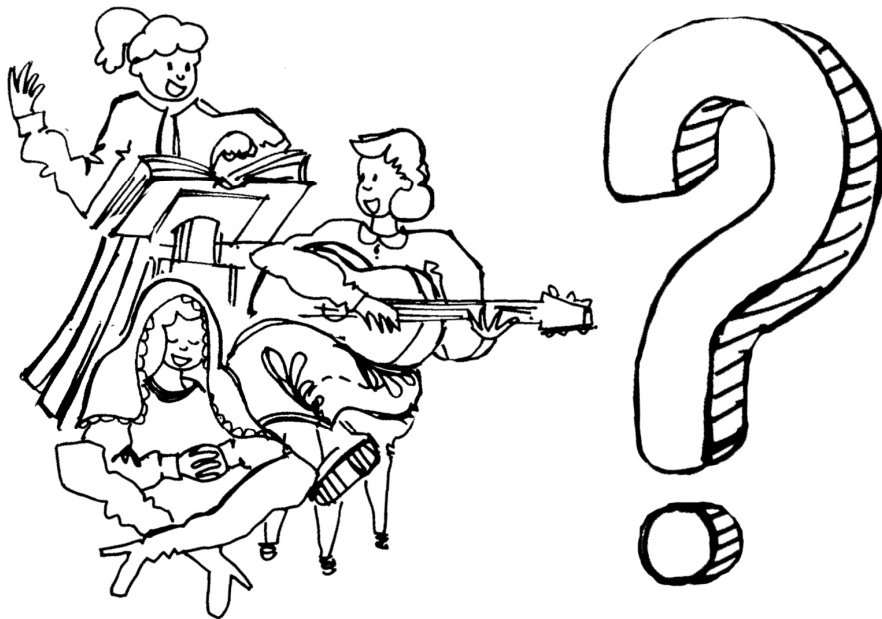


Specific Silence

*Exploring the Participation of
Women in Church Meetings*



**My Personal Theological Journey
Within the Brethren Movement Context**

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Eindhoven, The Netherlands, 2018

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Bibliography and Sources

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Bible translations: Bible references are from The New International Version (NIV 1984) unless stated otherwise. In these cases, the translation used is the English Standard Version (ESV 2008). The key passages are offered in the Darby translation (1884) for a more literal wording.

Introduction

What you have in your hands is my personal theological journey. This struggle spans at least 10 years of my life. It has not been a comfortable journey. It has involved much reading, thinking, praying, and sharing. Fortunately, I have not travelled this journey alone. I express my gratitude to many of you who have taken the time and energy to share your Scriptural insights and engage in open discussion with me - in person, or over the internet. I respect and value your input, even though we may disagree here and there in our conclusions.

For each of us, our theological positions are influenced by our motivation. This makes open study difficult. We all have a strong desire to please the Lord, but also a strong desire to live in harmony with the Christians we know and love. The apostle Paul asked the soul-searching question: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?" (Gal. 1:10). Similar questions that have often kept me awake are: "Am I being true to Scripture?", "Am I being unduly influenced by modern western culture?", "Am I prepared to follow Scripture if it leads me to a new conclusion?", "If necessary, am I willing to 'rock the boat'?", and "Am I willing to face the disapproval of fellow Christians that I love and respect?".

Isn't this topic divisive?

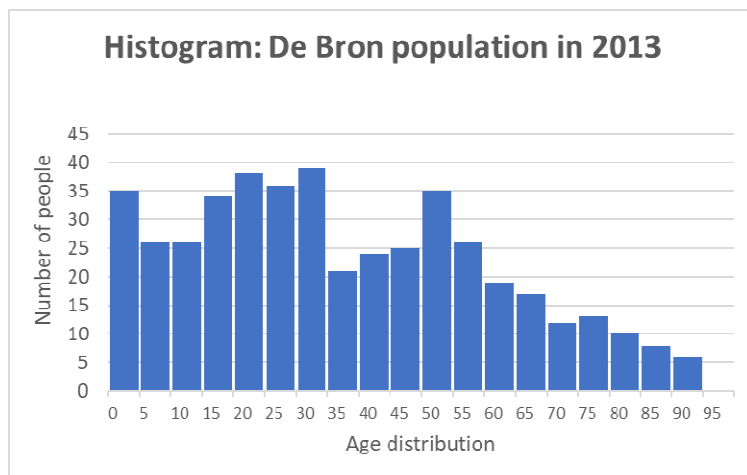
The role of men and women in the local church has been a hot topic for many years. Some people's convictions on this topic are so strong that they have caused divisions within families, churches and circles of fellowship. In some circles, an individual's view on this topic is used to determine whether or not they believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture. The stakes are high. The *possibility* of receiving serious criticism, of being excluded from otherwise happy ministry ventures, or of painful assembly desertions or divisions, works against an open Scriptural re-think of this topic. It is calmer and safer to avoid change of any kind - and to let those who disagree slowly leave. Some people suggest that we should not spend time on these sorts of topics. Rather, we should preach "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). It is true that focusing on Jesus will warm our hearts. And yet, gender *is* mentioned in Scripture. It is *impossible* for a local fellowship to avoid taking a position on this matter. The gender issue just *needs* to be addressed. It won't go away.

Why have I written this?

Back in 2005, a European brother who was visiting some assemblies in Colombia asked me if I could write a book on 'the silence of women in the assembly meetings'. His point was that most modern Christian books are *egalitarian* (consider men and women as interchangeable in all Christian matters) and that the more conservative books are rather old and less attractive to the new generation. I agreed that someday, once I returned to Europe, I would study the topic in depth and perhaps write something about it. But I also added that my writing must be a reflection of my *open study* on the topic. I did not want to study Scripture with the pressure to have to arrive at a previously determined conclusion.

Since then, for over seven years, I chose to stay silent on the issue of the role of women in the Church. During this time, I read many books, old and new, from feminist, egalitarian, and diverse complementarian perspectives (I added about a metre of relevant books to my bookshelf) as well as many articles from recommended magazines and websites. In 2008 I attempted to write, since the process of writing helps to clarify my own thinking. But after writing close to 50 pages, I felt exhausted and stopped. Every church leadership needs to reach a position on this topic, but the many hours I spent studying and discussing the matter

were not feeding my soul – not in the same way as the biblical study of other subjects often do. So I stopped writing and continued my research at a slower pace.



Then in 2012 we agreed as elders of De Bron, a rather large Brethren assembly here in Eindhoven (NL) that it was time to re-examine this issue. We gave ourselves one year to study the relevant texts together and then reach a conclusion – a conclusion that would reflect the light we had received on the matter by the end of that year. We would then have to move on

and give our attention to the many other important topics and pressing assembly needs. Personally I find it easier to *keep on* reading, praying, discussing and thinking indefinitely. This can go on and on, since there is no end to the amount of material available, and Bible scholars (even within Brethren assemblies) will never reach a unanimous conclusion. Furthermore, as long as I remain reading, praying, discussing and thinking, I can remain in reasonable harmony with nearly everyone. It is when you dare to put things together and reach towards a conclusion that you feel the stress beginning to form within Christian fellowship. Working together with fellow elders within an agreed time-frame helped me to reach some conclusions. The conclusions you will read in this paper developed during 2013. By the end of this year I felt that the Lord had given me enough clarity and peace to speak publicly on this matter – when I am asked to do so.

Basic outline

In the first chapter, you will find an overview of the position at which I have arrived. I recommend reading this first, in order to give you an idea of the direction we are taking in this writing. This introduction, together with the second chapter, will provide you with the background to my theological journey. No-one writes free of bias or assumption. When you understand my background, you will better follow my arguments, and may possibly identify with some of my concerns.

In chapters 3-5, I will set out the biblical foundations for the discussion of the role of women in assembly meetings.

In chapters 6-10, I will explore the four key New Testament passages that are relevant to the participation of women in church meetings. Chapter 10 is the summarising and concluding chapter. Here you will find an overview of the key conclusions I have drawn, together with their supporting arguments.

Chapter 11 contains a case study – it describes how we addressed this topic as a group of elders in 2013, and how we implemented our new conclusions within our own assembly. I also reflect on what has happened since then, through the last 4 years. Here you will find some tips or ideas that may be useful in your own local church context.

In chapter 12, I describe the ways in which my wife and I now live out these conclusions in practice. If you invite me to minister at your assembly, youth camp, retreat or conference, you may want to know what to expect!

Why write about this now?

Twelve years have now passed since I was asked to write something about the role of men and women in the Church, so why address them now? There are 4 reasons:

- (a) To provide answers to questions: People sometimes ask me, “What are your beliefs on gender roles within the church?”, “What has changed, and what has stayed the same, in your assembly?”. Such questions deserve a clear and honest answer. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience...” (1 Pet. 3:15-16).
- (b) To explain my reasoning: Sometimes I hear people judging the *motivation* of the person they disagree with. This can be very unfair. Personally, when necessary, I judge the actions and teachings of others, but I refuse to judge their motives. It is difficult enough to determine our own core motivation. That should make us hesitant to judge the motivation of others. Let God be the judge of our motives; “He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Cor. 4:5). For those who deem it necessary, I am presenting you with what you will need to judge, my reasons, my conclusions and my suggested applications on his subject.
- (c) To provide reassurance: It is very uncomfortable, and sometimes even confusing, when a visiting Bible teacher surprises the congregation by proposing some ‘new practice’ or ‘new teaching’. Church leaders are fearful of such *un-requested* interventions. I strongly hold that *it is the job of the elders to provide the biblical guidelines for local practice*. It is *not* the responsibility or role of visitors or guest Bible teachers. I would like to make it clear that I have no intention of speaking on this topic *unless* I am invited to do so by the leadership of the assembly or conference. Visits should be used to encourage spiritual growth and internal harmony. “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14:19).
- (d) To provide a case study: Church leaders in every congregation need to reach some form of conclusion on this topic. Most elders have families and a full-time job that limits the amount of time and energy they can make available to research this topic afresh. Perhaps the method of study, the conclusions we have drawn, or the way that we have implemented these conclusions locally will be of help to such conscientious and busy elders. You may agree with me on some points and not on others. That in itself is not a problem. My theological journey on this topic has taken a decade, and much hard work. Your journey, and that of your local church, may also take time. Be patient and choose to remain a learner. As we follow the Lord Jesus we continue to learn, and in His good time He will shed the necessary light on His word.

Reflect on what I am saying,
for **the Lord** will give you **insight** into all this.

Do your best to **present yourself to God** as one approved,
a workman who does not need to be ashamed
and who **correctly handles the word of truth**.

And the Lord's servant **must not quarrel**;
instead, he must be kind to everyone,
able to teach, not resentful.

- The Apostle Paul (2 Timothy 2:7,15,24)



An Overview

Before I take you along my theological journey on this topic, I would like to share with you my conclusions and worldview with regards to the issue of gender. You will notice here that I only state or describe the way I see things - the Scriptural and historical reasoning behind my views are detailed in the chapters that follow. I hope that knowing where we will end up will help you to relax a little (this is, after all, an emotionally charged topic) and encourage you to read on and explore the supporting reasons.

When God created humanity, He chose to make two genders, both male and female, equal in value, yet different from each other. Individually, as man and woman, they create an image of God - and in relationship with each other, they also create an image of God. Man has been given the role of 'head', and woman that of 'helper'. In fulfilling their God-given roles, they create an image of God. This complementarian gender distinction is a design feature; it is something 'good', and choosing to fully express it will enhance human flourishing. The challenge, of course, is to discover what the 'head-helper' model involves, and *where* and *how* to express it today, within our different cultural settings. In this writing, I refer to this gender design feature as the '*Creation Order principle*' – it is a timeless principle. I believe it is possible to strongly agree with and endorse God's Creation Order principle, and yet express it differently, in different families and churches.

When sin came into the world, it marred everything in God's good creation, including the relationship between men and women. Since then, women have no longer been happy with their 'helper' role, and have either become passive or have sought to dominate men, and men are no longer happy with their 'head' role, and have either become passive or have sought to rule over women.

Expressing the Creation Order principle

In the Old Testament, we see that God seeks to express the Creation Order principle among His chosen people, Israel. In the Tabernacle, for instance, only men, and never women, were given the privilege and responsibility of serving as priests, bringing offerings and representing the people before God. There are some examples of women with power and influence (for good and for bad), but generally speaking, the Old Testament world is a male-dominated world, in which we sometimes see God using women to serve as judges and prophets among His people – but never as priests. Some aspects of this male-dominated world are a God-approved expression of the Creation Order principle, but other aspects, perhaps even *most* of the ways in which this world operates, are an expression of sin and the Fall.

Then comes the New Testament. The Lord Jesus has a completely different view of women. He is not influenced by the Fall, He has no desire to 'rule' over women. He values men and women alike. He speaks and listens to both of them. Against common social expectations, He allows women to sit together with men at His feet and learn, He pays attention to their needs, He includes them in his parables, and He allows women to follow Him and care for His needs and those of His disciples. When dying, He showed concern for a woman, and He allowed women to be the first witnesses of His resurrection. But Jesus did not treat men and

woman as being interchangeable. There is no evidence that He had an egalitarian agenda. The 12 disciples He chose were all men. In His loving dealings with men and women, He sought to express the Creation Order principle.

After the Resurrection, the Father and the ascended Lord Jesus send the Holy Spirit. On the special day of Pentecost, when Christ's church began, the Holy Spirit descended on both men and women – He baptised both into one Body. Since then, the Holy Spirit indwells every born-again believer, whether male or female; He desires to produce His fruit in them, He gives them gifts, and He desires to empower their ministries. These actions of the Holy Spirit show us that whether male or female, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, free or slave, educated or illiterate, we all have the same value, dignity and status in Christ's community, the Church. This new community is fresh, dynamic and counter-cultural, so very different from what people had seen in the Temple rituals and experienced in their Synagogues. This *inclusivity* was an important factor that contributed to the explosive growth of the Church in the first century: the poor, the slaves and the women found a place where they were treated with equal respect, and could be equally used by God. In those early days, the priesthood of *every believer* was a powerful reality - and this was achieved without setting aside the Creation Order principle. Both the apostles Paul and Peter write to Christians explicitly to encourage husbands and wives to uphold and live the 'head-helper' model in their marriages – expressing the Creation Order principle in their homes. We also find instructions on how to uphold the Creation Order principle in the church.

Subjective and objective ministry

Unlike the Temple in Jerusalem and the regular meetings in the synagogues, those who visited the meetings of early Christians felt that God was really among them. Outside of these meetings, God was also acting and making Himself known through 'regular' Christian men and women - to such an extent that sometimes people were afraid of joining them. The early church was a new and vibrant community. But just as new wine needs new wine skins, this new community needed new structure and protocols in order to flourish long-term. In the divinely-inspired record of *practice* of the early church and in the *teaching* of the apostles we can identify two types of ministry: (1) an *objective* ministry associated with authority and the Holy Scriptures – providing leadership in local churches, teaching the Holy Scriptures and apostolic letters, and ensuring that discipline and healthy order was maintained, and (2) a *subjective* ministry associated with a day-to-day living relationship with God – expressing thanksgiving and worship, praying for the sick and needy, praying in the Holy Spirit, and receiving supernatural revelation (something God wants to say to an individual, a group or the whole community, to be passed on for their benefit), that is, a word of God for the moment.

I refer to the first kind of ministry as *objective*, because it finds its origin and authority in the Holy Scriptures. I refer to the second kind of ministry as *subjective*, because it finds its origin in a personal 'sense' of being led by the Holy Spirit, or in a personal revelation that a person 'feels' may come from God. This *subjective* ministry must be tested by those present - to ensure that it is in harmony with the Holy Scriptures, and that they too experience the inner feeling or conviction that this revelation really is from God.

This 'objective-subjective' distinction helps me to understand how the Creation Order principle found expression in these early churches. Appropriate men (elders) were given the responsibility of leading their local churches, as men who would give account to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Appropriately gifted men were given the task of teaching God's Word – with clarity and authority – in their church meetings. The *objective* ministry was

therefore placed in the hands of suitably qualified men, not women. However, the *subjective* ministry was open to all suitably spiritually prepared brothers and sisters, in every sphere, both during and outside of church meetings.

When the Church began in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descended on all present (both men and women) and they all began to speak in tongues – this is *subjective* ministry in the context of a church meeting. In 1 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul explains *how* men and women should ‘pray and prophesy’, and there is no need to try to exclude these instructions from church meetings.

Paul corrects those who ignore the Creation Order

In time, some Christian women became over enthusiastic about their new-found freedoms, and began to set aside the Creation Order principle and venture into some of the *objective* ministry reserved for men. In 1 Corinthians 14, while giving instructions to ensure that the *subjective* ministry in church meetings would remain edifying for the whole community, Paul corrects this tendency of some women to overstep the mark. He makes it clear that when it comes to *objective* ministry, ‘when the church comes together’, women should be silent – they should not participate. Years later, in his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul again addresses this application of the Creation Order principle within the church: he states that, in an appropriate manner, men and women should *both* pray publicly in church meetings – this is *subjective* ministry; however reiterates that women should not teach (in church meetings) or take authority over men (be part of church leadership) – this is *objective* ministry.

Given that these apostolic instructions were written in letters that were designed for wider application and circulation, we can safely assume that this desire by some well-intentioned Christian women to engage in *objective* ministry was not restricted to the churches in Corinth and Ephesus. The apostle wished to ensure that the Creation Order principle should find expression in all churches everywhere.

Luke corrects those who abuse the Creation Order

Given the Jewish tradition of restricting the participation of women within society, and the fact that so many Jews became Christians, it is easy to understand how these converted Jews must have exerted pressure in the early churches to silence the women - to take this *subjective* ministry away from women, and return to the Temple protocol and synagogue practice whereby only the men were vocal and active. In the New Testament, we can also see how difficult it was for converted Jews to stop promoting circumcision and Jewish dietary codes. It has always been difficult to let go of long-held customs and practices.

Luke wrote his Gospel about 10 or 15 years after Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Luke was a Gentile, and therefore not so strongly influenced by Jewish traditions. He was observant, well aware of the strong current in some areas to reduce the significance and participation of women in the life of Jesus and in the early church, and he uses his Gospel narrative to resist this trend. He informs his friend Theophilus, and reminds us as readers, that women had a very important place in the life of the Lord Jesus and in the early church. Notice how women are central to the opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel (Elizabeth, Mary, and the prophetess Anna), and in its closing chapters, women are presented as heroes (in contrast to the doubting male disciples). Luke tells us that women *also* served Jesus and accompanied Him on His travels. Later, in the book of Acts, Luke regularly takes the trouble to explicitly state that both men *and* women were converted, that both men *and* women were present at a given event. He points out that the church in Philippi grew out of a women’s

prayer meeting, that Priscilla and her husband both engaged in theological discussion to help the preacher Apollos, and so on.

We are observing workings of God's Spirit as He opened new opportunities for both men and women in the early church. It was the Holy Spirit who used Paul to promote the Creation Order principle in the Church, and to correct the women who were going beyond the limits of the freedom that had been given to them. It was the same Holy Spirit who used Luke to correct those who sought to eliminate or downplay the important role women played in the life of Jesus and in the life of the early Church.

Women and the subjective ministry phased out

Christian churches began to change in the second and third centuries. The original form of leadership through a group of elders began to be replaced by the leadership of one man, a chief elder, priest, or pastor. A number of bishops arose with regional authority over a several local churches. Church Fathers, well-educated men, wrote theological studies, apologetic and evangelistic material and helped define and defend Christian truth. Sadly, their numerous writings also show that these Church Fathers were *extremely* negative in their attitudes towards women. They described women as being morally weak, sinful, tempters, carnal, incapable of proper reasoning or edifying spiritual thoughts. They blamed Eve, and by extension all women, for what was wrong in the world. Church Fathers have written a lot of good and useful material, but their writing on women is embarrassingly biased, untruthful and harmful. Can you imagine the effect that these influential men had on the new but limited role of women in the church?

In the fourth century, Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Church had changed from being a persecuted minority to a wealthy, popular and influential power. The wealth of the Roman Empire allowed large and impressive basilicas to be built. Their design and practice were often inspired by those of the Jewish temple, with an altar, a clearly defined male priesthood (paid by the Roman state), beautiful and impressive garments, and the burning of incense and sounding of bells. The simple and participative dynamic of early church meetings and spirit-led church life gave way to a new, more formal, pompous and male-dominated churchmanship. It is easy to see how these two important church developments worked together to eliminate the limited participation of women which had been embraced by the early Church:

- (a) The *objective* ministry (which depends on intellect and organisation) gained more and more prominence, and the *subjective* ministry (which depends critically on the day-to-day workings of the Holy Spirit in individuals) was basically eliminated. In phasing out subjective ministry from their church meetings, the participation of women who could engage in such subjective ministry was therefore also phased out. Of course, Christians still prayed in their new basilicas, but these were formal prayers rather than spontaneous, Spirit-led prayers. Of course, Christians still read and taught the Bible and 'prophesied' in their new basilicas, but the definition of 'prophesying' was changed to mean 'practical and encouraging biblical teaching'.
- (b) The incredibly negative view that the Church Fathers held on women ensured that women were both perceived and treated as being low, small and silent members of the Church.

In the Middle Ages, the creation of monasteries and diverse orders of nuns that were not directly under the control of the Church made it possible for some Christian women to study

the Holy Scriptures and serve their communities. However women remained excluded from activities within the Church itself. This excessive restriction on the participation of women in Church life lasted until the early 1900s. You may well be aware that in the past, the Bible was used by many to justify the idea that women should not be educated, should not be allowed to attend university, and should not be allowed to make important decisions in business, politics or government administration. When the time came for democratic voting, the Bible was used once again to ensure that only men should have the right to vote. These are degrading, damaging and incorrect applications of the Creation Order principle. Every limitation on the role of women that goes beyond God's good creation design must be called 'wrong'. There is clear evidence that Christian men have used the Creation Order principle to 'rule over' women and deny them their God-given roles and freedoms.

The 'mixed blessing' of the feminist movement

Since the early 1900s there has been a growing social movement to recognise the value and talents of women within society. Why should a woman not be allowed to drive a train? Why should a man driving a bus earn more than a woman driving the same bus? Most Christians have agreed that this difference is wrong, and that these injustices should be set right. Many Christians were involved in the early stages of the women's liberation movement – and I think rightly so. Men and women are equally valuable, and should be given the same opportunities to learn and work. These changes in society caused many Christians to re-think the roles of men and women in the church. It is healthy to be forced to re-think our interpretations of Scripture. To what extent are we still incorrectly using the Creation Order principle to suppress the contribution of women to the life of the Church? This self-examination has been painful and emotive. Every Christian, and every local church, would benefit from a fresh re-examination of Scripture on this important matter. That is why I have taken the time to write these pages, and I hope that is why you are reading them.

Sadly, the feminist movement has in many parts of the world transformed itself and broadened its original goals. It has joined forces with those who wish to completely eliminate all differences between the sexes, those who claim that men and women should be interchangeable, that the labels 'man' and 'woman' should disappear from our vocabulary. A society that does not believe in the existence of God, and much less in the fact that God created this universe, has no interest whatsoever in recognising the Creation Order principle. But it should be different among us, as Christians who believe in God and His good design in Creation. For centuries, the church has followed secular society and denied women the roles and responsibilities that God has given them. Today we are once again in danger of following secular society and completely eliminating gender differences by ignoring the Creation Order principle – with its diverse expressions within Christian families and churches.

I have a dream...

My dream is to be part of a Christian community which, both individually and collectively, deeply desires to live like the early Church, in a relaxed, graceful, and non-legalistic way. To be part of a community of followers of Jesus who love God and take His Word seriously, encourage individual and collective spiritual growth (and gracefully accept the temporary pain and disorder that any changes may cause); a community that values *subjective* ministry by encouraging brothers and sisters to be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit in everything they do (both inside and outside of church meetings), and also recognises that God has given men special responsibilities in their homes and the church, and therefore encourages them to also engage in *objective* ministry. In short, my ideal church is a living, vibrant, participative and Spirit-led Christian community that seeks to reflect the image of God and give glory to Him in an appropriate expression of the Creation Order principle.



Background and My Journey

My Christian 'church life' began among Brethren assemblies in Colombia, South America. My parents were missionaries there. My father spent many weeks of the year visiting homes, farms and villages in the coffee covered mountains. His strategy was to take an electric generator, film projector and amplification system by Jeep or by horse to remote villages that had no electricity. Christian music would be played through 2 or 3 speakers during the afternoon, letting the workers in the fields know that something special was going to happen that evening. A large sheet would be hung up in the village high street or football field, creating a makeshift 'cinema' in which to show a Christian film. When night fell, he had the attention of the whole village. In those days, village locals had little else to do in the evenings! Over the years, a number of Christian churches were established in this area. They were made up mainly from the farming community that loved the Lord Jesus deeply. They became keen evangelists, particularly through their musical gifts, using their guitars and writing their own testimonies in songs.

As a child, the customs and practices of your community become what you consider to be 'normal'. There are a number of minor and not so minor gender differences lived among the Brethren assemblies I knew at the time. As is usually the case, every element of their church practice can be explained or defended using historical anecdotes, pragmatic arguments or the application of Bible texts. In time, some of our gender differences have slowly disappeared. Others remain. Gender differences firmly based on Scripture *should* remain. But as the years went by, I experienced a growing sense of unease about the ways that we interpreted some portions of Scripture.

Sitting arrangements: Given the origins of the Brethren assemblies in Colombia, men and boys were required to sit on the right hand side of the meeting halls, while women and girls sat on the left. When my brothers or I misbehaved during a meeting, my mother would make us sit next to her on the women's side. Such humiliating experiences are never forgotten! When the assembly in Pereira, where I was brought up, moved to their current large central hall, three rows of chairs became available. The middle row was open to both men and women. Looking back, I recognise that the change from 2 to 3 rows of chairs was done deliberately. By the time I was a teenager, there was freedom to sit anywhere in the meeting hall – a very natural and, many would add, *positive* development.

Moving to Europe

At the age of 17 I finished Colombian high school and returned to the UK. While living with my grandparents in London, I discovered that we belonged to the 'Brethren movement'. Until then I thought we were simply Christians gathered in New Testament style churches. I also began to notice other differences, all connected in some way with gender. In Colombia, a man would always stand at the front, often with a guitar, and he would lead the time of singing – both during the Sunday morning singing and preaching meeting and also during the mid-week prayer and Bible study evening meetings. He would have selected some songs, and then he would ask for suggestions from all those present, from men, women, children, sometimes even from non-Christian visitors who were often attracted to the home and church meetings due to the singing. This created a very participative, family atmosphere. In the

assemblies in London, no one would stand at the front to lead. Only the men would suggest songs. No musical instruments were used. There were frequently long silences between songs and prayers. This protocol was not completely new for me, since this more reserved practice was also used in Colombia, but only during the celebration of the Lord's Supper – which was a weekly event.

Gender differences

Over the next 2 or 3 decades, as I visited Brethren assemblies in Europe and North America, other differences between gender roles became more evident:

Prayer meetings: A typical Brethren assembly prayer meeting has four elements: (a) a time to sing, (b) a time to share prayer requests, short testimonies and expressions of gratitude, (c) a time for a short reflection from God's word and, of course, (d) a time to pray. It has been common practice that only men share the Word and pray aloud in such meetings. But we had always accepted that both men and women were invited to participate in the first two elements. In the area of Colombia where I grew up, brothers and sisters, young and old, were free to suggest songs. The practice of sharing prayer requests is also fairly common among Brethren assemblies. It is chaired by a responsible brother, and the items mentioned are often written on a board on the wall to ensure that they are prayed for and not forgotten. A regular concern, particularly in European assemblies, is the issue of how a woman might be able to publicly share a prayer request whilst also remaining silent in assembly meetings. One solution is to agree that the sharing takes place *before* the first song is sung. This first song will then mark the beginning of the 'official' assembly meeting. Another solution is that women are asked to write their prayer requests on a piece of paper before or during the meeting, so that they can be read out by a man. A common solution is to consider the time of sharing as a 'short pause' in the assembly meeting.

Missionary reports: It is common that missionaries on furlough give a report to a number of interested assemblies about the development of the work on the mission field. When the missionary team is a couple, the husband usually does the talking. However, what is to be done when the missionary is a single woman? How can she publicly share her report and testimony while remaining silent in the assembly meeting? Sometimes these women are asked to write their report, which can then be read out by a man. After the assembly meeting, over tea and coffee, the missionary sister would be free to share in personal conversations. Another solution is to refer to these missionary reporting meetings as 'non-assembly meetings', and this would be made easier if the reporting took place in a house or rented hall and not in the usual assembly meeting hall. The most 'odd' solution I have heard of is that the lady was asked to sit down and talk from behind a blackboard that separated her from the congregation. In this way it was felt that she was not speaking in an assembly meeting.

Time for the children: In some areas, assembly meetings are an event for adults only. Children have the option of either sitting quietly next to their parents, or going out to Sunday school. Other assemblies, wishing to make the meetings more 'family-friendly', include a 'children's slot' in the Sunday morning programme. Typically, this would include 2 or 3 children's songs and a short story, and sometimes children may be invited up to the front to share a Bible text they have memorised during the week. Women are usually more gifted than men when it comes to ministering to children. How can a woman publicly coordinate the children's songs or tell the short story while remaining silent in the assembly meeting? Brethren assemblies in North America often divide their Sunday morning service in two: first the Sunday school hour (for children and adults) where the format is relaxed, free and flexible. This is followed by the 'assembly meeting', where women should remain silent.

Other congregations choose to begin their meeting 15 minutes earlier, and devote this time to the children. Although the whole assembly is present, these 15 minutes are not considered part of the assembly meeting. In the area where I grew up in Colombia, giving some time to children and their teachers and parents on a Sunday morning was a very normal and natural thing. It encouraged families to come to the meetings together.

Hair length: I never recall this being an issue among the Brethren assemblies in Colombia. It is fairly normal for men to have short hair, and women like to do the best with what they have. Among North American Brethren assemblies, women cut their hair, sometimes fairly short, but as long as it is considered 'feminine', no-one would comment. Not so among many Brethren assemblies in Germany. German sisters who even trim their hair are labelled 'disobedient' and often requested not to participate at the Lord's Supper. As you can imagine, this is an issue that has required much prudence at international conferences and careful editing of photos for use in international Brethren mission magazines.

Appropriate clothing: What kind of clothing is expected of brothers and sisters during assembly meetings? In some regions and countries *men* are required to wear a jacket and a tie - especially if they are to preach - and *women* are required to wear a dress or a skirt, and not trousers. It is not uncommon in some areas for sisters to arrive at the meetings by bike, cycling in trousers and then rapidly changing into a dress or skirt before the meeting begins – particularly for the Lord's Supper.

Head coverings: As was fairly common in most Christian churches two centuries ago, *women* in most Brethren assemblies are still required to wear a head covering and *men* are still required to remove any head covering during assembly meetings. In some Brethren assemblies, this is only required in order to participate at the Lord's Supper. In other assemblies this practice is encouraged but not enforced – it is considered a matter of 'personal conviction'. While visiting a large Brethren conference in Holland in the late 1990's I was surprised to notice that at the beginning of the conference most of the sisters did not have their heads covered - as was the custom in other countries. After the announcements came a time of prayer, and just before the first brother began to pray, most sisters covered their heads. After the time of prayer, their head coverings came off again as they listened to the Word being taught, explained and discussed among gifted brothers. It was the first time that I had seen this kind of practice, so during lunch I asked a brother for an explanation. "Scripture says that women should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy," answered the brother. "Listening to Bible teaching is not prophesying, so sisters only cover their heads when we have times of prayer." That answer got me thinking.

Christian Symbols – An exploratory study

During 2004, while serving as a missionary in Colombia, I set some time aside to study this topic of gender roles within the Church. My particular concern then was how to understand the directives about head covering found in 1 Corinthians 11, and their implications on both men and women. I chose to study this practice, or symbol, of 'head covering' in the context of two other Christian symbols, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In February 2005 I made freely available a 42-page paper entitled "Christian Symbols – An Exploratory Study".¹ This study helped me to put this practice of 'head covering' into a context. It is amazing how central and controversial this practice has become in some assemblies, even to the point of defining who

¹ This paper "Christian Symbols – An Exploratory Study" is freely available from my website: www.philipnunn.com - under eBooks.

we can or can't have fellowship with. In those days I wrote: "The 'cover-uncover' symbol is only addressed once, in 1 Corinthians 11. That in itself is not a problem, but it does mean we must be careful in our conclusions. If serious and studied Christians still have some differences on the details of the first two symbols [Baptism and the Lord's Supper], we must definitely study with precision and apply with grace this third symbol. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbols given to us by the Lord Jesus Himself. They are directly related to Christ and His work of salvation, which are fundamental doctrines. It is evident that this third symbol is not at the same level as the first two, and yet, it is a biblical symbol with a meaning".²

My growing unease

"Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head" (1 Cor. 11:4-5). This is the only text in Scripture that addresses the practice of 'head covering'. Over the years I would use this text to encourage women to *cover* their heads in assembly meetings, and at the same time I would teach that women should *not* pray or prophesy audibly in these assembly meetings. Of course, they could pray in their hearts and sing prayers together with the whole congregation. But they should not pray or prophesy *audibly* like the men did. The usual argument was that 1 Corinthians 11 says *how* men and women should 'pray or prophesy' (men with their heads uncovered, women with theirs covered) and that 1 Corinthians 14 says *where* they should 'pray or prophesy' (women should remain 'silent' in assembly meetings). But even after completing that study on Christian symbols, I felt that I could usually convince sisters to keep silent *and* have their heads covered in our assembly meetings, but in doing so I felt that I was somehow 'forcing' the interpretation of the Scripture.

Here are the two 'stress points' where I felt I was 'bending' Scripture to make it fit our common practice. These will be addressed in future chapters but here I state them briefly:

1. Head Covering – When?: The apostolic instruction in 1 Corinthians 11 is that a woman should cover her head *when* she 'prays or prophesies'. That is it. Nothing more. The text is asking women to cover their heads when they are *doing* something, namely praying or prophesying. It is not possible to prophesy mentally. If the 'prophecy' referred to here is audible, there is no need to argue that the 'prayer' referred to must be silent. Yet in the circles where I fellowshiped it was very common to require women to both cover their heads and to remain quiet. I felt this was inconsistent. If we want women to cover their heads, then we should allow them some audible participation. Or if we ask women not to participate vocally, then they should not need to cover their heads. I felt that we were going beyond what was written – and insisting on it.
2. Head Covering – Why?: The apostolic instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 are providing guidelines for when a man or a woman participates *audibly* in a *public* setting. The references to 'dishonour', 'disgrace' or 'shame' reinforce the idea that the context is both publicly visible and audible. A few verses later the apostle Paul adds, "the woman ought to have a sign of *authority* on her head" (11:10). The Greek word translated *authority* is used nearly one hundred times in the New Testament, expressing various forms and degrees of authority, always in the *active* sense of *having authority* or *acting with*

² 'Christian Symbols – An Exploratory Study' page 21. Freely available at: www.philipnunn.com - under eBooks.

authority.³ The New Testament never uses this word in the *passive* sense, to suggest being *under authority*. This strongly reinforces the idea that the symbol of head covering was to be used by women to show that they could function with some degree of authority, while under authority. But I kept on hearing that women should cover their heads as a symbol of their *submission*, to show that they remained silent while under authority. This arbitrary shift from the grammatical *active* to the *passive* also made me uncomfortable. I felt we were forcing something here.

Busy missionary life in Colombia did not allow me the time to dig deeper. Other topics and concerns filled our days. But I promised myself that someday, when I had the time and resources to do so, I would look further into this matter.

³ The word 'sign' is added by translators to make sense of the text. It links the word *authority* with the symbol of head covering. The word *authority* is a translation of the Greek word *exousia*, which can be translated as anything between 'has permission,' 'ability or strength' to 'power of rule'.



Starting Point and Argument

Since the beginning of the Church, most doctrines - if not all - have been the subject of intense discussion among Christians. Balanced formulation of doctrines requires that we hold Bible texts together in tension. If we ignore or downplay some 'difficult' Bible texts, a particular view can be more easily defended. If we think that '*of course* the Bible teaches that women should remain silent in the church' or '*of course* the Bible teaches that God is just as pleased with the ministry of men as He is with that of women both inside and outside church meetings' – then we have not yet felt the tension inherent in Scripture.

Based on the principle that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture, the interpretation of each Bible text should take into account the message of all the other relevant texts. Biblical doctrines are well formulated when they keep two or more biblical truths in tension. In doing this, the choice of starting point is very important.

Choosing a starting point

If the interpretation of one Bible text is singled out and taken as the firm (clear, obvious, absolute) starting point, this will influence our understanding of all the other Bible texts on the same topic. If one text is used as the lens through which all the other texts must be viewed, it will most likely bias or distort the overall biblical message. Our challenge is to let the interpretation of the relevant texts influence each other. A careful conclusion will then have to wait until the end.

Why not start with Galatians 3:26-29?

3:26	for ye are all God's sons by faith in Christ Jesus.
3:27	For ye, as many as have been baptised unto Christ, have put on Christ.
3:28	There is no Jew nor Greek; there is no bondman nor freeman; there is no male and female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus:
3:29	but if ye [are] of Christ, then ye are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise.
Darby translation	

The central theme of Galatians 3 and 4 is the relationship between faith and the law. That both Jews and non-Jews now have access to God through that faith. Galatians 3:26-29 is an important text that shows that Christianity eliminates certain social barriers – affirming that *all* may be justified, without being required first to convert to a certain group. The possibility of being 'baptised into Christ' is open to all humans, irrespective of race, social standing or gender. *All* may have 'faith in Christ', *all* may be 'sons of God', *all* are 'one in Christ Jesus'. This text does not suggest that such social and gender differences disappear, but rather that they are simply irrelevant to being made righteous (3:6), irrelevant to being justified (3:8, 11, 24), irrelevant to receiving the Holy Spirit (3: 14, 4:6), and irrelevant to being made sons of God (3:26).

Imagine a large new boarding school opening its doors to all children in the area (irrespective of race, nationality, social standing and gender). All children are warmly welcome! This wonderful inclusivity does not eliminate the possibility that some of these children will participate in the school choir and others will not (depending on individual talent), or that

some will sleep in the boys' dormitory and others in the girls' dormitory (depending on their gender). *Inclusivity does not eliminate the existence of differences.*

After conversion, a Greek Christian retained the privileges and responsibilities of being Greek. A Christian slave retained the privileges and responsibilities of being a slave. A Christian woman retained the privileges and responsibilities of being a woman. Once "made sons of God", they are all "one in Christ Jesus". Galatians 3:27-29 does not address the privileges or responsibilities of being either Jew or Greek, slave or free. Neither does this text address the roles of men and women in the family or in the church.⁴ Since this text provides no guidelines for church structure or church meetings, I conclude that it is not *directly* relevant in this study.

Why not start with 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?

14:34	Let [your] women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to speak; but to be in subjection, as the law also says.
14:35	But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to speak in assembly.

Darby translation

Some scholars argue that these verses are not authentic apostolic material. Given that not all manuscripts place verses 34-35 in the same place in chapter 14, it has been suggested that someone other than Paul may have inserted them into the text later. I do not wish to go down that road. The fact is that the vast majority of theologians and scholars, both in the past and today, accept these verses as being genuine apostolic material, and seek to understand their relevance to church life.

This text is clearly relevant, since it deals with women and the church. But is it a good starting point? If 'be silent - don't speak' is taken as an absolute prohibition, this will exert an immense force on the interpretation of all the other relevant texts. How emphatic is this instruction? Most would agree that this prohibition is not as absolute as the one imposed on Zachariah (Luke 1:20). Most would agree that the command to 'be silent' allows at least a certain type of vocal female participation, for example in collective activities such as singing or stating their agreement with a prayer by voicing an 'amen'. Could it also allow for some other type of verbal expression? To determine what type of female participation Paul seeks to restrict in the assemblies, this text must be interpreted in harmony with its context within the apostolic letter (chapters 11-14, in which Paul is providing guidelines to encourage edifying participation in the church meetings) *and also* the other relevant didactic and narrative biblical texts found elsewhere.

Is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 not clear enough?

An interpretation of this text that is based *only* on grammar and etymology (the meaning of the words 'silent' and 'speak') will require women to keep their mouths closed in church meetings. Clearly all the apostolic instructions about church order given in chapters 11-14 should be taken seriously, as commands from the Lord Jesus Himself. The question is *what precisely* should be taken seriously. The fact is that sometimes the intended meaning of a portion of Scripture does not depend on etymology (the meaning of the Greek words) or

⁴ Hove, Richard. *Equality in Christ?: Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute*. This is a very thorough exegetical study of this passage.

grammar alone, but also on its direct context and the teaching found in other relevant Scriptures.

For many years I have had a preference for numbers, for algebra, trigonometry and formulas. Unlike words and sentences, mathematics is always precise. There is no ambiguity. I like that! But to understand written language, so much more has to be taken into account. Has anyone ever misunderstood something that you have said or written? That never happens in mathematics! Lawyers are employed to write wills and contracts in 'legal language', to make the meaning as precise as possible. And even then, years later, more lawyers are employed to iron out some of the details that were probably clear when it was first written, but have become less certain now that the inheritance has to be distributed! Yes, the Bible is God's word. Every word and sentence was inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded for our benefit. It is important, however, to remember that the Bible is written in 'normal' language and not 'legal' language. God's revelation is varied and rich in form. God has chosen to reveal His thoughts to us through poems, songs and proverbs. We find Old Testament prophets communicating through warnings and authoritative statements, interpreting dreams and acting out messages. Scripture makes use of symbolic language, hyperbole, sarcasm, parables, allegories, and other devices. We learn from didactic statements, but also from good and bad biblical examples. This 'normal' kind of communication is fine. We use it every day. But it usually leaves room for interpretation, and sometimes contains apparent contradictions and ambiguities. The lack of mathematical and legal clarity on all topics in Scripture should lead us to be humble and careful. As a reviewer of this paper wrote: "Perhaps God allowed this ambiguity in order to search our hearts. If every text were crystal-clear, we would be following the Letter, not the Spirit. We could easily become Pharisees. But now we have no more remedy than to ask: Lord, how can I please you?".

To illustrate how the intended meaning of a text can differ from an interpretation based only on the meaning of words and grammar, consider these three more clear examples:

- (1) Do not kill: One of the Ten Commandments given through Moses reads "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex 20:13 DBY). We know that 'kill' means 'to take or end life'. The grammar of this sentence is also simple and clear: 'do not end life'. But later we read that the Israelites were required to sacrifice (kill) animals. In addition, we read that the Israelites were sometimes required to kill a 'sinner' from within their own camp, and to kill enemies in battle. What God was commanding in Exodus 20:13 cannot be discovered by considering only its etymology and grammar. The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" does not forbid the killing of animals. More significantly, the "Thou shalt not kill" does not prohibit human killing generally, but seeks to forbid a *certain type* of human killing. The interpretation of the command "Thou shalt not kill" - taking into account other relevant didactic and narrative biblical texts - leads some to translate this text, "You shall not *murder*" (NIV). Other passages 'moderate' this text. This does *not* mean that other texts 'weaken' the command in Exodus 20:13, but rather that they help us to better understand the intended application of the command.
- (2) Obey authorities: Should a Christian always obey the authorities? "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Rom. 13:1). Both the meaning of the words and the grammatical construction of this text are clear and straightforward: Christians must always obey the governing authorities. But there are times when those in authority do, or require *us* to do, things that are wrong. There are situations where even the apostles ignored "strict orders" from recognised authorities,

arguing that they “must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:28-29). A grammatically correct reading of Romans 13:1 always gives the “governing authorities” divine backing, and always requires the Christian to submit. Thankfully there are other Scriptures that ‘moderate’ this text. These other texts may be in a neighbouring passage, or in another book of the Bible entirely.

- (3) Answered prayer: Jesus taught his disciples that “if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:19). Both the meaning of the words and the grammatical construction of this text are clear and straightforward, yet prayer has never been governed by this simple ‘mechanical’ formula. The Bible contains other texts with teachings on prayer, and many stories about men and women illustrating the practice of prayer. Jesus’ intended meaning here is clearly not based on etymology and grammar alone.

This does not mean that words can be given *any* meaning. Rather, that words can have different *shades of meaning*, and that grammatically clear phrases could have been understood differently by the original readers – because as they read the passage they mentally filled in the unwritten assumptions or conditions themselves. In our three examples, it was understood that the word ‘kill’ refers to murder, that our obedience to the authorities must not contradict divine revelation, and that God’s response to prayer will always be in line with His will. What did the brothers and sisters in Corinth understand when they read 1 Corinthians 14:34-35? What is the divinely intended meaning of the command to ‘be silent’? There was a time in Church history when women were not even allowed to sing along in church meetings. You may have heard the story of how Johann Sebastian Bach played the church organ so that his future wife, Barbara, could sing a hymn. Even though the church building was empty, he got into trouble with church leaders because ‘women should remain silent in church’. It is possible that the command to ‘be silent’ could refer to a particular type of vocal participation, or speaking under certain conditions. If the existence of a ‘condition’ or ‘exception’ was considered obvious to the readers at that time, there would be no need to have it written explicitly within the text.

The point I want to make here is that the apostle Paul’s intended meaning when he commands women to ‘be silent’ is probably not straightforward. The etymological meaning of the word ‘silent’ could easily lead us to a conclusion which the apostle did *not* intend. It seems wiser, then, to explore the other relevant Scriptures first. This is why I suggest that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is not an appropriate starting point for this study. In fact, if you are sure that you know what ‘be silent - don’t speak’ (1 Cor. 14:34-35) means, you are likely to bend all other Scriptures on gender to fit your understanding of this text. If you are to benefit in any way from reading this paper, I suggest that you temporarily let go of your pre-determined understanding of this text, and then re-examine it at the end, after you have let the other texts speak for themselves. That is what I have done.

Starting point?

References to gender differences in the New Testament are not a ‘surprise’, they don’t just appear out of nowhere. Furthermore, they are not based on or connected to the role of men in Israel or the Old Testament priesthood. In His teaching, the Lord Jesus uses the creation account when giving guidelines on marriage and divorce. The apostle Paul uses Genesis 1-3 to support his teaching on the asymmetrical role of men and women within marriage and also within the Church. For this reason, I suggest that Genesis 1-3 is the appropriate starting point for this study.



Text #1 Genesis 1 - 3: The Creation Order

All of the Bible's teaching on gender is built on the principles derived from the creation narrative. The way that God created Adam and Eve and then interacted with them, both before and after the Fall, will help us to understand what His intentions are for each of the two genders, and what He expects of them. These ideas, which I refer to here as Creation Order principles, are foundational to a proper understanding of what God expects from a man and what He expects from a woman. We live in a society that seeks to eliminate gender differences, a society that considers men and women as being *interchangeable*. How should we respond as Christians? If you see men and women as being interchangeable, you will certainly see no reason for men and women to function differently within the church. Creation is a good starting point. Here I wish to draw your attention to seven interesting and important details in the creation story which, I suggest, help us to understand gender from God's perspective.

Genesis 1

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| 1:26 | And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over the whole earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth on the earth. |
| 1:27 | And God created Man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. |
| 1:28 | And God blessed them ; and God said to them , Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the heavens, and over every animal that moveth on the earth. |

Darby translation

(1) The significance of being made in God's image

The climax of the creation story is verse 27, in which God creates humans "in his image – male and female". Humans are the only carriers of God's image. This image invests every human with great dignity. But what does this *image* suggest about being a man or a woman? You and I, as a man or woman, reflect something of what God is like. Furthermore, the way we relate together as man and woman is also designed to reflect something of God Himself.

- (a) Equally as individuals: Men and women *individually* and *equally* resemble God in many ways. Like God, men and women are creative, spiritual, moral, intelligent, relational and more. As bearers of God's image, men and women carry equal value or worth.
- (b) Differently as individuals: In some ways, men and women resemble God *differently*. The apostle Paul states that the man (and not the woman) "is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor. 11:7). In some *masculine* ways a man can better reflect the image of God (perhaps as protector, as guide, or as father, Mal. 2:10). In some *feminine* ways a woman can better reflect the image of God (perhaps as comforter, as nurturer, or as mother, Isa. 66:13).

- (c) Equally in relationship: Men and women *together* in relationship also show that they are created in God's image. Together, as male and female, as partners, we are called to multiply, to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over it.
- (d) Differently in relationship: As men and women *together*, we can resemble something of the relationship within God Himself, a relationship of equals but asymmetrical, a relationship of equals but hierarchical: The Father sends the Son; The Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit. There is eternal love and joy between the Father and the Son. The different roles and the evidence of hierarchy within God Himself are part of God's revelation of Himself, an expression of His glory.

Hierarchy

It is worth taking a break here to consider the word 'hierarchy'. It is perceived by some people as a negative word, associated with one person being more important than another, with dominance, exploitation, injustice, and power struggles. Of course, hierarchy can lead to these negative things. Jesus pointed out that "the kings of the Gentiles" lord it over those under them, and He made it clear that hierarchy in the Christian community will exist but must be expressed in a very different way; "the one who rules like the one who serves". He illustrated this type of hierarchy in the way that He treated His disciples; "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27).

In essence, hierarchy is a positive and even necessary organisational concept. For things to be organised and to work effectively among equals, some form of hierarchy is necessary. We find hierarchy all around us. Think of an electric light and a switch: the switch activates the light, but the light cannot activate the switch. In nature, I read that biological organisation is the *hierarchy* of complex biological structures and systems. In music, a conductor directs the orchestra. Builders, administrators, soldiers and football players all seek some form of hierarchy in order to succeed. In a hierarchy, the order of 'command' can only go in one direction. I have been told that every piece of computer programming requires hierarchy: it receives an instruction and it does something with it, it has a link upwards and a link downwards – but no horizontal link (which would create ambiguity). In fact, to get anything done among a group of 'equals' you must have hierarchy.

Why this short digression? Because the Creation Order principle includes hierarchy, and if you think that hierarchy is a dirty word, you will be fighting it all the way. Hierarchy *can* lead to exploitation, but it doesn't *have* to. It is actually necessary. And when Christians are involved in some form of hierarchical relationship, we are always asked to lead as servants. There is clear evidence of hierarchy in Creation. There is hierarchy within God Himself. There is also hierarchy in the man-woman relationship - as they *together* resemble something of God Himself.

Genesis 2

2:18	And Jehovah Elohim said, It is not good that Man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate, his like.
2:19	And out of the ground Jehovah Elohim had formed every animal of the field and all fowl of the heavens, and brought them to Man, to see what he would call them; and whatever Man called each living soul, that was its name.
2:20	And Man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the heavens, and to every beast of the field; but as for Adam, he found no helpmate, his like.
2:21	And Jehovah Elohim caused a deep sleep to fall upon Man; and he slept. And he took one of his ribs and closed up flesh in its stead.

- 2:22** And Jehovah Elohim built the rib that he had taken from Man into a woman; and brought her to Man.
- 2:23** And Man said, This time it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: **this shall be called Woman, because this was taken out of a man.**

Darby translation

(2) The significance of Adam being created before Eve

Is the order in which God created things significant? Do animals have some sort of authority over humans because they were created first? Clearly God could have created Adam and Eve at the same moment in time. Why didn't He? What was God trying to *teach* by first creating Adam, and then later, Eve? Interestingly, this 'chronological detail' is used when defining authority within the church. The apostle Paul explained that a woman should not be permitted "to teach or to have [or 'to assume'] authority over a man" because, among other reasons, "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim. 2:12-13). This suggests that, from the very beginning, before sin entered the world, God had in mind different but complementary roles for men and women.

And what about the animals? They were created before humans, but it is not said that they were created in the image of God. God explicitly gave humans authority over animals, "Rule over... every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28).

(3) The significance of Eve being made from Adam

Why did God create Adam from dust, and Eve from one of Adam's ribs? Does this 'methodological detail' have any significance? Perhaps the fact that Eve was made from Adam's rib points to their equal value, that they share genetic material, that they are made to belong together, that she has something that he needs, that they complement each other. This idea finds support in Adam's enthusiastic reaction when he first meets her: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). But the apostle Paul uses this 'methodological detail' to explain that from the beginning, before the Fall, God had intended man to function as 'head' in the man-woman relationship, "for man did not come from woman, but woman from man" (1 Cor. 11:8).

Anticipating how some could distort this argument, the apostle Paul quickly adds that, "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" (1 Cor. 11:11-12). The fact that after Adam all humans are born from women is a reminder that men and women need each other - that they depend on each other.

(4) The significance of Eve being created to be Adam's helper

Adam was in need. God waited until he felt lonely. He then created a woman to be his companion and work partner. God said that He would make Adam a "helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18), or a "helper comparable to him" (NKJV); a partner of equal significance, worth and value. The Hebrew word translated here as *helper* is often also applied to God, as helper of Israel, or helper of a needy person (Is. 50:7). Clearly the word 'helper' does not mean 'inferior'. When a surgeon 'helps' a child, it does not make him inferior to the child. Being a helper bears no relation to status, value, authority, submission or importance.

Adam was created first, and he was missing something. Eve was created and given to him not as his assistant, but because he was incomplete on his own. God gave Adam a woman, Eve, an equal but distinct partner, to make him complete, so that together they would fulfil a task which he would not be able to do alone as a man. Being a *helper* is no dispensable

service. It involves meeting a genuine need. Being a *helper* is not something to be chosen. It is a God-given role which comes with corresponding expectations, joys and responsibilities. Creating Eve to be a *helper* shows that, from the start, before the Fall, men and women were designed to complete each other, a completeness that becomes more evident as each fulfils their different and complementary role.

Genesis 3

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| 3:1 | And the serpent was more crafty than any animal of the field which Jehovah Elohim had made. And it said to the woman, Is it even so, that God has said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?... |
| 3:6 | And the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a pleasure for the eyes, and the tree was to be desired to give intelligence; and she took of its fruit, and ate, and gave also to her husband with her, and he ate... |
| 3:9 | And Jehovah Elohim called to Man , and said to him, Where art thou?... |
| 3:16 | To the woman he said, I will greatly increase thy travail and thy pregnancy; with pain thou shalt bear children; and to thy husband shall be thy desire, and he shall rule over thee. |
| 3:17 | And to Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife , and eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed be the ground on thy account; with toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life... |
| 3:20 | And Man called his wife's name Eve; because she is the mother of all living. |

Darby translation

(5) The significance of Eve being deceived and not Adam

Here in Genesis 3 we read that a crafty snake approached Eve and talked her into eating the forbidden fruit. She ate it. She then gave some to Adam, and he ate it. What was the difference between the sin of Eve and that of Adam? In the context of the church, the apostle Paul explains that women should not “teach or have authority over a man” because “Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Tim. 2:12-14). Was Adam less of a sinner? Clearly not! In Romans 5:12 we read that “sin entered the world through one man”. Adam was more responsible than Eve because he sinned as the ‘head of the couple’, and he sinned consciously, without being deceived. If Genesis 2:15-25 is to be read as a chronological narrative, the instructions about the forbidden tree were given directly to Adam before Eve was created. It was Adam’s responsibility then, to pass on these instructions to Eve. Satan approached Eve who had only received God’s instructions via Adam. Eve was tempted and fell. Eve took the lead in eating the forbidden fruit, while Adam, being “with her” (3:6), most probably watched and said nothing. For Adam, the eating of the fruit was a deliberate rebellion.

Some suggest that women should not be allowed to *teach* from the Scripture because they are more gullible, more easily deceived than men. This is not the apostle’s argument. Elsewhere Paul positively encourages older women to teach the younger women (Tit. 2:3-4). Furthermore, there is ample evidence that men, like women, are tempted, are deceived and choose to sin. The restriction God placed on the activity of women in the church is more likely to be connected to the Creation Order principle than with a woman’s vulnerability or capacity to sin. Both did violence to God’s design, Eve by initiating the eating of the fruit, and Adam by being passive and then joining in with Eve’s disobedience. In the church, the apostle urges Timothy to encourage believers to uphold and express the Creation Order principle.

(6) The significance of God calling Adam and not Eve

The man is called the *head* of the woman in the New Testament, but not in Genesis. However this episode, in which God calls Adam after both of them have sinned, illustrates and helps us to understand at least part of what *headship* involves. After Adam and Eve both eat the forbidden fruit, “the Lord God called to the man [Adam]: ‘Where are you?’” (3:9). This “you” is singular and not plural. Even though Eve sinned first, it is Adam, as man, as representative of the couple, who is held responsible. As *head* of the man-woman team, the man is called to account.

While explaining to his Roman readers how sin entered into the world, Paul writes, “sin entered the world through one *man*,⁵ and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned... death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam” (Rom. 5:12-19). Even though Eve sinned first, it is Adam, as representative of the couple, who is held responsible. As *head* of the man-woman team, the man takes the collective blame. The expression ‘being head’ has a very rich meaning. It is something that is given, not fought for. It also includes a sense of sacrificial love, caring initiative and wise leadership (Eph. 5:23-25). But the important thing to notice here is that by calling Adam - not Eve, and not both of them – God demonstrates his view of the unique responsibility that He has placed on the shoulders of men.

(7) The significance of the curse and sin’s consequences

After Eve and Adam sin, we read that God curses the serpent and the earth. He explains to Eve and Adam the consequences of sin having entered the world; it would have an adverse effect on them as individuals as well as on their relationship to each other.

- (a) Sin’s consequence for men: God accuses Adam of two wrong-doings: (1) he “listened to his wife,” that is, he passively followed her lead rather than acting as *head* and protecting her, and (2) he “ate from the tree”, that is, Adam chose to disobey the clear instructions God Himself had given him (2:17). As a consequence of these sins, God curses the ground (3:17). Thorns and thistles will now grow, and make Adam’s work unpleasant and more difficult. Work itself is not the punishment. We read that God gives Adam work to do before sin enters the world (1:28, 2:15). *Notice, then, that Adam’s sin damages God’s good creation and makes it more difficult to carry out his God-given role within it: to work the land.*
- (b) Sin’s consequence for women: After pointing out Eve’s sin, God says: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children” (3:16). Giving birth to children is not her punishment. We read that God instructed both of them to “be fruitful and multiply” before sin enters the world (1:28). Eve already has the organs necessary to become pregnant. As a consequence of her sin, Eve will now experience more pain in childbirth. *Notice, then, that Eve’s sin damages God’s good creation and makes it more difficult to carry out her God-given role within it: to ‘multiply’ and give birth to children.*

⁵ The Greek word translated ‘man’ and ‘all men’ in this verse is *anthropos*, which is used generally for human beings, male and female. We know that the first reference ‘man’ in this verse refers to the male person Adam (and not to Adam and Eve together) because of the way this ‘man’ is compared with another man Moses (v.14) and “the one man, Jesus Christ” (v.15,17,19).

- (c) The effect of sin on the relationship between men and women: God explains to Eve how her sin will negatively affect the relationship between men and women. The passage reads, “your *desire* will be for your husband, and he will *rule* over you” (3:16). What does this mean? The two key words are *desire* and *rule*. To understand them, it helps to refer to God’s interaction with Cain in the next chapter. God addresses Cain and uses a similar expression: “And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its *desire* is for you, but you should *rule* over it” (4:7 NKJV). In this context, *desire* probably means a craving to control: if Cain does not do what is right, sin will *desire* to control him. But Cain should not let sin *rule* him: here *rule* simply means to govern, or to master or dominate. How, then, does sin affect the relationship between men and women? Eve will now desire to control her husband, and Adam will desire to rule, master or dominate his wife. Whichever way you read these verses, it is clear that sin and the Fall brought an unhealthy sense of competition and a damaging rivalry into the relationship between men and women.

The word *rule* is a fairly strong word. The notion of the woman being the *helper* and man being the *head* is clearly present in Genesis before Adam and Eve sin. The ‘head-helper’ model is God’s beautiful design. But the word *rule* is only used in connection with the man-woman relationship to describe a consequence of human sin. God is not *instructing* Adam to rule over his wife. Neither is God giving him *permission* to rule over Eve. The idea that ‘man would *rule* over his wife’ was *not* God’s intention. It was *not* part of God’s original design. *Notice, then, that sin damages God’s good creation and makes it more difficult for Adam and Eve to carry out their God-given roles within it: the loving and caring ‘head-helper’, ‘man-woman’ relationship.*

Due to the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary, we Christians are a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17). But forgiveness and redemption do not eliminate God’s original design for men and women. The Creation Order principle is timeless. Rather, becoming a ‘new creation’ in Jesus makes it possible for Christians to live by the Spirit, it enables us to become more like Jesus - it empowers us to live out God’s original ‘head-helper’ design.

Genesis 1 - 3: my conclusion

In Genesis 1, we learn that men and women are equally valuable as bearers of God’s image, and that in our relationship to each other we also reflect something of the image of God. In Genesis 2, it becomes evident that although men and women are equal in worth, we are also different by design. Adam has a real need; he is incomplete, and so God makes Eve as a “suitable helper” to meet that need. The way that God creates Adam and Eve demonstrates that, from the very beginning, before sin entered the world, God wanted men and women to be different and to complement each other. The Creator concluded that this design for gender was *very good*. I refer to this original design feature for gender as the ‘Creation Order principle’.

Genesis 3 describes how sin enters and damages God’s original good creation. As consequence of sin and the curse, selfishness and competition enter into the relationship between men and women. The Fall introduces the possibility of exploiting the hierarchy and misusing the gender asymmetry. Ever since, it has been more difficult to live this Creation Order principle in a healthy way. It is very important to remember that the Fall is not the reason that men and woman have different roles, but rather the reason why it is more difficult to live out God’s design in our relationships today. In both the Old and New Testaments we find some good expressions of this Creation Order principle and also some very sad and painful departures from this original design.



Expressing the Creation Order Principle

The Creation Order principle, the idea that men and women have been created with *equal* value and dignity, to fulfil *different* roles, has always been God's design for humanity. God has built masculinity or femininity into our bodies and souls. Man was created to assume the role of responsible caring leader, and woman the role of intelligent and willing supporter, a *complementarian* relationship. In this chapter we shall explore how the Creation Order found expression in the Old and New Testament and in the first centuries of the church.

Given our sinful human nature, the practical expression of this principle is not easy. Some men consider themselves superior to women. Some women fight for dominance over men. In some cases, both men and women become unhealthily dependent and passive in their attitudes towards each other. Our sinful human tendency is always to corrupt God's good design. In every culture, there is evidence of gender injustice and corruption of the Creation Order principle. In fact, these deviations from God's original plan appear in the Bible itself – for example, when a husband has multiple wives, when a daughter or wife is treated as a piece of property, or when women are materially and socially disadvantaged. But corruptions of the Creation Order should not lead us to ignore or dismiss the principle itself. In both the Old and the New Testament we also find good examples and teachings that encourage and illustrate the Creation Order principle.

Women in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, we encounter various roles played by men, such as heads of households, leaders, judges, prophets, priests and kings. Women usually play different roles, such as wives, mothers, homemakers, household administrators and business women (Prov. 31). Sometimes we encounter women, with God's approval, taking on roles that were usually carried out by men, for instance Miriam – a prophetess (Ex. 15:20), Deborah – a judge and priestess (Jud. 4:4), and Huldah - a prophetess (2 Chr. 34:22). The fact that God called them and blessed them in their roles, suggests that these 'exceptions to the rule' could exist without doing violence to the Creation Order principle. Knowing the heart of men, God ensured that women were legally protected under the Old Covenant. Even so, there are many examples of gender injustice, oppression and failure in the Old Testament.

Women in the life and teachings of Jesus

Everything that Jesus said and did in connection with gender is in harmony with the Creation Order principle. For example, he chose only men to be his 12 key disciples. As you may know, Jesus was silent on the roles of men and women in the church. In fact, in the four gospels Jesus only mentions the Church on two occasions in his teachings (Mat. 16:18; 18:17). Jesus did not say anything that will help us to determine the role of women in church structure or church meetings; the main focus of his teaching was the Kingdom of God. But the way he related to women does help us to understand how to apply the Creation Order principle.

Two millennia ago, when Jesus walked through Israel, the roles and opportunities open to women were very limited. Even the Jewish leaders, who understood the Creation Order, were using this principle to keep women small, at home and uneducated. When it came to

His attitude towards women, Jesus' teachings and many of his actions went against the Jewish culture of His day. In the Gospels we see Jesus interacting with various kinds of women; with his mother, with his friends Mary and Martha, with the Samaritan woman, and other groups of women with children. In His healing and teaching he gave special attention to widows – the most vulnerable of all women. His words strengthened the woman's stature and security within the family. He encouraged women to sit at His feet and learn (John 4:27; Luke 10:39). Jesus included women in His teachings and various parables. In contrast with common practice among the rabbis of his time, Jesus allowed and welcomed women to follow Him and to be part of His team of disciples (Matt. 23:1-10, Luke 8:2-3). His teaching on 'eunuchs for the Kingdom' opened new possibilities for unmarried women - who at that time lacked status and significance. After His resurrection, Jesus chose to appear first to women and then to His male disciples. Clearly the new community Jesus was inaugurating correctly expressed the Creation Order principle, giving men as well as women their God-intended status and value.

Women in the Gospel of Luke and Acts

Of the four evangelists, Luke stands out for his sensitivity towards gender. Like the other Gospel writers, he had to carefully select and arrange his material, and the attention he gives to women in the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus is striking. In the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, Elizabeth, Mary and Anna take centre stage. In its closing chapters women are standing by the cross, and it is women who first believe and bear witness to His resurrection. Frequently in his accounts of parables and healings, we notice Luke's use of gender parallelism: a shepherd loses a sheep, a woman loses a coin; a man is healed, a woman's son is resurrected. Luke mentions that women were among the followers of Jesus and that they helped Him financially (Luke 8:1-3). During His visit to the home of Mary and Martha, Martha was busy as hostess, occupied with her woman's role, doing what society would have expected of her. Mary, on the other hand, joined the disciples and sat learning at Jesus' feet. When Martha complained about Mary's socially awkward behaviour, Jesus commends and defends her choice: "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Martha's practical service is not denigrated, but neither is it given preference. The Gospel message was radical, and it dramatically affected women's status, particularly in first-century Palestine.

Although women do not feature in the Book of Acts to the same degree as in his Gospel, Luke still desires Theophilus and future readers to know that women were valuable, responsible and active members of the early church. Ananias and Sapphira are *both* considered responsible and culpable for their sin. Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos *together* (notice that here Luke mentions the wife first, Acts 18:26). Luke points out that "both men and women" were being added to the church (Acts 5:14), and that Saul considered Christian men and women both equally worthy of persecution (Acts 22:4). Luke explicitly points out that prominent women became Christians (Acts 17:4, 12). On the two occasions that Luke mentions a church meeting in a particular person's house, it is in the homes of women: Mary the mother of Mark, and Lydia (Acts 12:12, 16:40). Women such as Tabitha are involved in offering practical help - tasks which are usually associated with deacons. In passing, Luke mentions that Philip had four daughters who prophesied, female counterparts to Agabus (Acts 21:9, 21:28, 21:10-11).

The Creation Order expressed in Marriage

Paul and Peter made some clear statements about household arrangements and the roles of men and women within marriage. Their comments are in harmony with the Gospel writers.

Their writings teach us how the Creation Order principle is to be expressed in marriage and family arrangements.

Peter, a married apostle, visited churches together with his wife – as did other apostles (1 Cor. 9:5). His advice to married couples is: “Likewise, wives, *be subject* to your own husbands... Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” (1 Pet. 3:1,7 ESV).

In his writings, the apostle Paul teaches husbands and wives to express the ‘head-helper’ model in their marriage relationships. “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them” (Col. 3:18-19). He urges Titus to encourage the older women “to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God” (Tit. 2:3-5).

By comparing the ‘husband-wife’ relationship with that between Christ and the Church, Paul sets a high standard for Christian marriage: “Wives, submit [yourselves] to your [own] husbands as [you do] to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:22-25). Christ is always the head of His Church. This comparison also makes clear that the ‘husband-wife’, ‘head-helper’ model is not interchangeable.

Both Paul and Peter, in harmony with the rest of the New Testament, consistently uphold the Creation Order and promote a loving, sacrificial, and complementarian relationship between husbands and wives within marriage.

The Creation Order in Marriage and then in the Church

Before we move on, I would like to point out that there are more Scriptures that explain the Creation Order within a family setting than there are that explain it within the context of the Church. If you cannot recognise, understand, appreciate and accept the expression of the Creation Order principle in marriage, I am convinced that you will not recognise, understand, appreciate or accept the expression of the Creation Order principle in the Church. If you do not feel comfortable with the ‘head-helper’ model for marriage, you will not feel comfortable with the different roles given to men and women within the church. If you are to benefit from the study of gender and the church, I suggest you first test your heart on the expression of gender roles within marriage. By the way, Christian couples who strongly agree with the Creation Order principle can express the head-helper model in their home-life in very different ways – depending on their culture and setting. Churches, like marriages, can also look quite different from each other even while upholding the Creation Order principle. The Creation Order principle allows for diversity of expression. *But the principle itself must either be accepted or rejected.*

Church order is to be found only in the New Testament

Where should we look for guidelines and instructions on the structure and functioning of the church? The Christian church is clearly a New Testament concept, a ‘mystery’ revealed in the apostolic era (Eph. 3). There are some similarities between the Church, the nation of

Israel and the Jewish synagogue, but the Church is not an 'evolved' or 'adapted' version of one of these. The nation of Israel had a temple and a male priesthood. This is not a reason to require a church to have a building or to have male leaders. A synagogue is governed by men called 'elders,' and men and women are usually required to sit separately. Again, this is not a reason to require the church leaders to be called 'elders' or to insist that during church meetings men and women should sit apart from each other. Jesus said to his disciples: "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). And this church project began on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended and empowered the gathered believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2).

It is therefore in the New Testament that we are to seek guidelines and instructions for the structure and functioning of the church. The patriarchal structure within Jewish society, the exclusive role of men as kings and priests in Israel, and the cases of a few women like Miriam, Deborah, Huldah who served Israel as judges or prophets shed, therefore, no *direct* light on what God expects from men and women within the Church.

Living church life today

The New Testament presents the Body of Jesus Christ, the Church, as a group of people. As Christian men and women we can live *church life* at different levels. At some levels, there will be a difference between what God expects from men and women, and at other levels there will be no difference. Consider the following four levels – or ways of looking at the church.

- (1) Universal Church: Some call this the Catholic or invisible church. It consists of all the believers that have ever existed. Some day we will collectively be made "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:26-27). We join this Church by faith in Jesus Christ, and at this level, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28).
- (2) Local churches: Church life is much bigger than what happens in our own church buildings or church meetings. As a community we are called to love and care for each other, to correct one another, to practice hospitality, to encourage and serve each other, and to "spur one another on towards love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). At this level, both men and women are equally encouraged to use their gifts "to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies - in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 4:10-11 ESV).
- (3) Local church structure: The New Testament *does* provide guidelines on how a local church should be organised or structured. We notice that the Creation Order principle finds expression at the level of church structure. When Paul and Timothy wrote to an established church in Philippi they identified *three* groups of people within it: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). We find here the **overseers** or **elders** - those who helped lead the local church. These are men. Another group are the **deacons** - those who carried serving responsibilities. It is my opinion that these were suitably qualified men *and* women.⁶ The third group was the rest of the congregation, **all the saints**. Being a man or a woman may well affect your role in church structure.

⁶ Here I recommend two useful books by Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (1995), and *The New Testament Deacon* (1992).

- (4) Local church meetings: Meetings are important moments in the life of a local church. How does the Creation Order principle affect these meetings? How does being either a man or a woman affect one's participation in these meetings? This, as you know, is the main focus of this paper. But before we address this important element of church life, we need to be clear as to what we mean by the term 'assembly meeting'.

The concept of an 'assembly meeting'

An 'assembly meeting' is a concept that is clearly found in the New Testament. It is true that we Christians are always church - the church doesn't only exist on Sundays! Similarly, a church elder or deacon retains his function during the whole week, not just when the church meets. However, those moments when the church meets are special in the life of a church. Paul was concerned about the church in Corinth because their meetings did "more harm than good" (1 Cor. 11:17). Meetings have the potential either to build up or to discourage and destroy a congregation. Furthermore, when the church meets, the apostolic directives require a certain order or protocol, to ensure that these gatherings will be edifying, and that the Creation Order will be displayed. This order or protocol is only required when we "come together as a church" (1 Cor. 11:18) or "if the whole church comes together" (1 Cor. 14:23). We refer to this gathering of the church as an 'assembly meeting'.

There are some things that Paul says should normally take place outside of the assembly meetings. For example, he says, "*in the church* I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor. 14:19). If hungry, believers were encouraged to eat at home (1 Cor. 11:33-34). If they had questions, women were encouraged to ask them at home (1 Cor. 14:35). Even though churches initially met in homes, there was still a distinct difference between an informal meeting of Christians in the home and an 'assembly meeting'. Of course, there were and still are *grey areas* when only a part of the church meets, for instance at seminars, discussion groups and youth activities, or when the purpose of the church meeting is irregular, as in the case of weddings, funerals, picnics, or evangelistic barbeques.

Football club meetings

It may be helpful to think of a football club which has its members' meetings 6 times a year. These are the formal club meetings. Each meeting has a chair-person, a secretary who takes the minutes, a treasurer who gives the financial report, and a room full of enthusiastic club members. They are only counted as valid meetings if a certain proportion of members is present. The meeting itself usually has an agreed protocol. These meetings may take place in the clubhouse or in a hotel or other location. During the rest of the year, the same group of people can meet together to watch football, or to celebrate a victory, or to enjoy a relaxed barbeque. They can meet in the clubhouse to watch films or to play cards. But these additional occasions would not be considered 'club-meetings'. They may have a completely different protocol, or simply no protocol at all. An assembly meeting could be seen as being similar to this club meeting. A few basic conditions should be met for a gathering of Christians to be considered an 'assembly meeting'.

The New Testament does not provide us with a technical definition of an assembly meeting. Some commentaries and Christian books do provide different technical definitions. Each Bible student must make his or her choice. Personally, I prefer the simplest possible definition: an 'assembly meeting' takes place when a local church comes together for some spiritual activity, and the Holy Spirit is present among them to guide them in worship, prayer or edification.

Church Fathers and women

In the second, third and fourth centuries, influential Christian scholars took over the leadership of the churches. All these early Christian scholars had received classical education, and brought to their Christian studies views of women that were grounded in Greek thought. In their writings, their aim was to make Christianity intellectually respectable, and more appealing to the educated Greco-Roman people. In some of their writings, women are praised by the Church Fathers for being God's creation, God's good gift to men - but on other occasions women are also described as being weak in mind and character, and the curse of the world. Consider the following examples:

Tertullian (AD c155-255): "God's judgement on this sex [women] lives in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first foresaker of the divine law; you were the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, even the man Adam".

Origin (AD c185-253): "What is seen with the eyes of the creator is masculine and not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh".

St Augustine (AD c354-430): "If one rejects giving birth to children as the reason why woman was created, I do not see for which other help the woman was made for the man".

John Chrysostom (AD c398-404): "A wife has just one purpose: to guard the processions we have accumulated, to keep a close watch on the income, to take charge of the household".

The Christian church, under the strong influence of the Church Fathers, began to change from a ministry style of leadership to a governance style of leadership, from a participative community to a community marked by a clear distinction between an active clergy and a passive laity. Women and sex (even within marriage) became symbols of the flesh and of sin. Where possible, sex should be avoided and the ministry of women restricted to the private space of their homes. In time, church leaders were encouraged to live celibate lives. The Creation Order principle was interpreted wrongly by these Church Fathers, and used to justify the subordination of women evident in the Greco-Roman world at that time.

Summary

The Creation Order is a timeless principle that is expressed in different ways throughout Scripture. We encounter both good and corrupted expressions of this principle. Jesus and the apostles upheld this Creation Order through their words and actions. The New Testament has explicit teaching on how the Creation Order principle is to be expressed within both the family and the church. Instructions on the structure and function of the church are found only in the New Testament. 'Assembly meetings' are special moments in the life of a church, moments during which the members of the church come together and the Holy Spirit is present among them to guide them in their worship, prayers and ministry. Church Fathers wrongly interpreted the Creation Order, under-valuing women and suppressing their God-given roles. Today, the danger is to ignore the Creation Order completely. In the New Testament, I have identified four key chapters which, when considered together, help us to understand how to express the Creation Order principle when the church comes together. In particular, these help us to determine the level of vocal participation that men and women should exercise during 'assembly meetings'. We shall now look at each of these in turn.



Text #2 Acts 2: The First Assembly Meeting

- 1:14** These gave themselves all with one accord to continual **prayer**, with [several] **women**, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.
- 2:1** And when the day of Pentecost was now accomplishing, they were **all** together in one place.
- 2:2** And there came suddenly a sound out of heaven as of a violent impetuous blowing, and filled all the house where they were sitting.
- 2:3** And there appeared to them parted tongues, as of fire, and it sat upon **each one of them**.
- 2:4** And they were **all** filled with *the* Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave to them to speak forth.
- 2:5** Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, pious men, from every nation of those under heaven.
- 2:6** But the rumour of this having spread, the multitude came together and were confounded, because each one heard them speaking in his own dialect.
- 2:7** And all were amazed and wondered, saying, Behold, are not all these who are speaking Galilaeans?
- 2:8** and how do we hear [them] each in our own dialect in which we have been born,
- 2:9** Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and those who inhabit Mesopotamia, and Judaea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
- 2:10** both Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya which adjoin Cyrene, and the Romans sojourning *here*, both Jews and proselytes,
- 2:11** Cretans and Arabians, we hear them speaking in our own tongues the great things of God?
- 2:12** And they were all amazed and in perplexity, saying one to another, What would this mean?
- 2:13** But others mocking said, They are full of new wine.
- 2:14** But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and spoke forth to them, Men of Judaea, and all ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words:
- 2:15** for these are not full of wine, as ye suppose, for it is the third hour of the day;
- 2:16** but this is that which was spoken through the prophet Joel,
- 2:17** And it shall be in the last days, saith God, *that* I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh; and your **sons** and your **daughters** shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your elders shall dream with dreams;
- 2:18** yea, even upon my **bondmen** and upon my **bondwomen** in those days will I pour out of my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
- 2:19** And I will give wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:
- 2:20** the sun shall be changed to darkness and the moon to blood, before the great and gloriously appearing day of *the* Lord come.
- 2:21** And it shall be that whosoever shall call upon the name of *the* Lord shall be saved.

Darby translation

The four key chapters which shed light on how the Creation Order principle may be expressed when the church comes together are: Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 11, 14 and 1 Timothy 2. I have chosen to start with Acts 2 for two reasons. The first is that it comes chronologically before the first letters of Paul to Timothy and to the Corinthian church. The second reason is that this is the passage that opened my eyes to the possibility that women could sometimes speak in a meeting of a church without violating the Creation Order principle. Until then, the 'lens' through which I read all Scripture was that "woman should remain silent in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34). According to my understanding of what it meant to be 'silent', any woman who spoke in an assembly meeting must be in the wrong. But here, in Acts 2, it looks like women spoke in the congregation without it being sinful, because they were urged to speak by the Holy Spirit. As mentioned earlier, I suggest that you stop thinking about 1 Corinthians 14 until we address that passage in chapter 9. We will now turn our attention to Acts 2, and try to let this chapter speak for itself.

Many theologians believe that the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost marks the beginning of the Christian church. This is common teaching among Brethren assemblies. While on earth, the Lord Jesus told Peter and other disciples, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). When Jesus said this, His church was a future project. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus told His disciples, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5). The arrival of the Holy Spirit took place a few days later at Pentecost, and this event marked the beginning of the Church of Jesus Christ. The events of this first church meeting are described in a fair amount of detail in Acts 2. Let's explore carefully what happened on that very special day.

Were women present at this meeting?

In Acts 1:14-15 we read that in Jerusalem a group of about 120 believers met: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers". The women in that upper room likely included those who accompanied Jesus from Galilee and were witnesses of His death, resurrection and empty tomb (Matt. 27:55; Luke 23:49, 55-56, 24:1-11). Following the instructions of the resurrected Jesus, these believers came together regularly to "wait for the gift My Father promised" which would happen within a few days (Acts 1:4-5). This waiting involved praying. Christian men and women were accustomed to meeting together - to pray and to listen to the apostles pass on what they had learnt from Jesus.⁷ Luke begins Acts 2 by telling us that "*they were all together in one place*". The terms 'they' and 'all' would most naturally refer to this initial group of about 120 believers, a group that certainly included the 12 apostles, a group that also included women, a group that could fit into a large house. It was not unusual for fairly large groups of people to meet in houses. Further on in Acts, Luke refers to other gatherings of people in houses (Acts 10:27; 12:12; 16:40; 20:7-8) and Paul refers to a number of churches meeting in houses (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). To limit those present in the house to only being men or to only being Peter and the other 11 apostles is, in my opinion, an odd and unnecessary restriction on the text.

⁷ If the women who followed Jesus from Galilee were accustomed to speak to the Lord Jesus in the presence of other men, then it would seem natural that they would also pray audibly in these meetings. But we are not told who prayed aloud in these meetings. Furthermore, since the Church did not exist at this time, these prayer meetings were not church meetings.

While the believers were all together in a house, “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on *each of them*” (Acts 2:2-3). This arrival of the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Church of Jesus Christ, the Body of Christ, a new entity made up of both men and women. As we shall see later, when Peter explains what had happened, or was happening, he quotes the following words from the prophet Joel which explicitly mention men and women twice: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your *sons* and *daughters* will prophesy... Even on my servants, both *men* and *women*, I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). Why quote this passage to explain what was happening? Most probably because men and women were both involved.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit was necessary to baptise every believer, male or female, into the Body of Christ. Later on, the believers, particularly those with Jewish prejudices, had to learn that Gentiles and slaves were just as welcome in the Body of Christ as converted Jews and free people. As Paul later explained, “we were all baptised by one Spirit into [so as to form] one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13). The natural reading of the first two chapters of Acts suggests that on the day of Pentecost, a mixed group of believers were together when the Holy Spirit came on *all* those present, both men and women.

Did women vocally participate in this meeting?

All those in the house heard and saw something special that day. They heard a sound “like the blowing of a violent wind” and saw something like “tongues of fire” resting on each of them. And then, “*all of them* were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). The text says that *all* those present in the house spoke. It would be extremely odd to suggest that the Holy Spirit descended only on the men present and not on the women. We are told that they “saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on *each of them*”; no one was excluded.

Speaking in tongues could be considered a form of prophecy.⁸ The vocal participation of women at this gathering cannot be labelled as being ‘incorrect’, ‘carnal’ or ‘sinful’ behaviour. It would be wrong to suggest that these Christian women were in some way violating God’s Creation Order or wilfully imposing themselves on the congregation. We are told that what happened in that house was driven by the Holy Spirit and therefore *must* be fully in harmony with God’s will.

Is this a model to be repeated?

It would not be correct to say that this event is the model or pattern for all future meetings of the church. But neither should we ignore or downplay what happened here. Often, guidelines and instructions are given after something has already started. The intention is to establish order or provide boundaries for something good that is already happening. For example, we read that many ‘spontaneous’ sacrifices were offered to God by people like Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God was pleased with their offerings and sacrifices. But years later, in Leviticus 1-7, we find guidelines and instructions for future sacrifices. Similarly, 20 years after the church began on this special Pentecost day, we find some apostolic regulations for future church meetings - penned in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

⁸ In essence, the difference between ‘tongues’ and ‘prophecy’ in this passage is the language. When Peter explains this tongue phenomenon, he says that men and women were ‘prophesying’ (Acts 2:17,18).

Acts 2 was probably written around 70AD, that is 15 or 20 years after Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. I find it significant that 15 or 20 years after Paul provides the guidelines and instructions for meetings of the church, Luke desires his readers to notice that in the first meeting of the church, the Spirit enthused and enabled *all the believers* present in that house, both men and women, to participate vocally.

Was this really a ‘church meeting’?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the New Testament does not provide us with a technical definition of an assembly meeting. I proposed that a ‘church meeting’ or ‘assembly meeting’ is when a local church comes together for some spiritual activity and the Holy Spirit is present among them to guide them in worship, prayer or edification. Before Pentecost, there were no church meetings because there was no Church. Some could argue that this gathering of believers was not an ‘assembly meeting’ when it started, but clearly it became one once the Holy Spirit descended on them.

Was this a special occasion? Definitely! This first meeting of the Church was a very unusual occasion. Loud winds and tongues of fire are not regular occurrences in assembly meetings! But the fact that it was a *special* and *unique* event in history does not contradict the fact that it was an assembly meeting, a special one, the first one.

Later, we receive apostolic guidelines that give some structure and order to assembly meetings – to ensure that the Holy Spirit can continue to have freedom to lead those present, and that the gatherings would continue to be a means of edification for all present. “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1 Cor. 14:26). For example, to encourage an orderly and participative atmosphere, it was required that speakers should take it in turns to address the congregation - rather than a number of speakers simultaneously addressing small groups: “And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop” (1 Cor. 14:30). These subsequent guidelines for the meetings of the church do not contradict in any way the fact that Acts 2 describes the first meeting of the church. What took place at this first ‘church meeting’ was God’s design, directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and in harmony with the Creation Order principle.

Was this meeting an ‘evangelistic event’?

It is important to note that between verses 4 and 5 there is a clear *transition* from a house (Acts 2:2) – where perhaps a maximum of 100-150 people could meet, to a wider space where at least 3000 people could assemble – probably the Temple plain. Those in the house must have gone out to meet the multitude in an open space. Many Jews from around the world had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. A crowd began to form, “the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6 ESV). Given the audience, perhaps speaking outside to a crowd of 3000 people could correctly be called an ‘evangelistic event’. However, this was a different gathering from that which had taken place inside the house.

Who was speaking outside the house?

Who was “declaring the wonders of God” on the streets and to the gathered crowd (Acts 2:11)? A number of people must have been speaking – perhaps in smaller groups, possibly

gathered according to language. The crowd recognised that the speakers were “Galileans” (Acts 2:7). Some Bible scholars, based on this reference to Galileans⁹ and the fact that it would have been very difficult for women to address a crowd of “God-fearing Jews” (Acts 2:5) in a public space, suggest that once they were outside the house, only the men, or perhaps only Peter and the 11 apostles addressed the crowd. This may be true once the 3000 had gathered. But on the streets, probably in small groups, it is natural to expect that all those who were speaking in tongues in the house (men and women) would continue to do so on the streets outside. Note that the crowd consisted of more than 12 native language groups (Acts 2:9-11), suggesting that more than 12 were speaking.

Acts 2 describes, therefore, two events on the day of Pentecost; the first ‘assembly meeting’ (Acts 2:1-4), followed by an ‘evangelistic event’ (Acts 2:5-41). As to the ‘evangelistic event’, we know for sure that Peter spoke once the 3000 people had gathered, and strongly suspect that on the streets of Jerusalem all the believers spoke in tongues and “declared the wonders of God” to those around them. As to who spoke at the first meeting of the church inside the house, it is clearly stated: “all of them” (Acts 2:4).

Why did Peter quote the prophet Joel?

Some people in Jerusalem had noticed something noisy and strange had happened in the house where these Christians had gathered. Many in Jerusalem had heard these Christians on the streets speaking to them in their own language. The crowd were now asking “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). The apostle Peter stands up and quotes the prophet Joel in order to explain. What they were witnessing was the beginning of the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy, which reads: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons *and daughters* will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both *men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

Clearly the events of that special day did not fulfil the whole of Joel’s prophecy as quoted by Peter. Some things have yet to be fulfilled, such as “the sun [being] turned to darkness and the moon to blood” (Acts 2:20). But the prophecy did lend support to what they were seeing, hearing and experiencing on that day, namely, that it was God’s Spirit that was at work (and not the effect of alcohol as some suspected), and that God’s Spirit was speaking through men and women (and not just men, as Jews at that time would have expected).

Peter’s references to God’s Spirit working through “sons and daughters” and through “both men and women” in order to explain the events of that special day supports the conclusion which we have already arrived at based on the narrative itself: that both men and women were present in the house and later on the streets, and that, led by the Holy Spirit, both men and women spoke in that first church meeting and later on the streets.

Acts 2: my conclusion

The careful reading of Acts 2 suggests that two events took place on that special day of Pentecost. First, a gathering of believers in a house that could comfortably be described as an ‘assembly meeting’. Second, outside of the house, a large gathering that could be described as an ‘evangelistic event.’ The evidence from Acts 1 and from Peter’s discourse

⁹ This reference to “Galileans” does not limit the speakers only to the 12 apostles or only to men. At the end of his Gospel, Luke tells us three times that *women* were present among the group of believers, and also that these women came from Galilee (Luke 23:49, 55, 24:1-12).

later in Acts 2, strongly supports the presence of both men and women in this first 'assembly meeting'. We are explicitly told that *all* those present in the house, encouraged and empowered by God's Spirit, received what looked like tongues of fire, and participated vocally in this meeting. Nothing in this chapter suggests that the participation of women in this first assembly meeting was sinful in any way. At least at that point in time, God considered this to be in harmony with the Creation Order principle. Peter in his discourse, and later Luke in his reporting, wished to make clear to their listeners and readers that everything that took place in that house was driven by the Holy Spirit. The events of this first 'assembly meeting' must in some way influence our understanding of the other three key New Testament texts.



Text #3 1 Timothy 2: Praying, Teaching & Authority

2:1	I exhort therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings be made for all men;
2:2	for kings and all that are in dignity, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all piety and gravity;
2:3	for this is good and acceptable before our Saviour God,
2:4	who desires that all men should be saved and come to [the] knowledge of [the] truth.
2:5	For God is one, and [the] mediator of God and men one, [the] man Christ Jesus,
2:6	who gave himself a ransom for all, the testimony [to be rendered] in its own times;
2:7	to which I have been appointed a herald and apostle, (I speak the truth, I do not lie,) a teacher of [the] nations in faith and truth.
2:8	I will therefore that the men pray in every place, lifting up pious hands, without wrath or reasoning.
2:9	In like manner also that the women in decent deportment and dress adorn themselves with modesty and discretion, not with plaited <i>hair</i> and gold, or pearls, or costly clothing,
2:10	but, what becomes women making profession of the fear of God, by good works.
2:11	Let a woman learn in quietness in all subjection;
2:12	but I do not suffer a woman to teach nor to exercise authority over man, but to be in quietness;
2:13	for Adam was formed first, then Eve:
2:14	and Adam was not deceived; but the woman, having been deceived, was in transgression.
2:15	But she shall be preserved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with discretion.

Darby translation

Just as Ephesians 5 is a well-known passage on Christian marriage, 1 Timothy 2 is a well-known passage on the role of men and women in the Church. Given its importance to church order, it has been the focus of much study and controversy. Some consider this letter to Timothy to be non-authentic, probably written in the late 2nd century in Paul's name. This is a dangerous route to go down. I consider the text an authentic one, with a message intended to go beyond a local situation. Let's take a closer look.

Where should these directives be applied?

The apostle Paul was planning to visit Timothy, but foresaw possible delays in his travel arrangements. He had some instructions for Timothy that he considered urgent enough not to risk delay: "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15). What does Paul mean by "God's household"? Are the directives given in this letter to be applied only in assembly meetings? Or to all activities within the Christian community (including their meetings)? Or are these directives to be practiced by Christians generally within society? For example, does the directive "I do not permit a woman to teach or have

[assume] authority over a man” (1 Tim. 2:12) require that a Christian woman should not teach only within the context of assembly meetings, or in assembly meetings as well as house-groups, youth camps or seminars, or should she not teach anywhere where men are present, including in language schools, vocational training centres and in universities? Or could this be understood to be a prohibition for women to teach biblical and ‘spiritual topics’ to men? Please notice that Paul in his letter does not provide us with the precise context. Often the subject matter can help us to define the context for application, but this is not always the case.

Instructions about identifying and appointing “overseers” (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and “deacons” (1 Tim. 3:8-13), for example, clearly apply generally to local church life – and not only to what goes on in church meetings. Similarly, the advice on how to treat older and younger people, men, women, and widows applies generally to the life of the local church (1 Tim. 5:1-16). The directive, “I want women to dress modestly” and to do “good deeds” (1 Tim. 2:9-10) is unlikely to be restricted only to church meetings or to local church life. It is more likely to apply to the lives of Christian woman generally, including their activities done as part of the church and in its meetings. Many commentators today suggest that the directives on prayer and teaching found in 1 Timothy 2 are given to be applied only in church meetings. Some commentators would extend the scope to include some other public settings. In the past, this chapter was used to exclude women from teaching positions in colleges and universities. You will notice in what follows that I apply the directives of 1 Timothy 2 primarily to church meetings. Yes, it is my *choice*. I consider it the most reasonable option among all possible explanations I have encountered. If you choose for yourself a different wider context, this will not affect in any way the analysis that follows.

Who is encouraged to pray?

Paul begins 1 Timothy 2 with an open and general call to pray, to ask, to thank, and to intercede “for everyone”, especially for those in authority. It pleases God to listen to the prayers of His people (1 Tim. 2:1-3). Here, Paul does not tell us *who* should do the praying. After a beautiful Christological digression (1 Tim. 2:4-7) he continues his teaching on prayer: “I want men everywhere [in every place] to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing” (1 Tim. 2:8). Here Paul is asking men to pray in a certain way. If you, like me, think that these instructions apply primarily to church meetings, then when Paul is asking men ‘in every place’ he means ‘in every church’ (this is also possible in 1 Cor. 1:2, and 1 Thess. 1:8). Alternatively, you can take this as a general call for men to pray publicly.

The apostle then turns his attention to women: “...likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness - with good works” (1 Tim. 2:9-15 ESV). It is plain that he is encouraging a godly lifestyle and a modest dress code among women who profess to know God.

The uncertainty in the interpretation of these texts is caused by the word translated ‘likewise also’ or ‘in like manner also’ or ‘similarly also’ at the beginning of verse 9. It points to a *similarity* between the verse with directives for men and the verse with directives for women. Commentators usually side with one of these two possible interpretations:

1. Women are permitted to pray: The ‘likewise also’ refers to the way that the apostle wanted men and women to pray. Since men were more prone to be angry and argumentative and women were more prone to focus on external appearance (fancy hair styles, pearls, expensive clothes) - both undesirable behaviours for people who profess

to meet to worship God - Paul would then be saying: I want men *to pray properly* in every place without anger and arguing, 'likewise also' I want women *to pray properly* in every place without giving undue attention to her outward appearance. She should make herself beautiful by doing good works.

2. Only men are permitted to pray: The 'likewise also' could refer to the corrective behaviour without including the aspect of prayer. Paul would then be saying: I want men *to pray properly* in every place without anger and arguing, 'likewise also' I want women *to dress properly* without giving undue attention to her outward appearance. She should make herself beautiful by doing good works.

Does one of these interpretations force or bend the text more than the other? Probably not. Some Greek scholars favour the first and some the second interpretation. Both explanations use 'likewise also' in a reasonable way. If verses 8 and 9 were joined by a word like 'and' rather than 'likewise also' or without the adverb simply saying "I want men... I want women..." then the ambiguity in the text would disappear: only men may pray publicly. *The presence of 'likewise also' in this text ensures that we cannot conclude that this directive teaches that only men can pray publicly.*

The issue of whether or not women are permitted to pray publicly is a very important one. With just a minor change to the text, Paul could have made it *abundantly clear* that women were being invited to pray publicly. But he chose not to. Conversely, with just a minor change to the text, Paul could have made it *abundantly clear* that women were *not* being allowed to pray publicly or in church meetings. But he chose not to. In the verses that follow, Paul is abundantly clear about women not being allowed to teach in such settings. But for some reason, the Spirit of God does not inspire Paul to forbid public prayers by women. This is not a 'simple argument based on silence'. In addressing public prayer and teaching in the churches, the apostle clearly forbids women from teaching, but does not forbid them from praying. I think this is significant. Take a moment (in prayer?) to consider what the Spirit of God might have had here in mind.

Men and women may pray out loud

Sometimes we must make a judgement when it comes to conflicting interpretations. My mathematical mind would prefer to classify interpretations in two boxes: 'correct' and 'incorrect', then simply reject the 'incorrect' and settle for the 'correct' interpretation. But unfortunately, life is not always that simple! Here I will explain why I am inclined to think that the first interpretation is what Paul had in mind.

After correcting false teachers and making some personal remarks in chapter 1, Paul devotes chapter 2 to giving encouraging and corrective remarks applicable primarily to *church meetings* (prayer, teaching and authority), and devotes chapter 3 to giving instructions about *church structure* (elders and deacons). Given this flow of 'church instructions' in chapters 2 and 3, it is more likely that Paul is addressing 'prayer' (with regards to both men and women) in 1 Tim. 2:1-10, and then addressing 'teaching and authority' (with regards to men and *not* women) in 2:11-15. When addressing 'prayer' (1 Tim. 2:1-10), Paul does *not* make reference to the Creation Order principle. He would not need to if there were no gender difference to account for, and the same rules applied to both men and women when it came to public prayer. When addressing 'teaching and authority' (1 Tim. 2:11-15), however, Paul *does* make reference to the Creation Order principle. He needs to, in order to explain that gender difference *does* come into play here: that women should not teach or have authority over men.

Consider the following two observations: First, it seems to me rather odd (but not impossible) to suggest that Paul would break this flow of instructions relating to the church to interject in verse 9 with two general, non-church related admonitions for women: to dress appropriately and do good works. It appears to me more natural that Paul is not digressing after verse 8, but encouraging women to pray as well as men, but in an appropriate manner. Second, the absence of a reference to the Creation Order when discussing prayer in verses 1-10 would suggest that men and women were both praying publicly. Remember, these two observations do not *prove* that women were called to pray. What I am trying to say is that these two arguments both suggest that interpretation 1, listed above, fits better than interpretation 2.

In this letter, as was often the case, Paul uses his writing to promote sound teaching, and also to correct anything that opposes it. What issue was the apostle trying to correct in chapter 2? Based on my experience and knowledge of human nature, men are usually more prone than women to be angry or quarrelsome – especially when it comes to doctrine and theology! When it comes to outward appearance, women are usually more prone than men to give excessive attention to their clothes and the way they look. Perhaps Paul chose to address both men and women based on their differing weaknesses. His aim here could be to encourage both men and women to pray, but from the position of a godly lifestyle. Although the emphasis may be different, the general principles that Paul has outlined here connected with public prayer naturally apply to both genders: men should *also* dress with ‘modesty and discretion’, and women should *also* ‘lift up holy hands’ in prayer, ‘without anger or disputing’. Whatever Paul’s motivation to address men and women separately, it would be incorrect to conclude based on this chapter (as some do) that God wants only men, and not women, to pray in homes, churches or in public.

Let a woman learn in ‘quietness’

After dealing with public prayer, the apostle turns his attention to learning, teaching and authority. “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission” (2 Tim 2:11). What would have been most striking to Paul’s first-century readers was the fact that women were allowed, even encouraged, to learn in the first place. The text literally says: ‘Let a woman learn’. This is a strong corrective command against people like the Pharisees, who would try to exclude women from learning.

The Greek word translated ‘quietness’ here is used three times in this chapter: “that we may live peaceful and *quiet* lives” (2:2), “A woman should learn in *quietness*” (2:11), “I do not suffer a woman to teach nor to exercise authority over man, but to be in *quietness*” (2:12). Paul’s use of the word ‘quietness’ here suggests a sense of ‘calmness’, or ‘tranquility from within’. He uses the same word in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 when he encourages some lazy and disorderly believers to do their work *quietly* and to earn their own living. It does not necessarily mean to be literally ‘silent’, but usually refers to a person’s general attitude or disposition. Peter uses this word once when encouraging women not to focus unduly on their external beauty, but rather on “the unfading beauty of a gentle and *quiet* spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Pet. 3:4). This is a different Greek word from the one Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:34, in which he says that “women should remain *silent* in the churches”. In 1 Timothy 2:11-12, the apostle is asking women to display a general attitude of calmness and submission while learning in the assembly.

Women, Teaching and Authority

Later, the apostle adds, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have [assume] authority over a man; she must be silent [quiet]. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not

the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (2:12-14). Some people suggest that Paul had in mind one particularly troublesome woman in Ephesus, or that he was trying to shut up noisy or ignorant women. This is a dangerous path to take. Nothing in the letter justifies it. This is an easy way of dismissing any passage in the Bible that we do not happen to like. It is better to take the text at face value and agree that the apostle intends to restrict the participation of women in the church. The uncertainty lies in whether the apostle had either one or two restrictions in mind: Are women being asked not to engage in what can be described as ‘authoritative teaching’, or are they being excluded from both ‘teaching’ and ‘exercising authority over men’. Let us explore these possibilities.

‘Authoritative Teaching’ – One Restriction

Those arguing from this perspective conclude that gifted women are permitted to give ‘normal teaching’ in a church meeting, but should only refrain from ‘authoritative teaching’. They point out that Paul makes two parallel statements, one positive and one negative: a ‘yes’ to quietness and submission (1 Tim. 2:11) and a ‘no’ to teaching and exercising authority over man (2:12). They suggest that these two verses should not be read as containing four separate commands for women (be quiet, be submissive, don’t teach, don’t exercise authority over men). But rather that the second complements the first: that a woman’s ‘quietness’ should be practiced with a submissive attitude and her ‘teaching’ should be practiced with a ‘non-authoritative’ attitude.

The above reasoning draws its strength from the fact that the instructions are in parallel statements. Is this a strong enough argument? Notice that there is a third line in verse 12 which simply states “she is to remain quiet” (ESV) or “to be in quietness” (Darby). This extra statement could be seen as breaking the pattern. Furthermore, the word ‘authority’ does not stand alone. The type of authority Paul has in mind here is either “authority *over* man” or “authority *of* man” (‘over’ and ‘of’ are equally valid insertions). If we were to read Paul’s statement as one of prohibition, it should read something like this: ‘I do not permit a woman to teach with authority of/over men’. And this is not the same as saying that gifted women may deliver ‘normal teaching’ in the congregation but should refrain from ‘authoritative teaching’. The authority of the teaching of God’s Word (both explaining and applying it) resides in God’s Word itself! It has authority because it is God’s Word. I would argue that it is *not* possible to teach God’s word without authority. In the words of the apostle Peter, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). The words of God carry authority: do not teach (in the meetings of the church) and do not assume authority over men (in the structure of the church).

Teaching and Authority – Two Restrictions

Paul probably has in mind a situation whereby the teaching and learning is taking place within the gathered assembly: “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (2:11-12 ESV). The construction of verse 11 does suggest that *quietness* and *submission* are complementing each other. But the construction of verse 12 is different, it uses the word ‘or’, or ‘nor’. It is more natural, therefore, to identify here two prohibitions, related, but still distinct from each other. Women are being asked not to teach (in a church meeting) *and* not to exercise authority over men (not be church elders).

An expression of the Creation Order principle

As always, Paul justifies these gender distinctions in matters of church order using the Creation Order principle; “for Adam was formed first, then Eve”. Adam was formed first. Adam received instructions directly from God. Adam was given the responsibility to instruct

Eve accordingly. Then came the Fall, “and Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. Yet she will be saved through childbearing - if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control” (1 Tim. 2:13-15). Adam knew what God had told him, but chose to disobey. He became a sinner deliberately. Eve acted independently from her ‘head’, Adam, and was deceived by Satan. She became a sinner. Both Adam and Eve abdicated their God-given roles within the Creation Order. The last verse of this chapter is difficult to understand. Perhaps it could mean that a woman who refuses to bear children is, like Eve, rejecting the place God has given her in the Creation Order, by neglecting her responsibility to ‘multiply’.

The restriction placed on the teaching and authority of women in the church is *not* a reflection on the woman’s lack of skill or ability. It is motivated by theology and *not* by biological differences or cultural concerns. Appropriately qualified men have been called by God to function as ‘head’ in the church, and are given the responsibility of teaching and exercising authority within the church (male elders). Women, having been called by God to be ‘helper’, have the responsibility to allow these men to function as ‘head’, and where possible, offer them support.

1 Timothy 2: My Conclusion

The apostle Paul opens this chapter with an open and general call to pray. He then encourages men everywhere to *pray properly* without anger and arguing. The presence of the phrase ‘likewise also’, together with the absence of a reference to the Creation Order principle in the section dealing with prayer (2:1-10), the lack of a clear prohibition (like there is for teaching) and the thematic flow of the chapters 2 and 3, lead me to conclude that Paul was encouraging women everywhere to *pray properly* without undue focus on their outward appearance. Women were also encouraged to learn, and to do so with a calm and quiet spirit. Using the Creation Order principle, the apostle urges women not to *teach* men in church meetings and not to take *authority* or leadership over men in the church. Teaching in church meetings, and leading the church (being an elder), are responsibilities given to suitably qualified men.



Text #4 1 Corinthians 11: Praying and Prophesying

- 11:1** Be my imitators, even as I also [am] of Christ.
- 11:2** Now I praise you, that in all things ye are mindful of me; and that as I have directed you, ye keep the directions.
- 11:3** But I wish you to know that the Christ is the head of every man, but woman's head [is] the man, and the Christ's head God.
- 11:4** Every man praying or prophesying, having [anything] on his head, puts his head to shame.
- 11:5** But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered puts her own head to shame; for it is one and the same as a shaved [woman].
- 11:6** For if a woman be not covered, let her hair also be cut off. But if [it be] shameful to a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, let her be covered.
- 11:7** For man indeed ought not to have his head covered, being God's image and glory; but woman is man's glory.
- 11:8** For man is not of woman, but woman of man.
- 11:9** For also man was not created for the sake of the woman, but woman for the sake of the man.
- 11:10** Therefore ought the woman to have authority on her head, on account of the angels.
- 11:11** However, neither [is] woman without man, nor man without woman, in the Lord.
- 11:12** For as the woman [is] of the man, so also [is] the man by the woman, but all things of God.
- 11:13** Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman should pray to God uncovered?
- 11:14** Does not even nature itself teach you, that man, if he have long hair, it is a dishonour to him?
- 11:15** But woman, if she have long hair, [it is] glory to her; for the long hair is given [to her] in lieu of a veil.
- 11:16** But if anyone think to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor the assemblies of God.

Darby translation

We must start by admitting that this section of Scripture (1 Cor. 11:2-16) is complex, and causes problems for all serious interpreters. It is a passage that generates as much controversy and contention today as it did when it was first written (11:16). Note that here it is taken for granted that both men *and* women prayed and prophesied. Paul's concern is *how* this should be done: Men should pray and prophesy with their heads uncovered and women with their heads covered. In dealing with this chapter, I shall try to focus only on the details that may help us understand the role of women within the church.

Do Paul's instructions in this passage (1 Cor. 11:2-16) about men and women 'praying and prophesying' also apply to what goes on in church meetings? It is generally agreed that the section beginning at 1 Corinthians 11:17 and ending at 14:40 addresses situations that take place when the church is gathered - with the exception of chapter 13, the discourse on love, which has a wider application. What is *not* commonly agreed is the context or function of the first half of chapter 11.

Before we look at different arguments used to defend placing 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 with or apart from the section giving instructions for assembly meetings, it will be helpful to explore the meanings of three important verbs: *pray*, *prophecy* and *teach*. After considering whether or not 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 applies to church meetings, we shall explore the meaning and relevance of three important nouns: *head*, *authority* and *covering*.

What is involved in ‘praying and prophesying’?

Whatever the practice of praying and prophesying involved, it is evident that both men and women did it with God’s approval. There is no hint in the passage that women should not pray or not prophesy. The point of this section is that *when* they pray and prophesy, both men and women should do so in an appropriate manner. But, what did Paul have in mind when he referred to the activities of praying and prophesying?

To ‘pray’: We are all familiar with prayer. But to what kind of prayer does Paul refer here? Could he be referring to internal prayer in public, such as when we follow someone else’s spoken prayer and say ‘amen’ at the end? Or is Paul referring to our private times of prayer with the Lord? Perhaps. It could of course include such prayers. But it is not normal for someone to prophesy ‘inside their heads’. Of course, some prophets wrote (or dictated) letters, but prophets normally spoke (1 Pet. 1:10; 2 Pet. 1:21; James 5:10). Prophecy is typically a spoken ministry,¹⁰ and that is how Paul treats it in this letter: “But everyone who prophesies *speaks...*” (1 Cor. 14:3, 29). Given that here the apostle mentions prayer and prophecy a number of times together, I think it is more likely that Paul was regulating *vocal*, or *audible* prayers and prophecies, those heard by another individual, group or perhaps by the church as a whole. Of course, a woman may choose to apply the directives found in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 in her private prayer life, or when she is writing letters of encouragement to others, but it is very unlikely that this is the apostle’s reason for writing this section.

To ‘prophecy’: This activity does require close attention, because many Christians throughout the history of the Church (from the second and third centuries onwards) have changed its definition to mean something along the lines of ‘a practical exhortation from Scripture’. When Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, ‘prophecy’ was understood to be one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, just like tongues, words of knowledge and gifts of healing. Prophecy was understood then as a message given under charismatic inspiration, something supernatural, a gift from God’s Spirit to be used in both private and public settings.¹¹ This New Testament form of prophecy, as we see it exercised within the context of the church in Corinth, was a response to a thought, concern, vision or revelation from the Lord that just ‘came’ to a person while at home, on the way or even while sitting in a meeting (1 Cor. 14:26, 30).

What was the purpose of prophecy? The apostle Paul answers this question: “everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort... he who prophesies edifies the church” (14:3-4). Please take careful note that *this is not a definition* of New Testament prophecy. Paul is not telling us what prophecy *is* but rather what prophecy *does* – as he contrasts it with the gift of speaking in tongues. Not everything that edifies the

¹⁰ We read of some who prophesied while singing “accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals... who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD” (1 Chr. 25:1-3). The apostle John wrote down a long prophecy and encouraged others to read it (Rev 1:3). But normally prophets spoke.

¹¹ Whether this type of NT prophecy and other Spiritual gifts (*charismata*) are available to Christians today, or whether some or all these gifts have ceased with the death of the last apostle (this position is called *cessationism*), is an important question - but it goes beyond the scope of this writing.

church is prophecy. Not everything that strengthens, encourages or comforts the church is prophecy. These noble goals can also be achieved, for example, through practical Bible teaching, through singing good Christian songs, or through hearing a personal testimony.

It is worth noting that there is a difference between Old and New Testament prophets. The Old Testament prophets had a clear, authoritative message from the Lord. They would start with a “Thus says the Lord...”. These Old Testament prophets had a similar sort of authority to the New Testament apostles. If an Old Testament prophet made a mistake and prophesied incorrectly, he could be killed. In the church at Corinth, if someone was taking too long to share his prophecy, he would simply have been asked to sit down and make room for somebody else to speak. It is evident, then, that prophecies in the early church had far less authority than prophecies given by Old Testament prophets. For example, a prophet named Agabus shared a prophetic word with Paul about his trip to Jerusalem. He introduced his prophetic word with “The Holy Spirit says...”, and even so, the apostle Paul thanked, but *ignored*, this prophetic word (Acts 21:10-15). The believers in Corinth were encouraged to “weigh carefully” each prophetic message given in a church meeting (1 Cor. 14:29). The speaker may have added a ‘human element’ to the revelation – his own personal interpretation, or application, perhaps – and this had to be identified and sometimes rejected by those present. Each prophetic message had to be in harmony with the Holy Scriptures.¹²

Can messages from God have different degrees of authority? Every message from God carries the same degree of authority. When we read the Holy Scriptures, we know that every word belongs to God’s message. Every word is invested with Divine authority. But when someone is preaching, he is quoting some parts of Scripture and then adding his own explanations. Yes, every preacher should speak “as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). Because of this, we listen seriously and carefully to what he says. But we shall never give the same *weight* to the teacher’s words, explanations, illustrations and applications as we give to the Holy Scriptures themselves. Only when the words of the preacher are in strict harmony with the Holy Scriptures does his message have full authority. The message of some preachers includes many personal experiences, personal opinions and possible unintended mistakes. The core message may well be from God, but it may be *diluted* by adding to it his personal ideas and possible misunderstandings. In such cases, just as with a prophetic message, the Corinthians were called to “weigh carefully” what was said, and to retain what they considered came from God. Only that which comes from God has full authority. Furthermore, God’s message in the Bible is for all Christians in all ages. God’s message through a preacher or a prophetic word today never has that universal scope. It is a word from God for the moment.

How do ‘teaching’ and ‘prophesying’ differ from each other?

Understanding *prophecy* as the early church did, it is now possible to distinguish it from *teaching*. Teaching involves *explaining* and *applying* the Holy Scriptures. Teaching may well require much study and preparation. Teaching which is faithful to the Word of God carries authority, the authority of the Bible itself. How then does a prophecy come into existence? When Paul was giving guidance for the delivery of prophecies in the church in Corinth, he says that, “if a *revelation* comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop” (1 Cor. 14:30). This is a key text. Notice that what prompted a prophecy was a *revelation*, not a Bible study. Prophecy had its basis in revelation and it had to be carefully

¹² If this way of looking at prophecy is rather new to you, I strongly recommend you read: *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, by Wayne Grudem.

weighed by those who heard it. Teaching had its basis in the Holy Scriptures, and carried the authority of God's Word with it. That is why I refer to New Testament prophecy as a 'subjective' ministry, and teaching as an 'objective' ministry.

I can well imagine that this careful weighing of personal prophecies was sometimes hard work, perhaps even tiresome. I can imagine that there will have been extroverted and excitable individuals who frequently thought they had received a message from God for the congregation. I can easily imagine situations where a congregation would prefer to receive more Bible teaching and fewer prophecies! Perhaps that is why Paul urged the Thessalonian believers, "do not treat prophecies with contempt". Rather, they should "Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Thess. 5:20-21).

Women may prophesy but not teach in church meetings

Recognising this difference between Bible *teaching* and 'Spirit inspired' *prophesying* is very important when it comes to understanding the participation of women in the early church. Bible teaching is an 'objective' ministry. The teacher speaks with authority, explaining and applying the Holy Scriptures. But there are other more 'subjective' ways to participate, like praying, or sharing a prophetic word, or some other Spirit-led, contribution that may encourage or build up those who hear it. This is 'subjective' ministry. You will notice that 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 can easily fit together: In his letter to Timothy, the apostle explains that a woman should not teach in church meetings (she should not participate in 'objective' ministry). In his letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle explains that a woman may 'pray and prophesy' in an appropriate way during church meetings (she may participate in 'subjective' ministry). Of course, I have jumped a bit here. But what I am trying to point out is that Paul is not contradicting himself if he states that a woman may *prophesy* but not *teach* in a church meeting.

A practical observation before we move on: Teaching and prophecy can easily be combined, just as teaching and prayer can also be combined. If you are a preacher or Bible teacher, seek to remain open to the workings of the Holy Spirit even as you speak. As you prepare at home and as you preach or teach, you may receive an idea, a burden or an impression from God's Spirit, something that He probably wants you to say in order to address a specific need of one or more people in your audience. Notice that at Corinth, some revelations were received beforehand and brought to the meetings (14:26) while other revelations were received spontaneously from God's Spirit during the meetings (14:30). Both were possible. Over the years, many have given testimony to this reality of this process, even today! Yes, teaching and prophesying can be combined, but they remain distinct activities.

Where should we place 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?

We return now to the question of *where* men and women were expected to cover or uncover their heads when they prayed and prophesied. When the apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 11, was he thinking about the behaviour of men and women during church meetings? Some might say 'of course not'. Other may say 'yes, definitely'. Let's consider the arguments presented by both sides.

No, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 does *not* have church meetings in view

Some Bible scholars hold the opinion that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 was written to regulate *how* men and women should pray and prophesy generally, in the presence of others. They suggest that Paul will have had private or informal settings in mind, for example when a woman would pray and prophesy in a home or during one-to-one encounters, and perhaps

also in some public situations - but definitely not during church meetings. Their view is usually supported by the following arguments:

1. The idea of 'coming together' is not mentioned: In chapters 11-14 of 1 Corinthians, we find 6 references to assembly meetings, or "coming together" (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 33, 34 and 14:23, 26). Note that there is no reference to church meetings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 - The first reference is in 11:17. Therefore 11:2-16 was not written about church meetings.
2. A new topic: The new section beginning with 11:17 opens with the phrase, "in the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good". This introduction suggests that Paul is addressing a new topic, namely to correct bad practice in their church meetings. Since church meeting corrections begin at verse 17, the preceding section (1 Cor. 11:2-16) was not written with church meetings in mind.
3. The command to be silent: This is the strongest argument. Three chapters later, Paul requires women to "remain silent in the churches", saying that, "they are not allowed to speak" (1 Cor. 14:34). The apostle does not contradict himself. Therefore, 11:2-16 Paul explains *how* men and women should pray and prophesy, and in 14:26-40 he explains *where* they should pray and prophesy. Since women are asked to remain silent in church meetings, verses 2-16 must have been written with another setting in mind – perhaps small groups or informal settings.

Yes, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 does have church meetings in view

Other Bible scholars believe that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 was written to regulate *how* men and women should pray and prophesy in the presence of others *including* during church meetings. Their view is usually supported by the following arguments:

1. The topical flow of the letter: After prohibiting Christians from becoming involved in pagan worship (chapter 10), Paul then goes on to address three subjects of concern relating to their church meetings: women participating with their heads uncovered (verses 2-16), disregard for the poor at the Lord's table (verses 17-34) and issues to do with the appropriate participation in church meetings (12-14). The instructions given in 11:2-16 fit naturally into this flow.
2. Section unity: Notice that the section containing chapters 11-14 begins and ends by addressing the appropriate behaviour of women. There is a parallel in thought expressed in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and in 14:33-36. Both passages make reference to the Old Testament (Genesis and the Law – most probably an allusion to the Creation Order principle, as we shall see later), both make reference to 'churches' (11:16 and 14:33b) and both describe a practice as being 'shameful' for a woman (11:6 and 14:35). There is structural symmetry. These two passages could be seen as 'bookends' to one united section - chapters 11 to 14 – suggesting that the guidelines given in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 *were* intended for church meetings.
3. The covering of women's heads: Many commentators argue that women's head covering was a cultural sign of social decency at that time. Women were required to cover their heads in public – it would have been shameful for both she and her husband if she had appeared publicly with her head uncovered. In the privacy of their own homes, this head covering was no longer necessary (similar to the custom among many Muslim women even today). Given that churches usually started in homes, it is understandable that

some women began to participate in such meetings without covering their heads. This was socially unacceptable, and here Paul is seeking to correct this impropriety. If this explanation is historically true,¹³ then the main purpose of verses 2-16 is to correct the manner of participation of women in these church meetings.

4. The text itself: Paul begins chapter 11 with the positive, “I *praise* you for...” (11:2). Half way down the chapter he moves on to correct the negative, “In the following directives I have *no praise* for you...” (11:17). This chapter is a unity. There is nothing in chapter 11:2-16 itself that points to an application outside of the church setting. If, for instance, the instructions in chapter 11:2-16 required women to cover their heads while they ‘sang spiritual songs and listened to Bible being taught’, virtually everyone would be happy to allow the whole of chapter 11 to belong to the section on protocol within church meetings.

What do we conclude, then? Yes or no?

There are good arguments on both sides when it comes to including or excluding 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 in or from the section that deals with order in assembly meetings. The only serious objection I see to applying 11:2-16 directly to assembly meetings is the subsequent call for women to be ‘silent’ within these meetings (14:34). Now, if the reference to ‘silence’ in verse 34 can be understood to be asking women to abstain from a *certain type* of public speech in the assembly meeting, a request that is not intended to stop them from ‘praying and prophesying’, then there is no good reason to exclude chapter 11:2-16 from the section on instructions for church meetings. And, as we shall see in the following chapter, I think this is the case.

Now we will move on to explore the meaning of three important nouns found in this passage: *head*, *authority* and *covering*.

The word ‘head’

The apostle Paul refers here to the Creation Order principle using the word ‘head’ (Greek, *kephale*).¹⁴ Paul also uses this word in Ephesians 5:23, “the husband is the *head* of the wife as Christ is the *head* of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour”. Sometimes the word ‘head’ implies someone being ‘greater than’ or having ‘authority over’ someone else. But not always - it can also be used to denote the relationship between two parties, where one is ‘dependent’ or ‘cared for’ by the other. We discussed this type of healthy *hierarchy* earlier, in connection with the way that men and women together in relationship can express the image of God (chapter 4). It is in this sense that we encounter the three *head* relationships at the beginning of this chapter: Christ is the *head* of every man, the woman’s *head* is the man, and Christ’s *head* is God (11:3). The word ‘head’ is not used to show a power structure – notice that God is mentioned at the end. In this context, where men and

¹³ This distinction between private and public space is also captured by Tertullian (AD c200), a Church Father, in his treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*. Notice his argument: “Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets [*in vicis*], so you should wear them in the church [*in ecclesia*]. If you wear them when you are among strangers [*extraneos*], then wear them among your brothers [*fratres*]... If you won’t wear your veils in church, then I challenge you to go around in public without them”. Tertullian’s challenge was to convince Christian women to cover their heads during church meetings.

¹⁴ A growing number of Christian authors today promote the idea that this word ‘head’ has to do with ‘source’ and not with ‘hierarchy’. Grudem’s extensive research does not support this modern shift. See his conclusions in, *Does ‘Kephale’ Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature: A survey of 2336 Examples*. Trinity Journal, 1985.

women may both practice “praying and prophesying”, it is important to Paul that this positive and healthy sense of *hierarchy* will be a lived reality, and outwardly visible.

The word ‘authority’

The text reads “For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have [a sign of] *authority* on [or over] her [own] head” (11:10). As you may already know, the word ‘sign’ has been added in many Bible translations to help make sense of the text. It links the word *authority* with the symbol of head covering. You should feel free to add or remove the word ‘sign’ yourself, as you try to make sense of this verse.

The Greek word translated *authority* is used nearly one hundred times in the New Testament, expressing various forms and degrees of authority, always in the *active* sense of *having authority* or *acting with authority*.¹⁵ The New Testament never uses this word in its *passive* form, to suggest being *under authority*. And yet, given the references to ‘man being the head of woman’ (11:3), and Paul’s prohibition for a woman to ‘have *authority* over a man’ in a church context (1 Tim. 2:12), there is a strong temptation to try to force this verse to say that the woman is somehow ‘under authority’.

Rather than forcing the natural meaning of the word ‘authority’ from the *active* (having authority) to the *passive* (being under authority), perhaps it is better to explore in the context of this chapter the ways in which women do have *active* authority. Here are two possibilities:

- (a) She is free to choose: A woman has *active* authority over her own head. She can decide for herself what she does with her head, whether to have long and decorated hair, or to shave it off; to cover it or not to cover it. When she voluntarily chooses not to cut her hair off, or decides to cover her head when she prays and prophesies, she shows that she willingly takes her place within the Creation Order – something the angels are particularly sensitive to.
- (b) She is free to minister: The woman, when she has her head covered, has the *active* authority (just like any man with his head *uncovered*) to pray or to prophesy. At the appropriate time, and with the right attitude, she may participate vocally when she has this ‘sign of authority’ on her head. In doing this, she shows that she willingly takes her place within the Creation Order – something the angels are particularly sensitive to.

The word ‘covering’

What is this *covering*? What does it symbolise? When should it be used? Consider the following relevant texts: “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head” (1 Cor. 11:4), “every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head” (11:5), “for this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have [a sign of] authority on [or over] her [own] head” (11:10), “judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (11:13), and “does not the very nature of things tell you ... that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering” (11:14-15).

Some, based on verse 15, suggest that the *covering* referred to in this passage is the woman’s long hair. But this simple explanation runs rapidly into problems with the text itself.

¹⁵ The word *authority* is a translation of the Greek word *exousia*, which can be translated anything between ‘has permission,’ or ‘ability or strength’ to ‘power of rule.’

Why would long hair only be necessary when women 'pray and prophesy'? What does it mean for men to 'uncover'? Is the passage suggesting that men cut off their long hair when they 'pray or prophesy'? If the 'cover' refers to the woman's long hair, then verses 5 and 6 read rather oddly: "And every woman who prays or prophesies with *short hair* (her head uncovered) she dishonours her head, it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman *does not have long hair* (does not cover her head), she should have her hair cut off..." This is a rather forced interpretation.

Should women cover their head today?

The majority of Bible commentators recognize that the 'cover' in this passage refers to some garment that a woman was expected to wear on her head (over her hair) when she prays or prophesies, and that the 'uncover' meant that a man should not have something on his head when he prays or prophesies. The variety of different interpretations and practices may be summarised in three basic positions:

1. To cover and to uncover is an *absolute* requirement: Some interpret this passage as a fixed requirement for all time and all cultures, that it is essential for men to always uncover when they pray and prophesy, and for woman to always cover when they pray or prophesy. Something like stealing, murdering, adultery or blasphemy – they are fixed, absolute, unchangeable requirements that hold true for all time. The fact that this instruction is part of "the Lord's command" (14:37) adds importance to our unquestioning obedience. There is a suggestion that the angels are also interested to witness this type of obedience (11:10).
2. To cover and to uncover was a *cultural* requirement: Others argue that at that time, all decent women would have covered their heads in public places – like many Muslim ladies do today. It would have been socially unacceptable for a woman to have been in a public space (including a church meeting) with her head uncovered, and this would have brought 'shame' on her husband and those around her. The call for men to uncover their heads, and for women to cover theirs, is a call to respect cultural sensitivities and avoid causing unnecessary offence. The fact that this instruction is part of "the Lord's command" (14:37) adds importance to our need to be culturally sensitive. There is a suggestion that the angels are also interested to witness this type of obedience (11:10).
3. To cover and to uncover was and is a *symbolic* requirement: A third group see the act of covering and uncovering as a symbolic act, that the apostle is introducing this as a Christian symbol, something like kneeling, baptism, lifting hands in prayer and the Lord's supper. In itself a symbol is nothing. But when understood, the symbol or symbolic act will reflect a Divine principle or spiritual reality. The fact that this instruction is part of "the Lord's command" (14:37) adds importance to our practice of the symbol and the reality it represents. There is a suggestion that the angels are also interested to witness this type of obedience (11:10).

What could this cover and uncover symbol represent? Again, Christians also differ as to its meaning. But basically, the different views may be clustered in three positions:

- (a) It is a symbol of *submission*: That when a woman covers her head, she is saying that she is under authority, she is showing that she is submissive to God, the headship of men (her husband?), that she accepts her place in the Creation Order.

- (b) It is a symbol of *authority*: That when a woman covers her head, she is invested with the necessary authority to be able to ‘pray and prophesy’ in public without doing any violence to the Creation Order principle. This could perhaps be compared with the idea of asking an IKEA employee to wear a uniform, or a traffic warden to wear their hat while they are on active duty. Their external attire (uniform, hat, head covering) will show those around them that they have, in that time and place, *active* authority to do their jobs.
- (c) It is a symbol of *respect*: That when a woman covers her head, she shows due respect for the presence of God. Those who hold to this view, would probably also cover their head during their personal time with the Lord, when thanking God for meals at home or in a restaurant, when sharing the gospel with a friend or while participating in a house group, Bible study, a Christian camp, conference, concert, etc.

The interpretations that I find most satisfactory are 2 and 3b. And here is why. To equate the cover with long hair is, as pointed out above, very inadequate. If the apostle Paul desired women to wear long hair and men short hair, this passage (11:2-16) is an extremely longwinded and confusing way to ask them to do so! The weakness with interpretation 1 is that there is nothing absolute about this practice. In the Old Testament, for example, Aaron and the priests were required to wear a turban on their heads when they ministered before the Lord (Lev. 8:9,13; Ez. 44:17-19). So, at that point in time, in that setting, some men were required to cover their head. Clearly there is nothing absolute about this covering.

The weakness of interpretation 3a is that it gives the word *authority* in 11:10 a passive sense (under authority), and, as pointed out before, this word is always used in active sense (having authority) in the New Testament. The weakness of interpretation 3c is that it goes beyond what is explicitly stated in the passage. The cover and uncover, if understood as a symbol, should accompany the (public) acts of ‘praying or prophesying’ – and not every time a person is conscious of the presence of the Lord. Furthermore, it can lend itself to socially odd or eccentric behavior, it requires many arbitrary exceptions and I think that its application can easily lend itself to legalism or feelings of guilt – since you can always do more. Of course, a believer is personally free to apply this symbol in one of these ways, but I would caution against going beyond what the apostle wrote. It can lead to unhealthy religious bondage. Given the apostolic calling to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17 ESV), I know of some dear sisters who always have their heads covered. I admire their commitment to a conviction, but I find it hard to believe that this is what God had in mind with this instruction.

The interpretations that are left are 2 and 3b. It is my view that those who settle for explanation 2 have a reasonably good argument to do so. I would suggest to congregations that settle for this interpretation to seek out some other culturally relevant way to make the Creation Order principle *visible* in their church meetings. My preference is for explanation 3b, in which a woman will cover her head only when she actively engages in *subjective* ministry during assembly meetings. I respect, however, those who have come to a different conclusion from my own, and would be careful not to cause stress or discomfort when visiting congregations that hold a different practice or conviction on this matter. More on this in chapter 12.

A personal plea to church leaders

Before ending this chapter, perhaps I may be allowed to make a plea to elders and church leaders: by all means study this issue of coverings, and educate your congregation of the different possible interpretations. Do not be afraid of stating clearly which interpretation or interpretations have your preference or the preference of the group of elders. But please do

not *force* your conclusions on the whole assembly. Do not allow your 'covering' protocol to become part of the *identity* of your congregation. Remember that the topic appears only once in the New Testament and it is found in a complex passage, it lends itself to different honest interpretations. Please don't elevate your preferred interpretation to a condition for fellowship. Graciously allow brothers and sisters to consider the passage and reach their own conclusions and convictions before the Lord. I am convinced that this approach contributes to a healthy assembly atmosphere. Yes, believers in your congregation may well arrive at different conclusions. This will call for grace, acceptance and maturity from every brother and sister. But this is much better than a congregation with forced external uniformity.

1 Corinthians 11: My Conclusion

This section deals with the way that men and women should pray and prophesy. The kind of situation Paul has in mind here is audible praying and prophesying in a public place, something beyond private one-to-one encounters or private home settings. There is a difference between teaching and prophesying, the first is the explanation and application of the Holy Scriptures, an 'objective' ministry invested with authority. Believers in Corinth prophesied when they felt that God's Spirit had revealed something personally to them. It was 'subjective' in nature. Those present had to judge it.

There are good arguments both for and against including verses 2-16 in the division of the epistle that deals with order in church meetings (chapters 11-14). *There is nothing in the text itself (11:2-16) that would hint or suggest that women should not pray and prophesy vocally in church meetings.* The textual flow could naturally include verses 2-16 in the section on the ordering of church meetings. If the word 'silent' in 1 Cor. 14:34 was given to stop women from participating vocally in ministries that carried authority, such as teaching or judging other prophets (we shall consider this in the following two chapters), then there is no compelling reason to exclude verses 2-16 from this division of the epistle that deals with order in church meetings. In this case 1 Cor. 11:2-16 could be interpreted as guidelines on how men and women should pray and prophecy in church meetings, in a way that upholds the Creation Order principle.



Text #5 1 Corinthians 14: 'Be Silent, Don't Speak'

- 14:23** If therefore the whole assembly come together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and simple [persons] enter in, or unbelievers, will not they say ye are mad?
- 14:24** But if all prophesy, and some unbeliever or simple [person] come in, he is convicted of all, he is judged of all;
- 14:25** the secrets of his heart are manifested; and thus, falling upon [his] face, he will do homage to God, reporting that **God is indeed amongst you.**
- 14:26** What is it then, brethren? whenever ye come together, each [of you] has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done to edification.
- 14:27** If any one **speak with a tongue**, [let it be] two, or at the most three, and separately, and let one interpret;
- 14:28** but if there be no interpreter, let him be **silent** in [the] assembly, and let him speak to himself and to God.
- 14:29** And let two or three **prophets speak**, and let the others judge.
- 14:30** But if there be a revelation to another sitting [there], let the first be **silent**.
- 14:31** For ye can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all be encouraged.
- 14:32** And spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.
- 14:33** For God is not [a God] of disorder but of peace, as in all the assemblies of the saints.
- 14:34** Let [your] **women** be **silent** in the assemblies, for **it is not permitted to them to speak**; but to be in subjection, as the law also says.
- 14:35** But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to speak in assembly.
- 14:36** Did the word of God go out from you, or did it come to you only?
- 14:37** If any one thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him recognise the things that I write to you, that it is [the] Lord's commandment.
- 14:38** But if any be ignorant, let him be ignorant.
- 14:39** So that, **brethren, desire to prophesy**, and do not forbid the speaking with tongues.
- 14:40** But let all things be done comelily and with order.

Darby translation

In this chapter, the apostle provides some corrective guidelines to give good order to assembly meetings. It is evident that Paul wishes to protect the principle of multiple participation during such gatherings, and that he wishes to protect the leading role of the Holy Spirit within church meetings – it should be evident that 'God is really among' the people who are gathered there (14:25). The message and the manner of each participant should edify, build up, strengthen, instruct, or encourage the church (14:5, 12, 16, 26, 31). Participants should think and behave like adults (14:20). Proceedings should be conducted in a peaceful way (14:33), in harmony with the Creation Order principle (14:34), and cause no reason for "shame" (14:35). He concludes the chapter by reminding his readers that everything should be done in a 'fitting and orderly' way (14:40).

The only two verses in the whole Bible that require women to ‘be silent’ and ‘not to speak’ in church meetings are found here in this chapter: verses 34 and 35. Some scholars suggest that these two verses were not present in the original text written by Paul. Their argument does not convince me, but given the importance of these two verses, I think it is worth examining their argument and settling the matter of authorship before we take a closer look at some relevant details in this chapter.

Was 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 written by the apostle Paul?

Most old manuscripts of the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians place verses 34 and 35 after verse 33. But there are some old manuscripts that place these two verses at the end of the chapter, after verse 40. The lack of a reasonable explanation for the presence of these verses in two different locations leads some scholars to conclude that they were added later by someone other than Paul.¹⁶ Those who agree with their reasoning are clearly frustrated that over the centuries women have been so restricted in the churches all because of a non-authentic text! After all, if it is not authentic, it cannot be binding.

It is true that, on occasions, a scribe has added some text or remark for clarification, like in Mark 16:9-20, for instance, or Acts 8:37. Over the years, as the Scriptures were further copied, the church would end up with two versions: copies of the original, and copies of the text with the additions. Today we have copies of both. Bible translators then have to decide whether the differences between the texts were caused by a scribe either *adding* something, or *deleting* something. When making this decision, the scholars look at the possible *reasons* for adding or subtracting a word or verse. Scribes will always try to make things simpler and clearer. In Acts 8, for example, there is no good reason for a scribe to want to *delete* verse 37 – it is not a controversial text. Since there is no reason to delete it, it follows that it was most probably added. That is why most Bible translators today conclude that the original book of Acts did *not* have verse 8:37, that this verse was later added by a scribe as a clarification for those teaching on baptism. What then would motivate a scribe to change the position of verses 34 and 35 in 1 Corinthians 14? This puzzles me too. Maybe a scribe thought that placing verses 34 and 35 before or after the reference to ‘the Lord’s command’ (verse 37) would strengthen or weaken Paul’s directive. But moving these verses does not change their meaning. What weakens the argument of those who wish to treat verses 34 and 35 as being non-authentic is that there are no manuscripts that do not include these two verses. Considering the fact that all known manuscripts have verses 34 and 35 (whether after verse 33 or 40), it seems irresponsible to reject them altogether as being non-authentic.¹⁷ My conclusion is that these verses *were* written by Paul, that they are authentic, and that our task is to understand what he meant by them. Now let’s look at some of the relevant details in chapter 14.

¹⁶ Here a simple version of their argument: The difference in manuscripts must be explained in one of the following three ways: (a) Paul wrote v34-35 after v33 and someone later moved them to put them after v40. (b) Paul wrote v34-35 after v40 and someone later moved them to put them after v33. (c) Someone other than Paul wrote them and they were later added to the original text in two different places. Since they can’t find any motivation that would support (a) or (b), they conclude that (c) must be the correct answer.

¹⁷ Another suggestion is that verses 34 and 35 belong to a letter written to Paul by the Corinthians. Paul is quoting from this letter and then disagreeing with it. Paul does quote from their letter (see 7:1, 6:12, 10:23). These quotations are short and clear and then Paul comments on the topic quoted. There is, however, no evidence here that Paul is quoting the Corinthians. Therefore they should be taken as Paul’s words.

Do the words ‘all’, ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ include both men and women?

Throughout this chapter, we encounter frequent *inclusive* expressions: “If the *whole church* comes together and *everyone* speaks in tongues” (verse 23), “if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while *everybody* is prophesying, he will be convinced by *all* that he is a sinner and he will be judged by *all*” (verse 24), “when you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction [‘a teaching’ (Darby); ‘a lesson’ (ESV)] , a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation” (verse 26), “if *anyone* speaks in a tongue” (verse 26), “for you can *all* prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged” (verse 31).

Inclusive terms should be taken at face value. In the normal use of language, inclusive terms such as ‘all’, ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ are used either because literally everyone is included, or because it is the general rule (with some known limitations or clarified exceptions). When we say that *everyone* may use the church car park, it is understood that only cars with handicapped passengers will make use of the handicapped parking lots, and that only the elderly will make use of the parking lots clearly marked for them. This does not need to be included in the announcement; it goes without saying. But it would not be correct to say that “everyone can receive a free ice-cream” and then later clarify that Asians and Latinos are excluded. However it would be correct to say this if the exceptions were rather small, for instance, if it were later clarified that professional footballers and company directors were to be excluded (they can buy their own ice creams!). With small exceptions, the general rule would still hold: “everyone can have a free ice-cream”.

What was normal in church meetings at that time?

Many Bible scholars suggest that this is the way we should read 1 Corinthians 14. The general rule is that every believer present in the church meeting (male or female) was free to contribute vocally as he or she felt led by the Holy Spirit - that the terms ‘all’, ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ should be taken literally. Later in the chapter Paul points out some reasonable exceptions to ensure that the Creation Order principle would be maintained, that multiple participation would be protected, and that everything that was said would be understood, and would build up the congregation.

Other Bible scholars suggest that Paul did not need to explicitly exclude all women from vocal participation in church meetings until the end of chapter 14, because their exclusion would already have been taken for granted by the readers. They knew that women remained silent in the synagogues, and their understanding would have been that this also applied to the church meetings. We could reasonably expect that Paul had explained this silence for women earlier during the months he had lived with them in Corinth. These scholars suggest that when men and women in the congregation listened to Paul’s letter being read out, and heard “every woman that prays and prophesies...” (1 Cor. 11:5), they knew already that Paul was not referring to their assembly meetings. And when they came to chapter 14 and heard frequent reference to ‘all’, ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ they knew already that the call to strive for spiritual gifts was addressed to both men and women, but that the functioning use of these gifts while the church was gathered – what Paul was describing - referred only to men.

What then was *normal* practice in the meetings of the early church? What influence did the honourable way Jesus treated women have on the early Christian communities? What influence did the events at Pentecost (Acts 2) in Jerusalem have on subsequent church meetings in Jerusalem and elsewhere? Paul wrote this letter not only with the Corinthian church in mind, but thinking of all churches everywhere (1 Cor. 1:2). How can we choose between these Bible scholars who disagree with each other? We turn now to the text itself.

Does the reference to ‘brothers’ and ‘he’ exclude sisters?

In this chapter, we find a number of references to ‘brothers.’ For example, “What then shall we say, *brothers*? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation... Therefore, my *brothers*, be eager to prophesy” (14:26, 39). The Greek word translated ‘brothers’ [*adelphoi*] is plural and masculine. Sometimes this word is used with a reference to the masculine sex, like in Acts 1:14 when referring to the *brothers* of our Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 9:5, Gal. 1:19). Paul uses it 27 times in this letter. Most of the time Paul uses it to address the whole congregation, referring therefore to both men and women (1:10, 11, 26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6, etc). The four times that Paul uses the word ‘brothers’ in this chapter (14:6,20,26,39) he is clearly addressing the whole congregation. That is why most modern Bible translations replace ‘brothers’ with ‘brothers and sisters’ in this chapter.

All the references to ‘he’ you may find in your translation of 1 Corinthians 14 are inserted by the translator. The Greek does not have them. They should be read then as a generic ‘he’ and not a masculine ‘he’.

We conclude that Paul’s use of the word ‘brothers’ in 1 Corinthians 14 and the presence of ‘he’ in some Bible translations does not support the idea that only male believers were being addressed. Unless there is clear textual evidence that what is being said refers only to men, the words ‘brothers’ and ‘he’ should be understood to include both men and women. It is clear that the apostolic teaching given in this letter, and particularly in this chapter, was interesting, useful and encouraging for all the brothers and the sisters in the congregation.

Who is being encouraged to ‘eagerly desire spiritual gifts’?

Notice that chapter 14 begins with a strong encouragement: “Follow the way of love and *eagerly desire* spiritual gifts [gifts of the Spirit], especially the gift of prophecy”. This call is surely addressed to every Christian. Not everyone was a prophet, but everyone, whether male or female, was encouraged to eagerly desire the gift of prophecy (14:1, 39). Prophecy, like some of the other gifts mentioned in this chapter, was a vocal gift.

Where did Paul expect these believers to share the prophecy, if the Spirit of God were to respond to their eager desire and give them a revelation (verse 30)? If both men and women are being encouraged to eagerly desire audible gifts in the same section of an epistle where Paul is addressing order in the church meetings, one would expect that these church meetings would also be a place where they could use these gifts – albeit with some restrictions.

What could ‘be silent - don’t speak’ mean?

The word ‘speak’ (Greek *laleo*) is used over 20 times in 1 Corinthians 14. Sometimes it is used to refer to the communication between a believer and God (prayer), and this ‘speaking’ could be either audible or mental, public or private (verses 2, 14, 18, 28). It is also used to describe our internal dialog, “let him speak to himself” (verse 28). But the most common use of ‘speak’ in this chapter is an act of addressing the congregation (verses 3, 6, 23, etc.).

What could ‘be silent - don’t speak’ mean? What sort of public ‘speaking’ was Paul seeking to restrict? As you may have discovered, commentaries provide a variety of possible explanations. Some suggest that the ‘silence’ was intended to stop ‘chit-chat’ among women. But men are just as capable of ‘chit-chat’. If ‘chit-chat’ were a problem, we would expect Paul to silence the ‘chit-chat’ itself, and not the women. Here are some other possibilities:

1. The command for 'silence' applies to a specific group of difficult women: Some suggest that the apostle seeks here to address a specific problem in Corinth - the vocal participation of some particularly difficult women, who needed to be silenced until they could learn better social manners. But the text itself provides no indication that the restriction was directed towards a specific group of difficult women, or that the restrictions were temporary or local. In fact, the restriction Paul had in mind was to apply to "all the congregations of the saints" (14:33). I find this explanation very inadequate.
2. The 'silence' was to prevent wives from embarrassing their husbands: The Greek words for 'man' and 'woman' can also be translated as 'husband' and 'wife'. The suggestion, then, is that what Paul seeks to stop is wives correcting their own husbands during the church meetings. To do so would embarrass the husband and those around them - it would be shameful. For this reason, wives should be silent in church meetings and direct their questions to their husbands once they are at home. But this restriction is rather artificial. Could a woman publicly correct or ask questions of other men in church meetings, as long as they weren't her husband? Why should unmarried women and widows be allowed to be vocal, why restrict only married women? I find this interpretation also very weak.
3. The 'silence' was to prevent women from asking questions: "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. *If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home*; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (14:34-35). Paul calls for women to be 'silent' in church meetings, and then as a replacement (or solution) to this 'silence', he encourages them to ask their questions at home. Some understand from this reasoning that Paul simply wanted to stop the women from asking 'questions in church' and encourage them instead to ask their 'questions at home'. But why would women be allowed to participate vocally in everything else, with asking questions as the only exception? I find this explanation rather simplistic. It doesn't ring true.
4. The 'silence' was to prevent women from judging prophecies: More recently it has been common to understand the command for 'silence' as a request for women to abstain from publicly judging the prophets. This explanation has its merits, and is receiving growing acceptance. Some suggest that the "others" who are instructed to "weigh carefully what is said" are either the *other prophets* present, or perhaps the elders, who would have had the authority to interrupt and correct a deviant prophet. This interpretation requires "others" to refer to the men who are listening. Some people point out that there is nothing in this chapter to suggest that the judging or weighing of the prophets' messages was to be done out loud. Perhaps all the listeners are here being encouraged to "weigh carefully" *in their minds* every prophecy that was being given. This mental 'judging' is of course desirable, but given that the style of early church meetings was participative, it would have fitted in naturally for a prophet to be corrected publicly if what he or she was saying was incorrect. This public correction of prophecies was a task requiring authority, something suitably qualified men should do, not women – as an expression of the Creation Order principle. But could these strongly worded verses commanding 'silence' refer only to this relatively 'minor' activity? I suspect that the restriction on women is somewhat broader. The call here for women to be 'silent' could also include another activity mentioned in this chapter, namely the "word of instruction" ['a teaching' (Darby); 'a lesson' (ESV)] referred to in verse 26. This is the same word that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 2:12, here as a noun, and in his letter to Timothy as a verb, "I do not permit a woman to *teach*".

5. The command for 'silence' literally meant 'keep your mouths closed'!: The Greek word translated 'silent' is used three times in chapter 14. The speaker of tongues is asked to be *silent* if there is no translator present (verse 28). The person delivering a prophecy is asked to be *silent* if a revelation is given to someone else (verse 30) and finally, "women should remain *silent* in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says" (verse 34). Clearly the vocal participation of these three groups is being limited. In each case they are being asked to 'keep their mouths closed'! Note the structure of the passage: the apostle required the speaker of tongues *not to start* to address the congregation *if* there were no interpreter present (verse 28). This is conditional or situational silence. The apostle also required the person delivering a prophecy to *stop* addressing the congregation *if* a revelation were given to somebody else (verse 30). This is also conditional or situational silence. Those who put forward this interpretation point out that there is no 'if' connected with this call for women to be 'silent'. It is not conditional or situational silence, but *absolute* silence. Women should therefore 'keep their mouths closed' in church meetings, simply because they are women. In practice, those who hold to this position usually 'soften' this view somewhat to allow sisters to participate in congregational singing, saying 'amen', and in some cases giving the announcements or starting the hymns. I find the idea of *absolute* silence both extreme and unsustainable, and the attempts to 'soften' this position fairly arbitrary. I think there is a better explanation somewhere in between interpretations 4 and 5 above.

Different kinds of silence

To help clarify this discussion, let's consider the following three types of silence:

1. Absolute silence: Here we understand 'silence' to mean that a person must 'keep their mouth closed' for the duration of the church meeting. There was a time in church history when this was the way that this text was understood and applied. The female voice was not heard, not even in the church choir (young boys were called in to sing the melodies that were written for women). Today very few congregations are quite so strict.
2. General silence: Here we understand 'silence' to mean that a person should not be audible as an individual during church meetings, but that they may happily participate in all 'group' activities, like congregational singing, congregational reading of a portion of Scripture, saying 'amen', or collectively praying "Our Father" aloud. However, they may not teach, pray aloud, suggest a hymn, give a testimony, make an audible comment or observation to the whole group, or read a portion of Scripture aloud on their own, etc.
3. Specific silence: Here we understand 'silence' to mean that a person should not participate audibly in a church if their participation (a) threatens or restricts the multiple participation principle, or (b) is not understood by, or is not considered to be edifying for, the congregation, or (c) is considered to conflict with the Creation Order principle. Apart from these specific restrictions, the person is just as free as anybody else in the congregation to participate quietly or audibly in an appropriate way.

How do these three definitions of 'silence' compare with Paul's argument in chapter 14? Keep these three kinds of silence in mind as we consider the purpose of these restrictions, and how they relate to *submission* and *shame*.

(a) Restrictions and ‘submission’

Paul requires that “women should remain silent in the churches” and then adds that “they are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says” (14:34). Here, the apostle links his request for ‘silence’ with ‘submission’.

The apostle Peter urges, “wives, in the same way be *submissive* to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over *without words* by the behaviour of their wives” (1 Pet. 3:1). Here we also see a connection between the call to be ‘submissive’ and to do so ‘without words’. But notions of either *absolute* silence or *general* silence do not fit here. These kinds of silence would not help the wife to reach the goal of winning her husband for the Lord Jesus. She would need to continue to communicate with him, but in an attitude of submission, without turning him into an ‘evangelism project’. Peter also asks slaves to be *submissive* to their masters (1 Pet. 2:18) and young men to be *submissive* to those who are older (1 Pet. 5:5). In all of these cases, communication must continue, but in a special way. This calls for a kind of *specific silence*. This is also the case when Paul asks Christians to *submit* to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1), and church members *to submit* to the authority of their church elders (Heb. 13:17).

During church meetings, women “must be in submission, as the Law says” (14:34). To whom should the women be in submission? The New Testament always specifies to whom a person must submit. The only two exceptions in the New Testament are found here and in 1 Timothy 2:11. Only in these two passages is the ‘to whom’ omitted. Interestingly, these are the two passages that deal with the women’s limited participation in church meetings. This suggests that what the apostle has in mind is an *attitude* rather than a *relationship*. The call here is not for wives to be in submission to their husbands, neither for women to be in submission to men generally. The call is for women to display a submissive attitude, one of unassertiveness in church meetings. If and when a woman participates with *subjective* ministry during a church meeting, she is being asked to do so in an unassertive manner.

How does the Law support Paul’s argument here? Which Law does he have in mind? The Law of Moses does not require that women be silent or submissive. Was this an invitation to reflect on the passive role of women in Old Testament public worship? As we have already considered in chapter 5, the Church is not the continuation of Israel. It is something completely new. It is true that only men could be priests under the old covenant, and even then, only a select group of men. In contrast, in the church of Jesus Christ, every believer is a priest (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). It is more likely that when he seeks support for the submission of women, Paul has the Creation Order principle in mind. His point then, I think, is this: when a woman participates in *subjective* ministry in an unassertive manner in a church meeting, she is respecting the call for selective ‘silence’. In doing so, she is taking on her role as ‘helper’ in the ‘head-helper’ model, she is honoring the Creation Order principle. I think that women can function better as ‘helpers’ to the men in church meetings by practicing *specific* silence than they can by practicing *absolute* or *general* silence.

(b) Restrictions and ‘shame’

Why are women required to be ‘silent’ in church meetings? Paul notes that “it is *shameful* for a woman to speak in church” (14:35 ESV). In a shame-based culture, arguments around shame are very powerful. In chapter 11, we read that if a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, she “puts her own head to *shame*; for it is one and the same as a shaved [woman]” (11:5 Darby). A shaved head would have been just as *shameful* to a woman as praying or prophesying with her head uncovered. This could suggest that this *shame* is connected with culture. Today, here in the Netherlands, it is not *shameful* for a

woman to shave her head. In those days it was not *shameful* for a woman to pray or prophesy if she had her head covered. What kind of ‘speaking’ would be considered *shameful* for a woman in the context of a church meeting? If Paul meant that all kinds of speech were considered shameful for a woman, then he had *absolute* or *general* silence in mind. But if only the kinds of vocal participation that conflicted with the Creation Order were considered shameful, then he had *specific* silence in mind.

(c) The purpose of these restrictions

In this chapter, the apostle Paul is not imposing a set of *arbitrary* restrictions on the participation of believers within church meetings. These restrictions have a purpose, a goal. For example, by requiring the contribution of two or three prophets, and requiring a prophet to stop and give way to another that has just received a revelation, he protects the principle of multiple, Spirit-led participation. By requiring that a speaker of tongues should only speak in a church meeting if a translator is present, he protects the principle that everything in a meeting must be understood, and must lead to mutual edification. By restricting the number of people speaking in tongues to “two or at the most, three”, he protects the priority of prophecy. By asking women to be ‘silent’, he protects the Creation Order principle in church meetings. By requiring people to speak in turn, one at a time, he ensures understandable and orderly meetings. Clearly every form of participation in church meetings should be in some way a “manifestation of the Spirit” and “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7), for the “strengthening, encouragement, and comfort” of those present (14:3). It must “edify” (14:5, 17), and “build up the church” (14:12). In short, every form of audible participation “must be done for the strengthening of the church” (14:26).

My question, then, is what definition of ‘silence’ best contributes to this noble set of goals? *Absolute* or *general* silence may more strongly accentuate the ‘male-female’ distinction inherent in the Creation Order, when compared with *specific* silence. With the participation of women in group activities such as congregational singing, congregations that practice *general* silence for women will enjoy greater richness and fullness in their meetings than those who practice *absolute* silence. But I can’t fail to observe that congregations that practice *specific* silence, allowing women to contribute audibly in activities like prayer and prophecy, will enjoy so much more richness and fullness than those who practice *absolute* or *general* silence. The practice of *specific* silence among women during church meetings (participating together with men in *subjective* ministry, but refraining from taking part in *objective* ministry) is the arrangement that best helps a congregation to move in the direction of the apostolic goals mentioned above.

1 Corinthians 14: My Conclusion

In this chapter the apostle Paul provides directives for church meetings. He wishes to protect the principle of multiple participation, and the leading role of the Holy Spirit during such gatherings. The content and the manner of each form of participation should edify, build up, strengthen, instruct or encourage the church, and the proceedings should be conducted in harmony with the Creation Order principle. “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40).

As to *who* can participate audibly, Paul’s references to ‘all’, ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ should be taken literally unless there is a good reason not to do so. The references to ‘brothers’ usually refer to the whole congregation, including both men *and* women. Women are just as likely as men to be recipients of each of the spiritual gifts. The fact that in the middle of a section dealing with church order, the apostle Paul urges all his readers, both men and women, to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts” and repeatedly encourages all to seek to

“prophesy” (14:1, 5, 31, 39), would suggest that if anyone received a *revelation* from God, they would also be able share it for the benefit of others – while respecting some of the ‘conditions’ of order in church meetings. If it were not for verses 34 and 35, nothing in chapter 14 would suggest that there were differences between the ways that men and women should participate in church meetings.

Those verses that do restrict the participation of women are genuine apostolic material, and therefore should be taken seriously. In considering the meaning of this apostolic request for women to be ‘silent’ during assembly meetings, we considered three types of silence. Technically, *absolute* silence best fits the text. Historically, different forms of *general* silence have been common practice in most Christian churches. But I conclude that *specific* silence, also fitting the text, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, best contributes to the reaching of the apostolic goals for church meetings expressed in this chapter.



Putting the Puzzle Together – Summary and Conclusions

It is now time to fit together the conclusions from the previous chapters into one harmonious framework. To help you to follow the flow of the argument, I shall keep my comments short.

The Creation Order – Genesis 1-3

New Testament statements on gender nearly always draw their support from these three chapters in Genesis. Here we learn that both men and women are created in God's image, a fact that gives them equal value and dignity. Both are intelligent, creative beings. Both are equally sinful, and in need of forgiveness and grace. Both are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and can have the same talents and receive the same spiritual gifts.

In this passage we also learn that men and women were deliberately designed to be different from each other. Man has been given the responsibility of being a loving and caring *head*, and woman has been given the responsibility of being a willing and intelligent *helper*. I use the term 'Creation Order principle' to refer to this equal-value, different-role distinction between men and women. This Creation Order is a timeless principle that is expressed differently in different times and settings. It is God's idea, and therefore something good and positive, which when expressed properly will lead to human flourishing. The Creation Order principle finds expression primarily in the family and in the church.

Clarifications and definitions

Church guidelines: The Church is a mystery revealed to us in the New Testament. Explicit guidelines as to the structure and functioning of the church must therefore be found in the New Testament. To understand how the Creation Order principle is to be expressed in church meetings, we need to look at relevant narrative and didactic New Testament texts. A balanced conclusion will begin by allowing the four basic texts to inform each other - rather than using our understanding of one text to force an interpretation on all the others.

Equal and different: Galatians 3:28 contains a beautiful, inclusive affirmation that "in Christ" there is "neither male nor female". It affirms that men and women are equally justified and accepted as children of God. This text does not suspend the gender differences in the family or church settings.

Inclusive terms: When we encounter words such as 'all', 'everybody', 'everyone' and 'brothers', we should understand 'the whole congregation', both men and women, unless there is some clear evidence to the contrary.

Teaching and prophesying: To teach the Bible and to prophesy are two distinct activities. The basis for teaching is the Holy Scriptures. The basis for prophesying is the receipt of a revelation. A teacher may include a prophetic word (received at home or while speaking) in his message, but they remain essentially distinct activities.

Objective and Subjective ministries: In the early church, we identify two types of ministry: *Objective* ministry involved activities that were invested with authority and are reserved for suitably qualified men. This included activities such as leading the local church (elders), teaching the Holy Scriptures in church meetings, and perhaps also publicly judging another

person's prophetic words. *Subjective* ministry is any activity that is based on the believer's *personal* relationship with God, and the Holy Spirit's *personal* leading or gifting. This may or may not be spontaneous. This ministry does not carry the authority inherent in teaching God's Word. This included public, vocal activities such as praying, prophesying (different from teaching), speaking in tongues, interpreting, sharing a word of knowledge, etc.

Absolute, General and Specific Silence: In exploring the possible meanings of the word 'silent' in 1 Corinthians 14, we considered three types of silence in assembly meetings: *absolute silence*: when a woman's mouth must remain closed for the duration of the meeting; *general silence*: where women can only join in with the audible congregational activities, like singing; and *specific silence*: where women are required not to participate in *objective ministry* but are free to participate, together with men, in *subjective ministry* – in an appropriate way.

Putting the puzzle together

There are four key passages in the New Testament that help us understand the roles of men and women in church meetings. Together they show us how the Holy Spirit worked among believers in the meetings of the early Church to ensure that He could encourage and edify those present while giving due honour to God's Creation Order principle. It is now time to put the puzzle together.

(1) 1 Timothy 2: Praying, Teaching and Authority

In this passage, the apostle Paul uses the Creation Order principle to require that Christian women to abstain from *teaching* in the church and from *exercising authority* over men in the church. He is asking women not to participate in *objective* ministry. He also urges all believers to pray, and to do this in an appropriate manner. When dealing with prayer, Paul does not refer to the Creation Order principle since he is not pointing to a difference between men and women. He is asking both men and women to pray (*subjective* ministry) in an appropriate way. This praying by men and women, like the teaching by men mentioned above, is in the context of the church or church meetings.

(2) 1 Corinthians 14: 'Be Silent – Don't Speak'

In this passage Paul encourages men and women to eagerly desire spiritual gifts (especially the gift of prophecy) and simultaneously he provides guidelines to limit and moderate the participation of individuals in the meetings of the church to ensure that a number of goals would be met. The guidelines were given to protect the principle of multiple, Spirit led participation, to ensure that everything said could be understood, to ensure that every contribution would strengthen, encourage, and comfort those present, to ensure that the Creation Order principle was respected and that everything done would glorify God. Towards the end of the chapter, Paul requires that women to be 'silent'. *Absolute* silence best fits the text. *General* silence is preferable in that, for example, it enriches the time of worship through congregational singing. *Specific* silence, however, is the arrangement that best helps a congregation move in the direction of the apostle's noble goals for church meetings. In harmony with the instructions given in **1 Timothy 2**, Paul is asking women to honour the Creation Order principle by abstain from *objective ministry*, and encourages both men and women, to eagerly desire spiritual gifts (especially prophecy) and to participate in *subjective ministry* (in an appropriate way).

(3) 1 Corinthians 11: Praying and Prophesying

In the first half of this chapter, the apostle Paul explains *how* men and women should pray and prophesy. This is *subjective* ministry, a ministry that is open to both men and women in church meetings. When they prayed and prophesied, men are asked to 'uncover' and women

to 'cover' their heads. In harmony with **1 Timothy 2** and **1 Corinthians 14** women are seen here participating only in *subjective* ministry.

(4) Acts 2: The First Assembly Meeting

In this passage we read about the first church meeting. All those present, both men and women, were filled with the Holy Spirit; something like a tongue of fire rested on each one of them, and they all began to speak in other tongues (a form of prophesying). Here we see both men and women, enabled by the Holy Spirit, engaging in *subjective* ministry at this first church meeting.

Some 20 years after the beginning of the church, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church and later his first letter to Timothy. During these years, different irregular practices had crept into church meetings. One of these was that some women were exceeding their God-given area of ministry, and were attempting to exercise roles of authority in the church, seeking to engage in *objective* ministry. In these two letters, Paul does not seek to stop certain types of ministry, or to silence what the Holy Spirit had begun at Pentecost (multiple participation of men and women, led by the Holy Spirit). The apostolic instructions in these two letters are guidelines to moderate participation, and correct deficiencies in the church meetings to ensure that the Holy Spirit would still be free to lead among those present, that every participation would be edifying, that the Creation Order principle would be honoured and God glorified. What the Spirit of God did in this first meeting of the church (empowering men and women in *subjective* ministry) was later moderated, not forbidden. This view is in harmony with **1 Timothy 2** and **1 Corinthians 11** and **1 Corinthians 14**.

The completed puzzle

In the early Church, we see what the Holy Spirit began, and what the apostles sought to promote: a community of followers of Jesus in which suitably qualified men (and not women) took on the role of *leadership* (called elders or overseers) and *teaching* in their assembly meetings. Both men and women participated in these assembly meetings in *subjective* activities such as 'praying and prophesying', and they were encouraged to participate with an appropriate attitude and in a way that edified the community, gave honour to God's Creation Order principle and glorified God – in such a way that God's presence was really felt among them. This explanation provides a simple framework that is in harmony with **Genesis 1-3**, **Acts 2**, **1 Corinthians 11**, **1 Corinthians 14** and **1 Timothy 2**.

Is this the only model that provides an explanation of the five key Bible texts on this topic? No. In my mind, those who propose an egalitarian model do violence to the Creation Order principle that is so prevalent throughout Scripture. I have read many other complementarian explanations – each with its own set of stress points and weaknesses. The model I am proposing here also has its stress points and weaknesses. But, after everything I have read, seen and heard on this topic, the framework I propose here is, in my view, the model that best fits all the Biblical data. After many years of searching, I now feel at peace with this interpretation of Scripture. The framework I propose here has the added advantage that the conclusions can be easily explained to a congregation and the detailed applications can happily vary between local churches – all this encouraging a rich, gracious and edifying atmosphere where both men and women may participate while honouring the Creation Order principle.

The following chapter is a case study. In it you will read about why and how we studied this important and emotive topic here in our assembly back in 2013. You will also find out how we chose to apply this model locally and what has happened since then.



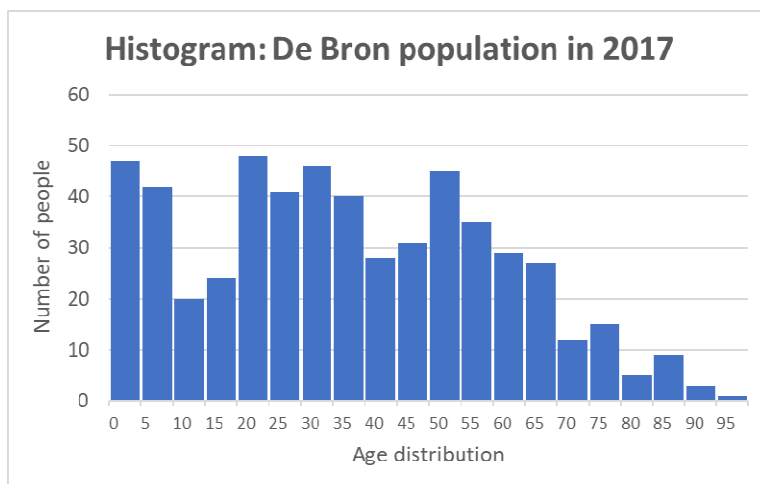
Chapter 11

Developing and Applying these Conclusions Locally

Theological studies are never intended to be an academic exercise. The aim of studying God's word is to provide direction to our private and collective lives. From time to time I am asked about the changes that have taken place in our congregation here in The Netherlands over the last 4 years. People usually ask the following questions: "What is the theological framework you use to allow women to take part in some activities but not others?", "How do you implement this theological conclusion in your assembly?", "How was the theological framework developed, explained and implemented in your assembly?", and "In hindsight, what positive or negative effects have you seen in your assembly?". I have addressed the first question at length in chapters 3-10. Here I will provide some answers to the other three questions. Every congregation has its own history, its own family culture, its own social setting. What I share here is not intended to be a model for all churches to imitate. Your conclusions and your local situation may be different from mine. Nevertheless, you may well find some ideas here that could be useful in your own context.

Our background: A growing need for clarity

The congregation in which I currently serve as one of the 5 elders is called 'De Bron'.¹⁸ It is a lively, friendly, open and growing congregation. There is a diverse mixture of children, singles, younger and older families and elderly people. There are other significant differences within the congregation, such as levels of education, financial status, ethnicity and cultural roots, and theological inclinations. Our most recent assembly address book (October 2017)



contains 558 names. All together, on a typical Sunday morning, about 300 people (including children) are present – which is fairly large for a Brethren assembly.

History and developments: This assembly began in the living room of the Prijt family, back in 1916. It was one of a network of some 60 exclusive Brethren congregations here in The Netherlands. Over the last 20

years, the network of Brethren these assemblies has become increasingly weaker, allowing local congregations to explore and benefit from a wider spectrum of conferences and ministries. This is very much the case in our local setting. In 2005, after several years of Saturday morning Bible studies on leadership,¹⁹ the first group of five recognised elders was formed. Since then, our congregation has been led by a group of elders. The presence of a

¹⁸ Dutch for 'The Source'. Website: <http://www.debroneindhoven.nl/>

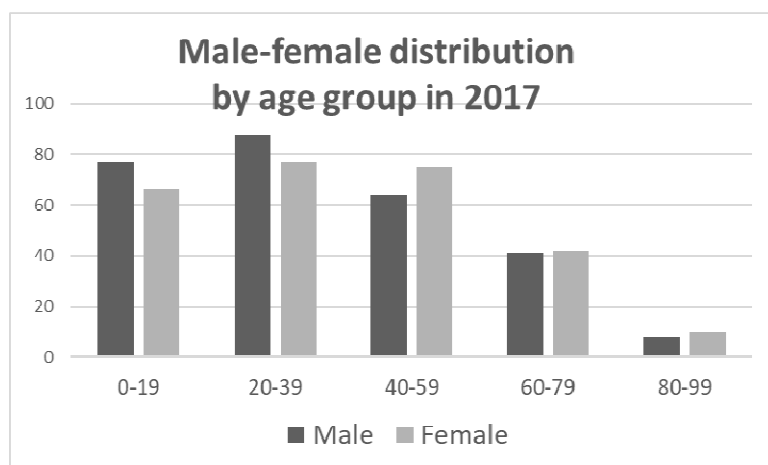
¹⁹ With the help of the book 'Biblical Eldership - An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Leadership' by Alexander Strauch.

recognised group of elders was a very important factor in providing direction and momentum to the study of the issue of gender roles within the church.

The Lord's Supper is normally a weekly celebration. For many years, the Ministry of the Word meeting would take place on Sunday afternoons – following an open-ministry format. These last 15 years have brought other local changes: We now have the Ministry of the Word meeting in the morning, after the Lord's Supper. The speaker and topic are often announced beforehand. These changes have increased the number of people who choose to attend this meeting, motivated, we think, by the improved quality of the spiritual food given. There have also been developments in musical style, the use of musical instruments, and a growing variety of songs and hymns – some of which are 'home made'. In addition to our normal hymn book, we print our own updated song book every two years. I have found that being part of a growing and developing, lively, assembly has been a privilege and a blessing for me and my family. However it also presents a unique set of challenges. Change is often uncomfortable, but is a natural part of life.

Balancing order and freedom: The simple Brethren model of church life works well in smaller 'family-like' congregations. Every Sunday it is easy to see who is missing – which makes pastoral care a little easier. Open and free participation during the Lord's Supper and ministry meetings takes place more naturally in these 'family-like' congregations. But when an assembly meeting exceeds 100-150 people, healthy order can become an issue. It is a challenge to find a balance between order and freedom. Some larger Brethren congregations in South East Asia limit the vocal participation to only their elders, or a reduced group of *recognised* spiritual, mature and gifted people. Freedom is thus restricted to an agreed group of people. We have chosen a different model. During these last 5 years, every Sunday one of the five elders is 'on duty'. He arrives half an hour before the meeting begins and is available for conversations with visitors. He usually starts the Lord's Supper with a Bible text, a prayer and a hymn – or asks a fellow brother to do so. This elder is responsible for the correct use of the microphones, seeking to ensure that every act of participation brings glory to God and builds up the congregation. He will intervene if someone seeks to disrupt the healthy order of the meeting. The presence of this 'on duty' elder has also been very helpful in the implementation of the participation of women in church meetings.

A growing need to address the issue of gender: The Netherlands is a very modern and morally liberal society. It is also a very individualistic society, in which everyone has a right to



their own opinion; to have it heard, and to have it respected. As always, secular culture is felt within the church. The society in which some of our younger people have grown up considers the roles of men and women as being interchangeable. In 'De Bron', however, women were required to be silent during all assembly meetings. A growing number of denominational and

independent churches in The Netherlands have begun to allow their women to participate vocally, to lead the 'worship team', to teach, to pastor congregations, and in some, women are even referred to as 'apostles'. For over 10 years, there had been a growing need in our

assembly to take a fresh look at this topic of church and gender. Some felt that the gifting and the experience of women was being undervalued or simply ignored. There were deep convictions and deep emotions on both sides of this debate. As church leaders we were aware that the issue of gender had the potential to divide our assembly. At times, those with strong personalities would publicly express their personal convictions – much to the frustration of those who disagreed. Sometimes a new or a visiting woman would spontaneously suggest a hymn or pray in a prayer meeting – causing reactions of both joy and distress in the assembly. This was not healthy. *The lack of clarity was becoming divisive.* As time went on, the tension was only growing.

Fear can paralyse. Paralysis and faithfulness are not the same thing. It is easy to continue to put off difficult discussions indefinitely. There are always other topics, concerns, pastoral visits, and programs that require our attention. At the beginning of 2012 we decided as elders that we would tackle this difficult subject in 2013, and that we would give ourselves a year to work on it. At this time, the team of elders consisted of Gerard Venhuizen, Gerrit-Jan van Kleef, Hans Savert, Hans-Jürgen Reumerman and myself. During those default months, I grew to love and greatly respect these hard-working Godly men.

Step One: We Prepared our Hearts

In the autumn of 2012, the elders booked 2 days away at a hotel. Our personal views were diverse, and we felt the tension within the team. After a time of prayer, one of the elders suggested that each of us in turn should share our personal worries and concerns in relation to this topic. What hidden motives or fears did we have? No one studies Scripture in a vacuum. We all have good and bad experiences and pressures that influence our judgments. Having a personal 'bias' is unavoidable, but by identifying our possible 'bias', and sharing it with others, we might be able to reduce its effect on our judgment. Constructive discussions require this degree of sincerity, vulnerability and openness.

What can these pressures look like? Some may live under strong expectations from a dominant wife or parent. Some may be hoping for greater freedom for women in order to reduce the risk of losing young families. There may be a deep concern for the wellbeing of the elderly saints who have already lived through many changes. Our judgment as we study Scripture can be influenced by the expectations of our favourite Bible teachers or those of people and assemblies that we have happily worked with in the past. No-one likes to be judged, criticised or rejected by those they love. What hidden motives or fears did I find in my heart? I have a deep love for my brothers and sisters in Colombia, where I spent half of my life. How would they react if I came to a different conclusion? Would a change in my understanding of Scripture cause confusion or discouragement among them? Since 1992 I have worked 'full time' in Christian activities. Most of the assemblies and families that financially support us and our work ask their women not to participate audibly in their meetings. Is it worth rocking the boat? *My strong personal preference was to keep things the way they were.* As a family, we had lived through a Brethren network division back in 2005 which was emotionally draining, and which had also had negative financial consequences for us. I had no desire to repeat the experience. I did not want to risk new tensions and criticisms. I became aware that with this 'bias' of mine, it would be very difficult to study God's word with an open heart and mind. Have you discovered your own 'bias' on this topic?

After a time of open sharing, we individually presented our fears to the Lord. We asked Him to remove them so that we could study His word and listen to His voice with an open heart. This, for me, was a turning point. It was a decision to be open to the Lord's leading without forcing an acceptable compromise or desired outcome. If you have not reached this point, I

strongly recommend you do so – as you study this topic or any other biblical theme. *Our fears and desires bias our open study of God's word.*

Step Two: We prepared a Plan

Our plan for going forward was to study Scripture together, asking the Lord to shed His light on His word. But we were aware that such studies can broaden and go on for years. Our study had to remain focused. After the preparation of our hearts, we set some limits to our study.

Doctrinal boundaries: The issue of eldership would not be reopened: we agreed that being an *elder* was a role for men and not for women (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6; 1 Cor. 16:15-18). We would not include in our study the functions or responsibilities of elders and deacons. We would not reopen the issue of *head coverings*, since this topic had been discussed years before and been left as a matter of personal conviction. We defined our central question: *what should be the role of men and women when we meet together as a church, specifically on Sunday mornings and during the mid-week prayer and home Bible study meetings?*

Time boundaries: As elders we carried a number of different responsibilities. The time and energy left available to devote to these studies was limited. This study had the potential to go on *indefinitely*. There are always more good books we could read! Our plan was to work hard on the topic for one year, and then, at the end of 2013, we would draw a line under our studies and discussions.

A realistic goal: We were not expecting to find ‘the’ answer that would unite all Bible-believing-Christians worldwide. Nor would we seek to come up with a pragmatic, temporary compromise that would keep the majority of our congregation together. Our goal was to make some decisions based on the light we expected to receive from the Lord. Then we would move on to other topics and assembly needs. We would only reopen the gender topic if and when the Lord made it abundantly clear that we should do so.

Working together with the congregation

After those two days, and a number of other study meetings, we wrote up our progress. It was an outline of our understanding of the key relevant Scriptures, including possible weaknesses in our arguments, pointing out where we still had our doubts.

Assembly decisions: How does an assembly make a decision? Must all brothers and sisters agree before a project can begin or a change implemented? When everyone agrees, decisions are easy to make. But in larger assemblies, and on delicate matters, this is often *not* the case. Some congregations reach a decision by taking votes. If more than 80% agree, the motion is passed. This method works, but is difficult to support biblically. What is a good method of decision-making? At some point an engine must be switched on or off. Someone has to do it. Not everyone in the assembly can turn the key at the same time. I propose that an *assembly decision* requires that a group of mature, spiritual men, the elders, after broad discussion within the assembly, turn that key on or off. Like the parents of grown-up children, *elders discuss the possibilities with the whole congregation, they guide the discussion process, they welcome constructive feedback, and then, before the Lord, they make a decision.* Scripture makes it clear that church leadership carries with it certain authority but also special responsibility: they “must give an account” (Heb. 13:17). Everyone in the assembly is involved in the process, but not everyone is held equally accountable or responsible for its outcome.

Constructive criticism: To make good use of the giftedness in our own assembly, early in 2013 we presented our insights and findings to a group of 10 respected brothers during a Saturday morning seminar. Our question was: are we missing something important? The two-hour presentation was followed by open discussion. During the following weeks, we received some written feedback, and visited a number of these brothers in their homes to discuss their insights and concerns. Our conclusions, together with a possible action plan, were developed accordingly. It is my experience that open unguided discussions in large groups seldom produce anything useful. Usually, dominant characters will suppress the gentler speakers. But a clear proposal leads to informed and focused discussion. It is constructive. It leads to healthy decision-making.

Involving the congregation: Later in the year, we made an assembly-wide invitation. All those interested in the topic were invited to a Saturday workshop, which consisted of a presentation followed by an open time of questions and answers. About 60 brothers and sisters turned up. I learned that for some people in our assembly, the roles of men and women in assembly meetings was a very important and emotive issue, but for others it was no big deal! To my surprise, I discovered that a fairly large group of brothers and sisters didn't mind what would be decided! Whatever we decided would be fine with them! Looking at this positively, perhaps they simply trusted those involved. After this workshop we visited the homes of those who had deep theological or practical concerns, to listen and to discuss the matter further. *Be assured, dear reader, that there is no biblical interpretation on this topic that will keep everyone's conscience at peace.* The least we can do is listen carefully and try to explain – without judging motives or attempting to press for agreement. Of course, theological agreement makes walking together easier (Amos 3:3). If we take the time to listen, carefully and seriously, we show genuine love and respect even if we end up disagreeing. This is very important.

Beyond differences: a pure heart

True inter-Christian fellowship is more than just doctrinal agreement. It is based on our fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). While on earth, we may sincerely differ on some issues. How should we get along with our fellow brothers and sisters when our consciences differ? Sometimes God needs time to help us to develop or change our convictions (Philip. 3:15-16). You may know by experience, as I do, that changing a deep-seated conviction is a slow and very painful process. And while we live and respectfully discuss our differences, we shall see what is in each other's hearts. After all, we are called to "pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace" not along with those who happen to agree with us, but "along with *those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart*" (2 Tim. 2:22).

Time to apply, live, express these conclusions locally

As the year 2013 advanced, we had a growing peace about our conclusions and the resulting proposal for our local assembly. In November 2013, on a Sunday morning, I shared the theological framework with the whole assembly – basically a summary of what you have read in chapters 3-10. Then in December, also on a Sunday morning when the whole congregation was together, another elder explained how we proposed to implement some changes in order to ensure that our practice would be in line with our theological findings and conclusions. *With the same theological conclusions, different assemblies may find different ways to apply, live or express these conclusions locally.* Here follows the way that we have chosen to express our theological conclusions here in Eindhoven:

Activities restricted to suitably qualified men:

- Assembly leadership: this is the responsibility of the elders.
- Assembly teaching: Preaching and teaching in our assembly meetings.
- The Lord's Supper: Serving the bread/cup at the Lord's Supper (*).
- Baptism: Officiating a baptism by speaking the Matthew 28:19 baptism formula (*).

(*) We made clear to the congregation that we do not have direct biblical support for these two recommendations, but we chose this practice as a way to give visible expression to the Creation Order principle in our assembly.

Activities for suitably qualified men and women:

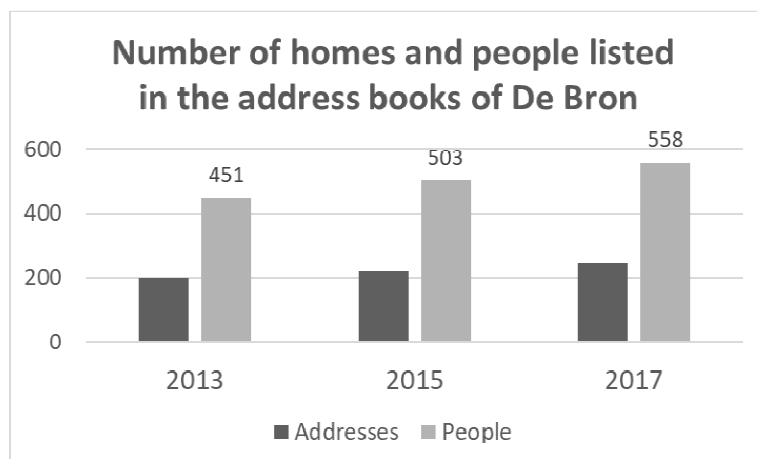
- The Lord's Supper: Brothers and sisters are invited to pray, suggest a hymn, read a Bible text (perhaps adding a short comment on how the Lord uses this text to personally encourage them - but sisters are asked not to use this as an opportunity to teach).
- Testimonies: During evangelistic, baptism or testimony meetings, both men and women may publicly share a testimony of what God has done or is doing in their life.
- Prayer meeting: Both men and women are invited to suggest a hymn, read an encouraging Bible text (perhaps adding a short comment on how the Lord uses this text to personally encourage them - but women are asked not to use this as an opportunity to teach), to share their concerns and prayer needs, and also to pray out loud.
- Other assembly activities: Brothers and sisters are both encouraged to take on responsibilities in areas such as children's work, youth activities, house groups, home visitation, pastoral work, prayer ministry, running workshops and courses, music ministry, administrative, technical and financial tasks, etc.

Other recommendations:

- Family unity: We publicly encouraged believers to discuss these recommendations in their homes. We encouraged women not to take part audibly if her husband did not agree or support her. Furthermore, we said that we would consider it 'odd' if a married woman were to audibly participate significantly more than her believing husband. This was to encourage a healthy balance at home.
- Creation Order principle: Some understand the head covering as a cultural expression of womanhood in Bible times. Others see it as a Christian symbol. We encouraged Christian couples to talk about this and reach their own conclusions before the Lord. We would respect these different interpretations and convictions, and choose not to judge people's motives.
- Male responsibility: We encouraged Christian men to recognise their God-given responsibility of headship, and not to become spiritually passive at home or in church life. In making room for the audible participation of women, we strongly urged our men to remain spiritually active and engaged in church life and in the church meetings.
- Longer meetings: In order to reflect the increase in potential participants, the duration of the Lord's Supper would be extended from 60 to 70 minutes.

Looking back after 4 years (2014-2017)

Some congregations that have made space for the participation of women have changed dramatically, the men becoming increasingly passive and the women basically 'running the show'.



Thankfully this has *not* been our experience. Here are some tips and observations as I look back over the last 4 years:

Wait for the right time: If there is harmony in the assembly, and the women are reasonably happy to remain generally silent in church meetings, I would suggest that you do not address this topic. It is not the right time. Based on what I have seen and

experienced, discussions on this topic can be incredibly emotional and time consuming. But if you sense deep unrest in your assembly, do not run away from the challenge. My hope is that this writing may help assembly leaders who face that situation.

United leadership: Work through the topic carefully together among the elders or leaders of your assembly. You need to act together. Be patient with each other, keep trusting each other, keep seeking the Lord for guidance, keep moving. Fear among leaders leads to paralysis within the assembly. A division in the leadership will likely lead to a division in your assembly.

Stay together: Keep the assembly involved in the study and discussions. Towards the end of 2013, one brother requested a visit from two elders. He could see a weakness in our proposed biblical explanation, and was naturally concerned. Knowing that he is very intelligent and is blessed with a wealth of Bible knowledge, I asked him, "what explanation would *you* propose concerning the role of women in our assembly?". His honest reply was, "I have no proposal. I find weaknesses in every explanation I have heard, read or seen". We smiled. I knew exactly what he meant. That is why it would be possible to keep on talking about this topic indefinitely! Another brother requested a visit from two elders. He told us, "I have carefully followed your studies this year, and you have not convinced me with your arguments. But I appreciate the open and serious way you have worked with the assembly on this difficult topic. I do not plan to leave the assembly. I will calmly submit to this new arrangement. But I just wanted you to know that you have not convinced me". We smiled. We did not try to convince him. I recall only one unpleasant home visit on this topic, where a very distressed older woman accused us of cutting pieces out of the Bible. In time she calmed down. She and her husband still form part of our assembly.

Did anyone leave the assembly? In a large assembly there are always people coming and going, but I am aware of only one sister, in her nineties, who chose to leave because women were now able to pray and suggest songs in assembly meetings. Of course, there are fundamental doctrines on which we cannot compromise without preaching a different gospel. But I am convinced that any practical or doctrinal difference can be made so important or explained in such a way that it will force a division in a congregation. I have seen this happen. *Staying together, serving together, worshipping together is a heart choice.* And yes, God's grace will always be necessary.

Keep on teaching: During the first two years, only a few women took part audibly during our Sunday meetings. Those who did so, did it in a calm and spiritually mature way. During the last two years, I have noticed that the participation of women has grown, especially among a few 'new' sisters. *If you want the Creation Order principle to be expressed in a healthy, biblically-balanced, orderly way, from time to time you must keep teaching it and keep encouraging it.* The secular pressure to eliminate all gender distinction is strong! What you forget, you lose!

Passive men: I am convinced that on average women can express themselves far better in prayer than we men can. Their open and warm heart for the Lord, and eyes that see family needs (that we men often overlook), greatly enrich the assembly worship and prayer meetings. The great danger is that men begin to pull back. We men can feel that our prayers are quite boring and unimpressive compared to theirs; that the women are doing a fine job and we relax and simply add our heartfelt 'amen' to what they say and do. We need to regularly encourage men to stay connected and active in the church meetings. Until now, the men have remained connected and active in our assembly meetings. The personal testimonies of both brothers and sisters before baptisms or during occasional testimony meetings have been an encouragement to us all.

First theology, then implementation: As society rapidly changes, there will always be a pressure for change within the Church. As I said earlier, change is a natural part of life. If you prevent change, you lose something. The pressure to change can be positive, it can stop us from becoming 'photocopy machines' – faithfully and mindlessly replicating what others have done before us. But the great and real danger that I see is that some congregations easily cut-and-paste teachings and practices they see or experience in conferences or other churches *without serious theological reflection!* Their reasoning goes something like this: "If others who love Jesus are doing it, it must be ok. If it is producing fruit, if we see God's blessings, then it must be good. We will do it too!"

If you are a pragmatic, 'copy others', sort of person, please remember the story of Samson and the prostitute. He slept with her. At midnight he "got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill" (Jud. 1-3). Where did Samson get that supernatural strength from? God's Spirit! What was he doing there? Visiting a prostitute. You would be very unwise to conclude from this story that God is approving prostitution. Theology determines what is good and bad. God's blessings and supernatural manifestations are only evidence of His immeasurable grace, not His endorsement of a theology or practice. Take note, if God only worked through perfect people, ministries and churches, He would not be able to work through you and me. We desperately need that grace! I repeat, only theology can help us determine what is good and bad. Furthermore, when significant changes are brought into an assembly without the prior work of serious biblical study, this creates an unhealthy precedent. *Without a good theological framework, doctrinal and practical 'shifting' will never end.*

Is this a 'new teaching'? Some Christians operate under the motto, "What is good is not new and what is new is not good". Is this helpful here? Yes, if it is used to explore what happened in the early churches and then seek to learn from them. No, if it is used to hold on to the way that we have always explained or done things in the past. This is why serious Bible study should precede serious change. Christians from different traditions throughout the ages have also offered their explanations, some stronger, some weaker. It is my considered and honest personal judgement, that the explanation presented in this writing best fits all the relevant

New Testament Scriptures. I do not consider the explanation presented in this writing as 'new teaching'. It is an attempt to understand and then return to what was in the beginning, to the "ancient paths" (Jer. 6:16), to that period of Church history *before* the pressure from Jewish traditionalists and the Church Fathers basically eliminated Spirit-led, *subjective* ministry from church meetings - and in so doing, they also closed the door to the limited audible participation women enjoyed in such meetings at the beginning.

Progressive or limited implementation: You may agree with the explanations and conclusions expressed in earlier chapters, that women are free to participate in *subjective ministry* during assembly meetings. Your concern now is how to implement these conclusions locally. Please don't be in a hurry. In His good time, the Lord opens the doors and shows the way.

In some assemblies, women have already been vocal in church meetings by giving out announcements, or by starting the hymns, or by praying in the prayer meetings, or occasionally by sharing their testimonies – but they have had no theological support for what they are doing. The teaching in this paper will support what they are already doing. Nothing needs to change. In future, the assembly leaders may use this theological framework to encourage their women to expand into new areas, for instance, by encouraging them also to express prayers of worship on Sundays, or to suggest a song, or read a Bible text – if they sense the Spirit of God is leading them to do so. There is no hurry to implement all the freedom offered under subjective ministry. Every assembly has its own history and character. This theological framework will also be useful to teach the men to take up their own responsibilities when it comes to subjective and objective ministries, and to encourage women to participate, but also to respect the boundaries and not venture into objective ministry. By moving only within the freedoms offered by the theological framework, an assembly can develop at its own speed while honouring the Creation Order principle.

Grey areas: more rules? As you have seen above, we have agreed on some basic guidelines in order to honour the Creation Order in our assembly life and meetings. Yes, there are some grey areas. Life is full of grey areas! *My tip here is: Keep things simple. Teach principles, and don't try to make rules to eliminate all grey areas.* Grey areas can be healthy for believers. Personally, they must study Scripture, seek the Lord and develop their own convictions. They will learn to love, and not to judge the person next to them who has come to a different conclusion. If in their heart a man or woman believes that the 'head-helper' model is something good and God-given, they will find their own unique ways to express this attitude in their homes and assembly life. Teach the principles!

Conclusion

As I look back, for me the greatest benefit of this theological framework is the contribution that women now make with their audible prayers – both on Sunday mornings and in prayer meetings. The concerns of women, the issues they see and pray for, and their approaches to addressing our heavenly Father in prayer are somewhat different from those of men. Their vocal participation becomes a reflection of their daily walk with the Lord, and it contributes to the spiritual atmosphere of the meetings. In their participation, they show themselves to be 'suitable' helpers, who 'complement' the men very well. In our assembly there is now harmony on this issue. Those tense months of study and implementation are now behind us. We have learnt from the process. We are now busy with the many other aspects of a growing assembly life. Christ remains among us, and therefore we look to the future with caution and optimism.



Chapter 12

My Personal Conviction, Practice and Teaching

Some people have asked me about my convictions on the role of women in assembly meetings, and how my wife, Anneke, and I practice these convictions. They want to know what they should expect from us if we were to visit their church, youth camp or conference. This short chapter aims to answer those questions.

My personal conviction

In Genesis 1-3 we find God's original good design for men and women. Men and women are equal in value and giftedness. God chose to make men and women different, so that they would complement each other. Man was given the role of 'head' and woman that of suitable 'helper'. Individually, as man and woman, and together in our relationship, we express the image of God. Together I refer to these foundational teachings on gender as the 'Creation Order principle'. Our challenge is to honour and express the Creation Order principle in our families and churches.

In the Church there are two types of ministry: *objective ministry*, which finds its origin in Holy Scripture and is invested with authority, like Bible teaching and church leadership (being an elder), and *subjective ministry*, which finds its origin in a believer's personal walk and communion with the Lord. This ministry is to be used to serve others, but it is not invested with authority. It includes activities such as praying, suggesting a song, giving a testimony or sharing an impression that the Lord has placed on your heart (not teaching). The four key Bible texts in the New Testament that help us to understand how the Creation Order principle should be expressed in the church meetings are: Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2. My conclusion is that, in order to honour God's Creation Order principle during church meetings, the 'silence' required of women in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 is not *general* silence but a *specific* kind of silence, namely, that they abstain from any form of objective ministry. Objective ministry is entrusted to suitably qualified men.

Prophecy, as practiced in the New Testament, is not the same as teaching. Teaching finds its origin in the study of the Holy Scriptures. Prophesying finds its origin in a revelation, that is, in a personal experience led by the Holy Spirit. It is a word from the Lord for the moment. Therefore, New Testament prophecy (as found in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14) is *subjective ministry*. I hold that the apostle Paul had the assembly meetings in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Both men and women could participate in *subjective ministry* ("praying and prophesying") during assembly meetings – with the right attitude and in an appropriate manner.

My Practice

What this means in practice today, is that I continue to believe that suitably qualified men (and not women) should *teach* in assembly meetings and *lead* the church (in other words, elders should be men). However both men and women, as led by the Holy Spirit, in an appropriate moment, in a correct way and with the right attitude, should be free to pray aloud, suggest a song, share a testimony or read a Bible text (but not teach) in an assembly meeting. Since early 2014 this has been the practice in the assembly here in Eindhoven, in which I serve as one of the elders.

My wife and I desire to respect the local practice of every Christian assembly. We are aware that other sincere believers reach different conclusions and have different practices. If we visit an assembly where women are asked to keep silent, *motivated by respect*, my wife will also remain silent. If we visit an assembly where sisters are expected to cover their heads for the duration of the meeting, *motivated by respect*, my wife will also cover her head. Our conviction is that women were only required to cover their heads when they actually 'prayed or prophesied'. If we visit an assembly, like our own, where sisters are free to participate in some form of *subjective ministry* during the meeting, my wife will cover her head because there is a *possibility* that she might pray, suggest a hymn, share a testimony or read a Bible text. This is not 'chameleon behaviour' (constantly changing to please people). Our understating on this matter is clear and public. Our flexibility is a way to respect deep felt differences among believers, and to be a blessing to them while holding on to our own personal convictions.

My teaching

The teaching about the role of men and women in assembly life and meetings is to be seriously studied and agreed locally. It is the responsibility of everyone in the assembly to seek the Lord's guidance, and the role of its local teachers and elders to explain and encourage the practice of biblical guidelines for assembly practice. When I visit and participate in different assemblies, camps and conferences, I respect and submit to the order proposed by its leadership. My goal in ministry is to encourage and to edify, not to promote controversy. Therefore, I would not teach about the possible participation of women in assembly meetings unless those responsible ask me to do so.

For me this practice of *careful teaching* is not new. Some of the Brethren assemblies I visit practice household *baptism*. My personal conviction is that the Bible teaches post-conversion baptism, practiced by full immersion. Some of the Brethren assemblies I visit disagree with the notion of leadership through a group of recognised *elders*. My personal conviction is that every assembly should be led by two or more recognised elders. Some of the Brethren assemblies I visit require that during their meetings no musical instruments should be used, that women must wear dresses or skirts (not trousers), and men should wear a tie and preferably also a jacket. Personally, I do *not* agree with these requirements. But I will not teach about these topics unless the leading brothers of the assembly (elders, if they have them) explicitly ask me to do so. This is also my position on teaching about the possible participation of women in assembly meetings.

“And if on some point you **think differently**,
that too **God will make clear to you**.
Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

- Philippians 3:15-16

Bibliography and Sources

This bibliography contains the books I have either completely read or consulted in my research on the topic of women and the church. I have most of them in my personal library. I freely recognise my indebtedness to the work of many others. *By listing these books I am not recommending all of them. They include very diverse and sharply conflicting perspectives.* Over the years, I have also read and pondered over many relevant articles. If interested, here are some interesting websites to get you started:

Egalitarian position: www.cbeinternational.org

Complementarian position: www.cbmw.com The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. A coalition for Biblical Sexuality.

New Testament Reformation Fellowship: www.ntrf.org under Early Church Practice.

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