

# A Biblical World View in Support of the Worth of Women's Work

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## **Abstract**

Scripture and false science have been used for many years to discourage women from reaching their full potential in the world of work. Perceptions that women were not fit to be educated arose in the culture of Old Testament times and continued for centuries. In the United States, as well as in other places in the world, the argument that women are not suitable for education and employment is now moot. However, cultural values have not always progressed to include women in positions of leadership, to allow them freedom to not have primary responsibility for the home and for children, or to encourage an equitable relationship between men and women, or even the view that, according to the Bible, men and women are equal in all aspects. This paper does not focus on the differences between men and women. While acknowledging that there are physical differences between the two genders, the focus here is that the Judeo-Christian Bible supports the equal standing of men and women in all aspects of the Creator's intent. Specific scripture passages that have been misused and misunderstood are cited and explained. A view to change is offered.

## **Introduction**

It is a misunderstanding that the Judeo-Christian world view does not support women working outside of the home. Even a stronger misconception is that work of women that is church related should be limited, and under the headship of men. While the Old Testament presented a patriarchal society, there are many examples of strong women who were active in their society and moved the purposes of the God of the Israelites forward. The New Testament presents a number of women who were active in ministry and financial support of the emerging church. There are also examples where Jesus Christ acted in a radical manner to support the concept of women being taught and equipped for service. Even those non-Christian religions who share the Old Testament as a point of origin do not have a basis for prevention of the right to achievement at work and ill treatment of women. This paper presents concepts which, when misunderstood, promote a patriarchal system that keeps women from recognition and opportunity they deserve. In addition, current prejudices, stereotypes, and other barriers to women's advancement, some of them stemming from religious misconceptions, will be presented.

## The Church and Current Perspectives

In his book, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women*, J. Lee Grady (2000, 153) lists as Lie #9 the statement that women should not work outside of the home. He posits that today's church operates with a mindset from the Industrial Revolution—that men went to work and women were in charge of the home and children. Before then, mother, father, and children were all likely to be employed in either a craft, or trade, or some kind of family business. There was no concept of a full time domestic mother. There is no definition in the Bible of this person, either. The woman in Proverbs 31, who is often cited as providing for her family, is actually a composite woman, who tends to her household but also is active in the marketplace and commerce.

Unfortunately in the United States, the Protestant/Calvinistic work ethic, coupled with the misinterpretation of Scripture passages, have produced a view of women's work that is skewed on several fronts. The current situation in the United States is a product of a patriarchal misinterpretation of the worth of women:

- The glass ceiling, where a disproportionate number of women are CEOs and corporate board members.
- Unwritten precedents in academia regarding tenure and promotion that keep women from advancing in rank and tenure.
- Lack of support by government and private enterprise for quality day care as well as meaningful paid family leave systems.
- Jobs categorized as “women's work” which are often the most essential in our society for care giving, and education and nurturing of the young—teaching, nursery, daycare workers, nursing, caregivers to mentally and physically disabled

children and adults, with a concomitant lack of respect and salary for these critical jobs.

- Even with welfare reform, archaic rules and stringent regulations that do not provide enough support for actually moving out of poverty.
  - A low minimum wage that has not changed in many years.
  - Severe status differences where men and women of the same age are considered differently—older women seen as expendable, where older men considered wise and valuable, and discrimination against older women in the marketplace.
  - The domination of male sports in our culture, which carries over into the workplace and the home.

This is only the beginning of the list. Unfortunately, in some churches, the situation for women is not better, and sometimes worse. If there is one place that a woman's gifts and talents should be welcomed it should be where she goes to worship. According to repeated Gallup polls, about 95% of Americans say they believe in a higher power of some kind. Approximately 77% call themselves Christians, and approximately 35% of Americans are regular attendees at religious services (Religious Tolerance, 2006). Even with only one-third of Americans regularly attending services, the number of people instructed by the church is significant, and worthy of attention. However, neither worship attendance nor church membership guarantee understanding of theology or scriptural interpretation for those who prescribe the rules of the church. Some church attitudes that are demeaning to women are:

- Prohibiting ordination of women.
- Not allowing women to be on an elders council.

- A ban on females preaching in a church.
- Women not allowed to teach men, or even male children.
- Women not being allowed to teach anyone.
- Women relegated to the ministries that involve the kitchen, visiting, child care, cleaning, decorating, carnivals and bazaars.

These attitudes come from a misunderstanding that because Jesus was male, and his apostles were male, the church has no room for female ministries that involve decision making, education of adults, or performing worship services. Unfortunately, these ultra conservative positions carry over into an attitude of expecting women to only work if “necessary,” such as being widowed.

One cannot deny biology, that it is the female of the species that bears young. But a functioning womb does not rule out a functioning brain. In fact, some recent studies have shown that having children increases women’s intelligence (Ellison, 2005). For most, child bearing is a nine month period during which most women are capable of working outside the home. Forty six percent of the U.S. labor force is composed of women, and almost 60% of all women work. (U.S. Department Labor Quick Stats, 2004) Almost 67% of women who have children under 18 are employed, breaking down into white – 67%, black or African-American, 69%, Asian, 63%, and Hispanics/Latino, 55%. (U.S. Department Labor, 2005) We have no evidence that children raised by women who work outside the home are harmed or deficient solely because of that fact. Yet, a common perspective of some churches and pockets of society is that once a woman has a child her destiny is to be at home. What may perpetuate that attitude is that it is extremely convenient for the husband/father if the woman is at home all the time, particularly if her

income is not needed, which makes life comfortable for him. Ideally, a woman should have a choice in the matter. If a woman wants to work outside the home, or from home, she should be on a level playing field with men, unencumbered by prejudices and biases from her church, which have no basis in fact.

### Genesis

Many point to Genesis and the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as reason for women being in a subservient position to man; therefore subject to and deemed to give preference to men on all levels. There are two versions of creation in Genesis. In Chapter 1, man and woman are created at the same time, in God's image, male and female, and given dominion over the earth and all that is in it—equally. (Genesis 1:27-31) God was pleased with his creation: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Gen 1:31a) The second chapter of Genesis is a different account, where God made first the earth and the heavens, then formed man out of the ground and breathed life into him. (Gen 2:4-7) God commanded the man to take care of the Garden of Eden, and gave him the command that he could eat of any tree in the Garden except "from the tree of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (v.16) God brought before him all the animals and birds, and the man named them, but no "suitable helper" was among these. (v. 19-20) This is when God put the man to sleep, and made a woman from his rib (v. 21-22) Because the woman was made from man, some use this act to determine that, because woman was created second, and from man, she must be inferior to man. However, that logic does not hold up in view of the fact that, as stated above, man was created from the ground—dirt. In a logical progression, this would make man secondary to and inferior to dirt.

Genesis 3 is often used by those who choose to denigrate woman's place as second to man. The serpent, who is called more crafty than any other animal God had made (v.1), approaches the woman and questions God's command, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman repeats God's command. The serpent counters with the statement that God is keeping this tree from her and the man because their "eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (v.4) In a way, the serpent was correct, because in the Garden of Eden, there was no evil—until the serpent appeared on the scene. Perhaps this is why the woman did not recognize evil when she saw it. The fruit on the tree looked good, she desired to be wise, and apparently so did her husband. He was with her and he ate the fruit also. (v.6)

Subsequently, the scene changes. They both recognized they were naked—and God speaks to them, asking why they ate this fruit. The man immediately blames the woman, and the woman blames the serpent. The first one chastised and cursed by God is the serpent, not the woman. She is second, and to her, God says, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."(v.16) Adam is told that he is at fault because he listened to his wife and disobeyed God. The ground is also cursed, making a life of sweat and toil for Adam all the days of his life. (v.17-19)

What really happened in Genesis 3 and why is so much discrimination of women wrongly based on this event? Neither the man nor the woman trusted in God's provision for them in the Garden. As a result, they suddenly did not trust each other, realizing their need for clothing. In place of a trusting, peaceful relationship with each other and with God, the result was "Shattered relationships, disharmony, fear, and subservience."

(DeGroot, 2002) God held all three actors as responsible: the serpent, the woman, and the man. The results of their lack of trust, and therefore, ultimate disobedience, were not proscriptive of what should be the lot of the human condition, but a description of what would be reality from that moment forward. As a sign of his love, God did not abandon Adam and Eve, but made leather garments for them before he banished them from the Garden. (Gen 3:21)

It is significant that Eve named her two sons (Cain and Abel) rather than Adam, for this showed the significance of both persons in the relationship as equals. In the Old Testament, the custom was that fathers named the children, and the custom continued in Gospel times, as evidenced when Zechariah was told by an angel to name his son John (This would be John the Baptist). When Zechariah questioned the angel, his tongue was silenced, and he could not speak again until Elizabeth gave birth, and they brought the child for circumcision. It was expected that the child would be named after his father, but Elizabeth said that he was to be John. The relatives protested that no one in the family had that name. Zechariah then wrote on a tablet, “his name is John” and then he could again speak. The mother’s giving of the name was not conducive to belief—it had to come from the father (Luke 1).

In our modern age, we have continually tried to ameliorate, in industrialized countries, much of the “pain” of childbirth through medicine, and the “sweat and toil” of agriculture through science. Logically, then there is no reason for church to hold on to the male-female divide, but to also work toward resolving those shattered relationships in the same manner we work to resolve the difficulties in childbirth and agriculture.

Other Examples from Scripture

Women in Old Testament times were viewed as significant only through giving birth to sons, and were distraught when they did not. Hannah (1 Samuel) was a least favored wife because she was barren (polygamy was a common practice). She prayed in the temple and became fertile, to bear a son, Samuel, who became a prophet and judge of Israel (Genesis 16-19). Sarah offered her servant Hagar to Abraham because she was infertile, and not until Ishmael (Hagar's son) was about 12 did Sarah conceive, and we are told that she was of an advanced age. Jacob had 2 wives and 2 concubines, and his 12 sons became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel.(Genesis 28-35). This importance of child bearing for the survival of the Israelites has been conveyed to future cultures that have viewed women as purposeful only for childbearing and the keeping home and hearth.

There were exceptions of this portrayal of women in the Old Testament. Deborah was a judge and prophet, and skilled at execution of military plans (Judges 4-5). Rahab the prostitute saved the two spies sent out by Joshua (Joshua 2) and then appears in the genealogy of Christ in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, one of only 4 women who do so (the others are Tamar, Bathsheba, and Mary). Esther saved her people by submitting herself to King Xerxes (Book of Esther). Miriam, Moses' sister, was a prophet and leader. Huldah was a prophet who had the same status as Jeremiah and others. Women and men worked side by side in building and furnishing the tabernacle in Exodus (Belleville,2004, 110-125).

Proverbs 31, beginning at verse 10, gives a view of women rarely found in the Old Testament. This is sub-titled "The Wife of Noble Character." Many do not realize that this is not just one woman that is being described, but a composite of what is

considered to be valuable in a woman. It is interesting that in this patriarchal environment, this woman is praised for accomplishments that have to do with merchandising, design, real estate trading, supervision, agriculture, and smart dressing. This woman has the confidence of her husband, she keeps the household fully provisioned and cared for, and provides for the poor. Her character also is one of being imbued with wisdom, a good sense of humor, and a gift for teaching. “Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:” (v.29) She and her works are to be praised at the city gates, (v.31) which is where the men sit and conduct business, news, and gossip. The message of this chapter, possibly written by King Lemuel’s mother rather than by the King, gives a message to both males and females: be wise, act from wisdom, put your knowledge into practice. Alison LeCornu (2002, 339) concludes that the “Femme Ideale” here “brings together theory and practice, learning and application, male and female, as well as issues of choice and rejection. The life portrayed is not one of passive, easy self-indulgence but rather an example of conscious decisions and choices that demand and impart strength of will power and conviction”( p. 337). However, the reality of acceptance of these leadership qualities in women is not generally recognized until Jesus Christ, by teachings and actions, brings emphasis to them in the New Testament.

### **Changes Brought About In The New Testament**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John support Jesus’ affirmation of women. However, many scholars and church leaders do not connect this affirmation with women’s place of leadership in the church. The fallout is that some churches continue to define women’s roles and functions according to how they believe the church functions,

extending their reach into home and workplace. Spencer (2004, 126-141) lists four ways that Jesus affirmed women:

1. Through his conversations with them he showed that he esteemed them. His theological discussions included the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:4-42) and Martha, Lazarus' sister, who affirms him as Messiah.

2. Jesus' teachings were favorable to women. Polygamy and divorce were injurious to women at that time. Their status was lowered because of being treated as owned and easily discarded by men. Jesus taught that marriage was for one woman and one man for life, elevating the importance of the partnership of women to men. (Matthew 5:31-32)

3. Women were an important part of his past (genealogy) and of his present. Many women in the gospel stories are told they are of "great faith" and were included as disciples.

4. Jesus used female images to include women in his teachings. The coin lost by the housewife, he as a hen desiring to gather people as chicks, concern for pregnant and nursing women, for widows.

When a woman called out to Jesus, "Blessed is the woman who gave you birth and nursed you!" his reply was "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:27-28). Jesus indicates that his teachings are for women, and they are expected to not only hear, but to put into practice his instructions for living in the kingdom of God. Many church leaders cite the fact that the apostles were all male as grounds for not allowing women in leadership. Spencer points out that nowhere does it say that women cannot be apostles. In reality, the twelve men were chosen to carry over

the tradition of the twelve tribes of Israel. They also represent the twelve patriarchs. Jesus' ministry was first to Israel, and before the Resurrection there was no New Covenant. Including women or slaves as apostles would not have enabled Jesus to be seen as reconstituting Israel in himself. After the Resurrection, the term apostle included others who were now witnesses to the Resurrection, and this new covenant era included both men and women.

However, women were part of the inner circle that included the apostles. The apostle Peter's mother-in-law's home was a central gathering place for the apostles. And many women disciples gathered with him in hearing his teachings, and supported him financially, as they also did Paul. Spencer concludes that both men and women were commissioned to preach the gospel, and that Jesus emphasized humble service from both, not putting one gender over another in leadership.

The gospels would not exist if it were not for women, specifically Mary, the mother of Jesus. As Sojourner Truth put it in her poem, *Ain't I a Woman*, "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him!" Mary was probably the one who gave information to Matthew and Luke for the early part of both of their gospels. Despite the convention that the testimony of women was not generally admitted in the courts of that time, women gave testimony to key events of the gospels: Mary and Elizabeth to the births of Jesus and John the Baptist, respectively, the women at the crucifixion, and the women at the empty tomb. A woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first to see the risen Lord. Jesus broke all the customs of the time by teaching and interacting with children and women.

### Women in the Gospels

The gospel of John makes clear that Jesus was for all—(John 1:12, 20:31). Jesus took the role of a midwife when he raised Lazarus from the tomb, saying “Lazarus, come forth!” This was a phrase used by midwives of the time when there was a difficult birth. (Blessing, 2002, 588.) In John, half of all of Jesus’ conversations are with women. Jesus’ involvement with women was shocking to all, because the rabbis of the time began each day with the prayer that thanked God that they were not born a woman, a slave, or a foreigner. Rabbis did not speak to women in public, and women of the day were not taught Torah. Jesus the Rabbi broke all the rules. The gospel of Mark portrays women as model disciples, showing devotion, faith, service, and giving (Thurston, 2002, 550-551).

### Women in Paul’s Letters

Paul is often misquoted and misunderstood as promoting headship of men over women (Marshall, 2004, 186-204). The passages in Colossians 3:18-19

18Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

and Ephesians 5:21-33

21Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26to make her holy, cleansing<sup>[a]</sup> her by the washing with water through the word, 27and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— 30for we are members of his body. 31"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."<sup>[b]</sup> 32This is a profound mystery—but I am

talking about Christ and the church. 33However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

are often interpreted as headship of the husband over the wife, and of any man over all women in the church context.

Nothing could be further from the truth. “Submit” does not mean that the woman is to be of the mindset that anything goes if the man says it does. “Submit” means as is fitting in the Lord, that is, in consistency with Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom of heaven being for all. One has to understand this verse in the context of the times. Wives who were new Christians were being asked to be harmonious for the sake of a good witness to others, especially to her husband if he was not a Christian. We in the Western world, points out Marshall, have a different expectation of marriage, that of a partnership, as opposed to the subjugation of women of those times. In Galatians 3:27-28 Paul clearly shows that Christ is for all—Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, and female. Ephesians 5:22-33 teaches mutual submission of one spouse to the other, in love and in respect, but many will focus on the end of v.24, “So also wives should submit to their husbands in everything,” and omit the other verses, and use that as an excuse for subjugation. They ignore that husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies (v. 28) and that the married couple are to portray the picture of the loving relationship of Christ and the church (v.32).

The verse that is used to keep women out of leadership and authority, but wrongly so, is 1Timothy 2:11-15.

11A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15But women<sup>[a]</sup> will be saved<sup>[b]</sup> through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

According to Belleville, (2002, 223). women were not to teach men in a domineering fashion, because Adam and Eve were created as partners. The cult of the female god Artemus was pervasive in Ephesus, and Paul was preaching against women serving in that cult.

## **Conclusion**

It is worth speculating the possible status of women in the world if the true intent of Scripture, that is, Biblical equality without hierarchy, having a view of men and women as complimentary to each other, was in practice. The issue is complex, as first one would have to ferret out whether society reflects the church or vice versa. In this post modern age the church seems to have a limited sphere of influence, and it is impossible to unravel past events. However, making a difference within the church itself may well lead to society changes, eventually, at least in some arenas.

Perhaps it is more proper to ask “What would the status of women in the church be like if we practiced the true intent of Scripture?” and then perhaps extrapolate possibilities from that view. For those denominations who do not ordain females, opening ordination to women would be a start. Others do ordain women, but do not grant them the same status as men in the assignments they are granted (Frame and Shehan, 2005). If ordination was open to all, and once ordained, the assignments were equal to all in prestige, remuneration, and autonomy, the message given to the congregation would be strong. Other benefits would follow. Women would hear messages from both a male and a female perspective. Children would have the experience of being shepherded in their faith from both males and females. Congregations would benefit from having a larger skill set available to them for ministry. It would be naïve to expect that this change

would come about quickly—if in some denominations it comes about as all. However, continuing the possible effects, the erroneous doctrine of males as head of household and responsible for decisions, and women as being under the headship of husbands and other males, would probably become extinct. Households would become more egalitarian.

Part of the strain in the two income household with children is the allocation of domestic duties. Women are still carrying the greatest burden of household responsibility even when both partners work full time jobs (Crompton, Brockmann, Lyonette, 2005). If men and women were viewed equally in value by the church, then it would be logical that training of children and values espoused from pulpits would emphasize equal responsibility in household and child care. It is no secret that the children are still viewed as almost the sole provenance of mothers world wide. Note the phenomenon of the “soccer Mom” but not the “soccer Dad.”

Healthier families may result, as children see both mother and father as responsible for child care and chores, not to mention the value of family life. The “Archie Bunker chair” in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. is reflective of man as wage earner, woman as supporter, and the one comfortable chair in the house belongs to the man as symbolic of his revered status. Indeed, in that series, when Edith Bunker took on outside volunteer work, Archie’s world was shattered as he became fearful that his meals would not be on time, and the household would be left unattended. Produced in the 70s, when women were entering the workplace in greater numbers, Archie’s attitudes were reflective of an earlier time, and the challenges from the younger cast members pointed out the tensions of the times.

It seems that we still have a legacy in the church from the reactionary times post World War II, when there was a movement in the United States to get women back into home from the jobs they held during the war, so that returning men could be employed. The idealized 1950s offered the norm of husband-wife, son-daughter, cat-dog, and house with white picket fence. “Leave it to Beaver,” “Father Knows Best,” and “Ozzie and Harriet” exemplified the family situation as it should be. The church never protested these models; in fact they perpetuated them, even though families had as many variations then as they do now.

An education for women was seen as necessary “in case something happened to her husband” but not as preliminary to a career. Women’s opportunities were generally limited to so-called female fields of nursing, teaching, or clerical work. Women went to college to find a husband, and begin a family, which they would raise as well as take care of home and hearth. Husband would be out in the world, returning to his haven at night. Perhaps it is time for the church to look to the marketplace and observe that there is a growing trend that both partners in a marriage will work, for mutual economic dependency (Raley, Mattingly, Bianchi, 2006). Education and labor force opportunities are expanded for women, as they should be also in the church. However, ideas and concepts change slowly, with the wage gap still present in some fields, and the view of egalitarian family roles, especially in minority families, still prevalent. However, income of women rises with education levels, and more women than men are currently attaining higher education degrees, overall.

Thousands of years of prejudice against women by not following Scripture’s intent have left us in our present state. This paper cannot begin to discuss violence

against women and the effect in the workplace, sexual harassment at work, stereotypes of females in leadership, lack of government or corporate sponsored childcare (particularly in the United States), medical studies that have been conducted on males only, poverty of women and children, the devaluing of the aging woman, the elevation of the anorexic model, and general sexism, that are all derivative from the premise of superiority of male over female. Clearly, the Christian world has not taken the Scriptures as intended. Instead Scripture has been bent and shaped to support male leadership and domination in the church, and, although unintentional, in the workplace as well. Perhaps the job of speaking love in truth belongs to women as American writer, Helen Thames Raley, born in 1909, was once quoted as saying, “In today’s world...it is still women’s business to make life better, to make tomorrow better than today.”

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