

A Biblical View of Women



Dr. Paul Ellis
January, 2021

A Biblical View of Women¹

In the church, you may encounter two views about women. There is the traditional view (women should aspire to be meek, stay-at-home-mothers) and the so-called progressive view (women can do anything men can do).

Which view is Biblical? I suspect most people would say the traditional view. Many churchgoers believe that the Bible calls women to be subservient and silent housewives.

Most people would be wrong.

What we call the traditional view comes not from scripture, but ancient Greece. It was the pagan philosophers of Athens who said the ideal wife was silent and subservient, and their views were exported around the world in a process known as Hellenization.

The alternative idea that women are equal with men and can do anything they put their mind to is the older idea. It was articulated by our Creator in Genesis 1 and modelled throughout the Bible.



What we call “traditional” should really be labelled a perversion of God’s original plan for partnership. As we will see, the traditional view is demeaning to women, harmful to families and thoroughly unscriptural.

What follows is a brief comparison of the Greek and Biblical perspectives.

¹ You are welcome to freely share this note with others. Much of the material for this note comes from the book, [The Silent Queen: Why the Church Needs Women to Find their Voice](#). Cover art by Pixabay.

The Greeks: Women are meant to serve men

The Bible: Husbands and wives submit to each other

The Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all taught that women are inferior to men. And because they are inferior, women should be ruled by men. “The male is by nature superior and the female inferior; the male ruler and the female subject,” said Aristotle.²

The Greek-speaking Jews of the first century felt the same way. Josephus the historian said, “A woman is inferior to her husband in all things. Let her therefore be obedient to him.”³

However, the Bible teaches that women are in no way inferior. Both male and female were made in the image of God. It’s true that sin unbalanced the scales, but if you want to know what God thinks of women, look at how Jesus related to them. Jesus treated women with kindness and respect. He even trained them, which was something no Greek or Jewish teacher did.

The philosophers and rabbis taught that women were little more than property. In contrast, the followers of Christ said radical things like “husbands ought to lay down their lives for their wives,” “wives have authority over their husbands,” and “women are the head of the home.”⁴

Sadly, it didn’t last. The Church Fathers who came later, reverted to the old ways of the Greeks. Augustine, the fourth-century Bishop of Hippo, said women had low intelligence and were not made in the image of God. “It is the natural order among people that women serve their husbands and children their parents, because the justice of this lies in that the lesser serves the greater.” John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, said women were weak and fickle and inferior to men.⁵

² Socrates said that women were inferior to men in terms of “their judgment and physical strength” (quoted in Xenophon, *Symposium*, 2:9). In his *Republic* (5), Plato opined that “all the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also, but in all of them a woman is inferior to a man.” Aristotle said females were inferior in *Politics*, 1:1254b.

³ *Against Apion*, 2:25.

⁴ “Husbands ought to lay down their lives for their wives” is the gist of Eph. 5:25. “Wives have authority over their husbands,” and vice versa (see 1 Cor. 7:4, especially in the NKJV). “Women are the head of the home” is one of those claims so radical, few people seem to realize it comes from the Bible. It is based on a literal reading of 1 Tim. 5:14 where Paul is instructing the women to be masters or lords of their homes. To quote John Chrysostom, the “woman is assigned the presidency of the household” (Sermon: “The kind of women who ought to be taken as wives”).

⁵ Augustine’s comments about the low intelligence of women come from *De Genesi ad Literam (The Literal Meaning of Genesis)* (9.5.9). His comments about women not being made in the image of God come from *On the Trinity* (12.7.10). His comments about women serving their husband come from *Questions on the Heptateuch*,

Later theologians sang from the same sexist songbook. Thomas Aquinas said “Man is more perfect than woman and naturally superior to the female.” Aquinas also said the relationship between a husband and a wife is “like that of a master to his servant.”⁶

The first duty of a wife, said the Puritan John Dod (1549–1645), is to fear her husband. Her second duty, “is constant obedience and subjection... she must resolve to obey him in all things.”⁷

Misguided men have been oppressing women from the beginning (see Table 1), but male privilege has no place in the new creation. “There is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Although many Christians have bought into the Greek view of women, it should also be recognized that the church has done much to liberate women. And by submitting to each other in love, Christian marriages model the one-flesh partnership that God designed in the beginning.

Table 1: Leaders and thinkers who said women are inferior to men

Socrates	René Descartes	Leo Tolstoy
Plato	Thomas Hobbes	Sigmund Freud
Aristotle	John Locke	Carl Jung
Josephus	David Hume	Charles Darwin
Augustine of Hippo	Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Karl Marx
Thomas Aquinas	G. W. F. Hegel	Adolf Hitler
Martin Luther	Arthur Schopenhauer	
Immanuel Kant	Napoleon Bonaparte	
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe	Friedrich Nietzsche	

1.153, quoted in “Equality for Catholic women?” http://equalityforwomeninthecatholicchurch.com/?page_id=165
 John Chrysostom’s remarks on weak women come from his “Homily 9 on First Timothy.”

⁶ Thomas Aquinas’s remarks on superior men come from his “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11.” His comments about servant-wives comes from his “Commentary on Ephesians 5.”

⁷ The John Dod quote comes from, “The duties of husband and wife,” *A Puritan’s Mind*, www.apuritansmind.com/the-christian-walk/the-christian-family/the-duties-of-husband-and-wife-by-dr-john-dod/

The Greeks: A woman's place is at home

The Bible: Men and women are to rule and reign and fill the earth

Xenophon, a student of Socrates, taught that a woman's place is in the home. "Since God has made a woman's body less capable of endurance, I take it that God has assigned her the indoor tasks." The Jews agreed. "Women's wisdom is solely in the spindle," said the rabbis.⁸

Philo of Alexandria, Jewish intellectual who lived in the first-century, believed public places and the hurly-burly of running a business were better suited to men, "but taking care of household affairs are the proper duties of women."⁹

The Church Fathers and later reformers also taught that a woman's purpose is to manage the home. Martin Luther said women were "chiefly created to bear children, and be the pleasure, joy, and solace of their husbands."¹⁰

The philosophers and rabbis believed that only men could work, but this division of labor is not found in the Bible. God told the first man and woman they had been created to rule and reign together (Genesis 1:27-28), and the Bible records many women who worked outside home. Ruth worked in the barley fields, Rachel was a shepherd, Miriam was one of the leaders of the Exodus, Deborah was a judge of Israel, Sheerah built a town, Lydia was a merchant, and Priscilla was a tentmaker.

Jesus encountered many women in his travels and not once did he send them home. Indeed, he included women in his company of disciples, and he welcomed Mary when she left the kitchen to sit at his feet.

In his epistles, the Apostle Paul praised several women who he identified as collaborators in the gospel. Some of these, like Phoebe and Priscilla, travelled internationally. Others, like Junia, had such prominent ministries that they went to prison for preaching the gospel.

⁸ Xenophon's quote comes from his *Economics*, 7:24–25. In the same work he notes, "To be woman it is more honorable to stay indoors than to abide in the fields" (7:30-31). The Jewish belief that "Women's wisdom is solely in the spindle" was quoted by Rachel Keren in "Torah Study," *Jewish Women's Archive*, website: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/torah-study>

⁹ *Special Laws*, 3.169.

¹⁰ *Table Talk*, 726.

Raising children is a noble occupation, but the traditional view that a woman has no options besides being a homemaker is more pagan than biblical. In the Bible, both fathers and mothers are called to be active in the raising of children, and all of us are encouraged to fan into flame the gifts God has given us.

The Greeks: Women must be silent in the assemblies The Bible: Men and women are encouraged to speak

Again, it was the philosophers of Greece who popularized the idea that women should remain silent. “Silence is a woman’s glory,” said Sophocles the playwright. The Greeks forbade women from speaking in public assemblies and the Hellenized Jews agreed. “It is a shame for a woman to let her voice be heard among men,” says the Talmud.¹¹

When the Jewish and Greek Christians of Corinth asked Paul whether he thought women should be silent in church, he replied, “What? Are you out of your mind?” Paul rebuked the Corinthians for even contemplating such a thing and reminded them that “when you come together each of you can bring a hymn, a word, a tongue, an interpretation.”¹²

Jesus commissioned his followers, male and female, to tell others the good news. Paul wondered how people can call on the name of the Lord if someone doesn’t tell them about Jesus. Yet several of Church Fathers ignored Jesus and Paul and followed the Greeks. “It is not permitted for a woman to speak in the church,” said Tertullian.¹³ Many today make the same error even though there are more than two dozen New Testament scriptures encouraging women NOT to be silent in church.¹⁴

¹¹ Sophocles is quoted by Aristotle in *Politics*, 1:13. The Talmudic prohibition is quoted in Kathryn J. Riss (2003), *Journey’s End: Removing “Biblical” Barriers Between Women and Their Destiny*, iUniverse, 249.

¹² “What? Are you out of your mind?” is a fair summary of Paul’s reaction as recorded in 1 Cor 14:36-38, or it would be except some English translations inexplicably omit Paul’s exclamatory “What?” The Passion Translation and the Source New Testament both capture Paul’s indignation with “I don’t think so!” and “Utter rubbish.” There is no question Paul was opposed to prohibitions on women speaking because of the number of times he encourages Corinthian women to speak up in church (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:5, 26, 31, 39).

¹³ *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 9.

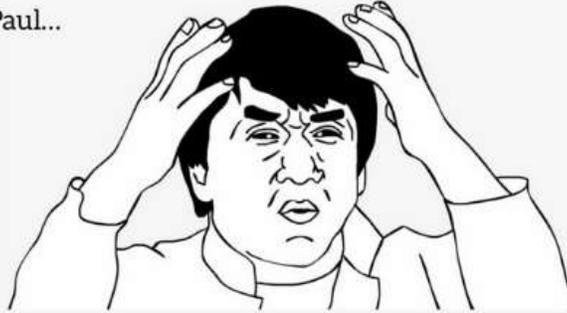
¹⁴ See for example, Acts 1:14, 2:4, 17, 18, 4:31, 21:9, Romans 12:6, 16:1, 3, 6, 12, 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11, 27, 14:5, 26, 27, 29, 31, 39, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 2:9, 4:10–11.

Greeks: "Women must remain silent in the assembly"

Jews: "Women must remain silent in the assembly"

Corinthians: "Should women must remain silent in the assembly?"

Apostle Paul...



The Greeks: Women cannot lead **The Bible: Anyone can lead if they are going in the right direction**

In the pantheon of Greek philosophers, women are notably absent. This is hardly surprising given that the Greeks thought women were inferior and essentially defective men. Similarly, among the Jewish sages and rabbis, you will find no women of note. How could there be when the Jews thought women were not worth listening to and that teaching them was a waste of time?¹⁵

Yet in the Bible we find many courageous women who led, and this was particularly true in the New Testament. According to Chrysostom, the women of the early church “were more spirited than lions, sharing with the Apostles their labors for the Gospel’s sake.”¹⁶ We know women played an active role in the ministry because Saul the Pharisee went around arresting them.

The early Christians were well-acquainted with female prophets, female apostles, and female pastors. In the final chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul named ten people involved in ministry in one form or another, and seven of them were women (see Table 2).¹⁷

¹⁵ The Jewish indifference to educating women is reflected in the Talmud: “Teach your sons but not your daughters” (Sifrei Devarim 46).

¹⁶ “Homily 31 on Romans.”

¹⁷ The ten ministers Paul acknowledges in Romans 16 include two apostles (Andronicus and Junia), a deacon (Phoebe), three co-workers in the Lord (Priscilla, Aquila and Urbanus) and four hard workers (Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis).

Table 2: Ministers in Romans 16

Women	Men
Phoebe	Aquila
Priscilla	Andronicus
Mary	Urbanus
Junia	
Tryphena	
Tryphosa	
Persis	

Jesus encouraged women to lead, and for a while they did. Then in the 364AD, the Council of Laodicea banned the appointment of women leaders.¹⁸ Jesus encouraged his disciples to let their light shine, but after the fourth century Christ's female followers had their gifts hidden under a patriarchal bushel.

Jesus said, "Everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40). Jesus expected his female followers to teach and lead, just as he did. Yet Theodore Balsamon, the 12th-century Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, expressed the prevailing view of his age when he said, "For woman to teach is, in the highest degree, indecorous and pernicious."¹⁹

The French reformer John Calvin said, "It is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly."²⁰ But female leadership is only unseemly to those who have been raised with a Greek mindset.

Christians know better. Anyone who is following Jesus can lead others, regardless of gender, race or age.

The need for the gospel is too great for us to quibble over who can and can't preach it. When you're drowning, you don't care who throws you a rope.²¹

¹⁸ The Council of Laodicea's banning of women leaders is found in Canon 11:

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm>

¹⁹ "Commentary on Canon 11."

²⁰ "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14."

²¹ "If you're drowning, you don't care who throws you a life preserver." So said Judy Jacobs in her *Preface* to Lee Grady's 2000 book, *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women*.

A biblical view of womanhood

The philosophers and rabbis are responsible for some of the worst ideas we've inherited about women. As a result of their sexist will, many women have been kept silent and sidelined, and the world is poorer for it.

“There should be no division in the body,” said the apostle, and so say all who have been baptized into Christ. Indeed, is this not the test of our fellowship, that we esteem those the world deems weak and womanly, while giving greater honor to the parts that lack it?

We who have learned to see through the eyes of Christ no longer regard anyone from a fallen, or Grecian, point of view.

Acknowledgements

This study note was made possible thanks to the generosity of supporters on [Patreon](#) and [Donorbox](#).

Other ebooks/study notes by Dr. Paul Ellis

- [Is God the author of evil?](#) (Patreon)
- [Are unfruitful branches lifted up?](#) (Patreon)
- [How to read the Bible](#) (Patreon)
- [The covenants compared](#) (Patreon)
- [When did John write Revelation? And why does it matter?](#) (Patreon)
- [What is the baptism that saves?](#) (Patreon)
- [The Silent Queen](#) (Patreon)
- [From Athens to Aquinas](#) (Patreon)

Classic sermons modernized and introduced by Dr. Paul Ellis

- C. H. Spurgeon's "[All of Grace](#)" (Patreon)
- D. L. Moody's "[Saved by Grace Alone](#)" (Patreon)
- Henry Moorhouse's "[The Good Shepherd](#)" (Patreon)

Author bio

Dr. Paul Ellis is the author of award-winning books such as [The Hyper-Grace Gospel](#) and [Letters from Jesus](#). His best-selling [Gospel in Ten Words](#) has been translated into ten languages. His website, [Escape to Reality](#), has been rated one of the world's top Christian blogs. Formerly a pastor and a business school professor, Paul Ellis now writes full time on the gospel of grace. He lives in New Zealand with his wife Camilla and their four children.

