

ZONDERVAN

*Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*  
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Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-519287

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*Cover design: Ron Huizinga*  
*Interior design and composition: Greg Johnson, Textbook Perfect*

*Printed in the United States*

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# Introduction

When Tim and I moved to Manhattan in 1989 to start Redeemer Presbyterian Church, we knew that issues that were controversial elsewhere could be incendiary in New York. Over the years sexuality and gender, as well as personal choices in these areas, have been at the top of our list of topics that provoke outrage, tears, shouting, and disappointment.

One woman told me tearfully when she learned Redeemer did not ordain women as elders or pastors, “It was like finding out that your fiancé is a child molester!” These are not moderate words that encourage continuing conversation. I wanted to console and help her, but the question becomes: How does one talk pastorally and compassionately to twenty-first-century people so that the notion of gender roles is presented not as an embarrassing antiquity the church is stuck with but as a gift, meant for our good?

The question is not academic for me. I wrestled deeply and personally with this issue as a woman who was once preparing to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church (USA).<sup>1</sup> Everywhere I have ministered since then, I have felt like a woman without a country. In some places I have been looked upon with suspicion as a “raving feminist” because I encourage women to teach and lead, and I do so myself.<sup>2</sup> In New York I have been called “self-hating” and worse because I continue to believe that God gave us a good gift when he created complementary gender roles for men and women.

As a pastor’s wife, a joint founder of Redeemer (and therefore partially responsible for some of its philosophy of ministry), and a woman in ministry, I have seen it as my role to talk women—and

men—off the ledge once they realize Redeemer’s complementarian position. It’s not as if we hide the issue. Elders’ names are printed in the bulletin every Sunday, and they regularly stand before the congregation—every one of them a man—for ordination of officers and other events. However, women are so visible on staff and in ministry at Redeemer that it sometimes takes awhile for the penny to drop.<sup>3</sup>

So how does one approach the issue? Pastorally there are always two fronts to be addressed, and learning opportunities that come with each.

First, the hermeneutical front: How do we discern what the Bible says? What do we make of cultural changes that have occurred since the Bible was written? Do we have to obey or even care about something said so long ago in a time and place so unlike our own? What should obedience to the text look like?

Addressing these questions creates opportunities to discuss the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, the nature of revelation, the cost of submitting to the lordship of Christ, and not least of all, the discipline of hermeneutics and how one learns to read and understand the Bible.

Second, the personal front: Are you saying that a woman is not as worthy as a man? Not as gifted? Not as filled with the Holy Spirit? Are you by implication suggesting that her sense of calling to the ministry is spurious? This is the twenty-first century; how can you tell a woman that a choice she wants to make is not open to her? This is a justice issue!

Underlying such personal questions are deep hurt and frustration caused by churches and persons who *have* marginalized women and their God-given gifts, making them second-class members of Christ’s body. They also reveal places where the world’s assumptions have shaped attitudes in both men and women, displacing

scriptural teaching with either subcultural traditions or postmodern individualism.

I want to address both constellations of questions under the headings of (1) hermeneutical imperatives and (2) personal journeys.

## Part 1

# Hermeneutical Imperatives

Accept and embrace the Bible as the Word of God, inspired and without error. This was not always the case.

God made his claim on my life during high school, but I was slow in coming to trust the Bible as anything more than a collection of Aesop's fable-like stories and poetic sentiments useful on ceremonial occasions. I was only dimly aware that there were people—vaguely referred to as “fanatics”—who held more robust views. Raised in a home and a church with the same view as my own, my perspective on Scripture did not detract from my intention to enter ordained ministry in the United Presbyterian Church. I knew God was real, and I had encountered him in every way possible *except* through Scripture. I had no notion that I was missing anything.

It wasn't until college that I met intelligent believers who accepted the Bible as God's Word, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. I wrestled with the authority and inspiration of the Bible for several years. Choosing to do an independent study course on the subject, I went through a reading list given to me by a professor only to come to the conclusion that all the books were written from the same point of view. Several reading lists later, I found myself intimately acquainted with textual criticism, textual variants, oral tradition, the Q document, the Essenes, liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, demythologizing, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and a lot more.

For me, exploring the fields of higher, biblical, and textual criticism revealed the fundamental accuracy of the canonical texts. Yet

it was actually a very simple question that resolved the deeper issue of authority. Jesus trusted the inspiration of the Old Testament and promised the inspiration of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> He quoted Scripture at every point in his life, including his words on the cross from Psalm 22. Jesus *bled* Scripture. If I trusted Jesus to be who he said he was, why wouldn't I also trust his view of the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures?<sup>5</sup> This was a game-changing realization for me. And it changed a lot more.

I have recounted this personal odyssey in order to assure the reader that I had every opportunity—and a major motivation—to stop short of fully accepting Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. No one among my family or friends believed that; so it wasn't a view I was raised to hold, and it brought with it massive consequences.<sup>6</sup> For instance, now that I trusted God's Word as truth, written to aid my flourishing and not to diminish it, my choices needed to be submitted to Scripture. When my choices and God's commands clashed, he won.

This made the study of hermeneutics one of utmost personal urgency. What was the Bible *really* saying on key issues? Could anyone know, or was there wiggle room? If there was wiggle room, was it anywhere useful to me?

The subject of hermeneutics is vast, and not all of it is relevant to the topic of women in ministry, so I will only summarize the basics. In the past generation there have been many new works on the science of biblical interpretation, and they contain much of value. Yet these books, even while recognizing the complexity of the task, if written by evangelicals with a high view of Scripture, still hold to the same two touchstones.<sup>7</sup> For me, these two principles have made all the difference, particularly in the area of gender roles, ministry, and the collision between them.

First, *Scripture does not contradict Scripture*. Or in the elegant

words of Article 20 of the Anglican Church's Thirty-Nine Articles, "neither may it [the Church] so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." The corollary of this could be stated thus: What is clear in the Bible interprets what is cloudy.

How could it be otherwise, especially if One Mind was behind the revelation, the writing, and even the choice of the diverse recipients of God's Word? I am always amused, and occasionally annoyed, that common sense doesn't figure into the discussion of the understandability of Scripture. If you can accept the existence of a Being powerful enough to be called God—the Creator and Sustainer of the universe—why is it so difficult to believe that he would be capable of communicating authentically and clearly to his creatures?<sup>8</sup> That seems a somewhat smaller matter than spinning all the electrons around all the nuclei of billions upon billions of worlds, never mind simultaneously attending to the broken hearts and crushed spirits of his sentient creatures.

Second, *every text must be understood in its context—historical, cultural, and social*. What was the author's intent in each book, passage, and sentence, and what did it mean to the original hearers? The corollary to this principle is: We must find a way to obey faithfully whatever we discover to be God's revealed will, even if our cultural situation has changed since it was first revealed.

Again, common sense should be an aid. God inspired human beings to write his revelation. The Bible is therefore a human book, using human language. Yet if God is immutable and in his providence assembled a book to guide his people in all times and places,<sup>9</sup> then what he revealed yesterday about his character and his design for his creatures will not be changed today.<sup>10</sup> God is not capable of "new and improved" anything, because his perfection is such that any change would be a step away from complete holiness, complete love, complete justice, and complete mercy. We may need to

practice obedience to his commands in creative ways, reflecting the changed contexts in which we find ourselves, but that rarely presents any real hurdle. God gives unalterable commands, but he also gives us freedom to obey them in culturally diverse ways.

Having established the hermeneutical ground rules, let us jump into the deep end of the pool and consider what some feminists call the “texts of terror”:<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12.

### What 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 Cannot Mean

First Corinthians 14:33b–38 reads as follows:

<sup>33b</sup>As in all the congregations of the saints, <sup>34</sup>women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. <sup>35</sup>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.

<sup>36</sup>Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? <sup>37</sup>If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. <sup>38</sup>If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.

This passage cannot mean that women may not in any way communicate orally in public gatherings of the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, just three chapters earlier, Paul writes that “every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.” The discussion regarding head coverings, including references to a woman being the glory of a man, hair being the glory of a woman, angels, and creation and the Trinity—though replete with significance—can obscure the central fact that women spoke

and prayed publicly in Christian gatherings. Paul in 1 Corinthians is not condemning the public ministry of women, but regulating it.

Women were among the prophets. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, while observing the Holy Spirit falling on men and women alike (Acts 1:14; 2:1–4, 16–18), quoted Joel 2:28–29 as the explanation for what was taking place. “Your sons and daughters will prophesy. . . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit . . . and they will prophesy.” Luke further mentions Philip the evangelist as having “four unmarried daughters who prophesied” (Acts 21:9).<sup>12</sup>

If I am reading 1 Corinthians rightly, it seems as if much of the letter was intended to rein in the practices of enthusiastic believers who, having experienced new freedom in the gospel, were now drawing false inferences from it and overshooting the mark, so to speak. They ate meat offered to idols, despite the insensitivity of that practice to weaker consciences. They placed too much significance on speaking in tongues. In the present context, 1 Corinthians 11 reads as an encouragement to retain divinely ordained gender roles (the current cultural sign of which was head coverings) even while women publicly exercised their spiritual gifts in a broad scope of ways.

In sum, there are many New Testament examples of women being commended rather than condemned for speaking in public. Women prophesy in 1 Corinthians 11:5 (and note that in 1 Corinthians 12:28 the gift of prophecy is rated above the gift of teaching), Priscilla and Aquila clarify the gospel to a man (Apollos) in Acts 18:26, and in Romans 16:3 Paul refers to Priscilla as a “fellow worker” (*synergos*), a designation also applied to Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:3, who participated in the work of evangelism alongside Paul. There are also Old Testament examples of women leaders and prophets, such as Miriam, Deborah, and