



ARE WOMEN EQUAL TO MEN? – *Christianity and women*

Jesus, Paul, and the early Church broke the social and traditional rules that kept women silent, secluded and subservient, by treating them equally. Women held positions of responsibility in the early Church, they were highly regarded and often more active than the men.

Sadly, after that time, some of the church leaders began to revert to the old practices and attitudes relating to women, and over the next three centuries, they incorporated

views of the inferiority of women into general christian understanding.

The book of Genesis, at the time of humanity's creation, emphasizes gender equality rather than male domination. It teaches that man and woman are created in the image of God and together they dominate the earth. The story of Creation culminates in the creation of women, responding to men's need for a partner who corresponds to them (Gen. 2:18, 20).

The text describes the creation of the woman by designating her as the man's *ezer kenegedô*, literally, "a force that corresponds to him." Unfortunately, the word "ezer" here is often translated as "help", which implies the idea of subordinate or servant, whereas in all authoritative biblical Hebrew dictionaries, it has the meaning of "help, assistance, power and strength". It never means "servant". The concept of an "ideal partner" seems to convey the thought best.

Was the apostle Paul a male chauvinist? Jesus recognized the value of women and in every interaction, He lifted them up. In 1st Corinthians, many have interpreted Paul's message to mean that women are to live under male authority and understand that they were created to serve men.

1st Corinthians 11:2 states: "God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and man is the head of woman." Recent studies into the background of the greek word "*kephale*" that is translated "*head*" in our english Bibles, have clearly shown that, in Paul's day, the word "*kephale*" did not carry any meaning of authority, dominance or leadership. Instead, it literally meant "*source*" or "*origin*," especially "*source of life*". Man was formed from dust, by God. Woman was fashioned from the rib of man. Thus, Adam was the source of Eve's creation.

Biblical scholars' latest research do not support the traditionalist view of male headship and female submission but reveal a new understanding by which men and women are viewed in a mutually supportive, submissive relationship."

The apostle Paul affirmed the equality of all Christians and captured this vision of the Kingdom compellingly in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." There was no difference based on birth, status or gender. All have the same privileges and blessings as children of God.

However, Paul seems to contradict some of his other teachings: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate... And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home.” (1 Corinthians 14:33-35) But we know from other passages in the Bible that many women were prominent teachers in the churches and that Paul approved and encouraged them.

To explain these contradictions, let's have a look at what the church in Corinth was like: Corinth was the largest and most diverse city in Greece. Greek was the common language, but there were various dialects heard in Corinth and communication was limited by a speaker's accent. The way Paul spoke in church was not necessarily the way people spoke to one another in more casual settings. Therefore, women who were not fully literate in the Greek language and were most of the time analphabets at that époque, were probably asking for clarification, or talking with each other.

So, this passage is directed at a specific problem, probably some women disrupting church services with noisy discussions and questions. Paul would not have instituted a general ban since he encouraged women to teach and pray in public gatherings.

Paul would be appalled that so many of his letters, set in particular situations, are being generalised centuries later as “the rule for ever”. There is a line to be drawn between what is for the occasion when it was written, and what is a message for all believers and all time.

Throughout the Bible, we see clearly that God believes women and men, even though different from each other, are equal when it comes to the treatment and value they should receive. However, “equality” does not mean "sameness" as both have some inherently unique giftings and abilities.

Spiritually, men and women are equal. Physically, of course, they are different. They have different anatomy, different hormones, different muscle mass, and more. Man and woman complement each other. They are different, but one is not superior to the other. Both are unique creations of God; He views both as equally valuable.