regretfully, second-century Christianity began the ever-so-gradual process of reconstructing the ancient gender walls, and the new era of openness and gift-based ministry, so emphatically inaugurated by the New Testament, did not last. In particular, three post-Apostolic developments stifled co-operation between men and women in the cause of the gospel: first, during the second century, and in the name of protecting unity, power in the church was gradually concentrated into the hands of an elite group of leaders, the bishops; this, in turn, led to the creation of a hierarchical form of church government, which was accompanied by a transformation of the biblical rite of laying on of hands into ordination;⁶² and finally, these developments were augmented by the establishment of male headship in the church, which fully matured by the end of the Middle Ages. Together, these developments resulted in what Paul would term as a quenching of the Spirit (1Thess

⁶⁰This is why those who oppose women in ministry go to extraordinary, speculative lengths to explain away passages such as 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 where both co-workers (*sunergonti*) and hard labourers (*kopiōnti*) appear in the text.

⁶¹In 1 Timothy 3, the qualifications for bishops and deacons are similar to each other. Considering that Phoebe was named as deacon of a particular church, Paul's statement "husband of one wife" could not possibly have meant that a deacon had to be a man. Indeed, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* explores various meanings of the phrase "husband of one wife." One that is glaringly missing is that a bishop must be a man. Vol. 7 (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 297-298; see also Jankiewicz, "Phoebe: Was She an Early Church Leader?"

⁶²See Darius W. Jankiewicz, "The Problem of Ordination: Lessons from Early Christian History," in *South Pacific Perspectives on Ordination: Biblical Theological and Historical Studies in an Adventist Context*, ed. by Graeme J. Humble and Robert K. McIver (Cooranbong: Avondale Academic Press, 2015), 101-129.

5:19) and the ministry of women as co-workers with men in the cause of the Gospel was extinguished. In these last days, it is high time for Seventh-day Adventists to rediscover the *transformative* hermeneutics and what it means for the church to be the “new creation” proclaimed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17.