

Exploring God's Design for Gender Roles in Church Leadership

Hermeneutics and Gender Roles



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An Overview

The study and practice of Gender roles in the home and church is important because the Bible addresses it in multiple ways and because it impacts so many people in every social setting.

Culturally over the last 100 hundred years women have made strides in the way they are affirmed, given rights, treated equally, and given access to jobs and positions of influence within the structures of society. These strides within society for women certainly include the church. Greater freedom for women is part of a larger historical narrative that includes various people groups within society who have been marginalized in the past.

Within the evangelical spectrum of churches every differing position on the issue of gender claims its position is the most biblical. The issue, however, that separates the various positions is not which ones are “more biblical” but which ones utilize a more consistent hermeneutic in interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation. Following the Bible is only as good as the “interpretation” of those biblical beliefs and practices. In the same way, theological positions are only as good as the proper and consistent hermeneutics behind it. While the Bible is without error, the interpretation by humans is not. This creates a level of humility and sobriety while one attempts to use sound hermeneutics as sinful people try to understand and apply God’s sinless word. Some of the basic hermeneutical principles include things like: literary type consideration, historical context, biblical context, grammar, syntax, Scripture interpreting Scripture, progressive nature of revelation, prescriptive versus descriptive, letter versus spirit of law, church history, primary versus secondary doctrine, literal versus figurative meaning, etc.



Text and Context

One of the greatest challenges of interpreting the Bible is that God does not simply communicate a list of universal principles that apply in every setting.

Rather, kingdom principles are primarily imbedded in narrative and specific historical settings. Determining the relationship between text and context is necessary but not easy. Text is the biblical passage itself and context is the social, cultural, and historical setting of the passage. Errors can be made when some passages are taken literally without considering the cultural context, and errors can be made when some passages are simply dismissed as cultural mandates that don't universally apply to other historical settings. Knowing the difference between the two is the science and art of interpretation.

Discerning what element of a passage is a universal principle and what element is cultural, for that time only, is the task of an interpreter. Some passages are exclusively cultural and have no universal mandate (e.g. Exodus 23:19 "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk."). Some passages have no cultural nuance and simply are to be applied universally in all settings (Ex. 20:14 "Do not commit adultery). However, the challenge is that most passages in the Bible have a mixture of both universal mandates and cultural exclusivity that are not universal (Romans 16:16 "Greet one another with a holy kiss."). This is why there are so many different dogmas, debates, and denominations. Most people unwittingly apply inconsistent hermeneutical principles in their attempt to interpret biblical passages.

The challenge for every church leader and every follower of Jesus who reads the Bible and attempts to put it into practice is to determine what aspect of a passage is exclusively cultural (context) and what aspect of the passage is universal (text). This is the issue of hermeneutics.

Below will illustrate three examples. The first example (slavery) will show that while there are biblical mandates, it is exclusively cultural. The second example (homosexuality) will show that the mandates are completely universal. The third example (gender roles) will show that there is a mixture of universal principle and cultural context. Of these three subjects, this is why gender roles is the most difficult to interpret. It takes a great deal of precision and disciplined rigor to discern what is cultural and what is universal. Most debates on this subject miss this fundamental distinction.

The Biblical Example of Slavery: It's All Context

Several passages both in the OT and NT address the relationship between slaves and masters.



Exodus 21:20-21

Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.

People who claim to “follow the Bible” do not put this passage into practice. Literal interpretation and application of this passage would result in error. Hermeneutical principles such as progressive revelation indicate that this passage is under the old covenant law. This is the historical setting. It was also cultural during that day that people owned slaves and that slaves were deemed as property. This is not true today in our culture and so the passage does not apply.

I PETER 2:18-21

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

The hermeneutical principle of progressive revelation does not apply here because this is found in the NT letters under the new covenant. Going back to the question of text and context, the text clearly teaches that slaves should submit to their masters because of the universal principle that submission to authority is a way of following the example of Jesus. This is true even if the slave master is harsh. This is the text and clear teaching of the Bible.

During the days of abolition, many people claimed slavery was one of the biblical institutions of society and would quote this and many other verses on the importance of submission in a slave-master relationship. They would claim that anyone trying to rid a society of slavery was violating biblical mandates under the new covenant.

Here is where cultural context is important. It is true that where there is slavery, Jesus gives the example of submitting to those in authority. However, slave ownership has been abolished due to the freedom minorities have secured over the centuries.

The hermeneutical question is whether or not there is any intrinsic and universal mandate within the Bible that indicates slavery is a binding institution within society. Other than these passages talking about submission, there is no binding mandate to preserve slavery. Therefore, the conclusion is that if a society does have slavery, these passages and principles of submission apply, but if it doesn't, the passages on slavery are not relevant.

As an aside, I Cor. 7:21-24 does tell slaves to secure their freedom if they are able, but if they cannot, then they submit to the historical setting and constraint they find themselves and entrust their plight to God.

In conclusion, the passages on the roles of slaves and masters are all cultural mandates. In



thinking about the distinction of text and context, these passages are all about context and exclusively cultural. The passages do not apply to cultural settings that have progressed away from the bondage of slavery.

The Biblical Example of Homosexuality: It's All Text

While less people in the western world today would quote passages like I Peter 2 to advocate slavery than many did 200 years ago, even though those passages command slaves to submit, some have tried to advocate that passages on homosexuality are similar. After all, society is progressing away from the prejudice of sexual orientation, and the gay community is gaining rights, freedoms, and access to opportunities like never before.

If we shift in the way we applied hermeneutical principles on the issue of slavery, we can come up with a position that advocates legitimacy to homosexual behavior. However, if we apply a consistent and rightful hermeneutic of text and context to these passages like we did with slavery, we will conclude that these principles on homosexual behavior are universal.

Leviticus 18:22

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

Romans 1:26-27

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

I Corinthians 6:9-11

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

What we see is that the principle of prohibiting homosexual practice is communicated in both Old and New Testament just like the command for slaves to obey their masters. In this regard, there is no difference. However, if we look at the principle of text and context we see that the text is consistent as a prohibition on the grounds of spiritual morality. Whereas the passages on slavery are conditioned on the social context of slavery as an institution, homosexual prohibition has no contextual dependence. It is a universal moral truth based on the natural relations of how God has created men and women.

These comments would be just the beginning of a hermeneutical study on the topic of homosexuality and the reasons why a consistent hermeneutic would deem homosexual practice as wrong in any cultural context. However, for the sake of this study, these few comments will suffice.



Gender in Home and Church: It's Both Text and Context

The topic of gender roles in home and church is much different than the topic of slavery and homosexuality because, like many passages in the Bible, there is an integration of text (universal principle) and context (cultural exclusivity).

In biblical times and beyond women have not been given the same rights as men, have been marginalized, viewed as property, and did not have as much access to education, resource, and opportunity. Today in 21st century U.S. women have the right to vote, are narrowing the gap with men on accessibility to opportunity, are narrowing the gap on equal pay for equal work, and are on a positive progression of being treated equally with men.

During biblical times this equality of progression was not the case.

Exodus 21:7-8

"If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her."

Deut. 22:29-29

"If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives."

These passages are taken from the OT law under the old covenant, and therefore, the principle of progressive revelation applies. Women during this day were deemed as property, and many of these laws regulated these male dominated transactions.

Passages like these are based on context. There is no universal biblical principle that raped women must marry their abuser or that fathers can sell their daughters for money. People who claim to follow the Bible do not claim to follow these passages and the reason is due to applying consistent hermeneutics.

While it is difficult to read these passages about women or about slaves being beaten because they were considered property, these are strong reminders that our society has progressed in some positive ways when it pertains to those who in the past were marginalized.



The foundational questions for the following NT passages are these:

Is the passage all text (universal); is it all context (cultural); or is it a combination of the two?

And if it is a combination (of which most are), how does the interpreter, with a precise and consistent hermeneutical scalpel, carefully distinguish which aspect of the passage is which?

I Cor. 11:3-13

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

There is a progressive order in this passage that moves from God the Father, to Jesus the Son, to man, and to woman. Each has a preceding headship. The issue here is not leadership but headship, and there is a clear difference. Jesus leads, but the Father is his head. The man leads, but Jesus is his head. The woman leads, but her husband is her head. Headship is about authority and within gender and within the Godhead there is order and authority. The point in this passage is that when women lead, they are to do so recognizing their head. The same principle holds true for Jesus and the man as well. For example, Jesus always led recognizing his submission to his Father. This is the text and universal truth of this passage.

The context or cultural aspect of this passage pertains to hair and head coverings. However, Paul uses quite strong language, and borderline universal language, that it's disgraceful for a man to have long hair, that it is more spiritual and natural that a woman have long hair, and that it is disgraceful for a woman to spiritual lead without a head covering. In fact, the head covering and length of hair are actually tied to the universal headship principle. This makes it debatable as to whether these issues are simply cultural, but because there are not other passages that teach this principle of head coverings and length of hair, it would not be proper to build a universal theology around one passage.



While the conclusion is that this part of the passage is cultural and non-binding in today's society, the strong language reminds us that theology is not an exact science. It is often percentages of certainty, rather than absolute certainty.

I Cor. 14:31-35

For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the Lord's people, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

This passage in the Bible is a prime example of why hermeneutical consistency is the difference maker and not which theological position is simply deemed "most biblical." It is not the Bible that is in question between positions; it is the interpretation of the Bible that differentiates. Also, the conventional theological dichotomy of complementarians versus egalitarians isn't always helpful. It is not about theological camps but about proper hermeneutics of Bible passages.

Taking this passage at face value, a church that allows women to ask questions or to talk at all in a church service is an unbiblical church and in violation of I Cor. 14. This stipulation that women are not allowed to speak at all has universal-like language such as, "as in all the congregations of the Lord's people," and "as the law says." This is why it is important not to ever build a theology or theological position on one verse or passage of Scripture. This is the danger of "proof texting." Precision and consistency in using hermeneutical principles is the only way a different conclusion to this can be made. What part, if any, of this passage is text (universal), and what part, if any, is context (cultural)?

A key hermeneutical principle is "Scripture interpreting Scripture." At face value the passage seems to indicate women are to never talk in church with no exceptions. However, even though the passage says there are no exceptions, there are. And the reason we know there are exceptions, whether this principle is universal or simply cultural to that day, is because I Cor. 11 says that when a women prays or prophesies publicly she is to do so without violating the principle of headship.

If one takes a literal interpretation of this passage, I Cor. 11 contradicts it. And because the author is the same in both passages, and even written in the same letter, it is clear that Paul did not mean that literally "it is a disgraceful for women to even speak in church" (even though that is exactly what he said).

An important question here, however, is that while praying and prophesying are clearly stated as permissible for women publicly in the church, are those the only exceptions? In other words, when a biblical passage gives a specific prohibition, how does one determine the extent of that prohibition, particularly when other passages do indicate a different practice?



For example, would it have been okay for a woman to make some public announcements. The answer seems simple but if we are trying to be rigorous and “biblical only” the Bible says it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church and the only “biblical” exception to this is when they pray and prophesy with their head covered.

Today, if someone preached a message and afterward opened it up for some Q and A on the message, would it be most biblical to communicate the qualification, “and we are only taking questions from men today. Women if you have any questions, please ask your husbands when you are home, and next week they can represent you with their questions. The Bible says it would be a disgrace if you even asked a question publicly in this church.”

If that were said, more than likely that church would not be around long in this 21st Century American culture. Is this because the church has become so liberal and worldly that we no longer follow the clear teachings of the Bible like I Cor. 14?

Or is there an interpretation that is different than what seems so clear and at face value? This is a question of hermeneutics. The face value interpretation doesn’t work because we have another passage that contradicts that interpretation (unless of course the face value interpretation of I Cor. 11 doesn’t actually mean women can step into those public roles).

Culturally at that time it was often disgraceful for women to speak in public. A synagogue for example needed a quorum of 10 men. Jewish history during this time tells us that the common prayer a Jewish man prayed everyday was this, “God, thank you that I am not a gentile, a slave, or a woman.”

Women did not have many rights during this day, were often considered property, had little access to education, and predominantly had identity through their husbands. It was a clear disadvantage to be a woman, and that is why Jewish men thanked God everyday that he wasn’t a woman.

Some wonder why Jesus chose only men when he chose the twelve. Was this due to the importance of male authority? An equally relevant question is *why did he choose only Jews?* Certainly leaders of the church moved beyond simply being Jewish males. Gentiles eventually took on leadership roles, as did women like Lydia, Priscilla, Junia, Phoebe, and many others.

Although the societal culture of Jesus’ day and the days of the early church were certainly Jewish-centric and male dominated, there were glimpses of breaking this overt domination as Jesus broke societal culture as he engaged with the woman at the well, engaged and included many other women, and as women began to slowly and sparingly emerge as leaders within the church. The examples were few and far between for a reason.

While there are no examples of leaders in the Bible taking a stand against the institution of slavery, these few glimpses of women stepping into places of influence were a challenge to the culture.



And so as we read this passage in I Cor. 14 we cannot read it as purely text (universal) without discerning what parts are context (cultural).

While it may have been biblical in the OT to beat a slave and not have any consequences as long as he didn't die, and while it may have been biblical in the NT to require slaves to submit to their masters even if they are harsh and unfair, and while it may have been biblical during NT times to prohibit women from asking questions publicly in the church because that would have been disgraceful, and while it may have been biblical to prohibit men from having long hair because that would be a disgrace to him, none of those things are true for the church today because they are all cultural and not universal.

While our society has digressed in some ways with the ways of God, it has progressed in other areas with the ways of God.

Yes, many ethnic groups in biblical times were marginalized, and yes, many of the poor were enslaved and marginalized, and yes, women were often dominated by men and marginalized. And God gives biblical mandates for how to live for God and store up treasures in heaven while living in an less than ideal world of marginalization, but as Galatians 3:28 says, *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

There is a reason these three specific types of people are mentioned in this verse (race, socioeconomic, and gender) as all of them were heavily marginalized and dominated. One has to wonder how that verse challenged the morning prayer, "Thank you God that I am not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."

Therefore, when interpreting passages like I Cor. 14 on the issue of gender, we must apply a consistent hermeneutic like we do when we interpret other passages like slavery that are so intertwined with the culture of that day.

Here is where the hermeneutical scalpel is critical. While we must acknowledge these and other passages on women and gender are laced with cultural applications that are for those settings only, there is a clear difference between these passages and the ones for example on slavery.

The relationship between slave and master is a man-made relationship and 100% culturally dependent, and the relationship between male and female is created by God and therefore, does have some universal patterns. This is why there is nothing intrinsic and universal about the passages on slavery, and while there are things that are intrinsic and universal about the issues of gender.

Conclusions on what part of this passage is cultural and what part is universal will be made after other passages below on gender are considered.

Ephesians 5:21-28

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.



Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

This passage coincides with the passage in I Cor. 11 on the progression of headship. Headship in this passage is about husbands and wives as well as Jesus and the church. Headship is about authority and accountability. Husbands are accountable before God for the direction and spiritual health of their marriage.

Husbands are to follow the example of Jesus on what it means to exercise this headship which is about sacrifice and laying down one's life.

God has order and accountability in all aspects of society such as government and citizens, parents and children, overseers and church congregation, and within the marriage relationship of husbands and wives. Husbands and wives implement spiritual leadership together in joint partnership but there is a clear distinction in where the accountability lies and that is with the husband.

This is not because God has created men to be smarter or better leaders; it is simply a principle of authority and accountability that will only last in this lifetime as the institution of marriage will only last in this lifetime (Matt. 22:30).

Therefore, while it is true contextually during Bible times women were marginalized, it is also true that the text of Scripture universally communicates that husbands have headship responsibility with their wives as they spiritually lead and influence together.

I Timothy 2:8-3:7

Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable,



hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

In this passage the headship distinction found in Ephesians 5 regarding marriage and I Cor. 11 regarding church continues and is consistent as it pertains to areas of church leadership.

As stated in Ephesians 5 the husband and wife are partners together as one flesh but the husband is the head of the wife. Because the church is patterned after family and is the spiritual representation of family (Ephesians 2:19-3:21, I Tim. 3:14-15), men and women are gifted to lead but elders are given the role of headship within the congregation, and this passage indicates that these overseers like in the home are male.

This passage is marked with contextual variances as well as universal truths. Women are not prohibited today from wearing expensive clothes, gold, or fine jewelry. Paul prohibits this during his day, however, for cultural reasons.

The prohibition of women not teaching or having authority over a man requires careful hermeneutical principles. The linkage to man being created first is a linkage back to the principle of male headship. The creation order is the same intrinsic and universal principle communicated in other passages that man does have headship over the woman.

At face value the passage seems to indicate that women should not teach a man or have authority over a man and there are no exceptions in the passage. And this application is tied to creation order and Eve's deception. However, a consistent hermeneutic used in interpreting other passages must be maintained here as well. This is where the breakdown usually happens.

What is the context of the passage? The most immediate context here is qualifications for overseers. Most of the qualifications listed are character traits. The two functional qualifications are "able to teach" and "managing his own home."

These are both consistent with "teaching" and "having authority."

While husbands are to lay down their lives for their wives and sacrifice for them as they exercise their authority and protect the health of their marriage before God, in the same way elders are charged with "teaching sound doctrine" (Titus 1:6-9) and shepherding the flock by being Godly examples (I Peter 5:1-3).

Headship in the home and in the church are strongly tied together as both are rooted in the intrinsic principle of creation order and the headship progression of Father to Jesus to man to woman.



However, what does “not teaching and having authority over a man” mean?

Conclusions on this will be made after one other group of passages are considered.

Acts 18:1-3

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

Acts 18:18-26

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, “I will come back if it is God’s will.” Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

I Cor. 16:19

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.

Romans 16:3-5

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house.

2 Timothy 4:19

Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.

The most prominent power couple from a spiritual and influential perspective in the entire Bible is Priscilla and Aquila. No couple gets more print (from four different N.T. books) than this couple. This was a highly unusual couple for many reasons and the Apostle Paul calls them out often.

In the year 52 A.D. the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, and this sent the couple



packing their bags, leaving everything they knew, and arriving in a new city called Corinth. At about the same time Paul was on his second missionary journey, arrived in Corinth, and as was his custom he began to preach in the synagogue and began to look for people of peace. Priscilla and Aquila had a joint business venture together as they were both tentmakers.

When Paul met them they were either already Christians or Paul led them to Jesus. They invited him to live with them, and Paul lived with them for 18 months in Corinth discipling and training them to be missionaries and church leaders.

Paul started the church in Corinth and this couple's leadership capacity became clear as they joined Paul's team and offered to use their house as a base for ministry. They were so influential that Paul convinced them to leave Corinth and travel with him to the next city where they would help him plant another church. Paul went to one of the most strategic cities possible as he went to Ephesus, the capital of Asia.

Ephesus had been impacted by John the Baptist but was not familiar with the gospel of Jesus yet. Paul stayed a short time there in Ephesus and then came back a year later to spend more time establishing the church. In the meantime, Priscilla and Aquila helped found the church and used their home once again as a base of ministry.

While they were there, they heard the gifted Apollos teach but they noticed deficiencies in his theology and understanding of the gospel. Therefore, after the synagogue meeting, they invited him to their home and they "explained to him the way of God more adequately." The greek tense of the verb is in the plural, and so it was clear that Priscilla and Aquila did this together.

Priscilla and Aquila are named in six different passages together and four of them have Priscilla listed first. This is highly unusual in any setting but even more unusual in the male dominated culture of the first century. Two possible reasons for this are that Priscilla was of a higher social setting or the more likely reason was Priscilla was the more influential of the two.

What would have been ordinary and customary in this setting is that Apollos would have come to their home, Priscilla would have made domestic preparations, and Aquila would have given Apollos the theological correction he needed.

Wives had little rights, were often viewed as property, could not vote, had little opportunity to education in general and particularly to theological education. After all, if wives had theological questions, they were instructed not to ask in church settings but ask their husbands at home (I Cor. 14:35). Therefore, they were dependent on their husbands.

Not so with Priscilla. She was personally trained by Paul himself in her home. She had some of the best theological education in the world. Therefore, it wasn't Aquila who simply noticed Apollos' theological deficiencies, they both did, and they both corrected him.

Culturally this probably was the first time the gifted Apollos learned the ways of God from a gifted



and godly woman who was partnering with her husband. Priscilla and Aquila knew the Scriptures better than most and were leaders of the church wherever they went.

Apollos heeded their instruction and went on to be one of the most influential leaders in the early church.

A year later Paul comes back to Ephesus for three years to further establish the church in Ephesus and here is where he writes I Corinthians and tells the church that Priscilla and Aquila greet them along with the church meeting in their home (I Cor. 16:19).

They helped lead this most strategic church in Ephesus during that first year without Paul and during the three subsequent years he was there. Priscilla did not take the customary back seat role as a female as Aquila risked his life for the sake of helping establish this church in the hostile and dangerous setting of Ephesus. Paul points out that they both risked their lives as they were both on the front lines of mission and ministry (Romans 16:3-5).

The entire Gentile church is indebted to the sacrifice Priscilla and Aquila made in helping plant and establish the Ephesian church, which resourced so many missionary endeavors. In writing to the Gentile church of Rome, Paul makes reference to the honor they and all the Gentile churches should give to Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3-5). They were the most influential early church couple recorded in Scripture.

Priscilla and Aquila eventually left Ephesus and came back to Rome after Claudius was gone. As usual, they planted and started another church in their home and as Paul makes mention of them to the Roman church, he asks that his greeting go to the church in their home.

In the last book Paul wrote, 2 Timothy, he makes mention honoring Priscilla and Aquila once again (2 Timothy 4:19). This was 16 years after they were first together in Corinth.

Partnership in ministry between a husband and wife is one of the greatest and most spiritually attractive pictures of family. Men and women are different but together they offer a more holistic representation of God. Women tend to be holistic thinkers, more emotionally expressive, and more relational than men. Men tend to be compartmental thinkers, less emotionally expressive, and more conquest driven. Men generally have more muscle mass than women physically, and women have the unique ability to bear children. Although those are generalizations with unlimited exception examples, the reality is that men and women are created by God to be different but their differences represent God's image equally.

Moms lead families differently than dads do, but God intended the family to be led by both. And when the family is led only by a dad or only by a mom, the balanced dynamic God intended is impacted. This is also true when it comes to God's spiritual family. A church led by all women or a church led by all men will have imbedded shortcomings and lack a full representation of how each gender represents the image of God.



While there are many more examples in the contemporary church today of amazing women church leaders and amazing husband-wife teams like Priscilla and Aquila, these examples are few and far between in the first century church. Priscilla's ministry and influence, alongside her husband, was extremely rare. Women simply did not have that kind of opportunity, nor did slaves, nor did Samaritans, nor did Gentiles initially, nor did any marginalized people group.

One can only imagine the level of difficulty men, and even some women must have had with Priscilla's influence. Without question she received ridicule and challenge from good intending people who were not used to that type of female influence as well as some ridicule simply from chauvinistic male Jews who thanked God everyday that they were not a woman.

Therefore, the hermeneutical principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture must be applied when considering gender roles in the home and church. The role and influence of Priscilla and Aquila and the impact they had together to help establish the Gentile church must be considered.



Today's Context

Because the backdrop to Western culture has aspects of male domination, in some ways similar to the first century early church, the women's movement over the last 100 years and particularly in the last half century have both positives and negatives.

Women having the right to vote, getting equal pay for equal work, having opportunity to education, leadership, resource, and respect, are all positive effects.

There are aspects of the women's movement, however, that has swung the pendulum too far. Liberating women from the domestic call of raising their children and embracing the maternal calling in the family has contributed to the breakdown of the family. Ultimately the extremes of this movement have attempted to breakdown any difference in the genders and have advocated for a gender neutral reality.

Male domination is not God's design but nor is the push for its opposite extreme of gender sameness. This has given rise to the cultural push for acceptance that same sex attraction and practice is a natural alternative to heterosexuality.

The church makes a mistake when it allows culture to influence its beliefs and practices. However, it also makes a mistake when it allows the culture to make healthy advances, and the church lags behind. There are plenty of examples of each throughout history.

The question at hand for this study is how does one keep a consistent hermeneutic while synthesizing all the passages on gender in the home and ministry?

There are essentially three positions on gender in the home and three positions on gender in the church. All of these positions have a different conclusion and use a different hermeneutic to distinguish what aspects of the relevant passages are cultural for that setting only and what aspects are universal truths for any setting.

The following three positions can apply to the home, and they can also apply to the church:

- 1) Shared headship – shared leadership
- 2) Male headship – shared leadership
- 3) Male headship – male leadership

See the appendix for an overview of these positions in both home and church.



4 Different Interpretations

Here are four different interpretations of I Timothy 2:12, I Corinthians 14:23, and I Corinthians 11:3-8 based on a consistent hermeneutic for each.

1) A Literal Hermeneutic with Universal Application

Women should not fill any teaching or authority roles where men are present.

The passage in I Timothy 2 is to be taken literally and at face value. Women are not to teach or have authority over a man. The reason we know this is to be universal in all settings and not simply a cultural mandate is because it is linked to the creation order and to the fact that Eve was the one deceived. Gender order is a universal biblical principle. Men and women are equal in dignity and image but they have distinct roles in the home and church whereby men are to do the leading and women are to follow their leadership. The two things that violate the universal gender order is when a man teaches a woman or exercises authority over a woman. This mandate is to be universally applied in all cultural settings.

The reality that Priscilla was influential over Apollos and over many churches is interpreted as a support to Aquila and since no formal position is specified, it is assumed that her role of “explaining” the way of God more adequately was not as strong as teaching or having authority.

The hermeneutic of literal and universal interpretation of I Tim 2 requires consistency in other passages such as I Cor. 11. Here Paul says that men should be forbidden from having long hair and that woman should have long hair. The reason this needs to be applied in all settings is because like in I Tim. 2 the linkage is to the universal truth that man was created first and is the glory of Christ and woman is the glory of the man. These are not cultural truths but universal truths. If a woman does pray or prophesy the church should require her to wear a head covering. We know these issues of hair length and head coverings are to universally be applied in all cultural settings because like the literal hermeneutic applied in I Tim. 2 they are linked to creation order and headship.

Similarly, I Cor. 14: 34-35 Paul does give a command for women not to speak in churches and this is linked to “as in all the congregations” and to the “law” which is more than likely a reference to the creation law of submission women are to follow. The only exception given to this command is when women pray and prophesy and the command on hair and head coverings apply. Nonetheless, it is disgraceful for women to speak in church and women should be asking their husbands at home any questions they might have. This should be applied in all settings.



If this literal hermeneutic is applied with no consideration of cultural context, then in the church context a woman should never teach a man (in any church setting including classes, groups, preaching, counseling, church services, etc.), never hold any position (paid or volunteer) in the church where she has any authority over a man, women should have long hair, men should have short hair, women should remain silent in churches unless they have a head covering when they speak, and then only in the cases of prayer and prophesy.

If this is the correct hermeneutic to use, the contemporary church today has departed significantly from biblical mandates on gender in the church, and there needs to be a strong call to repentance and a fresh commitment to teaching these principles in all the churches.

2) A Cultural Hermeneutic

Headship in the home and/or in the church is not tied to gender. Men and women lead and have accountability before God equally.

The Scriptures were written within a patriarchal cultural context where polygamy was the norm, women could not vote, women and slaves were treated as property, and women's societal identity was found in the reputation of her husband. The Scriptures often do not overtly combat the societal ills but rather it encourages marginalized people to not be overly troubled by their temporal plight but to entrust themselves to their eternal position before God (1 Cor. 7:17-24). The instructions for slaves to submit to their masters and for women to submit to their husbands were ways the people of God could function within less than ideal cultural circumstances and yet still entrust themselves to God. In today's U.S. culture slavery has been abolished, women are no longer treated as property, have the right to vote, and have an intrinsic and societal identity independent of their husbands. They now live in a culture where leadership in society is accessible in all areas. Therefore, while the passages on male headship in marriage and slave master headship over slaves are consistently taught within Scripture (Col. 3:22-25), the direct application of those passages only applies within cultures that still share those societal boundaries.

3) A Literal and Universal Hermeneutic with Some Moderate Cultural Context

Women can hold various leadership roles in the church but any teaching or positions in the public setting that carry authority over men are forbidden.

This position holds to a similar literal hermeneutic as the first position but does allow for a little more cultural variance and a modified application in all settings. When Paul says he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, he did not mean literally without exception. While nothing before or after the passage here indicates the exhortations given were to be for the public gathered church only, this presupposition to the text is foundational for how



this passage is understood. Here the interpreter begins to take more liberty and takes a slight departure from the previous position that the application was to be made universally in all church settings.

The presupposition brought to the text that the application of the passage is only for the formal and public arena allows for women to potentially assist in teaching or leading a class or group where men are present, or at least make a contribution to a discussion that could be lead to other men learning something about God by what the woman contributes.

However, allowing women to lead or teach in any church setting, or even make a contribution to a discussion that leads to men learning from women seems to violate both I Tim. 2:11 where Paul says a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. This mandate is consistent with what Paul says in I Cor. 14:34 where he says, “women should be silent in the churches and in full submission a the law says.”

Once the interpreter gives up the absolute universal and literal hermeneutic used in position one above, and yet wants to retain the universal application that women should not teach or have authority, the hermeneutical consistency moves to more shaky ground.

The interpreter is attempting to conclude that women should never preach and teach in a “public setting” because the mandate is tied to the creation order but the lines of formal and informal become a presupposition brought to the text that begins to show cracks. And the cracks are not only in the I Tim. 2 passage itself, and in the inconsistency of applying the I Cor. 14 passage, but it is manifested clearly in I Cor. 11.

The artificial presupposition brought to I Tim. 2 that the context is only public will not soften or help the application of I Cor. 11 to be less than literal. The hermeneutic used to forbid women from teaching or having authority over men as a universal mandate must then be applied to the issue of hair length and head coverings. Like in position one above, this is the consistency.

However, because this third position is a more relaxed version of position one, most in this camp would not mandate hair length and head coverings in the church today as universal commands. The interpretation is that this is simply cultural, and even though this passage is tied to the universal truth of creation order and headship, it is not relevant today.

This position wants to maintain a level of universal mandate on the issue of women not teaching or having authority over men but the level of inconsistency in applying a consistent hermeneutic is both difficult and impossible when interpreting the other passages on gender.



4) A Hermeneutical Mixture of Universal Truth and Cultural Context

Women (and men) can teach and lead in any role but all must do so in submission to the headship of male elders

A hermeneutically consistent position is that all the passages on gender in home and ministry are all universal truths but all of them are applied differently in different cultural settings.

Position three adheres to the universal principles of gender roles in home and church as applicable in all settings but also attempts to make “some” of Paul’s specific application of those principles in the first century church also binding to all settings. There is where the hermeneutical inconsistencies manifest themselves.

This fourth position is where the hermeneutical scalpel will need to be precise, consistent, rigorous, and disciplined to distinguish universal principle from cultural application. The premise of this position is that Paul roots his mandates and applications on gender within universal principle, and while every culture is bound to adhere to the universal mandates, we are not bound to the way Paul applied the mandates in first century church history.

To restate, position one makes everything a universal mandate binding on all cultures, position two makes everything a cultural mandate not binding on any other settings, position three blurs the line between universal and cultural application, and position four here clearly articulates the difference between universal and cultural application.

Therefore, the first order of business is to determine what, if any, of the passages on gender are universal mandates in the home and/or church.

Much more could be written to defend why the following principles in Scripture are universal truths binding on all cultures, but for the sake of this study, they will simply be stated:

- 1) **Headship is an issue of authority and responsibility and not an issue of exclusive leadership.** God establishes order and accountability to all aspects of society, and this headship is rooted in the Godhead.
 - God the Father is the head of God the Son (either eternally or at a minimum in Jesus’ humanity). Jesus gave leadership but always in submission to the Father. (1 Cor. 11:3)
 - Jesus is the head of the church. The church leads but in submission to Jesus. (Eph. 5:24)
 - Parents are the head of their children. Children help lead the family but in submission to their parents. (Col. 3:20)
 - Government is the head of citizens. The people lead but always in submission to the government. (Rom. 13:1-5)
 - Elders are the head of the congregations. Congregational members lead but always in submission to the elders. (1 Peter 5:1-3)



- The husband is the head of the wife. Husband and wives partner and lead the family together but the husband is the most accountable before God for the direction of the marriage and family, and the wife submits to that authority. (Eph. 5:22)
- 2) **Headship in the home is tied to gender.** Males are to be heads over their wives. And because the church is simply an extension of the home, headship in the church is tied to gender as well. Headship in the church, elders, are to be male. (1 Tim. 3:5, 1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6)
 - 3) **The church is an extension of the home.** The church is to operate as a family with spiritual parents and children. (Eph. 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 Cor. 4:14-17)
 - 4) **Whatever authority structure a society has, those who are marginalized or treated unfairly are to submit to the authority and entrust themselves and their injustice experience to the God who sees and who will reward** (e.g. slaves, poor, women, racism, government persecution, etc.) (1 Peter 3:1-6, 1 Peter 4:12-19, Col. 3:22-25).

The above four principles have their roots in creation and universal biblical principle. How they are applied depends on the cultural context.

However, here is an important clarification that is crucial when applying a consistent hermeneutic: simply because a command in Scripture is tied to a universal principle does not make that command or application universal.

This understanding of proper hermeneutics is critical when distinguishing universal principle versus cultural application.

For example, when Paul says that women are to have long hair, men are to have short hair, and he commands women to have head coverings if they pray or prophesy, he does connect these instructions to the universal principle of male headship. However, one can and should conclude that the principle of male headship is universal for all cultures, but the way Paul is applying it to the setting he is addressing is not binding to all settings.

Head coverings and length of hair were cultural applications of a universal principle. One does not need to conclude, we keep all the commands of this passage as universal or we keep none of the commands as binding. Male headship is binding but the way Paul applies it, even though he uses strong and emphatic language, is not binding.

In a similar way, when Paul says that women are to learn in quietness and full submission and they must not teach or have authority over a man, he ties it to the creation order or male headship. The application of the male headship principle in that setting of not teaching or having authority is not binding but the principle of male headship in the church is.



What is Paul getting at as he specifies the two areas of teaching and having authority? For one, it fits the culture of gender relations in that setting, but secondly and more importantly, the context of those commands in the passage itself is the qualifications of leadership, and in particular, the qualifications of elders. Overseers are given the final authority of the church and are to guard the teaching and doctrine of the church.

The two qualifications listed in I Timothy 3 for the elder that are functional in nature and not simply character issues are “able to teach” and “must manage family well as he will have to do as an elder.”

The role of husband in a marriage is directly tied here to the role of elder. Husbands don’t do all the teaching and leading in a marriage as the wife partners with him, but the wife is under the authority of the husband’s headship when she does teach and lead in the family. Likewise, elders aren’t the only ones who teach in the church, other men and women do, but any teaching is under the accountability of the elders.

Therefore, Women are not to be elders or practice teaching that carries the level of authority of establishing doctrine, which is the universal principle. One must remember that the canon of Scripture was not complete during the time I Tim. 3 was written and therefore, much of the teaching was new teaching establishing new doctrine under the new covenant. This prohibition carries with it a consistent hermeneutic. Women are free to teach, lead, and fill any church role in position that is underneath the authority of the elders and under established doctrine given by the authority of the elders. This allows women to teach or preach without undermining male headship. This was not the case in the context of I Tim 3 as there was false teaching and the need to establish new doctrine within the new covenant, thus, the prohibition for women teaching in that setting.

This also allows hermeneutical consistency when considering the difficult passage of I Cor. 14. Here, like in the other passages, the task is to determine what is the universal principle in the passage that must be maintained, and what is the application of that principle in the context.

Paul forbids women from speaking in church and instructs them to ask their husbands when they get home if they have questions. He ties this to the principle of women being in a role of submission. Like in the I Tim. 2 passage and in the Cor. 11 passage, one can and should adhere to the universal principle referenced without the need to be bound to the direct command.

The prohibition for women of talking or being required to ask their husbands at home is based on the context of the passage, which is about discerning the doctrine of the prophetic words. Again, one must remember that the canon of Scripture was not complete and so elders had to make doctrinal judgments about prophecy without the benefit of having 27 books of the NT. In other words, when there is a need to make authority judgments on whether a prophetic word is endorsed and/or obeyed, this is the task of the elders. Therefore, when Paul prohibits women from speaking, it is simply during the process of elder doctrinal discernment. Today the weighing



of prophecy is against the backdrop of Scripture and established doctrine, and therefore, practiced by all. However, the elders ultimately have the responsibility in any debated areas of prophetic practice.

Again, with this consistent hermeneutic, women are not to be elders and function with headship authority over the church in areas of prophecy and doctrine but are free to teach, lead, and fill any church role in position that is underneath the authority of the elders. Both of these interpretations and conclusions preserve a consistent hermeneutic when interpreting and applying the passages on gender in either the home or church.

Is it really possible that Paul's strong language in the following areas are not binding on the church today: that women should not teach or have authority over a man, that it is disgraceful for women to speak in church, that they must wait to ask questions until they get home, that men should be forbidden in the church from having long hair, and that women should have long hair for her glory and because of the angels? The answer is yes these things are not binding because they are cultural applications of the universal principles and not the universal principles themselves.

This hermeneutical precision of deciphering between universal principle and contextual application is the way the entire Bible is properly interpreted and applied. And when this consistency is not maintained, people simply pick and choose which applications they want to make binding on all settings.

Here are other examples of commands given by NT leaders that are tied to universal principles but are not binding universally:

Colossians 3:22-25

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

Universal Principle: Christ is our example of submitting to any human authority and God will bless this obedience.

Cultural command: Slaves obey your earthly masters.

Just because the command is tied to the universal principle does not make the command universal. Only the principle is binding.

2 Corinthians 13:12

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Universal Principle: We are to show love and hospitality to one another in our greetings.



Cultural Command: When you greet, kiss one another.

The universal principle is binding but the command is not.

Acts 15:23-30

With them they sent the following letter:

“The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.”

So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter.

Universal Principle: The elders are tasked with determining doctrine and practice and that doctrine and practice is to be anchored in God's word but also sensitive to the cultural setting.

Cultural Command: Christians are not to eat meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, or strangled animals.

The universal principle of submitting to elders is to be followed but we are not bound to the prohibitions the elders gave to that first century early church that was attempting to be sensitive to the Jewish audience as they made their way toward complete freedom.



Conclusion

We could look at passage after passage and use a disciplined hermeneutical scalpel to show that simply because a command in Scripture is tied to a universal principle does not mean that command is binding in other settings.

I Timothy 2:12 and other passages on gender in the home and church have been some of the most misinterpreted and misapplied passages in all the Bible. What happens is that most people choose a theological camp and then attempt to make the various passages fit with the camp.

The real task is to apply consistent hermeneutical principles that distinguish universal principles from applied application to the setting and context.

This fourth and final view maintains the universal principle that God has given the husband headship in the family and male elders headship in the church family. Much more could be stated about why this brings health and balance. This headship gives wives in the home and women in the church the freedom to function in any capacity as long as it is done with submission to their husband and submission to the elders.

The application of this universal principle will look differently in different contextual settings. For example, today in the Middle East, where women are still marginalized, it may be wiser for the elders in that cultural setting to restrict women from teaching publicly in a church setting as this may bring rebuke and even danger to the church or these women in a male dominated society.

Likewise, Paul applied more restrictive constraints to women, slaves, and other marginalized folks to these and other universal principles in this first century context.

Today, in 21st Century U.S. women are not bound to the same injustices and constraints of centuries past and are given much more access to resource and leadership. This should be embraced by the church while maintaining the headship of created order.

As it was stated at the beginning, theology is not an exact science. We are dealing with “percentages” of certainty and not absolute certainty as all these interpretations are evaluated.

These issues of gender in home and ministry are not on par with the theological positions of the Godhead or the morality of holy living. Disrepute comes on the church when moral areas of sin are compromised and when the principles of the ten commandments and other lifestyle areas



of integrity are not pursued, and also when the nature of God or elements of the gospel depart from historic Christian faith.

Areas such as these (doctrine of God, doctrine of the gospel, doctrine of the Bible, doctrine of moral living) are all foundational to the church and have little room for debate. The application of gender roles and its variety within the spectrum of churches, however, are maintained differently by sound evangelical churches. Therefore, mutual respect for differing positions and a heavy dose of humility are required to maintain unity around what Augustine called “unity in the essentials, liberty on the non-essentials, and love in all things.”