

The role of women in leadership and teaching at Belmont Chapel

Introduction

Does the Bible place restrictions on the role of women in the local church?

A few years ago, most evangelical churches in Britain would unhesitatingly have answered, "Yes." But now the situation has changed, and churches have adopted very different policies. In many churches today, women are playing a vital role in teaching and in leadership; in others, the traditional understanding remains in place. In still others, women are allowed a greater degree of responsibility than previously, but remain within restrictions.

For responsible biblical fellowships, this is not just a matter of adopting fashions or changing styles; the respective roles of men and women have been carefully thought through from Scripture; and on all sides of the question, it has been possible for Christian leaders to put up an honest biblical defence of their position.

Sadly, there has sometimes been more heat than light in the debate, and Christians have often failed to appreciate and understand the point of view which other brothers and sisters have adopted with integrity. This booklet isn't an attempt to add fuel to the fires of argument! It simply tries to aid understanding by setting out the position which one church has found most helpful, scriptural and reasonable, while recognizing humbly that other Christians will have different perspectives, and even that there will be those within our own fellowship who do not agree with some of our interpretations of difficult Bible passages.

Belmont Chapel is a church in which suitably gifted women have been given freedom to engage in teaching, and to occupy leadership positions, on an equal basis with suitably gifted men. You may wonder why we have come to this conclusion, especially since it wasn't our conviction until fairly recently. If so, we hope you'll come to understand our position clearly as you read through what follows.

Who is this booklet for?

First, we hope it will help church members understand clearly that we want everything we do to be based upon faith in Scripture and careful study of what God commands.

Second, we hope it will help church members, and newcomers to the church, to grasp clearly why we practise the policy we do. We'd like everybody to be aware of the biblical considerations on which our practice is based.

Third, there are friends and onlookers outside the church to whom this may be a helpful summary of thinking and teaching. If it clarifies for you the questions involved in the discussion, and throws some light on the Bible passages at the core of it, we'll be very pleased indeed.

1. Should women be teachers of the church?

The trouble with the question of women's teaching is that the Bible doesn't contain many direct statements about it! But there are two key passages around which all the discussions range. Let's look at them in detail.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

When they read these words, people often claim, "It couldn't be clearer! Verse 34 says women should be silent in the churches. And verse 33 says that this is what happens in all Christian churches. How can you argue with that?"

But wait a minute... Before we rush to the conclusion that we've settled it immediately, we ought to look carefully at the context. That's what honest Bible interpretation must do. We must also ask if the words in Greek mean what they *seem* to mean in English; because sometimes words and phrases can have a different reference from what we might expect.

And when we do so, we notice a few problems that need to be accounted for.

(a) What does Paul mean by "keep silent"? Three chapters before, he said that women could pray or prophesy as long as their heads were covered (11:5). So clearly they could say *something*. What kind of speaking doesn't he approve of?

(b) When he says "they are not allowed to *speak*", he uses the verb *lalein*, which just means "to talk", rather than *didaskhein* ("to teach") or *kerussein* ("to proclaim") - as you'd expect if he were talking about weighty communication. It's an unusual word to choose, and is more likely to mean "to chat", rather than "to deliver half an hour of Bible exposition"!

Now sometimes people try to answer (a) by saying, "Perhaps women were allowed to pray and prophesy in house groups, but not in the main body of the church." That doesn't work; in most cities, "house groups" were the only meetings the church usually had!¹ Others say, "They can prophesy - that is, deliver a word of encouragement or inspiration - but they can't teach - that is, define what doctrine is for the church."

But can you make such a hard-and-fast distinction between words of encouragement, and words of doctrine? Don't most public utterances to the church contain a bit of both? And how many male teachers "define what doctrine is for the church" when they stand up to speak? Most wouldn't dare. The place for doctrine to be formulated, defended and stated is through the church leadership working together - not through some maverick preacher standing up and suddenly announcing what we all have to believe.

The ways in which some churches try to get round the problem ("it's all right if they're interviewed by an elder, but not if they're delivering a talk", "it's OK if there's a man in overall charge of the service and he knows what they're going to say", "it's all right if it's just a film or a tape") seem to us rather artificial attempts to square the circle. If Paul had intended anything so complicated, he'd surely have gone into more detail about it.

We think the real answer lies in three clues: first, the word *lalein*; second, the background of life in Corinth; and third, the thrust of the whole passage.

Let's take them in reverse order. What is this passage about? Answer: *Paul's concern that everything in the church should be done in a fitting and orderly way* (verse 40). It's obvious from the information contained in the letter that the Corinthians weren't very good at that, although they were an immensely gifted, lively, enthusiastic church. They were living in a Greek culture in which respectable women were supposed to be quiet creatures who stayed at home, out of sight, most of the time, and certainly weren't educated; few of them would have been able to match the men in a theological discussion.

In church services they would have been separated from the men, in a group by themselves on one side of the church, while the men sat together on the other (as still happens in Eastern countries today). When they became bored, they might easily start whispering among themselves; or they might try to catch their husband's eye across the room and hiss, "What is he talking about?" Gradually the noise level would rise and the service would be disrupted until they were quietened down again.

So Paul says, "God is not a God of disorder, but of peace! We don't want all the prophets talking over each other at once (v 30); nor do we want all the women disrupting things either! If you have a question, don't disrupt the service with it; wait till you get home, and ask your husband then."

It seems to us that this is a much more likely reconstruction than any of the other suggested ways of fitting together chapter 11 and chapter 14. Outside observers would be scandalized by unruly behaviour from the women. The Christian women were already unusual, since they were involved in praying and prophesying - something which normal women didn't do in Greek religion (it was only for female oracles, who were extremely atypical women). So if the behaviour of Christian girls was uncontrolled and intemperate (like the prophets and tongues-speakers who were trying to out-shout each other in verses 27-30), that would bring only disgrace to the household of God.

This passage, then, isn't ruling women out of teaching the church for all time. You *could* read it that way, but there's no compelling reason that you should. Rather, the signs are that we're dealing with a local first-century problem in a different culture from our own, and so what we should do is to ask, "How do the underlying principles apply?" If God wants our services to be decent, orderly and reverential; if he wants us not to disfigure them by selfish insensitive behaviour; if he wants outsiders to see that "God is really among you" (verse 25) - what does that mean we need to do?

1 Timothy 2:8-15

This is the other passage which at first sight may seem undeniably clear. "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (v 12). How could anybody argue with that? Surely it's just perverse to try to make it mean something different?

But once again, we need to ask the question: are there any difficulties with this "obvious" reading, when we look at the context and the expressions that are used? In fact there are – several of them.

(a) We always have to be alert to the presence of unusual words. If we fail to spot those, we can end up with dramatically wrong ideas about what the text is trying to say. (For example, that's what the Jehovah's Witnesses do when they read Colossians 1:15 and conclude that Jesus is just a created

being; they misread the word "firstborn" as if it meant exactly the same in first-century Greek and modern English.)

And in this passage there are (at least) two unusual words. When Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or hold authority over a man", the word for "hold authority" - *authentain* - isn't the one you'd expect. Instead Paul has chosen one which usually means "to usurp authority"; in other words, "to grab an authority that she isn't supposed to have". This isn't a case of a woman being appointed to leadership, but a violent grabbing of power.

The other word is "silence" - *hesychia*. This word can mean "silence", but usually it just means "quietness", and that's how it's translated wherever else it's used in the New Testament. Former Belmont member W.E. Vine defined it in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* as "quietness, causing no disturbance to others"; Hesychia was the Greek spirit of tranquility and peace.²

(b) At first glance, Paul's argument in verses 13-14 seems very unfair. What if Eve was the one who was deceived? Is he saying that she then bears responsibility for the Fall more than Adam did? Isn't it worse to sin deliberately, like Adam, than to be led astray, like Eve? Is the implication that women are somehow more gullible and silly than men? If not, why would this incident result in women being deprived of leadership and authority over all the centuries to come?

(c) Verse 15 seems really bizarre. What has childbearing to do with salvation? Must a woman have children to get into heaven? What then happens to the unmarried, and what about salvation by grace through faith alone?!

Once again, then, the passage isn't straightforward; and whenever a section of Scripture bristles with so many unexpected difficulties, it can be a warning to us that there *may* be a situation described here which is local and temporary. If the early readers would have understood it, but we can't, it's an indication that the problem Paul is describing - and the solution he is proposing - doesn't really apply in the same way to us today. You can't say for sure, but the possibility exists.

So what else might the passage mean? Well, once again it comes from a letter written to a church in a Greek city (Ephesus) where female life was rigidly controlled. (There seems to have been much more freedom for women in churches with Roman backgrounds; female names feature much more prominently in Romans 16 and Philippians 4.) In such an environment, Paul is saying something quite radical when he suggests that women should "learn". (Perhaps the example of their former member Priscilla, who had helped her husband correct Apollos' theology, had made the church in Ephesus ready for this idea.)

But it's a case of one step at a time. Women must not engage in public teaching without being properly instructed. For the moment, they must learn at home. Ephesus was a sophisticated modern city, and wealthy Christian women might have been tempted to make themselves prominent by dressing fashionably - which Paul discusses in verse 9 - or by grabbing authority in the church, feeling that they already knew enough to set the men right.

But Paul reminds them of Eve, who led her husband into sin because she was "deceived" - the word means "she saw things wrongly". Adam understood what he was doing; she didn't. It would be tragic for ill-informed women teachers to lead everyone into temptation and sin.

In fact, that seems to have been happening already in Ephesus (perhaps pioneered by Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul has just mentioned in 1:20). We know that Hymenaeus was still teaching error later on, because his name crops up again in 2 Timothy 3, where Paul talks about "the kind

who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women" (v 6). Women with time on their hands - maybe the young widows Paul advises to remarry and get on with family life (1 Tim 5:11-15) - were being led away "to follow Satan", and encouraged to think that they knew a lot more than they did.

Ephesus, after all, was the city which boasted the temple of Diana, the greatest pagan temple of Asia Minor and a centre of goddess worship which persisted for four centuries after the coming of Christianity. So women were right at the heart of Ephesian religion – women who were independent of men (Diana was a greater hunter than any male) and didn't get married or bear children (Diana was an eternal virgin). The city was steeped in magic (Acts 19:19-20) and its people were extremely proud of the international prestige of the Diana cult (Acts 19:27-28). The temple was run by priestesses who were the virgin daughters of aristocratic Ephesian families, and we are told by an (admittedly unreliable) ancient author that men and sexually experienced women were banned from the sanctuary. The Amazons, a legendary race of all-female warriors, were reputed to have visited Diana's temple three times to worship there, and some even claimed they had founded it.

So although Ephesus was a Greek city in which women were normally kept under social restraint, there was a strong local tradition of female leadership in religion, and a prevailing idea that spirituality and virginity belonged together. It wouldn't be unusual if in the Christian church converted women were looking for the same power that girls exercised in the temple of Diana – or if they were rejecting their husbands in order to boost their holiness! Whether this is true or not, it was certainly against this background of female, sexually abstinent religion that Paul was writing his letter to Ephesus.

But being a female priestess in the temple was one thing (all you had to do was follow prescribed rituals); being a teacher in the Christian church, interpreting God's Word wisely and offering pastoral direction to adult lives, was quite another. For this, sheltered, unworldly Greek women were not yet ready.

So Paul recommends the best solution he has found: not to allow women to teach, nor to take on authority they aren't qualified for. (He does say "I do not permit", rather than "It is not permitted" - in other words, "here's my personal practice, this is what I have found to work".³) He is not decreeing that women can never, in any century, even if properly instructed and gifted to do so, teach or hold authority. He is speaking to his own century, and to Ephesian culture in particular.

Indeed, by saying "a woman must learn", he is laying the foundation for future developments in which women will be able to exercise a teaching gift alongside men. But for the moment, their social responsibility was to engage fully in family life, including having sex and giving birth to children - something which (it appears) the false teachers didn't encourage, since such gross physical activities reduced a woman's natural spirituality and might even cost her salvation. Paul says: no, that won't happen; you will be saved even if you go through childbirth.⁴

This reading of the passage seems to us to remove a large number of the questions which surround these verses, and provide the most natural, plausible, literal interpretation of what Paul is really saying. We know that his letters often give instructions which are just for one situation; he tells widows they should stay unmarried in Corinth - the exact opposite of what he advises widows in Ephesus! He tells slaves "to be subject to their masters in everything" (Titus 2:9), but we don't therefore conclude that God thinks slavery is OK and that people should be slaves in our age too.

So our conclusion is that this passage does not say what it might seem to, if you read it superficially and carelessly. Does that mean it's out of date, and has no value for us any longer? No, we don't think that; we believe (as we will show later) that every part of Scripture has an enduring

significance, and nothing in God's Word is redundant. When we read 1 Timothy 2 today, its challenge for us is that we need to live with one another in ways which allow the truth to be taught, allow our lives to be modest and reverent, and allow others to experience the grace of God through us. We mustn't be like the angry men (v 8) or the pushy women (v 12) of Ephesus. But when properly instructed and suitably gifted, we should use what God has given us to bless one another.

The rest of Scripture

Now if these two key passages don't prohibit women from teaching, there is not much else in the whole of the Bible that would stand in the way either. Indeed we notice that:

(a) throughout the Bible, women are valued and empowered more than they were in any of the surrounding cultures. And when Jesus came along, his radical new community gave women an important role to play. (You might ask, "So why were there no women apostles?", and that's a good question which we will analyze later.)

(b) the gospel insists on the absolute equality of male and female in the kingdom of God (Galatians 3:28). And while that doesn't imply that men and women will have exactly the same roles, it does suggest that we shouldn't put restrictions on the role of either men or women unless there are clear, unmistakable biblical grounds for doing so.⁵

(c) in fact, women played a key part in the development of the early church, including activities which we would classify as "teaching" (we've already mentioned Priscilla, for example, and Paul counsels Titus to give the older women a training responsibility for the younger ones). On our view of the two passages we've analyzed above, there is no reason that today this teaching function shouldn't be exercised in main church services.

(d) The creation story in Genesis does not suggest (as we will see in a moment) a radical difference in authority between men and women; instead Genesis 1 focuses on the fact that both male and female characteristics are part of our bearing God's image (Gen 1:27) while Genesis 2 emphasizes that Adam is incomplete without Eve, who is "someone like me... part of my body, my own flesh and bones" (Gen 2:23, CEV). And this shared equality and identity continues through Scripture. For example, when we read the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12, gender is never mentioned. The implication is that men and women *alike* are gifted by God, as he wills (1 Cor 12:11).

Now we suspect that some people who have followed our argument would still have one objection. "OK, it sounds logical and plausible, but it's incredibly complicated, isn't it? You have to do all kinds of fancy footwork and unexpected somersaults to end up with those conclusions. Surely God's Word will be plain and simple. You're making it stand on its head."

We don't think that's the case. Sometimes Scripture is just not as straightforward as we want it to be; and honest interpretation means we have to look carefully at all the data, not just some of it, trying to find a solution which fits in everything God has given us. This is true of some of the biggest doctrines in the Bible!

Look for example at the doctrine of the Trinity. It took nearly four hundred years for Christians to formulate it properly, and while they were doing so, there were plenty of impatient people who wanted a simpler version. As a result, they all veered off into error.

There was the talented Bible teacher Marcion, who believed that it was quite simple – Christ wasn't

really human, he just appeared to be. There was the great evangelist Arius who believed that it was quite simple – Jesus wasn't on the same level as God the Father. Both gained a massive popular following, because their idea was plain, simple and easily grasped. But it didn't do justice to Scripture: Marcion had to ignore most of the Old Testament and cut large chunks out of his New Testament too; Arius overstressed John 3:16 and forgot about John 1:1. If either of them had taken over the church, we'd have had a deficient view of Jesus for ever after. It's a good job there were more careful teachers who weren't put off by the complexity of Scripture!

In our own day, we've seen plenty of leaders who have taught that Christians should be financially prosperous, by emphasizing a few verses which seem to promise wealth and success; and others who have taught that all Christians should possess all the spiritual gifts, by looking at some of the evidence and ignoring the rest (e.g. 1 Cor 12:29-30). At Belmont we reject these teachings, although they are attractively simple, because we believe the truth is actually more complicated than that. We have to be faithful to the totality of God's Word. And the same thing applies when it comes to women teaching in the church.

So that's where we stand on women teachers. What about women in leadership?

2. Should women be leaders?

The main arguments against allowing women to be leaders (or at least "elders") are probably these:

(i) We don't find women in leadership in the New Testament churches; and all Jesus' disciples were male.

This is true; but it would have been quite difficult for women in the early church to have exercised overall leadership, even though there were more freedoms for women in the Roman world than the Greek world. As it was, women played an enormous role; it's revealing that during the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, the women were free to come and go because the authorities assumed they weren't a risk; but when the persecutions started, women as well as men were hunted down, because their enemies had started to realize that the women counted for something in this movement, too. Richard Bauckham (who noticed this point) has traced in his great book *Gospel Women* just what it was that the women had to contribute.

In the letters of the New Testament, we find significant names noted. There's Junia (who was female, despite the attempts of several correctors of manuscripts to change her sex!) who is listed as being "foremost among the apostles". There's Phoebe, who seems to have been officially recognised as a "deacon" of the Cenchræe church, and whose ministry took her all the way to Rome. There are Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodias and Syntyche, who worked alongside Paul in the earliest days of the Philippian church and were remembered fondly as his fellow-labourers. Women seem to have occupied as prominent a role in the early church as the society of that day would allow.

As for Jesus' disciples: they were all male, certainly, but they were also all Jewish. That didn't stop Gentile elders from emerging as soon as Gentiles became Christians. If they had all been blue-eyed or right-handed, we would be silly to conclude that only blue-eyed and right-handed people could be disciples. Within the society of Jesus' day, a rabbi with female disciples would have been suspect from the beginning. Jesus would not have achieved any kind of hearing had he tried to flout

convention in that way.

Perhaps too there's another reason for the maleness of the Twelve. When Judas defects, Peter says that it's important to make up the number (Acts 1:22). Why? Because the twelve male disciples represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and their patriarchal heads; they are told they will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). Says Linda Belleville in *Women Leaders and the Church*,

It is important not to make a leap from the twelve apostles to male leadership in the church. The leap, instead, should be from twelve apostles to the [entire] church of Jesus Christ. It is not male leaders who will serve as judges in the future, nor, for that matter, is it female leaders. 'Do you not know,' Paul says, 'that the saints will judge the world?... Do you not know that we will judge angels?' (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

But the pattern wasn't continued. After James was killed, nobody suggested bringing the number back to twelve. So the idea of twelve Jewish male leaders disappeared into history as churches sprang up everywhere, and we shouldn't assume that the number, the ethnicity or the sex of the Twelve have any bearing on church leadership in the age of the gospel.

Even Wayne Grudem and John Piper, who are staunch opponents of women in leadership, make it clear, "We would *not* argue that merely because Jesus chose twelve men to be His authoritative apostles, Jesus must have favoured an eldership of only men in the church."⁶

(ii) The qualifications for elders in the Pastoral Epistles (Timothy and Titus) are all about men.

Again, this is true; but notice two things.

(a) The qualifications are a rough and ready guide, not an exhaustive list; and they're capable of variation depending on circumstances. For example, Timothy (working in a well-established setting in Ephesus) is told not to appoint a recent convert; Titus (in a much newer church setting) is given no such instruction. So it's obvious that in Ephesus and Crete all the qualifications would assume maleness; it isn't so obvious that this would be the case today.

(b) 1 Tim 3 gives a list of qualifications for deaconship, then (v.11) says, "Likewise, the women..." Which women? The wives of deacons? If so, one would expect that there would also be a list of qualifications for the wives of elders - but we don't find that. The conclusion must be that Paul is giving Titus a list of qualifications for female deacons. Maybe that was the highest position a woman could aspire to in Ephesus; but it was a leadership position nonetheless, and there's nothing to indicate that in another age, at another time, there might not also be female elders.

(iii) The principle of headship gives different roles in life to men and women, and leadership is a male role. It isn't that women are inferior to men; it's just that their role is different.

This is probably the biggest objection of all, which is why we wrote a whole paper on the subject. For those who haven't seen the original, we will summarize its main arguments here.

There are two brief passages where Paul says that the husband is "head" of the wife :

1 Cor 11:3 Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Eph 5:23 The husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.

These verses seem to say that there's a chain of authority in marriage. The husband is "head" of the wife, and the wife is enjoined to "submit" to him. So in the church, leadership must be male; how could a man lead his wife at home, but be led by her in church matters (because she was a leader and he wasn't)? So, naturally, women must be silent in church, and ask their husbands to explain things at home.

Paul bases his arguments on God's plan in creation. God has ordered life this way; how can we challenge his wise decree?

However, once again things aren't quite as straightforwardly obvious as they might appear...

Apart from references to Christ's headship over the church, we have only these two places where the term is used. There's no other case in the whole of Greek literature where one human being is called the "head" of another. So how do we work out what it means?

In English we use "head" to mean "the person in charge", but that's because we know that the head contains the brain which controls the body. However, the Greeks and Romans thought it was all located a bit lower down! The head was just the most prominent part of the body, the first bit you noticed when you looked at someone.

Bible scholars have argued for over fifty years about whether "head" in these passages means "authority", and despite lots of arguments for and against, you have to conclude that the case isn't proved one way or the other.⁷

But read the passages in context. Neither is really about authority; neither is trying to settle the question of who rules the roost.

However, in every passage where the word "head" (Greek *kephale*) is used, it seems to have something to do with prominence or public visibility – it talks about someone who is the representative of someone else. When you see somebody approach, the first thing you look at is their face. And just as the head was the most prominent part of the body, the husband in Greek society was the representative of the wife, the public face of the marriage.

This seems to be the idea in Paul's mind in our two passages. We don't understand all the details of dress customs which lie behind 1 Cor 11, but Paul was clearly trying to ensure that Christians' clothes would not cause them disgrace in the eyes of outsiders. Christian men would dishonour Christ if they had long hair (in those days, it meant you were effeminate) and if Christian women didn't cover their heads, they were signalling that they were sexually available - and so bringing disgrace on their husbands. And women who prophesied were to wear a sign of their authority on their heads (we don't know what this was⁸) to show that they were recognized as gifted by God to speak in public in this way.

So the question being addressed in the passage was: "How do we bring honour to one another?". It certainly isn't "Who wears the trousers in the family?" The only mention of authority is the "sign of

authority” which the prophetess possesses. And what Paul wants to ensure is that we don't obliterate male and female differences, but allow them to be expressed and honoured in appropriate relationships within church life.

Corinth was a sleazy city, with a lot of wild women on the streets. And so if you were to be judged to be a respectable family, the husband had to be recognized as “head” of the wife – the one who was the public face of the marriage, the representative of the family in society and law – the one who would be either disgraced or honoured by the way she behaved. In our day, the expectations of the world around are quite different. (And you might reasonably argue that, in our century, excluding women from significant roles would give non-Christians just as damaging an idea of what the gospel is all about.)

So what about Ephesians 5? Well, here Paul is supplying some helpful illustrations of his key theme, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (In other words, “Don't submit unwillingly, because you have to – because it's the law, or because it's customary – but in a new, radical, chosen way, because you follow the Lord Jesus, and want to honour him.”) Children must not fight their parents, slaves must not slack off when masters are not watching. And wives? Paul says they must “submit in everything” so as not to bring disgrace upon their “head”.

This wasn't new; in Greek society, everybody expected this of respectable wives. But what *is* new is the command to husbands to love their wives “as they love their own bodies”; neither pagan nor Jewish communities expected men to do this! Paul wants Christian marriages to look different, and so he addresses the man, who has the social power to do things differently. He says less to women since they had no power to change their role; they could simply do all that society expected much better than pagan wives did it.

(That doesn't mean, of course, that the passage has nothing to say to women today – the principles involved, of loving respect, of care for the other person, and especially of bringing honour to the one with whom your name is associated, still give women an important measure of responsibility in building the solidity and health of the marriage. Both partners, whatever the culture they live in, are called permanently to a submission of their own selfish preferences to the good of the other person.)

And so neither of the "headship" passages seems to give men a permanent, unchangeable authority. But wait a minute. There are three other verses which speak of the “submission” of wives: Col 3:18, Tit 2:5 and 1 Pet 3:1, 5. Doesn't that mean that men will always lead?

We don't think so. Here's why:

(a) Paul's big concern in Colossians 3 is that whatever we do, we should “do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus”. In Colosse, close to Ephesus, that meant that wives must “submit”, just as slaves and children must “obey... in everything”. Employees and children have a little more freedom than this in our times; and we don't insist on them behaving just as they would in the first century. Why would we make such a rule for women?

(b) Titus (in conservative Crete) and Peter (in traditionalist Northern Turkey) are also offering advice which is appropriate for their society - not for always. Today we don't expect strong drink to be a particular temptation for older Christian ladies (unlike Titus), and we don't see gold jewellery as unbridled extravagance (which Peter does - but in his day you couldn't buy cheap stuff from H. Samuel or Argos).

And so once again we extract from these passages some very important principles which are still valid today – Colossians 3 tells us that everything we do, in all the relationships of our lives, should

reflect our love and unquestioning obedience to the Lord Jesus; Titus tells us that older Christians, just as much as younger ones, need to exercise personal self-control and discipline; and Peter warns us against extravagance, show, and thoughtless luxury. Each of these passages still has plenty to say to challenge our lives profoundly again and again. But what we *don't* do is apply them in exactly the same way as Christians did in the first century; our world is very different from theirs.

There are two further references to female "submission" (1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:11), but they probably don't refer to submission to a husband. (In 1 Cor 14, for example, the same word is used a couple of verses earlier where prophets are told to "control themselves"; so probably that's what women are being told to do too.)

Submission in Scripture isn't just about women submitting to men; we all have to submit to one another in different relationships in life (Eph 5:21). In 1 Cor 16:16, Paul asks the Corinthians to submit to "everyone who helps and labours with us". Well, that included Priscilla "my helper" (Romans 16:3), not to mention Persis, Tryphena and Tryphosa "who laboured in the Lord" (Romans 16:12)... so Paul is appealing here for men to submit to women!

In sum, there's not much textual grounding for a doctrine of male "headship" anywhere in Scripture. Indeed that wasn't how the pagans saw Christianity; they dismissed it scornfully as a religion of "slaves and women". It liberated the oppressed and marginalized in a way which the conservative establishment found absolutely terrifying. So wouldn't it be strange if we applied the Bible in our own day in a way that led outsiders to dismiss us as hidebound, domineering and enslaving?

One of the reasons that many people feel "headship" is a vitally important doctrine is that Paul appears to link it to the Trinity:

Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (*1 Cor 11:3*)

So if we regard "headship" in the way we've suggested, does that mean we're eroding the foundations of our faith? No, it doesn't. If this verse were proposing a chain of command - God, Christ, man, woman - then maybe it would; but as we've seen, that's not what the word "head" is all about. We think this verse is saying:

- *"The head of every man is Christ"*: Christ is the one who represents us before God; the Father sees us in him, clothed in his righteousness, our sins covered by his blood. And so the way we live must bring honour to the one who represents us. (The word used for "man" means "humankind", not "male", so it can include women too. But probably Paul is speaking about men here, because they are the public figures in the Greek world - the ones who represent Jesus in society.)

- *"the head of Christ is God"*: if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. He came not to speak about himself, but to do the Father's will. Jesus' whole aim was and is to bring glory to the Father.

- *"the head of the woman is the man"* (or "the head of the wife is the husband"): in the social world of those days, the wife was represented in public by the husband, and it was her responsibility not to bring dishonour to him by the connection. The way in which Jesus honoured his Father, and the way in which redeemed lives could be lived to Christ's glory, offered a picture of the way in which wives must honour their husbands.

To put it another way: just as Christ brings credit and honour to God, and the redeemed Christian

life brings credit and honour to Christ, the woman's lifestyle must bring credit and honour to the marriage (and so to her husband).

Are we saying, then, that there's no such thing as "headship" nowadays? No, we're not. But we are saying that "headship" isn't gender-specific: in different societies, at different times, both men and women may find themselves in positions of prominence, because that's what their culture expects of them. And when they do, those who recognize them as "head" must support them and bring them honour.

(iv) When Paul says women must submit, he appeals to the order of things in creation – which means he isn't imposing a "temporary restriction" but giving a command which is permanently valid

It's true that in 1 Tim 2:12-14 Paul says that a woman must be silent and mustn't usurp authority, then directs his readers back to the story of Adam and Eve. So doesn't this mean that he is stating an eternal principle – that men and women have *always* had a different station in life, right from creation onwards? If so, we can't change things today just because we're living in a more feminized society...

We don't think so. For one thing, as we noticed above, the Genesis story itself doesn't make any comment about the roles of male and female; instead it goes out of its way to emphasize the equal importance and interdependence of the sexes, in a way that other creation stories don't. (The Babylonians, for instance, claimed that woman was created only as a punishment for male sin.) When we read what the Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed, it's clear that Genesis is determined to emphasise the equality of male and female.

It's true that woman is created later than man; but this is used to show simply that without her, man is incomplete. (And after all, man himself was created after the animals in the Genesis 1 account, but this doesn't make him less important – quite the reverse!) It's true too that man has the job of naming the rest of creation, including woman, before she emerges; but it's also true that the woman then takes on the responsibility of naming when she has her first baby (Gen 4:1). It's true too that woman was created as a "helper" for man; but it's often been pointed out that this word doesn't mean inferiority; sixteen times in the Old Testament it's used to describe the help that God gives to us. And woman was to be "a helper *suitable* for him" - the word implies "a counterpart", someone of equal status.

So where does the male domination of women begin? According to Genesis 3:16, in the Fall. It isn't part of God's creation but the direct result of human sin. So none of the detail of the Genesis story would support the idea that men are naturally ordained by God to exercise authority over women.

The nub of the issue is really 1 Tim 2:13 – and indeed one very small word in the verse! Paul says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve." What does that word "for" mean? According to Strong, it's "a conjunction used to express cause, explanation, inference or continuation", and it's variously translated "actually", "after all", "although", "because", "indeed", "since", "then", "though", or "for" - in other words, it's a useful little word that can express a number of different connections!

Here it could mean one of two things. It could be *explanatory*, meaning "And this is the reason women can't be leaders". Or it could be *illustrative*, meaning "Actually, when you think about it..."

Which is it?

Obviously, if it's *explanatory*, Paul is hooking his argument right back into creation. "Women can't have authority because God formed men first when he created humans. And then women were deceived anyway." But that doesn't seem right for two reasons:

(a) Why should man be the natural leader just because he was created first? As we've seen above, Genesis itself doesn't contain a hint that "coming first" means superiority. It doesn't follow logically and Paul makes no attempt to explain this puzzling reason.

(b) Why does it matter that woman was the one who was deceived? Is Paul saying that all women everywhere are less logical, less morally strong, less capable of understanding, than men are? A woman might retort that she may have been deceived, but Adam knew exactly what he was doing, and still did it anyway; which makes the man more guilty than the woman! Again, if these are the grounds for Paul's judgment, they don't seem natural and convincing.

Because of this, many liberal scholars have used the verse as proof that Paul was misogynistic, unreasonable and Pharisaical in his approach to women. We don't think he was, and we don't believe the Word of God contains error, prejudice or illogic. Instead, Paul was using the word "for" in an *illustrative* way: he was saying, "It isn't my practice to let women teach or exercise authority, because let's face it, woman doesn't have special spiritual powers, as the pagans believe down at the Temple of Diana. In fact, back at the dawn of creation, she wasn't even around at the start, and when she did appear, she was deceived pretty quickly!"

Paul was using creation not as a *proof* of his practice, but a wry *picture* of why it could be necessary. Neither men nor women are spiritually superior to each other. But in the Greek culture of that day, he believed, it made sense for women to learn in quietness.

3. Important questions

When a church makes a change such as we have, there are important questions to be answered. We want everybody to be clear about the answers. So here are six common ones which we have heard.

Question 1: Are we going soft on Scripture?

Does this change mean that we have lost confidence in the plain, straightforward reading of Scripture? Are we now saying that you need to be a historian, a theologian, an anthropologist in order to interpret the Word of God correctly? If so, this is serious. When the medieval Church succeeded in imprisoning the Bible in Latin - resisting translations into languages which ordinary people spoke, and insisting that only trained scholars could interpret it correctly - it wasn't long until the Church slipped into all sorts of abuses and errors.

But no, we're not saying that. We believe firmly in two cardinal principles which were stressed by the Reformers, those courageous sixteenth-century Christians who liberated the Bible for ordinary people. These two principles are the *perspicuity* and the *particularity* of Scripture.

"Perspicuity" means that God's Word speaks clearly to the individual. The main lines of biblical faith, the identity of Jesus, the need of humans, the way of salvation, the demands God places upon those who are living a life filled with his Spirit - all of those things emerge clearly from the Bible

whoever is reading it. We reject utterly the idea that you need to have special scholarly talents, or a string of degrees, to make sense of the Scriptures. We quote Scripture, distribute it, advertise it, support the Gideons and the Bible Society and all who try to make God's Word known; because we believe it has the power in itself to lead people to Christ.

But the "particularity" of Scripture means that God's Word was written within a particular culture and time-frame. Just as Jesus the living Word was incarnate at a particular point in history, in a particular society, economic background and national identity, so the written Word comes to us from the culture within which it was first written. And what this means is that we have to read it carefully, intelligently and with prayer, in order to determine what it is saying to a very different age and mindset.

Often there will be little adjustment required, because people are people in any age. But customs can be different, and so in Britain today we don't often greet everyone with a holy kiss; we don't insist on all female attenders at Belmont wearing head coverings; we don't warn people not to muzzle their oxen while threshing grain, because many of us don't have a cow anyway. There are many, many areas where we automatically "translate" something into our own cultural terms, recognizing that although the specific situation has changed, there's still an important application which we mustn't lose.

(For example: when we visit Tesco's, we aren't offered bargain-price meat which has been on display in a heathen temple, so the New Testament instruction about "food offered to idols" doesn't *directly* apply; but *indirectly* we pick up from those passages the important principle that we mustn't allow our freedom in Christ to cause problems to other Christians who don't feel so much liberty as we do. And so on.)

Here for your interest are some of the key hermeneutical principles which are absolutely central to our methods of exposition at Belmont, and which have in fact led us to the conclusions in this paper:

Start with the obvious sense - this is a cardinal rule, and we apply it wherever possible. But when the "obvious sense" doesn't quite fit with other areas of Scripture, or appears self-contradictory, or seems less obvious once you look at the Hebrew or Greek words the writer uses, the responsible Bible scholar won't brush these problems aside. Instead they act as a warning that deeper investigation needs to be done.

Use Scripture to interpret Scripture - We believe as the Reformers did that God is not the author of confusion, and that therefore his Word will be one seamless revelation, without contradictions. This means we can use one passage of Scripture to throw light on another. One of the problems with this particular issue, as we've noticed, is that there aren't many other passages which say anything about female participation in church life, which is why it's possible for Christians of integrity to arrive at very different conclusions!

Pay careful attention to context - It's vital that we don't ignore the author's intention, or the specific local situation he was writing about. Otherwise you can pluck out verses from anywhere and make them mean anything (as the Jehovah's Witnesses do when they use Jeremiah 10:3-4 to condemn Christmas trees!). So in looking at 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 it is absolutely crucial to ask: what was really happening in Corinth? What was the situation in Ephesus?

Interpret the obscure by means of the clear - We should never build an important doctrine upon unclear verses. If the insight we think we have gleaned does not appear clearly somewhere else in Scripture, we are on unsafe ground. This is our problem with the traditional understanding of

"headship", which seems to us to make a lot of assumptions and ground itself upon a perilously thin Scriptural base.

Study the meanings of words in their contemporary usage, special scriptural usage, and range of meaning - This is essential, since otherwise we can totally misunderstand what is being said.

To give just one example: if we didn't study Ephesians 5:18 enough to understand it properly, we might interpret "Be filled with the Spirit" as a command to seek a once-for-all crisis, a sudden moment where the Spirit floods into our life in a never-to-be-repeated kind of way. And millions of Christians have understood the verse like this! Whole denominations have been founded on that interpretation!

But actually when we study the tense, we see that it's saying, "Keep on being filled with the Spirit" - not a once-for-all crisis, but a daily repeated process. Words are important!

Respect the consensus of the saints - Look at what other Christians have believed and taught about this particular section; you are most unlikely to be the first person in the whole of Christian history to understand the true meaning of a passage! And here we find two things.

First, it's undeniable that down through the centuries the Church has read these passages as if they prohibited women from teaching and leadership. But second, there has been a long tradition of dissidents, equally committed to Scripture and the Church, who have pleaded for a different reading. In our own day, there are Bible teachers of equal eminence and godly reputation on either side of the question. It isn't an easy one!

(Of course, the knee-jerk reaction is to say, "I can't work this out, so I'll just side with my particular heroes..." and then loyally follow the teaching of Grudem, Piper and Mark Driscoll, or alternatively Groothuis, Kroeger and Tom Wright! But that's a recipe for disunity, as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 3:1-9; we need to be willing to learn from all the teachers God sends; and the (Romans 14:5) principle is "Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind".)

Gain clues from the practice of the first Christians - The early Church wasn't right in every detail, but they were a lot closer to the apostles than ourselves; and so their practices can sometimes give us ideas about what we ought to be doing. Here again, there is contradictory evidence!

It's pretty obvious that within three hundred years, after Roman Emperor Constantine had made Christianity his state religion, church leadership rapidly became an exclusively male preserve. It's also obvious that in the Greek and Jewish societies in which many early churches sprang to life, there were important social restrictions upon the role of women. But it's also obvious that early Christianity appealed strongly to women as a liberating force, as we've already seen, and within the ranks of the earliest martyrs and missionaries there is a disproportionate number of female names. Wealthy women like Lydia, who fostered churches within their own households, were not uncommon. There is a growing awareness that New Testament women like Phoebe, Junia and Priscilla may have played a much more prominent role than we sometimes think.

Distinguish carefully what is a culturally specific instruction from a timeless command of God - This principle is at the heart of the debate over women. We most emphatically aren't at liberty to dismiss bits of the Bible we don't like, casually writing them off with the words, "Oh well, that was for those days, not now". We need to have clear interpretative principles which help us decide whether a particular command still applies to us today in precisely the same way as it did in the first century. Here are some of the questions we must ask:

(a) *Is this command based on creation principles?* (Why do we need to ask this question? Because, if it's true that 1 Cor 14: 3, 7, 8 see the distinction between men and women as something which is eternally true and written into God's ordering of creation, then we have no right to evade its force. The same is true about 1 Tim 2:13-14. But as we've tried to explain above, we don't believe that this is what Paul is appealing to here.)

(b) *Is this command addressing a situation pretty much identical with our own?* (We need to be careful to take into account the massive differences between then and now, in relationships between men and women, the social signals their conduct would send out to onlookers, the structure of marriages and the educational openings available to either sex.)

(c) *Is there a fundamental moral law involved, or a cardinal point of doctrine at stake?* (We judge that there isn't. Paul is not enforcing obedience to something God has eternally ordained; he's suggesting a way ahead in a particular set of social circumstances.)

(d) *Do we understand clearly what the command is asking us to do?* (As we have explained above, it's possible for Christians to disagree. We have tried honestly to weigh the possibilities and arrive at the most scripturally-faithful solution. But if anyone arrives at a different conclusion, we don't condemn them as disobedient, stupid or rebellious!)

(e) *Is there evidence elsewhere in Scripture that this command was not observed, or observed differently, in other places?* (That can be a telltale sign that we're addressing a temporary cultural provision. For instance, the provisions of the Acts 15 judgment aren't echoed by Paul later on; he's a lot more relaxed about Christians eating meat offered to idols than the original statement was! This suggests that in Acts 15:28-29 the Council of Jerusalem was coming up with a good formula to suit a particular need - but *not* implying that it would be eternally binding. When it comes to women, the restrictions placed upon them in Greek cities like Corinth and Colosse seem to have been considerably relaxed in Roman places like Philippi and Rome itself.)

(f) *Is there a general principle behind the specific command, which can be observed in other ways - or is the command itself a general principle?* (The general principle in 1 Cor 14, it seems to us, is that everything in the church - including the conduct of male-female relationships - must be done in a way which brings glory to God and does not bring misunderstanding from outsiders. The general principle in 1 Tim 2 is that men and women both have to behave in church settings, men reigning in their anger and competitiveness, women abstaining from wresting power that isn't theirs.)

Looking at these questions, and trying to answer them honestly, we are left with the conclusion that in both of our key passages there really is a local, temporary instruction being given, and that our job today is not to follow it to the letter, but to honour the principles which lie behind it.

Question 2: Are we altering our view of male/female relationships?

No, we're not. We do not accept that "headship" is a clear, central biblical principle which is basic to Scripture and foundational to male-female relationships - and that we're neglecting, belittling or destroying something important. We don't believe that's true because:

(a) *We don't find headship to be central in Scripture in any way.* It isn't mentioned much, as we've shown above; ideas that Paul appeals to a "creation order", or the nature of the Godhead, appear to be misinterpretations; passages about "submission" do not seem to support the "male headship" view when studied carefully; and the whole thrust of Scripture, in God's unfolding revelation, seems

to be towards the unity and equality summarized in 3:28: "neither male nor female... all one in Christ Jesus".⁹ Ideas of leadership and authority in the New Testament are always about *servanthood* rather than about who's on top. In Luke 22:24-30 Jesus set out a radically new understanding of leadership for his followers, and the precepts spelled out there should always inform our thinking about issues of authority and control.

(b) *We don't think "headship" is all about authority either.* It's about public representation, and reflects a set of social circumstances very different from those we live in today. And so our view of how marriage relationships should be conducted is drawn from the clear statements of Scripture, not the dubious principle of headship. In practice, we think this is what most biblically thoughtful Christians do anyway. So you'd find it hard to observe many practical lifestyle differences between a Belmont couple who believe in male headship, and a couple who don't.

(c) *Even if you do believe headship is an enduring principle in marriage relationships, your belief will probably make very little difference to the way you live out your marriage.* John Piper, one of the leading advocates of male headship, preached a sermon in which he outlined six things a wife's submission does not mean (he based it on 1 Peter 3:1-6):

Submission does not mean agreeing with everything your husband says... Submission does not mean leaving your brain or your will at the wedding altar... Submission does not mean avoiding every effort to change a husband... Submission does not mean putting the will of the husband before the will of Christ... Submission does not mean that a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength primarily through her husband... Finally submission does not mean that a wife is to act out of fear... The Christian woman is a free woman.

Instead, he says, "It's the disposition to follow a husband's authority and an inclination to yield to his leadership... But submission does not follow a husband into sin."¹⁰

We wouldn't disagree with much of this careful, minimalist definition, and can't imagine any healthy Belmont marriage looking very different - whether based on "headship" thinking or not.

(d) *The changes we're making are ONLY in the area of teaching and leadership in the church.* These changes don't affect any key doctrine of the faith, either – as we have tried to demonstrate above. There will be no implications for our marriages, in relationships between men and women in the church, in the career advice or relationships counsel we offer, or indeed anywhere else except for this one area.

Question 3: Are we altering our view of the Trinity?

Sadly, the debate about women's ministry has sometimes caused bad-tempered and extreme accusations to be thrown about – and both sides have been guilty of it. Sometimes, those who support women's teaching have accused their opponents of "subordinationism" – making Christ inferior to God. That's because 1 Cor 11:3 says, "The head of Christ is God"... and if you're taking "head" to mean "authority over", that means you think the Father is more important than the Son. Doesn't it?

Well, no, it doesn't: thinkers like Wayne Grudem have explained patiently that they have a thoroughly orthodox view of the Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit are equal in deity and authority. But they have different roles... and the Father is the initiator, the planner, the creator, while the Son is the agent of the will of the Father. (And, this view continues, it's just like that in marriage: husband and wife are equal, but they have different, complementary roles...)

Ironically, some of Grudem's supporters are now fighting back and charging the other side with precisely the same thing – watering down the doctrine of the Trinity! If you *don't* believe that “headship” is about authority, does that mean you're denying the differing roles of Father and Son within the Trinity?

Once again, it doesn't mean that at all. Our knowledge of the relationship of Father and Son isn't based on one controversial six-word phrase in Corinthians! The very phraseology of “fatherhood” and “sonship” gives us a clue about the different roles within the Trinity. And there's an abundance of Scripture to keep us clear: the Father sent the Son (John 6:44; 8:18; 10:36; 1 John 4:14); the Son came down from heaven to do the will of the Father (John 6:38); the Son, not the Father, died on the cross; the Father gave the Son (John 3:16); the Father gives us to the Son (John 6:39); the Father calls the Son (John 9:35); Jesus sits at the right hand of God (Mark 14:62; Acts 7:56), rather than the other way round; and so on.

And just in case anyone felt tempted to argue, “If you don't think women are under male authority, you must be denying that the Son is under the Father's authority” - we really don't see how that follows at all. On our interpretation, it's true, 1 Corinthians 11:3 isn't talking about the Father's authority over the Son; but that single verse isn't what the idea depends on. We know that Jesus is subject to the Father because he talked about it so much himself (as the references above make clear) and because lots of other clear biblical statements confirm the idea. Jesus sits at the Father's right hand, not the other way around (Acts 7:56); the Father appoints him heir of all things (Heb 1:1) and gives all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). But at the end of time, the Son will be willingly subject to the Father (1 Cor 15:28).

Taken together, all these verses (and many others like them) give us the doctrine of “the Economic Trinity”, which spells out (as far as God's mystery will allow) the inter-relationship of the Trinity. We spent a lot of time and effort teaching this doctrine in a series of Sunday evening Bible Schools just a few years ago, and we are not about to change our minds on such a cardinal area of belief. We can't emphasise strongly enough that our convictions about Father, Son and Spirit are completely unaffected by our reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3.

Question 4: If the church has operated with male leadership and male teaching down through the centuries, why is there a need to change God's providential arrangements now?

It has to be admitted that in general the church has been led by men in every century so far. Now that's probably not surprising, in view of the sinful patriarchal arrogance which has blighted men's relationships with women in culture after culture. Even at the time Paul was writing, a Roman family would value every male child, but wouldn't necessarily keep all the girls; parents could choose whether to “expose” the baby at birth so that unwanted females could be quickly disposed of. And in the first centuries after Constantine, we see powerful, influential Christian leaders who were witheringly dismissive of women, in ways we certainly wouldn't echo today. Here's the great St Augustine:

Woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason.

And here is the powerful preacher St John Chrysostom:

God maintained the order of each sex by dividing the business of human life into two parts and assigned the more necessary and beneficial aspects to the man and the less important, inferior matters to the woman. God's plan was extremely desirable for us . . . so that a woman would not rebel against the husband due to the inferiority of her service.

When women are regarded as contemptuously as this (St Thomas Aquinas said that girl babies were "monsters" born only because the father had weak semen, or a humid south wind was blowing at the time of conception), it's no wonder that God chose to use men in most prominent positions in church history. However, three things need to be said.

First, in every age of church history we do find significant women who have done amazing things for God - far more than in Islam or Hinduism, for example. Gradually women have emerged from the shadow of men to play a more and more important part in leadership and teaching.

Second, where women have been given the opportunity to develop leadership and engage in teaching, they have frequently proved to have been gifted in exactly the same way as men. The liberating movement which Jesus began, bringing new hope to women who were treated as goods and chattels by men, has taken a long time to reach its present stage; and we are fortunate today that we can benefit from the gifts God has given to the women in our churches, rather than condemning many of them to silence and frustration.

Third, when we look at the dismissive attitudes of some Christian leaders of the past – such as Augustine and the others quoted above - and consider how they were used to repress so much female giftedness and willingness to serve, we need to be careful that we don't repeat their mistakes today.

John Stott has said that the Christian's task in today's world is “double listening” - first of all, listening to what God says in his Word, and second, listening to the world outside, so that we can learn how God's unchanging Word applies to changing life situations in new ways. If we listen only to the world outside, we fall into the trap of trying to be fashionable. If we listen only to the Word, we're not really hearing the questions we should be tackling with its help.

This means that sometimes we will have to revise our interpretations. Trevor Hart¹¹ warns us, “We should never take the fatal step of identifying our interpretations (however careful they may be) with the text itself, or with “the meaning of the text itself.” When we do that, he says, we “*bestow upon them a finality, a sufficiency, which lifts them above the text and out of reach of criticism*”. This isn't honouring the Word of God; in fact, it really means dethroning it – putting our interpretation in its place! And then we're unable to hear it saying anything new and challenging to us, because we've got it taped; we think we know what it means.

So we shouldn't assume that just because a particular interpretation of a passage has been commonly held for a long time, we have exhausted all of its meaning and relevance. As one of the old Puritan writers put it, “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word.”

Question 5: Aren't you dividing the church, and making it impossible for people to stay in Belmont unless they think like yourselves?

There are at least three reasons why we'd emphatically say NO.

(a) Whichever church you join (even if you start it yourself!), you're unlikely to see eye-to-eye with every other member all of the time. And sometimes the leadership will make a decision which you wouldn't have made. Sometimes it will even be based on a reading of Scripture which you think is simply mistaken. When this happens, God is simply giving us a chance to exercise grace and forbearance; but if we simply withdraw from our brothers and sisters, and promptly ship out, we miss the chance to learn the lessons God wants us to learn in community with others different from ourselves.

Of course, if the leadership's decision is clearly heretical or plainly disobedient to God - "We no longer believe in the divinity of Jesus" or "We've decided adultery is no big deal" - we do have to leave, although even then we should do so with as much love and entreaty as we can. But if instead the new decision is based on an attempt to be faithful to Scripture, and to serve God more effectively, we have to honour the integrity of our leaders, and realize that our disagreement with them shouldn't be allowed to destroy the fellowship between us.

For many years, we have had a group of people in our church who have been in just that position. They were those who believed (in some cases very strongly) that women should be allowed to teach and lead. Some were men, who felt deprived of the contribution their Christian sisters could be making, and longed to see them able to participate in public teaching and church leadership; some were women, who felt quite keenly that God had given them gifts they just weren't allowed to use. These people have stayed with us for years, contributing immensely to the life and work of the church, even though they disagreed profoundly with the stance we had adopted at that point.

We are grateful to them, and we really hope and pray that those who are on the other side of the question will now show the same grace that they did. If they do, the church will benefit enormously. If they don't, and simply walk out, our ministry will be weakened and impoverished.

(b) The changes we are making do not affect any key doctrine of the faith, or any essential tenet of Christian belief or practice. On the primary things - the gospel message, the challenge of Spirit-filled living, our mission in the world, the love that unites us, the hope we share - we remain entirely at one. This change of policy has been decided upon after careful prayer, scrupulous and intensive study, and lengthy consultation. The motives behind it are the desire to follow Scripture more closely and to be better stewards of the gifts God has showered upon us. Where in any of this is there sufficient reason to separate yourself from your brothers and sisters?

What's more, these changes aren't "straws in the wind", signals of more worrying things - such as a shift in our attitude to the interpretation of Scripture, a sudden desire to be trendy, a capitulation to a powerful lobby group within the church, or a total re-writing of what we believe about men and women. There is nothing "behind" these developments; what you see is what you get! There's no hidden agenda being worked out here.

In America there is a group of churches who have recently taken a similar journey to ourselves. In their final report they summed it up well:

There are many doctrines that are essential to Christian faith—for example, the church must

teach that there is only one God, and that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet there are many other doctrines that are not essential to our faith, but are practical guidelines or policies for our physical life, and these may differ from culture to culture, or from one time in history to another. We want to get them right, but we must also understand they are not essential to what it means to be a Christian. We believe that eldership of women is one of those doctrines. It is a policy matter, not part of the Statement of Beliefs. People do not need to leave the church if they think we are wrong about the millennium, nor do they need to leave if they think we are wrong about women's role in the church.¹²

(c) Presumably, if anyone left us over this issue, it would be because they believed we were in error. Well, perhaps we are. As we have tried to emphasise, we're convinced of the stand we have taken, but we can clearly understand why others might honourably take a different position. So maybe we're mistaken... in which case our new development won't flourish, and we will need people who see biblical principles more clearly than ourselves to guide us back when it all goes wrong. But if all those who disagree leave the church, who will there be to help us to return to where we need to be?

Question 6: Are we just following fashion?

(a) This is not the way this decision has come about. There has been no fashionable pressure for change; the "women" issue is an item we have had on our discussion list for some years, and which we had promised the church we would deal with again. No factions, lobbies or pressure groups have influenced us. And through an extremely careful two-year period of research, debate, teaching, discussion and consultation, we have tried exceptionally hard to ensure that every relevant voice has been heard, every relevant consideration explored, all pressures to jump to conclusions excluded.

(b) We're following Scripture. While admitting that our conclusions may be at fault, holding ourselves open to correction in the future, and remaining aware that there are still questions of interpretation to be answered to which we don't have all the solutions yet, we are unambiguously convinced that we have arrived at a reading of the text which handles it more scrupulously, more honestly, more carefully and more completely than any other we have investigated.

(c) It honestly doesn't matter to us what others are doing (although of course we have carefully weighed our conclusions against the thinking and practice of growing churches and careful scholars around the world - including both those who agree and those who disagree with us - since we want to learn from the accumulated wisdom of all God's people). But in no sense are we giving in to trendy thinking; indeed the reverse, because in the more Reformed group of evangelical churches which we're closest to on many matters, the fashionable trend is to exalt male headship and proclaim complementarianism as the only Scriptural option.

(d) Nor are we giving in to the kind of secular pressure which argues, "Women can do whatever men can do in society nowadays, so why not in the church?" We recognize that the life and relationships of God's people should be holy, biblically directed, and different from the mores of whatever culture we happen to live in. And so we do not recognize the prevailing trends of society as something that should shape our life together, purely to make us "more relevant", "credible" or "acceptable" to our own generation; we will not allow biblical practices to be held hostage in this way to the whims of our culture. Instead, our hope is that we can model a radically different style of male-female relationships which shows our society how God intends men and women to operate in harmony, dignity and equality with one another. This has always been Belmont's aim, and we think this decision will enable us to do it even better. Nothing has changed in our aims and intentions.

And so . . .

We've tried to explain our thinking as clearly as possible, and we hope you can see where we're coming from. The Leadership Team will always be happy to answer questions, engage in discussion, or listen to arguments and objections; so please do contact us if you'd like a conversation. The worst thing that could happen would be that people would keep their thoughts to themselves, silently disagreeing or even leaving, but not talking things through properly first.

Naturally, as you'd expect from a booklet which contains such a detailed argument, not every Leadership Team member will necessarily agree with every interpretation in here of every verse we've analyzed! But as a whole this represents the broad lines of our thinking and the considerations which have shaped our decisions. Please pray for us as we continue to seek insight into God's Word and its power to build Belmont Chapel into a church which will represent the Lord Jesus more and more effectively.

The better we understand what God is saying to us, the more appropriately we can serve him.

The Leadership Team October 2009

Notes

1. Don Carson demolishes the “house group” idea: “This interpretation does not seem very likely, for: (a) Paul thinks of prophecy primarily as revelation from God delivered through believers in the context of the church, where the prophecy may be evaluated (14:23-29). (b) Distinctions between “smaller house groups” and “church” may not have been all that intelligible to the first Christians, who commonly met in private homes. When the “church” in a city was large enough (as certainly in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and possibly Corinth) to overflow the largest private accommodation, it must have been rather difficult, once opposition was established, to find a public venue large enough to accommodate all the believers of that city; i.e., the house groups in such instances constituted the assembly of the church. (c) The language of 11:16 (“If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice - nor do the churches of God.”) seems to suggest a church concern, not merely the concern of private or small-group piety. The “we”/“church of God” parallel either means that Paul has never allowed the practice, and the churches have followed his lead; or that Paul and the church in Ephesus (from which he is writing) constitute the “we” that have not followed the practice, and again the other churches have adopted the same stance. Either way, when Paul adopts the same tone elsewhere (see especially 14:33b, 36), he is talking about conduct in an assembly. (d) The immediately succeeding verses (11:17-34) are certainly devoted to an ordinance designed for the assembly. (e) If someone points out that 11:2-16, unlike 14:33b-36, does not include the phrase “in the church,” it must also be observed that 11:2-16 does not restrict the venue to the private home or small group. (f) Whether the restriction in 11:2-16 requires some kind of hat or a distinctive coiffure, it becomes faintly ridiculous in proportion to the degree of privateness envisaged. If the restriction pertains to every venue except the church assembly, does this mean the Christian wife must postpone her private prayer until she has hurried to her chambers and donned her headpiece? The restriction is coherent only in a public setting. (g) Above all, the universality of the promise of Joel, cited at Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit would be poured

out on men and women such that both would prophesy as constituent members of the community of the new covenant, seems somehow less than transparent if the women may display their inheritance only outside the gathered messianic community.”

http://www.cbmw.org/images/onlinebooks/rbmw/silent_in_churches.pdf

2. “Women are to learn in silence. Silence here is Greek *hesychia* (Strong's 2271). It is NOT *phimoo* which would mean 'muzzle' (contrary to how many may want read it). *Hesychia* is better rendered 'quietness' and is translated more accurately in 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12: "For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that with quietness/*hesychia* they work, and eat their own bread." Clearly, in this passage, it is not assumed *hesychia* means that they are to never utter a word. Simply put, they held their tongue and kept the peace (as in Acts 22:2). This sort of quietness denotes making a conscious choice not to speak out and stir things up, not the same as being muzzled and never ever uttering a single sound ever. Big difference.” Kenneth W. Collins at <http://www.kencollins.com/question-33.htm> .

3. Some readers may be worried by this idea. Paul is an apostle, isn't he? So surely everything he writes is the eternal Word of God, isn't it – not just personal advice and good ideas? But actually, when you look carefully at Paul's letters, you see that sometimes he is passing on direct revelation which must be obeyed in a non-negotiable way - for example in 1 Cor 7:10 he says, “To the married I give this command (*not I, but the Lord*)” - but on other occasions he gives his individual view. In the same chapter, for example (v 25), we find this:

“Now about virgins: *I have no command from the Lord*, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, *I think that...*”

In 1 Tim 2 he could easily have said “It is not permitted...” if he meant, “God wants me to tell you that...” Instead he says “*I do not permit.*” The implication is clear.

(Why would God include in the Bible Paul's bits and pieces of personal advice to the churches, if it wasn't inspired? Actually, it's really helpful to have stuff like this within sacred Scripture. For one thing, it helps us see how inspiration worked: we can see that not everything Paul wrote came directly from God, but that he knew very well when it did. Also, when we examine the personal advice he gives, we understand better how his mind worked, and gain a closer insight into his personality. On top of that, the advice he gives does indeed come from a “trustworthy” leader, and so we learn lessons about leadership and the way it operates. We don't have to follow his specific advice to the letter – he was only expressing his opinion – but it was good advice for the time, and may have a lot still to teach us now.)

4. Terri Darby Moore of Dallas Seminary has conducted the most careful analysis ever made of the preposition at the heart of this verse (*dia* - “through”). It appears in her article *If They Remain: An Analysis Of Approaches To 1 Timothy 2:15* (online at <http://bible.org/series/if-they-remain-analysis-approaches-1-timothy-215>). She shows that although it often means “through the agency of” - which wouldn't make a lot of sense here, if we believe that salvation depends on the cross and on faith, rather than on having babies! - it is often also used with the meaning “at the same time as” or “in the presence of”. So Paul (we believe) is saying, “Women, you can be saved *at the same time as* being mothers – childbirth doesn't keep you out of heaven!”

5. We're aware of the objection that Galatians 3:28 is talking simply about our status before God as redeemed people - not saying anything about our roles in life or in the church. But it's a little more complicated than that. Paul's real concern in Galatians isn't just "How do we become justified before God?" but "When we're justified, what does that do to the relationships between us?" He's making the case that Gentiles as well as Jews are part of the church through faith in Christ. And so 3:28 is describing, not just our salvation status before God, but the radical nature of the new community that transforms the relationships between us. (Every morning a devout Jew would thank God that he was not a Gentile, a slave or a woman; in Christ these distinctions lose any importance.) Now while Paul isn't arguing for a social revolution straight away - he expects slaves to stay with their masters, and wives to submit to their husbands - he is signalling a cataclysmic change in our view of ourselves and others, the kind of change that will eventually lead to the abolition of slavery, the burying of Jewish/non-Jewish frictions in the church, and the freeing of women to engage in teaching and leadership.

6. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 1991), "An Overview of Central Concerns," 67-68.

7. All we can say is: first, sometimes *kephale* seems to mean "authority" and sometimes it doesn't; both sides have produced ammunition from other passages in classical Greek to demonstrate that their preferred meaning really is possible (the key antagonists being Wayne Grudem on the "authority" side and Catherine Clark Kroeger on the "source" side). In our view, the search has produced very few clear results which have been helpful or conclusive.

Additionally, *kephale* certainly isn't the usual word you'd expect Paul to use if he wanted to say "authority". When the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) was translated, the Hebrew word *rosh* ("head") was translated by *kephale* when it meant "the physical thing that sits on my shoulders". But when it meant "leader", *kephale* was very seldom used. There were fourteen other words used, especially *archon*, and *kephale* appears only six times in a verse where it could arguably stand for "authority".

In the same way, in Jesus' and Paul's own day, the ruler of a synagogue had the title *rosh ha-keneset* ("head of the assembly"). When that title was translated into Greek, you might have expected the word *kephale* to be used – but instead they used the word *archisynagogos*. Why? Because *kephale* didn't usually mean "authority".

8. The passage is clearly referring to an authority which the woman possesses - not to one which is placed over her! "There is no known instance in the [Greek] language where the combination of subject, the verb 'have', the object 'authority' and the preposition 'over' are passive with regard to the subject, i.e., in which the subject is under someone else's authority, rather than exercising authority over the object of the preposition. There is not a reason in the world to think it is otherwise here, especially so, when Paul immediately qualifies the woman's authority over her own head (with regard to wearing or not wearing the head covering) by insisting that 'in the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor man of woman' (v 11)." - Gordon Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) p. 63 n. 11.

9. See footnote (5) above.

10. From Piper's sermon at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2007/2088_The_Beautiful_Faith_of_Fearless_Submission/

11. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 138.

12. From "Women in Church Leadership, Conclusion" by Joseph Tkach of Grace Communion International (<http://www.wcg.org/lit/church/ministry/women11.htm>)