

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY ABOUT WOMEN?

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Does the Bible really teach that women are inferior to men? Was the apostle Paul a blatant woman-hater? And wasn't the Bible a product of a male chauvinist society, after all? Unfortunately there is great confusion in the minds of men and women concerning the woman's role in Christianity. Misapplication of scripture coupled with the secular campaign for female liberation has intensified the confusion, leading many women into fear, discontent or rebellion.

We need to learn God's will about the woman's role, so that we can be free from the confusion, and thus free to follow God's plan for our lives. Matthew 11:28-30 tells us that God's plan is not burdensome, but a flight of freedom for our souls. Still, it is often difficult to trust God's Word and practice it in our lives.

Our article aims to correct common misunderstandings about women and the Bible, and to present the truth about the woman's role. As we'll see, there's no reason whatever to reject the authority of the Bible because of its teaching on women. Actually, this is one of the strongest arguments for accepting its inspiration!

I. The Honor of Women in the Bible

Contrary to the claims of some, women in the Bible have generally been highly honored. Let's discuss the theme of the dignity and honor of women in the Bible, beginning with God, moving on to Jesus, then considering the general commendation women receive in the scriptures.

God the Father

The source of the high honor given to women is found in God himself. God makes no distinction between man and woman as far as their basic dignity goes. He created both. Both have rebelled equally against his will, and he lovingly receives both back to himself on the same conditions of faith and repentance. Jesus died on the cross for *all* people, and Christians have been given a commission to share the good news with both men and women (Mark 16:15). Moreover, God expects total commitment from all alike. Truly, God shows no favoritism (Acts 10:34).

Scripture makes it perfectly clear that the creation of woman is not an afterthought. Woman is just as much a special part of God's creation as man. However, the prevailing attitude in the world toward women has always been tragic. A popular Chinese proverb calls baby girls "maggots in the rice bowl," and the government cruelly translates it into policy in this nation of 1.2 billion. Hundreds of millions of women on earth are routinely abused, shouted at, sworn at, bullied, and beaten every day. What a contrast the Bible presents, from the very first page.

People will ask, "Is God male or female?" Interestingly, although God is not a sexual being, in one sense the answer to the question is "Yes!" Genesis 1:27 says

"So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him:
male and female he created them."

The “image” of God is reflected in both male and female! We are taught to address God as “Father,” and certainly this is appropriate, but did you know that our heavenly father’s personality has all of the best attributes of male and female? God has the perfect blend of love, power, sensitivity, strength, emotion, rationality, concern, decisiveness, patience, and thoughtfulness – and in the perfect balance. That is why man and woman are complementary. God never intended men and women to stand *independent* of each other. On the contrary, he created them to be *interdependent* (1 Corinthians 11:11).

Jesus Christ

No one has done more to liberate women than Jesus Christ. In an age when many females were ranked equals to slaves, Jesus acknowledged their worth and elevated their status to equality with males before God. The gospels record numerous accounts of Christ interacting with women on the same level as he did with men. Jesus had close relationships with women (John 11:5), supported them when others put them down (Luke 7:36-50, Mark 14:3-9), and taught them personally (Luke 10:39). Jesus’ ministry was financed by women (Luke 8:3). His first post-resurrection appearance was to a woman (Matthew 28:1)! Jesus Christ did not hesitate to break through racial, traditional, and sexual barriers – to the utter amazement of his followers (John 4:9, 27). Though not compromising on the need for women to repent, Jesus upheld the honor and dignity of womanhood. Let it never be said that the Christian religion robs women of their dignity!

Of Heroes and Heroines

The Bible is full of heroes, great men of faith – but also full of heroines. The Old Testament has Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Deborah, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, and a host of others. In the New Testament, we recall Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. But there are so many more heroines! For example, the Samaritan Woman (John 4), Priscilla (Acts 18), Lydia (Acts 16), and the woman who anointed Jesus with perfume (Mark 14). The Bible writers weren’t afraid to give women the credit they deserved!

Men Have Much to Learn!

Some people have interpreted the Bible to mean that men have nothing to learn from women. It is true the New Testament doesn’t allow women to usurp authority over men in teaching or preaching (1 Timothy 2), but nothing could be further from the truth than to say that men have nothing to learn from women!

For example, in Genesis 21:12, God told Abraham to “*Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.*” Sarah was his wife and was commended for her submissive attitude towards him (1 Peter 3), but in that instance God tells Abraham to listen to his wife! Deborah was a judge over Israel (Judges 4-5), and through her wisdom many difficult issues were decided (Judges 4:5). Priscilla was a trusted companion in the ministry to the apostle Paul (Acts 18), and several times receives his commendation. These examples could be multiplied many times over. The point is clear: men are not considered intellectually, morally, or spiritually better than women in the Bible.

Christian Chauvinism?

Is it true that women are degraded, or downgraded, in the Bible? Middle Eastern society today is much the same as Jesus' society was 2000 years ago. Most Middle Eastern nations today are Muslim, so for the sake of illustration let's consider the position of the Koran on women:

“Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient (Surah 4)”.

Mohammed goes on to reprimand disobedient wives: they are to be rebuked, beaten, and sent to bed! In most mosques the women are hidden behind a screen. Heaven in Islam is “a band of brothers,” and little thought is given to women. This is degrading, but not the teaching of the Bible. Pakistan severely restricts the rights of women. Women are not allowed on the streets at night. This is a radical Islamic republic. In another Muslim nation, Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive cars. If these comments are hard to relate to, rent a copy of *Not Without My Daughter* and prepare to see how women are treated in many countries of the world (in this case the fundamentalist Islamic republic of Iran. Women's rights are virtually non-existent. And the sad stories can easily be multiplied worldwide.¹

If the Bible were really only the product of men, we would expect it to treat women in the manner of first century society. Instead, we find a nice surprise: women in Jesus' day would have enjoyed *more*, not *less* honor if their husbands and society followed the principles of God's word. The same holds true today!

II. Submission

Our society instinctively distrusts authority and submission. That's why so many people dislike the Bible's teaching on marriage. Marriage is designed to operate on the principle of loving “submission” (the wife's side) and loving “leadership” (the husband's side). This is God's plan. No wonder the state of marriage in the world is such a disaster! People have tried everything but God's way.

The Dirty Word

“Submission” has become the dirty word in our society. Men and women simply do not *want* to submit, and signs of rebellion are everywhere. Students disrespect teachers, citizens hold governors and police alike in contempt, and children disobey parents. It shouldn't surprise us that our society, with its selfish emphasis on “me,” has rejected God's plan for submission within

¹ In “democratic” India, which is over 80% Hindu, opportunities for its half a billion women are limited indeed. Hinduism teaches that you get in this life what you earned in the last; a certain fatalism and passivity are not, therefore, entirely unexpected. Wife-beating and spousal abuse are rampant. A disgrace in the history of India is *suttee* (the burning alive of a Hindu widow on her husband's pyre).

With their official “one-child policy,” Chinese authorities often force women to abort, or “terminate,” the newborn, and exact heavy fines from persons exceeding the one-child limit. China is officially atheist, though Taoism-Buddhism survives in many parts. Until the Revolution of 1911, women's feet were commonly “bound” (wrapped so tightly they became grossly deformed, useless for walking), all because men preferred women with smaller feet.

Female circumcision is an international issue. Such nations as Chad, Somalia, and the Sudan show unspeakable cruelty toward their female citizens in continuing this barbaric ritual, first recorded in Egypt more than 4000 years ago. Much of Muslim or tribal Africa enforces this rite of passage.

marriage. God never said it is easy to give up our rights and put the needs of others ahead of our own, but he commanded us to do that because he knows it's only through self-denial that we will find self-fulfillment (Philippians 2:4-7). He has created us "to do good works" and to function on the fuel of sacrificial love (Ephesians 2:10, 5:1-2). Selfish ambition is on the Galatians 5 list of sins because it destroys love and relationships.

Submission does not mean domination or oppression. The Bible teaches very clearly against abuse of authority (Matthew 20:25, Colossians 3:18-19). There are two correct meanings of submission, and neither of them usually settles very well when we hear it for the first time. One is to *willingly* put the needs of another (male or female) ahead of your own, as in Ephesians 5:21 – "*Submit to one another out reverence for Christ.*" The second meaning is willingly to be in subjection to another's authority, as in the Hebrews 13:17 command of submission to the authority of church leaders. This also applies to the relationship of wives to husbands.

This last area tends to be the most difficult to digest. Today's society interprets submission to a man as an admission of inferiority. To make things worse, some men have abused their position in leadership and become tyrants. Still others lack confidence in gaining female respect. The result can be rebellion at the seeming unfairness of the woman's role.

Viewing the situation from God's perspective, however, sets submission in a positive light. The Lord, not man, has designed marriage, knowing what will make it work best. He put submission into the relationship to create order, not inferiority. Someone has to be the leader, and God gave that responsibility to the husband. A man's authority over his wife is not earned; it is assigned by God. Submitting to that authority does not mean he is superior and you are inferior, it simply fulfills responsibility within the different roles God has assigned us.

One more thing: while most women do not like having to "submit" to a man, it's also true that most women find it even *more* difficult to submit to a woman. The real issue is submission, not sexuality. (Of course at the bottom of it all lies rebellion against the authority of God himself.)

Equality = Equalization?

Does equality mean that men and women should be the same in every respect? Consider a soccer team: since everyone is "equal", should we erase the distinction between the positions and let *everyone* play goalkeeper? Or let everyone play any position he likes? (That doesn't increase your chances of winning in the slightest!) No, teamwork is essential, and that is possible only when all the players operate within the roles assigned to them. "Equalization" would destroy any hope of victory.

There are several basic differences between men and women (physical size and strength, voice, childbearing, emotional makeup), but the differences between the sexes go even further; we have different roles as well. We certainly need to accept the basic differences, but we also need to understand the role differences. Complementary is God's plan (especially in the marriage relationship), and we must remember that men and women were never intended to stand independent of each other. God's Word clearly teaches that the husband is to be the spiritual leader of the family (Genesis 3:16). The Bible says, "*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:22). On the other hand, the husband is not free to be uncaring, lazy, or disrespectful (Ephesians 5:25-33). In fact, he is commanded "*Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*" (Ephesians 5:25). I seriously wonder how many wives would object to

following their husband's lead if this was his attitude: sensitive, sacrificial, selfless devotion to his spouse.

Differences in the role absolutely do *not* imply inferiority or superiority. Of course we are all equal in one sense (our standing before God), but *equality* before God does not mean *equalization* of our different God-assigned roles. We can all fill *different* roles and functions and still remain "equal." Parents and children are both precious in God's sight, but who would argue that a three-year-old should have "equal" say with his thirty-year-old parents? All church members share one sort of equality (the ground is level at the foot of the cross), but it would be incorrect to say everyone is equally a leader. In the same way, the Bible teaches that men and women are equal (Galatians 3:28), but that does not override the role differences between husband and wife.

Summary

Submission does not mean inferiority. Rather, it is the means to harmonious relationships. Our society is totally fixated on individual rights, and has overreacted to the biblical concept of submission. The right balance is what will bring the harmony and depth of friendship we all seek.

III. The "Woman Hater"

The mistaken notion that Paul was a "woman-hater" is based on a very few passages from his letters and whole lot of bad will on the part of people with an ax to grind. Before we examine the passages taken to show Paul's "male chauvinism," let's examine his general attitude towards women from the evidence.

Paul's own writings should be highly incriminating. Yet when we study his letters, we find a character exactly opposite what we have been led to expect! He makes his appreciation and praise of women clear to every community he wrote to:

Rome: Paul's warm feelings towards women friends and colleagues exude from the printed page! (Romans 16)

Corinth: He lets women pray and prophesy in the assembly (1 Corinthians 11:4), and says all apostles have a right to marry (1 Corinthians 9:5). The demand for a celibate clergy is vigorously rejected! (See (1 Timothy 4:3).

Galatia: Paul strongly upholds the equality of all believers: "*There is neither...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28).

Philippi: Paul urges the men to support the female leadership in the church (Philippians 4:3).

Colosse: Paul teaches husbands to sacrificially love their wives (Ephesians 5). To the Colossians he says "*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them*" (Colossians 3:19).

Thessalonica: Paul encourages the Christians to respect everyone who works hard in the church – not just the men (1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Ephesus and Crete: When Paul writes to male leaders, he is fully supportive of the women's ministry. Men are to expect a high standard of commitment from the women, just as from the men (Titus 2:3-5), and yet treat them with sensitivity and respect (1 Timothy 5:2). In fact, Paul reserves the highest leadership positions in the local church for *married* men with well-behaved children (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1)! Clearly he appreciated the invaluable experience and insight that come only from a smoothly running Christian marriage, where both partners communicate, love each other (love God even more), and fill the roles God has assigned.

It is obvious that, far from being insensitive to women, Paul was extremely considerate. In fact, when we tally all of Paul's personal greetings in his letters, *a full 40% are to women!* That's better than most men do today! Some woman-hater!

Of course it's possible to say one thing in a letter and yet be another in person. But exactly what was Paul's personal effect on the women of his day? Consider the upper-class Greek women in his society – the ones most likely to be offended if he was “down on women”. As we read Acts, which records the growth of the early church, we see many noblewomen coming to faith and following Paul (Acts 16:13-14, 17:4, 17:12, 17:34, etc). They weren't offended by the “woman-hater” – instead, they accepted him and his message.

Now that we have an accurate view of Paul's attitudes towards women, we can examine the passages problematic for those who've been offended by him. People have taken 1 Corinthians 14:34 to mean that women must keep absolutely silent in the church. The situation was that some women were embarrassing their husbands and violating order and decorum by arguing with men over the interpretation of prophecies. (This is the context of 1 Corinthians 14). Paul tells them to take up their questions *outside* the assembly, once they have gone home. The difficulty with the view that Paul prohibits women to speak at all is that in Chapter 11, he evidently has no objection to women praying and talking out loud in the services.

1 Timothy 2:11 teaches the same principle. Verse 12, however, deserves comment: “*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*” As we've seen, Paul is not commanding total silence. Nor does he not say this because men are superior to women. He does, however, uphold the biblical principle that in the church the men are to lead. What a shame that in most churches today the men are nowhere to be found, apart from the elderly and some children! Far from liking to dominate, most men have little or no desire to be the spiritual leader. The idea that Paul was a woman-hater is completely undeserved!

Paul's Insight and God's

It is God's Word which pierces our inner being and lays bare our thoughts and attitudes (Hebrews 4). Paul's writings (13 of the 27 New Testament books) are *all* inspired. Paul had a profound understanding of human character, including female character. He was right when he commented on the weak will and lack of self-control on the part of many women (2 Timothy 3:6-7). Women on the average *are* much more emotional than men are. That is one reason God entrusted the leadership of the church to men. We notice also that Paul is extremely “hard-line” with those who don't want to work (2 Thessalonians 3), as well as with those who are critical and divisive (Titus 3). In a tense situation men tend to withdraw, while women tend to manipulate and take over,

causing trouble. Critical, lazy or divisive women, as well as men, do not like Paul and his no-nonsense approach.

Far from having a poor evaluation of women, Paul understands us all too well! Paul was not a woman-hater, nor a man-hater, but a sin hater! We must realize that Paul's insight is not his own; it is *God's* insight into our character. God's Word is true, on target, and always penetrating.

How About a Retrial?

Paul did not misunderstand women, but women have misunderstood Paul – and all the more as amazingly few have read what he actually said. I've found that good-hearted women – those who are really serious about giving God control of their lives and “crucifying the sinful nature” – are not the ones who stumble on Paul's teaching. No, the women who fight against Paul are the ones who are critical, emotional, and rebellious in general.

IV. Why the Confusion?

We do not deny that women were misunderstood or oppressed in Jesus' day. They certainly were, and this has been the case in every generation.² Treatment of women today isn't much better. In many third world countries, women are worked like slaves, while in the developed world they are treated as sex objects, misunderstood by men too selfish to listen and really care. In any and every society the position of women would be radically improved if men – and women – would put the principles of God's Word into practice!

All men and women share in the same mission: to spread the Word of God to a world without love (Matthew 28). As long as we keep that straight, we will have true unity between sexes. Gratitude and sincere appreciation for hard work (1 Thessalonians 5:12) will replace critical attitudes and competitive feelings.

Instead of reading what the Bible really says, most women have listened to their friends' ill-informed opinions about the Bible's oppression of women and Paul the “woman-hater”. Uncritically they have swallowed these negative attitudes hook, line and sinker. Sadly, many people are looking for issues to campaign against. They simply would not have time for this if they were about their mission – if they could say, with the apostle Paul, “I am being poured out...” (2 Timothy 4:6).

The massive confusion results from *ignorance* and *selfishness*. Only when men and women make time to study God's Word and “deny themselves” (Luke 9:23) will we be united in our purpose and find what we were striving for all along: *meaning and happiness in life*.

² Contemporary sociology recognizes the abysmal status and treatment of women in the ancient world, and the utter contrast in which the Christian religion held out true hope to women. In *The Rise of Christianity*, 118 (Princeton University Press, 1996), sociologist Rodney Stark writes:

Both Plato [Republic 5 (1941 ed.)] and Aristotle [Politics 2,7 (1986 ed.)] recommended infanticide as legitimate state policy. The Twelve Tables – the earliest known Roman legal code, written about 450 B.C.E. – permitted a father to expose any female infant and any deformed or weak male infant (Gorman 1982:25). During recent excavations of a villa in the port city of Ashkelon, Lawrence E. Stager and his colleagues made a gruesome discovery in the sewer that ran under the bathhouse... “This sewer had been clogged with refuse sometime in the sixth century A.D. When we excavated and dry-sieved the desiccated sewage, we found [the] bones... of nearly 100 little babies apparently murdered and thrown into the sewer (1991:47).” Examination of the bones revealed them to be newborns, probably day-olds (Smith and Kahila, 1991).