

# *True Womanhood*

## *The Abiding Principles*

**Alison J. Sherrington**

**Foreword by Rev Dr Geoff Waugh**

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## Foreword

You hold dynamite in your hands with this book in our time in history and amid our cultural wars about the place of women in family, in society, and in the church.

Alison Sherrington is no stranger to tackling big and controversial issues head on. Her previous insightful book, *Word and Spirit*, dives into the controversial waters of charismatic renewal, and her clear explanation about the importance of both the Word of God and the Spirit of God challenges any dividing or emasculating of them. She calls for faith in God founded on obedience to the Word of God empowered by obedience to the Spirit of God.

Similarly, in this controversial book, Alison dives into the muddied waters of women's rights and feminism with a bold, brave reminder of the revolutionary nature of the Bible's revelation about true womanhood and Jesus' radical teaching and example.

Some traditional Christian doctrine with a narrow biblical exegesis idolizes words like "submission" and "silence" and surfaces with unbiblical teaching about subservient, compliant womanhood and slavery. Other so-called progressive doctrine exalts womanhood to unbiblical aggressive dominance in violent reaction to injustice.

Jesus confronts both extremes in His life and teaching, as Alison boldly argues. His female followers were often more insightful and faithful than the men, as they demonstrated at the cross and the resurrection. The Bible is filled with dynamic accounts of women's perceptions, leadership, and authority, while submitted to God and His holy ways and His enduring principles.

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God demonstrates the wonderful and mysterious marvels of submission and authority within the triune Godhead.

Alison tackles this controversial issue: “As I wrestled with the challenging topic of true womanhood, it became clearer to me that there is a difference between biblical principles (which do need to be adhered to) and the particular cultural expressions of those principles.”

Cultural expressions of biblical principles vary widely across different cultures and within any one culture. I saw that, for example, in church and communal life in Papua New Guinea. Should esteemed local leaders get rid of all wives except one (as was taught with dire results in some African missions)? Should village women modestly cover their breasts in a culture where nobody wore anything above the waist and they were in fact more modest than many Western women in string-bikinis or provokingly torn jeans?

Should women lead and preach and teach? Ask the millions of pioneer women missionaries, both single and married. I married one I met in Papua New Guinea, a brilliant teacher and natural leader, and my life and family still bask in that blessing.

So fasten your seat belt and prepare to take off with Alison into the wonderful and challenging vistas of true biblical womanhood. The truth will set you free.

***Rev Dr Geoff Waugh***  
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## Introduction

### *“Women have all the woe”*

One of my school teachers taught the spelling of “woman” and “women” by jokingly asserting that both words begin with “wo” because “Women have all the woe”! Even at that time I felt she was only half-joking, and that there was an element of seriousness in what she said. Marriage breakdown and divorce, which negatively impact both men and women, are not within the scope of this book; neither is domestic violence, in which women are nearly always the victims. However, quite apart from those kinds of suffering, women have much to put up with merely because they are women. Unpleasant physical realities constantly remind them that their bodies are geared for childbearing – which, I have been assured, is “no picnic either”.

In Bible times women were subordinate at every level. Girls were educated mainly by mothers; parents arranged marriages; and women had little legal position. Jewish men prayed, “Blessed art thou O Lord . . . who hast not made me a woman.” Even in our society some people say, “It’s a man’s world.” But should it be a woman’s world instead, as some feminists seem to be trying to make it? Surely it should be neither a man’s world nor a woman’s world, but God’s world.

### *Why this topic?*

Some passages of God’s written Word do seem negative towards women. On the other hand, in some parts of our Western secular society an aggressive feminism has blurred the distinction

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between men and women to such an extent that many women appear to be trying to be men, or at least to imitate them. What was meant to lift women has resulted in much confusion, and sometimes even an attack on men. In recent years the problem has become much worse still. Both masculinity and femininity are under attack now because of the dangerous false teaching that gender is “fluid” and we can all be the gender we choose to be.

What, then, are God’s expectations of women in *our* culture? Are they the same as in Bible times?

As I wrestled with the challenging topic of true womanhood, it became clearer to me that there is a difference between biblical principles (which do need to be adhered to) and the particular cultural expressions of those principles. Some practicalities that the Bible teaches about acceptable standards for women are inextricably linked with the cultural norms of the day. How, then, do we “correctly [handle] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)? Where do we draw that fine line between principle and culture? In Bible times the lives of most women seem very restricted when compared with the norms of today.

In my attempt to discover from Scripture the abiding principles of true womanhood, I felt it safe to draw the line between biblical principles and cultural expressions in a fairly conservative way – some might say too conservative, though a few might judge me slightly too liberal. What a controversial topic! My hope is that as a result of reading this book, women will be greatly encouraged in their understanding of God’s loving plan for them, and men will appreciate and respect true womanhood more than ever.



# **The Nature of God and Humankind**

## *The nature of our Creator*

Most Christians believe in an eternal triune or three-in-one God who is self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three “Persons” or self-distinctions who are neither three gods, nor three parts of God. They exemplify diversity within unity and unity in diversity, co-ruling always in perfect agreement from all eternity. Paul’s benediction “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14) implies three Persons, equal in power and glory, in the one Godhead. Peter addresses “God’s elect” as those “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood” (1 Pet. 1:1-2).

While He was on this earth Jesus willingly submitted to His Father’s will, a submission essential for the role He was given. Quite apart from this, however, some theologians believe that, though all three Persons of the Godhead are equal in nature and dignity, the differences in the roles they perform appear to involve some subordination in relation to one another. There does seem to be an order of precedence in operation and revelation, and this has led theologians to refer to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as the First, Second, and Third Persons of the Trinity respectively. Creation is from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit; and biblically it is most appropriate to pray to the Father in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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There is an element of mystery about our God that defies ultimate human understanding.

### ***God can be both fatherly and motherly***

As Father “the Lord disciplines those he loves” (Heb. 12:6), yet His fatherly love can also be very tender towards His children. *Abba*, the Aramaic word for Father or Daddy, expresses an especially close relationship to God, and Mark records that in His agony in Gethsemane Jesus addressed His Father as *Abba* (14:36). Paul says, “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘*Abba, Father*’” (Gal. 4:6).

God can be motherly as well as fatherly, for He Himself occasionally uses female imagery to express His care and compassion for His children. Through Isaiah God says to the people of Israel, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you”; and later He says, “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you” (49:15; 66:13). Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem is poignant: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . , how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34).

Some have claimed that in Revelation 1:13 Jesus appeared to John to have female breasts. This view is mistaken, and stems partly from a misunderstanding of the King James Version’s archaic English word for nipples: “girt about the paps with a golden girdle”. The Greek word *mastos* (breast), though in the plural in this text, does not imply femininity. It could be used of either a male or a female, as illustrated in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, Chicago, 1979). For modern readers the phrase in question is appropriately translated “with a golden sash around his chest” (NIV).

In Proverbs 8:22-31 the female figure representing wisdom has often been virtually identified with Christ, whom Paul calls “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). We should be cautious, though, about drawing conclusions from the femininity of this figure. Because the Hebrew word *hokmâ* (wisdom) is

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grammatically feminine, one would expect the personification of wisdom to be feminine. Furthermore, many scholars interpret the figure of wisdom in this controversial passage as merely a personification of the divine attribute that God exercised in creation.

Despite the assertion of some, notably the fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich, that God (especially God the Son) is our Mother as well as our Father, there is no Scriptural justification for addressing Him as Mother. Though He can be motherly towards us, God is basically our Father, and we must be careful not to try to feminize Him.

### *The nature of humankind*

Human beings are not merely complex animals. They are linked with God and akin to Him, but because they are created and therefore dependent beings they are of a different order from Him. Both male and female are created in God's image: "So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). By this special creation, humankind uniquely reflects God and bears an image corresponding to the divine original.

In the more detailed account in the second chapter of Genesis it is made clear that Adam was created first, but because "it is not good for the man to be alone", Eve was created to be his companion and "a helper suitable for him" (2:18). Not only was she created for him, but she was also made from a part of his body: "Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib [or *part* (NIV footnote)] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man" (2:22). This first wedding sets forth God's perfect plan for marriage as the union of one man and one woman. In his great Bible commentary Matthew Henry famously wrote: "The woman was . . . not made out of [Adam's] head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved" (Vol. I, published 1706).

Even before He created humankind God's plan was that under His authority male and female were to co-rule on this earth, for He said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and

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let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” His subsequent mandate to the man and woman to “fill the earth and subdue it” could not be fulfilled without the co-operation of them both (Gen. 1:26-28). It is noteworthy that at that time God did not specify either male or female leadership for this task. However, the creation of Adam before Eve, and her creation for him and from a part of his body, are interpreted by Paul as signifying woman’s subordination to man (1 Tim. 2:12-13; 1 Cor. 11:7-9).

## **Submission to Husband**

### ***The Fall of humankind***

God had given Adam and Eve free will and had set a test of obedience by commanding them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:2-3). They could equally have obeyed God or disobeyed Him, but they chose to disobey. Tempted and deceived by the evil one clothed as a serpent, Eve ate some of the forbidden fruit and gave some to her husband. He ate it too, thus joining with her in her sin (Gen. 3:1-6). Immediately, they felt guilty and were afraid of God and tried to hide from Him. Their relationship with each other was also affected, because Adam blamed Eve for giving him the fruit (Gen. 3:7-12). Sin is rebellion against God our Creator, and by its very nature it separates us from Him and from one another.

Because God is holy and just He has to punish sin. His judgment on Eve was that she would have more pain in bearing children (presumably, more than she otherwise would have had); and that she would be subject to her husband: “He will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). They would no longer be able to co-rule in perfect agreement as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do. Since equality in authority is not possible for sinful people, headship within marriage was needed after the Fall.

Even before the creation of Eve, God had put Adam in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). God’s judgment on him, “painful toil”, was fitting for the main worker, the main family provider. Because the ground would be under a curse, he would have to work hard to make it produce enough

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food: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” (Gen. 3:17-19).

### ***Submission to husband***

Though all three Persons of the Godhead are equal in nature, there are differences in the roles they perform. To fulfil His role as the Lamb of God, Jesus lived as a man on this earth, humbly submitting Himself to His Father. Since humankind uniquely reflects God, there is likewise equality of nature but difference of role within the human family. After the Fall the relationship between husband and wife was changed by the pattern of male headship that God set, with the result that the difference in their roles henceforth included a difference in levels of authority.

Because ideally it is a truly loving headship that the husband exercises in his relationship with his wife, marriage is sometimes pictured in Scripture as parallel with God’s relationship with His people, Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. Through Hosea He says to Israel: “You will call me ‘my husband’; . . . I will betroth you to me forever” (2:16,19). Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Cor. 11:2). In Revelation the Church is the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:2,9-10).

The parallel between marriage and Christ’s relationship with His Church implies the necessity for wives to yield their own rights to their husbands: “Wives, submit to your husbands as 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 Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Eph. 5:22-24).

Because Paul elsewhere describes Christ as “the Head, from whom the whole body [the Church] . . . grows as God causes it to grow” (Col. 2:19), the expression “the head of the wife” could include the idea of the husband as the source of life or nourishment for his wife, just as Christ is for the Church. However, since in the above passage from Ephesians the expression “the head of the wife” is used in a context of submission, almost certainly the

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primary reference there is to the husband's position of authority in the marriage relationship.

Differences in levels of authority are also emphasized by Paul when he writes: "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). It follows that as Christ is to be honoured by man, so the husband is to be honoured by his wife. Paul insists that "the wife must respect [or *reverence* (KJV)] her husband" (Eph. 5:33), and the basic meaning of *phobētai*, here translated "respect", is "fear". Most men have a God-given need to feel honoured, and perhaps it is partly the lack of respect involved in verbal behaviour such as nagging that men seem to find wellnigh unbearable: "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping" (Prov. 19:13)!

### ***It's not all bad news for women***

There are at least four biblical reasons why women need not feel that it is overwhelmingly "a man's world". The most important reason is that Scripture as a whole teaches that everyone needs to submit primarily to God Himself, rather than to any lesser authority. Further good news for women is that God commands husbands to love their wives; that He cares about women; and that He does not expect wives to be "doormats". These truths will be examined more closely in the following four sections.

### ***Wives are to submit primarily to God***

In the New Testament, commands such as "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities" and "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13) are obviously not meant to stand when those authorities order people to do something that amounts to disobeying God. Daniel preferred to be thrown into a den of lions rather than cease praying to God (Dan. 6:6-13); likewise, when Israel's supreme court, the Sanhedrin, ordered the apostles not to teach in the name of Jesus, they replied, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). In the same way, if a wife is ordered by her husband to act in a way that is against God's law, she is guilty in God's sight if she obeys him. Jesus said that families

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would be divided concerning Him (Lk. 12:51-53), but warned, “Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Mt. 10:33).

There are some specific examples in Scripture that illustrate the personal responsibility of wives to submit primarily to God, regardless of the consequences. To save the lives of all the Jews in the Persian Empire, Esther the queen risked her life by daring to approach the king in the inner court without being summoned by him. Her resolve was, “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). By contrast, Sapphira shared the fate of her husband Ananias for conspiring with him to lie to the early Church, and therefore to the Holy Spirit, about the price received for land (Acts 5:1-11).

It is important to note that those wives who are put in difficult situations by the expectations, requests, or commands of their husbands need to take great care in deciding what is against God’s law. For example, if a husband ordered his wife to cease attending church (as some husbands have done), what should she do? Having enough rest and spending enough time individually with the Lord are features of a Christian lifestyle; but keeping a Christian Sabbath and the manner of keeping it are controversial topics, even though it is generally accepted that the first day of the week was celebrated by the apostles and the early Church as the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Instead of immediately concluding that in order to be faithful to the Lord she would have to disregard her husband’s order, it would be better for such a wife to seek carefully God’s guidance for her specific circumstances. “Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another” (Heb. 10:25) is a very relevant exhortation. However, the Lord has enabled some wives in this situation to be content to meet regularly with a few other Christians for Bible study and prayer on a weekday.

### ***Husbands are to love their wives***

The Bible is a very balanced book. Although wives are told to submit to their husbands, men are certainly not encouraged to lord it over their wives. Rather, they are told that just as Christ is the Saviour of the Church, His Body, so they must not only love their



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wives, but love them sacrificially: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.” Paul points out that everyone “feeds and cares for [his own body], just as Christ does the church”; thus “Each one of you [husbands] also must love his wife as he loves himself” (Eph. 5:25-30,33).

In Colossians Paul’s terse command is: “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them” (3:19). Headship in marriage is a privilege that involves exercising authority in a godly rather than a harsh way. Peter, with experience of marriage, urges husbands, “Be considerate as you live with your wives [literally, *Live with your wives according to knowledge*], and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Pet. 3:7). Wives inherit eternal salvation on equal terms with their husbands – by God’s grace alone – and God cannot bless any ungodly treatment of them, such as riding rough-shod over their feelings or taking advantage of their comparative lack of sheer physical strength. Rightly understood, biblical teaching matches the God-given need of most women for both security and love.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21) is Paul’s general exhortation to the church in Ephesus, but it can also be applied to the marriage relationship. For example, no husband should be selfish enough to think that it is his right always to have his own way in every decision without even consulting with his wife; or to go out as much as he likes while his wife is always expected to be at home on her own or looking after the children. At times, love should cause a husband to subordinate his wishes to those of his wife. His headship, however, still applies. Unselfish love is not equivalent to weakness, or to an abrogation of authority.

### ***God cares about women***

There are numerous biblical examples of God’s help for women who were troubled or in need.

When the Egyptian maidservant Hagar ran away from her mistress Sarai (later named Sarah), “the angel of the LORD” found

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her near a spring in the desert, told her to return to her mistress, and promised her a son, Ishmael, and numerous descendants. Later, when Abraham sent her away with her son and their water supply ran out, “the angel of God” called to her, encouraged her with a further promise for Ishmael, and showed her a well of water (Gen. 16:6-13; 21:14-19).

Ruth, the Moabite widow of an Israelite, tried to support herself and her widowed mother-in-law Naomi by picking up leftover grain. She “found herself” gleaning in a field belonging to Boaz, not knowing at first that he was a relative by marriage (Ruth 2:1-3). He took the responsibility of being her “kinsman-redeemer”, and through her marriage to him Ruth became an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:9-17), and thus of Jesus.

Hannah, in anguish because of her barrenness, prayed silently at the tabernacle for a son, vowing to dedicate him to the Lord. The kind words of Eli the priest comforted her, and her prayer was answered by the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1-20).

God’s care for women goes far beyond problems such as impoverishment or barrenness. In His multi-faceted ministry to them Jesus did not hesitate to break cultural norms. He showed that God really values women and is prepared to trust them.

Jesus opened a conversation with a Samaritan woman, showed her that He knew about her sinful life, and, amazingly, told her that He was the Messiah. Her witness about Him enabled Him to stay in that town for two days, with the result that many believed in Him (Jn 4:1-42). Likewise, after His resurrection, He gave Mary Magdalene an important message for His disciples: “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn 20:17).

When Martha criticized her sister Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to Him instead of helping her with household tasks, He commended Mary for choosing “what is better” (Lk. 10:38-42). He also appreciated and defended the woman who poured very expensive perfume on His head and was criticized by the disciples for “this waste”. Knowing that He was to die soon, He saw her action as “a beautiful thing” done to prepare Him for burial, and even proclaimed that “wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Mt. 26:6-13).

***Wives do not need to be “doormats”***

Nowhere in the Bible is there any suggestion that God expects wives to be so passive or timid in relation to their husbands that they will not take any initiative at all, or even express an opinion about anything. Indeed, only a husband who despised his wife instead of loving her would want her to be such a weak “doormat”. By contrast, God shows His approval of some women who had to speak their minds, or had to act on their own initiative, if they were to be in line with His purposes.

Sarah called Abraham *'ādôn*, lord or master (Gen. 18:12), and Peter urges wives to be “like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master” (1 Pet. 3:6). However, when Sarah urged her husband, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son” – something that he was very reluctant to do – God told him, “Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (Gen. 21:10-12). In this instance it was Sarah who was more attuned to God’s will. A wise husband will listen to his wife and consider what she says.

Instead of telling anyone that her son had just died, the Shunammite woman shut the door of the room where the boy lay and asked her husband for a servant and a donkey so that she could go quickly to the prophet Elisha and return. “‘Why go to him today?’ he asked. ‘It’s not the New Moon or the Sabbath.’ ‘It’s all right,’ she said.” The boy was able to be raised to life because of her faith-filled action (2 Kings 4:8-37). The “intelligent and beautiful” Abigail is a more extreme example of a woman who had to act first and tell her husband later. She saved the life of her “surly and mean” husband Nabal by packing provisions, taking them to David and his men, and pleading with David in words that, though true, would normally be considered disloyal to her husband and therefore wrong. She said, “May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name – his name is Fool” (1 Sam. 25: 2-35).

It is interesting to note that Jesus did not expect women to be servile when speaking to Him. When He tested the faith and persistence of a desperate Syrophenician woman by implying that Gentiles were dogs, her spirited response, “Even the dogs

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under the table eat the children's crumbs", elicited His praise: "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter" (Mk 7:24-30).

### ***A biblical illustration of several truths***

Several of the truths set forth in previous sections are illustrated in one remarkable chapter, Judges 13. It is an account of God's dealings with Samson's parents, Manoah and his unnamed wife, concerning the conception, birth, and raising of their son.

Against the backdrop of sinful Israel delivered into the hands of the Philistines, the family story opens with the dilemma of a childless couple. Childlessness was considered a catastrophe, particularly for women. The "angel of the LORD" appeared to Manoah's wife and instructed her not to drink wine or any other fermented drink or eat anything unclean, because she would conceive and give birth to a son. Then came the momentous announcement: "No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (The stipulations for those under a Nazirite vow are set out in Numbers 6.) God not only showed His care for her and even promised her a very special child, but He also trusted her to remember all His instructions and be obedient in doing her part in the fulfilment of His mighty purpose for Israel.

She duly reported this encounter to her husband, beginning, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome." Obviously she knew, or at least sensed, that the visitor might be an angel, but in deference to her husband was reluctant to make such a great claim. Instead she opted for "man of God", a common term for a prophet. Manoah believed his wife, though it seems he did not trust her as much as God did, for his response was to pray for the "man of God" to come again to teach them how to bring up the promised boy.

God answered Manoah's prayer, but it is significant that again the angel went to the woman, not to him. This contrasts with the case of Abraham and Sarah, for it was to Abraham that God made promises concerning Sarah bearing a child. God knows us intimately and treats each person appropriately, whether male

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or female. He does not show favour to one person rather than another merely on the basis of our sex.

Manoah's wife "hurried to tell her husband, 'He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!'" Her use of the expression "appeared to me" is another indication that she sensed that these events might be angelic visitations. When Manoah asked "the man" about the rule for the boy's life and work, his reply began with the words, "Your wife must do all that I have told her", and ended in a similar way: "She must do everything I have commanded her." The emphasis that is implied in this repetition could well be a mild rebuke to Manoah for not trusting his wife fully. God had chosen to send His angel to her and had evidently already given her all the instructions that were needed.

Not realizing the identity of the visitor, Manoah invited him to stay till they prepared a young goat for a meal, but he told them to offer the animal to the Lord. When Manoah asked him his name, he said, "It is beyond understanding [or *is wonderful* (NIV footnote)]." Then "the LORD did an amazing thing": "As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD." Significantly, at this point it is Manoah who is said to realize this, not Manoah and his wife. She had sensed from the beginning that "the man of God" was probably an angel.

Manoah was terrified: "'We are doomed to die!' he said to his wife. 'We have seen God!'" Her forthright reply was down-to-earth: "If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this." She was not afraid to express her mind, and she showed superior common sense as well as superior spiritual sensitivity.

The story in Judges 13 is much more than yet another example of God's care for childless women, for He showed that He was prepared to place enormous trust in Manoah's wife. The chapter also gives us a glimpse of true womanhood in the context of a godly marriage. Manoah and his wife seem to have enjoyed a loving relationship in which she gave due respect to her husband

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as head of the house. She informed him of the visit of a “man of God” and ensured that he was present when the “man” came again, thus enabling him to be the one to converse with the visitor about their promised son. However, she was no “doormat”, but readily spoke up to counter her husband’s fear with plain common sense.

# **Life for Women in Bible Days**

## ***Women at work***

In Bible times women worked mainly in the setting of home and family. As one would expect, their most basic tasks were bearing children and bringing them up, along with doing general housework and providing food and clothing for their family. They were also expected to help with the family occupation if possible. Thus we glimpse Rachel the shepherdess taking care of her father's flock and Priscilla working at tent-making alongside her husband Aquila (Gen. 29:9; Acts 18:3).

Sometimes the work of women in the home extended beyond serving their own immediate family. Lydia provided hospitality to Paul and his companions; churches met in the homes of Nympha and of Mary the mother of John Mark; and Tabitha made clothes for the poor (Acts 16:15; Col. 4:15; Acts 12:12; 9:36,39).

Women could be employed as servants in others' houses or fields. Some even engaged in business, but this may have been rare. The ideal wife pictured in Proverbs 31:10-31 has her own business, and Lydia, a Gentile and probably a widow, is described as "a dealer in purple cloth" (Acts 16:14).

## ***Women in public life***

In Israel the husband's headship of the house provided the basic pattern for higher institutions. Contrary to today's Western culture, male headship was regarded as basic to all social structures, so not many women were prominent in public life. The most astonishing exception is the prophetess Deborah, a

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recognized “judge” or leader of Israel in the period before the monarchy (Judg. 4:4-5). She appears to be the only woman in the Bible who was appointed to a spiritual office. Miriam and Huldah were also prophetesses, but though they contributed to national leadership, they did not hold formal office (Ex. 15:20; 2 Kings 22:14). Some other women were recognized as “wise women” whose counsel was sought (2 Sam. 14:2; 20:16).

As queen mother, Bathsheba was given a throne at the right hand of Solomon (1 Kings 2:19), and queens could also exercise significant influence for good or evil. Wicked Jezebel, who promoted Baal worship and killed the Lord’s prophets, manipulated and dominated her husband, King Ahab of Israel, and even arranged murder for his benefit (1 Kings 16:31-33; 18:4,13; 21:1-16). Esther, on the other hand, was used by God to save all the Jews in the Persian Empire by her courageous but humble requests to her husband, King Xerxes (Esther 3-9). In Israelite history the only reigning queen was evil and idolatrous Athaliah, who murdered male members of Judah’s royal family and held power for six years (2 Kings 11:1-3).

In the New Testament some wives of civic officials were honoured as “women of high standing” (Acts 13:50). In general, women in Bible days who played any part in public life did so through influence rather than through legal power or authority.

### *An amazing woman*

People who are not very familiar with the Bible must be greatly surprised by the content of the fourth chapter of Judges. First there is a brief account of a situation that frequently occurred in Israel. Because of their sin God allowed the Israelites to be oppressed for years by an enemy (in this case a Canaanite king, Jabin), and consequently “they cried to the LORD for help.” One would expect to read immediately of yet another “judge” of the usual kind, a mighty man raised up by God to fight a battle that saves His people; but instead there is the staggering matter-of-fact statement: “Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel . . . and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.” As the nationally



recognized prophet and judge, her office was basically spiritual, like that of Moses before her and Samuel after her. Moses had described his work in spiritual terms: “The people come to me to seek God’s will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties” (Ex. 18:15-16).

Deborah was the one to whom the Lord revealed a plan of action against the nation’s oppressor. She sent for a man called Barak, and the message she delivered to him from the Lord amounted to a battle strategy: “Go, take with you ten thousand men . . . and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.” In the light of the culture of Israel in Bible times, Barak’s response is also astonishing, and is a testimony to this woman’s standing in Israel. He said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” His initial lack of sufficient courage or faith earned him a rebuke from the Lord, for Deborah said, “I will go with you. But . . . the honour will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman.”

Deborah went with Barak and the troops, and after the forces from both sides gathered, it was the Lord’s word through her that gave Barak the command to advance: “Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” When Barak and his ten thousand men rushed down Mount Tabor, the Lord routed all the enemy. Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, a non-Israelite woman, but she killed him while he slept, thus fulfilling Deborah’s prophecy.

In Judges 5 is the “Song of Deborah” that she and Barak sang, celebrating the victory and praising the Lord for it. The climactic honour towards the end goes to Jael: “Most blessed of women be Jael” (5:24); but the poem also includes some very memorable lines about Deborah: “Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until I [or you (NIV footnote)], Deborah, arose, arose a mother in Israel” (5:7). Almost certainly she would have borne children, but the words “a mother in Israel” seem to carry special weight and to refer to much more than literal motherhood. She was truly the spiritual mother of the nation, a mature and gifted woman of faith whom God raised up to save her people. Deborah was not only an amazing woman of vision, wisdom, and courage, but also the only

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Israelite woman in the whole Bible to exercise legitimate spiritual and governmental authority, and not merely influence, over both men and women.

### *A wife of noble character*

Proverbs 31:10-31 is a well-known passage that seems to describe a superwoman. Even the writer of Proverbs acknowledges that very few women would be able to match this ideal wife, for the passage begins: “A wife of noble character who can find?” To some extent she seems to personify wisdom, so it is not surprising that she is “a woman who fears the LORD” (31:30). She also exemplifies love in action, for her general motivation is to do her utmost to build her husband up, and not to tear him down: “She brings [her husband] good, not harm, all the days of her life” (31:12). To this end, most of her work could be summed up by the line, “She watches over the affairs of her household” (31:27).

The catalogue of tasks that she performs is formidable. Even though she works hard from early morning till late at night, she needs the help of servant girls, who probably perform the more ordinary household tasks. Her primary responsibility is to provide food and clothing for her family. To make clothes she first selects wool and flax and spins them; and she chooses food with care, bringing some of it “from afar”. She even contributes to family income by engaging in business, for she makes garments for sale and uses the proceeds to buy a field and plant a vineyard. She generously helps the poor and needy, probably mainly widows and orphans, and also gives “faithful instruction”, presumably to her children and friends (31:13-22,24,26).

Her fine character and her solid success earn her the respect of both her husband and her children: “Her husband has full confidence in her” and “Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her” (31:11,28). There is also a strong implication that her husband’s status in the city is due partly to the excellence of her character and reputation, for in the midst of the description of all that she does comes the verse: “Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land” (31:23). We are reminded of many modern sayings that seek to give credit to the role of wives in their

## *Life for Women in Bible Days*

husbands' achievements, such as "Behind every successful man there stands a woman."

### *Paul's ideals for wives*

Biblical ideals for women are ideals mainly for wives, as the Bible says virtually nothing about mature single women. Because marriages were usually arranged, there seems to be an assumption that a woman is either a wife or a widow. Normally a girl or "young woman" lived at home under her father's authority until she married, probably at a fairly early age.

In Titus 2:4-5 Paul lists several virtues that the older women can train the younger women to practise: "to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands". A wife is not expected to love her husband as sacrificially as he is told to love her (Eph. 5:25), but marriage is a commitment, and if a wife is lovingly committed to her husband she will want the best for him and will respect his headship by being willing to give way to his wishes when they have different opinions about a particular course of action. Love of their children is natural for women, but their motherly love needs to be put into practice constantly in the unrelenting task of taking good care of them, including bringing them up in a godly way.

As very few wives worked outside the home it was considered important for wives to be "busy at home", rather than neglecting household duties by leading lazy lives or by being out too much. Housework would have been far more laborious and time-consuming than it is today, and families were usually larger than in our culture. Part of a wife's work might consist of supervising servant girls employed in the household.

Self-control and purity are vital for both husbands and wives. A lack of self-control may result in sexual immorality, which has the power to strike a death-blow to a marriage. Kindness, the other virtue listed, is also important for husbands; but unkindness seems uglier in a woman than in a man, perhaps because it is contrary to an almost universal image of womanhood (and especially of motherhood) that is probably God-given.

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The reason Paul gives here for his desire for Christian women to be virtuous is “so that no one will malign the word of God.” He was determined to do all in his power to see the gospel spread as widely as possible throughout the world, unhindered by scandal or by any behaviour that could give rise to criticism by unbelievers.

### ***Peter’s beauty prescription***

Like Paul, Peter emphasizes that it is important for the behaviour of believers to be a help and not a hindrance to the spread of the gospel, in the home situation as well as in the wider world. Thus a Christian wife’s reverence toward God needs to be reflected in submission to her husband and in moral purity: “Wives . . . be submissive to your husbands, so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Pet. 3:1-2). Peter then contrasts the beauty that comes from outward adornment with the real, lasting beauty that is precious to the Lord: “Your beauty . . . should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (3: 3-4).

In Peter’s time as in ours, not all women would consider themselves “gentle and quiet” by nature. However, like self-control and kindness, gentleness is part of the ninefold fruit of the Spirit that we should all aspire to (Gal. 5:23); and any rough or loud-mouthed behaviour is particularly confronting in a woman and would spoil her Christian witness.

Peter goes on to encourage wives to emulate “the holy women of the past” who were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah was to Abraham, concluding his address with the words: “You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear” (1 Pet. 3:5-6). The exhortation not to give way to fear indirectly adds another virtue, faith, to the prescription for beauty. Sarah, as well as Abraham, had to trust in God and hold on to His promises against all odds. Gentleness and submission, far from being signs of weakness or fear, are often signs of a godly strength of character.

## Submission in the Church

### *Head covering in church*

As we have seen, Paul maintains that “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man [*of the wife is her husband* (NIV 2011 ed. footnote)], and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). The words “the head of the woman is man” are ambiguous because in Greek the words for “man” and “woman” are also words for “husband” and “wife”; and therefore from this text one cannot claim that men in general are supreme over women in general. Furthermore, although Paul would probably have shared the accepted view of his day that all social structures required male headship, he certainly could not have meant that every man could think he had the right to have authority over every woman he met. A translation such as “the head of the wife is her husband” would therefore seem preferable.

In New Testament times, as in some cultures today, a wife’s submission to her husband was symbolized by her head covering – though there is a possibility that the symbolic covering Paul was writing about consisted only of a wife’s obligatory long hair. In the church it was considered dishonouring to a husband and therefore shameful if his wife abandoned head covering, even though her words might be inspired by the Holy Spirit: “Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head” (1 Cor. 11:5). To support this position Paul appeals mainly to creation order: “A man . . . is the image and glory of God; but the 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. For this reason . . . the

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woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head” (1 Cor. 11:7-10). This “sign” is more naturally interpreted as a sign of her husband’s authority over her, rather than a sign of any authority of her own. However, Paul is careful not to deny that woman as well as man is created in God’s image; and the concept of woman as “the glory of man” may be interpreted as very honouring to women. Matthew Henry wrote in his commentary: “If man is the head, she is the crown, a crown to her husband, the crown of the visible creation” (Vol. I, published 1706).

Paul appeals not only to creation order, but also to custom, as he did not want the church to be brought into disrepute by the non-observance of what was considered ordinary decent behaviour: “We have no other practice – nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16). In Western culture today, head covering has nothing to do with a wife acknowledging that she is under her husband’s authority. Those Christian women who have long hair or who wear a head covering to church do not usually mean anything in particular by doing so. Though a wife should respect her husband as her “head”, the whole question of head covering has become a matter of personal conscience or choice.

### *Silence in church*

One of the most problematic passages in the New Testament is 1 Cor. 14:33b-35: “As in all the congregations of the saints, 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.” Paul underlines the seriousness of his instruction about silence for women, and perhaps also the seriousness of all the instructions he has been giving the Corinthians, by declaring: “What I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (14:37). It is interesting to note, though, that a few ancient manuscripts place 14:34-35 after 14:40, where the passage would not be so directly connected with Paul’s declaration about the Lord’s command. In addition, translators are divided as to whether “As in all the congregations of the saints” should be read as a concluding thought after “For God is

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not a God of disorder but of peace” (14:33a), or as the introduction to the two verses that follow.

Some modern scholars believe that the words of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 were first written by the Corinthians to Paul, and that he quotes them only to disagree with them strongly in the sarcastic questions that follow: “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached” (14:36)? It is true that in this letter Paul does occasionally appear to quote some words that had been written to him, only to refute them immediately; for example, “‘Everything is permissible for me’ – but not everything is beneficial” (6:12). It is also true that Paul did not disapprove of women praying and prophesying in church (11:5), presumably because prayer and prophecy were spoken under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the argument that Paul was quoting the passage about silence for women as something he disagreed with, is not convincing in the light of his pronouncement in 1 Timothy 2:11 that “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.”

Since it is possible to understand 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in a way that is consistent with other passages written by Paul, there seems no good reason to doubt that he composed the words in these verses, especially if the preceding words, “As in all the congregations of the saints”, are understood as the introduction to this passage. It seems most likely that Paul’s sarcasm in 14:36 is a rebuke, not to people who might have been trying to stop women from speaking in church, but to those who were allowing inappropriate speaking by women and perhaps also the various other forms of disorderly conduct that he has addressed in this chapter.

A great deal hinges on what specific types of behaviour were being condemned by Paul. The Corinthians would have known exactly what he was referring to, but unfortunately we do not. Although the types of speaking that he disapproved of could not have included genuine prayer or prophecy, they could have ranged from noisy discussion on the sidelines to participation in teaching or debate (cf. 1 Tim. 2:11-14). Paul’s stern words, “If [women] want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home”, may imply that they were addressing the assembly by asking the leaders questions. Whether the rule of

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silence applied to all women or only to wives, Paul seems concerned mainly about wives behaving in ways that were perceived as dishonouring to their husbands and perhaps also to the church leaders. The assumption that most wives would be more ignorant than their husbands would have been reasonable in the early Church.

The command, “They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says”, is often assumed to refer not to the Old Testament but to Jewish synagogue law, because the Old Testament does not link submission with being forbidden to speak. However, the words “as the Law says” are probably meant to be specifically related only to the words “but must be in submission”, an expression of the principle based on God’s judgment on Eve (Gen. 3:16). Paul’s linking of a wife’s submission with silence in public meetings was presumably a cultural norm of his time, just as head covering was. Similarly, in private life Peter preferred unbelieving husbands to be won over by their believing wives “without words” (1 Pet. 3:1). With the exception of prayer or prophecy, the behaviour of a wife who made her voice heard among men and women in church must have been regarded as a disgraceful display of independence, something that could harm the reputation of the church in Corinth and thus hinder the spread of the gospel.

In Western Christianity today, there are differing opinions about thorny issues such as whether women should be allowed to teach or preach to men as well as women. However, if a wife asked a question at an appropriate time in a church meeting, it would not now be taken as a sign that she did not honour her husband or the church leaders. Even in New Testament times submission did not always necessitate silence. It appears that men were not forbidden to ask questions in meetings, yet they too were expected to submit to the church leadership: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (Heb. 13:17).

### ***Submission in Western culture today***

The idea of the submission of wives to their husbands is now very unpopular with most people in the general community, including some within the Body of Christ. Because of the combined effect



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of modern household appliances, smaller families, and a massive change in societal attitudes, women are no longer confined mainly to the home. There are usually equal opportunities for men and women in education and employment, and the feminist push is to be “equal” (or seemingly more than equal) to men in every way.

Both within the Church and outside it, submission to husband may look very different now compared with New Testament times. Head covering to show submission is no longer practised, women can speak up in many situations without being considered disrespectful, and mutual submission is often practised in loving marriages. However, Paul’s exhortation to all Christians, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), is not incompatible with the general principle of the submission of wife to husband. Within Christian marriage the husband’s headship must still be respected, something that would not be too difficult for a wife who was loved sacrificially by her husband.



## Women's Service to the Lord

### *Women serving the Lord*

Only practical offices were open to women in the New Testament Church. It appears that Phoebe held a specific practical office such as deaconess: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me" (Rom. 16:1-2). It is probable that the delivery of Paul's letter to the church in Rome was entrusted to her.

In the Bible there are many examples of women serving the Lord in practical ways, most of whom would not have held any specific office. At Mount Sinai women spun thread for the tabernacle materials (Ex. 35:25; 38:8), and in 1 Samuel we read of women serving, probably in menial tasks, at the door of the tent of meeting (2:22). Luke records that women helped to support Jesus and His disciples out of their own means (8:3); and among the people to whom Paul sends special greetings in his letters are women such as Mary, who "worked very hard" for the believers (Rom. 16:6), and Rufus's mother, who had also been a "mother" to Paul himself (Rom. 16:13).

Although Deborah was the only woman in the Bible who definitely held a spiritual office, several other women were recognized as prophetesses. In the Old Testament Miriam and Huldah had input into the leadership of the nation. "Miriam the prophetess", the sister of Moses and Aaron, led the women in celebratory praise to the Lord after the crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian forces (Ex. 15:20-21); and much

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later, through Micah, the Lord reminded Israel, “I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (6:4). When Josiah the king of Judah realized that the Law had not been obeyed, he ordered Hilkiah the high priest to “inquire of the LORD” for him and for the nation. Hilkiah did this by consulting “the prophetess Huldah” and taking her answer back to the king (2 Kings 11:20).

In the New Testament Anna and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist were recognized for their prophetic ministry. When the infant Jesus was presented to the Lord in the temple, “a prophetess, Anna . . . gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:36-38). Luke records that “Philip the evangelist . . . had four unmarried daughters who prophesied” (Acts 21:8-9). In addition, we learn from Paul that women were allowed to pray and prophesy in public worship (1 Cor. 11:5).

Prayer and prophecy were not the only types of spiritual service open to women in the early Church. There were some women who were noteworthy for co-working with men for the gospel. In Acts we read, “When Priscilla and Aquila heard [the teaching of Apollos], they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (18:25-26). That Priscilla is mentioned at all in a teaching context, and that her name is placed before that of her husband Aquila, seem to indicate that she played a prominent role in explaining the Christian faith to Apollos. Likewise Paul writes: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3). Two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, are mentioned as co-workers with Paul, as he says that they “contended at [his] side in the cause of the gospel” (Phil. 4:2-3).

Paul instructs church members to give to one another wise teaching that is based on the teaching of Jesus: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col. 3:16a). For women, this meant teaching women and children. Older women were to teach the younger women how to live holy lives (Tit. 2:4), and mothers could play a major role in bringing up their children in the Christian faith. Paul writes to Timothy: “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and . . . now lives in you also” (2 Tim. 1:5).

## *Women's Service to the Lord*

There has been much controversy about whether any women were ever considered apostles in New Testament times. Those who claim that there were some women apostles base their opinion on a reference to Andronicus and a person called Junias or Junia as “outstanding among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7). There are differences of opinion about the name and the sex of this person. Most scholars now prefer the spelling Junia, and believe that Andronicus and Junia were probably a married couple. However, the word translated “among” has a very great variety of possible meanings, and the term “apostles” may sometimes be applied loosely to notable missionaries. If by “the apostles” Paul was referring mainly to the Twelve, the meaning would be that these two people were outstanding “in the opinion of” the apostles; but if Paul was using the term “the apostles” in a wider sense, as when he applies it to Silas and Timothy as well as himself (1 Thess. 2:6), it might perhaps be possible for a woman missionary co-working with her missionary husband to be called an apostle together with him.

### ***Why no spiritual office?***

Because government and teaching were both seen as exercising authority over those governed or taught, it is probable that women in New Testament times could not be appointed as elders, pastors, or teachers in a church setting of men and women. However, questions about the possible suitability of women for these roles seem to have been raised with Paul, for he expresses very forcefully his opinion on the matter: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And . . . it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Tim. 2:11-14).

Even though Paul does not claim that his opinion is the Lord's command, the reasons he gives for it seem to imply a belief that universally and for all time, no woman should teach a man or exercise any other type of authority over him in a church setting. It appears that in Paul's view, the creation of man before woman is enough to signify that woman is to be subordinate to man; and also in his view, the fact that Eve was deceived and became the

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first human sinner indicates that no woman is to be entrusted with any teaching or governing role in the Church.

### ***Interpretation problem***

Paul's prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man [or *usurp authority over the man* (KJV)]", and his accompanying references to Adam and Eve, are not as simple as they seem. Some have argued that Paul is prohibiting only the *usurping* of authority, but the relevant Greek word covers a whole range of meaning, from merely having authority to domineering. Adam and Eve may be viewed as representing mankind and womankind in general, or as representing the husband and wife relationship. As in some other New Testament passages, it is also uncertain whether the Greek words usually translated "woman" and "man" should here be translated "wife" and "husband". To indicate this uncertainty some modern translations add footnotes. The New Revised Standard Version has "I permit no woman [or *wife*] to teach or to have authority over a man [or *her husband*]", and the 2011 edition of the New International Version has "I do not permit a woman [or *wife*] to teach or to assume authority over a man [or *over her husband*]".

Regardless of the exact interpretation of Paul's prohibition, even in Western culture today, if a wife teaches a congregation that includes her husband, she might be considered by some to be teaching him as well as the other men who are present, unless it is clearly understood that she is teaching under her husband's authority. Perhaps in Paul's time a man would more readily feel the indignity of any situation in which a woman seemed to have authority over him, particularly if the woman was his own wife. In a private setting Priscilla participated in teaching Apollos, but her ministry to him was under the "covering" of her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26).

Even if Paul was definitely referring to husbands and wives rather than to men and women in general, the promotion of a married woman to any position of spiritual leadership in a church (apart from leadership for women's or children's work) raises a similar problem. Unless her husband holds an office at least equal

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to that of his wife, she may be considered to be exercising authority over him as well as over the other men in the congregation.

We do not know whether women who were widowed or divorced were excluded from Paul's prohibition. They did have greater personal responsibility than wives or young single women, as shown in the Old Testament laws about vows or pledges (see Num. 30:9). However, it would probably be very rare for a woman in New Testament times to be permitted to teach in a public worship service, and most scholars agree that only practical offices were open to women.

### ***Women teaching men***

In today's culture, is there any justification for women to teach men as well as women on spiritual topics? A fairly strong case can be made in favour of it, particularly in situations where there is no man suitable for the task, as used often to be the case on foreign mission fields.

Today we have the completed printed Scriptures, whereas the early Church had only the Old Testament and various Christian writings that were being copied by hand and circulated. As the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of God's people, they came to accept the books of the New Testament as part of God's Word, to submit to their divine authority, and to collect them together, excluding other writings. The canon of New Testament Scripture was officially fixed in 397 AD, and all the accepted books were those that had been written almost certainly in the first century by apostles or close associates of apostles.

In the early Church, leaders had to wrestle with weighty questions of doctrine such as those concerning the human and divine natures of Christ and the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through study of the apostles' writings in the light of the Holy Spirit, gradually the main doctrines of Christian orthodoxy were agreed upon in those early centuries, and today, in general, the Church is spared the pain of such great controversies.

In Jesus' time Jewish boys could attend the synagogue school, whereas the education of girls was in the hands of their

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mothers. In modern Western culture women are better educated, indeed usually as well educated as men; and many women have also been trained to interpret the Scriptures.

It was assumed in Bible days that male headship was basic to every social structure. However, there is now a general social acceptance of the participation of women at nearly every level of nearly every field. If all women withdrew from the teaching of secular subjects in higher educational institutions, the whole system could collapse. Today, most Christians assume that questions about women teaching men are relevant mainly to spiritual teaching.

In Western countries teaching adults is not considered to be exercising authority over them to the extent that it seems to have been considered by the Jews of the first century. There is almost universal literacy, there are plentiful sources of information, people are taught to think critically, and adults are not expected to accept everything they are taught. People are free to be like the Bereans, who examined the Scriptures “to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). There is general recognition among Christians that Scripture itself, not any teacher or preacher, is the supreme authority for faith and life.

### ***Guidelines are needed***

Despite the argument in favour of women teaching God’s Word to both men and women in our culture, it is usually best for women who feel called to engage in this type of ministry to follow wise guidelines. No woman who takes the Scriptures seriously can lightly assume that God has chosen her for such work. If a woman senses that the Lord might be calling her into a teaching or preaching ministry wider than to women and children only, it is important for her to seek the Lord’s confirmation, while guarding against pride, “pushiness”, or any usurpation of authority. If married, she would also need her husband’s approval before moving forward.

Confirmation of her calling might come partly through other mature Christians, and even if the proposed work is to be mainly outside her own church, the spiritual support of her own pastor would be beneficial and desirable. It would be wise to include



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some male advisers in her team, and she should take care to keep very close to Scripture as she teaches. In addition, a married woman would need to ensure that her family responsibilities were not being adversely affected.

Even though it seems that Paul, rightly for his day, did not permit women to teach the assembled church, the mention of Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos in their home (Acts 18:25-26) provides a miniature biblical pattern that can be expanded to enable suitably gifted women to teach in churches under the authority of male leadership. It is probable that Priscilla was a more gifted teacher than her husband, but Aquila, as head of the house, provided a “covering” for her. It is significant that even in our day, some women who have a teaching ministry feel that the best way for them to teach groups or congregations that include men is to teach them in the presence of a male pastor or elder who is in charge of the meeting. That is a way that is acknowledged as “fitting and orderly” (1 Cor. 14:40) by nearly all Christians. In a further expansion of the pattern, some male pastors give authority to suitably gifted women by “releasing” them into teaching ministries to men and women, without requiring their teaching to be in the presence of a male leader.



# Abiding Principles

## *Womanhood in every age*

Life for women in our age looks very different now from life for women in former times, but there is no reason for us to doubt that the abiding principles of true womanhood are the same as in Bible days. Despite great changes in the lifestyle of most women, such as better education, encouragement to express their views, and more engagement with life outside the home, most Christians would agree that the God-given inner nature of womanhood still shines forth most beautifully when the lives of women closely match the Scriptural ideals.

Nothing is said in Scripture about ideals for mature single women, as there were hardly any such women in Bible days because of arranged marriages. However, many of the virtues set forth by the writer of Proverbs, by Paul, and by Peter in their ideals for wives (Prov. 31:10-31; Tit. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6) are relevant to all women. When combined, these three sources produce a lovely picture of the main virtues of true womanhood in God's eyes. A married woman is to reverence the Lord and to trust in Him; to respect authority, including her husband's headship; to love her husband and children; to be self-controlled and morally pure; to be kind, gentle, caring, and compassionate; and to pay due attention to home duties.

Only the Proverbs passage speaks of a wife who engages in business, and it was probably quite rare for wives to do that in Bible times. Working in the outside world is definitely not an essential part of the biblical picture of true womanhood. By contrast, in Western society today many married women expect

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(or are expected) to juggle outside employment, or even a career, with many household and family responsibilities; and it is likely that some of today's social ills stem from this expectation. Not every woman is capable of being a superwoman who successfully undertakes work outside the home without neglecting some of her duties to her husband and children, and not every husband is considerate enough to help his wife with household chores.

### *No spiritual inferiority*

Woman is equal to man in nature but was created for the role of companion and helper to her husband, a role that would seem to imply subordination to him to some extent. When the Fall spoiled the perfect harmony Adam and Eve had enjoyed, God explicitly placed Eve under her husband's authority.

God's Word, however, makes it clear that there is no spiritual inferiority in being a companion and helper instead of the main decision-maker. God has given human beings free will, but the Holy Spirit is the divine Companion who comes alongside us as our Counsellor or Helper or Comforter (Jn 14:15-17,25-26; 15:26; 16:7-15); and Jesus on earth delighted in obeying His Father and in taking the role of a servant ministering to people's needs. He told His disciples, "I am among you as one who serves" (Lk. 22:27).

Men and women need one another not only in order to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28), but also in many other ways. They complement each other. In general, men are physically stronger and have a greater ability to see "the big picture", while women have greater physical endurance and do not miss the details. Women are often superior to men in relating to others, and some women who have an intimate relationship with the Lord can help their husbands to be in closer intimacy with Him.

Although the Bible teaches the need for submission of wives to their husbands, it also teaches that the difference between male and female is irrelevant in our personal relationship with God. Peter reminds husbands that their wives are "heirs with [them] of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3:7), and Paul's assertion that all believers are spiritually united in Christ is particularly inspiring:

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“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

### ***God’s mysterious ways***

Particularly from about the middle of the nineteenth century God has used various remarkable women in ways that may seem to break New Testament guidelines. Some American women in particular were amazing preachers who made their mark because their ministries were truly great. In the late nineteenth century Maria Woodworth-Etter demonstrated so obviously the power of the Holy Spirit that she reached many thousands for Christ. In the early twentieth century Aimee Semple McPherson built a church that could seat 5,000 people, established the first Christian radio station in the world, and founded a denomination. Later in the century Kathryn Kuhlman, who was famous for saying, “I believe in miracles”, became a leading healing evangelist.

When New Testament guidelines about women’s ministries appear to be broken, we should avoid criticism. We are living in a very different culture from that of the first century, and it is impossible to be definitive about the role of women in Christian ministry today. “Judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He . . . will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Cor. 4:5). God’s sovereign hand was upon what was included in Scripture, and not only did He include the Priscilla and Aquila pattern of ministry (Acts 18:25-26), which can readily be expanded in a way sufficient for the ministry of most women preachers, but he also included the astonishing story of Deborah (Judg. 4-5). When we remember Deborah, the great exception, we cannot doubt that God sometimes chooses to call extraordinary women to do great exploits for His Kingdom that extend “outside the box”.

Let God be God. He is free to make exceptions to His own “rules”. Though Old Testament Law stated, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deut. 23:3), Ruth the Moabitess put her faith in the God of Israel and became an ancestor of David and therefore of Jesus (Ruth 4:13-22). After the death of Eli and his sons, Samuel

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performed the priestly functions of interceding and offering sacrifices on behalf of the nation, yet he was not of the priestly line of Aaron (1 Sam. 7:5,8-9; 10:8). We need to be humble before the Lord and completely open to His call. Just as Deborah was raised up to rescue Israel from oppression by enemies, God may be raising up “Deborahs” in our spiritually dark time. Let us be available to Him and find His plan for our lives.

### ***Rejoice in God’s plan for you***

If you are a man, be a man and rejoice in your manhood. If you are a woman, be a woman and rejoice in your womanhood. God does not make mistakes about the sex He allots to each one of us. Male and female are different not only in their biology but also in their ways of thinking and feeling, and as the French say, “Vive la différence!” (“Long live the difference!”).

God is sovereign over all, and women who truly love and obey Him need not fear that they will be prevented from doing anything He wants them to do. It is neither a man’s world nor a woman’s world, but God’s world. May His Kingdom come! May His will be done! You will be happy and blessed as you fit in with God’s perfect plan for your life.

## **About the Author**

Alison J. Sherrington has degrees in Arts and Theology, and her previous book, *Word and Spirit*, has been widely read and well received within the Body of Christ.

Her experience includes secondary school teaching, hospital chaplaincy, and conducting seminars in churches. She is the founder of Philip House, an interdenominational women's organization that seeks to mobilize Christian women to be available to the Lord and to use their gifts to proclaim God's word in various ways. Single dedicated women would also have the option of joining a small Philip House community for that purpose ([www.philiphouse.org](http://www.philiphouse.org)).

Alison's church background is Presbyterian and Anglican, and she is now worshipping at Intenciti Church (formerly Bayside Christian Family Church), Wynnum West, Brisbane.