



**ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN  
IN  
CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND CHURCH:  
MODELS OF CHANGE COMPATIBLE  
WITH SCRIPTURE**

**INTRODUCTION**

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## INTRODUCTION

*The power of the models proposed in this lecture series lies partly in the fact that they allow Paul's language concerning male-female roles to stand in its literal and traditional sense. Paul wrote and spoke to an actual historical situation and need. He is not discoursing abstractly about male-female roles. These models respect the fact that the Biblical text does teach, and has been traditionally interpreted to teach, that women in the first century church were not to speak in the public assembly except under special restricted circumstances, such as in prayer or in prophesying. They were, in the customary sense, to be silent and in submission to males. They were specifically restricted from leading and teaching men. These models are not embarrassed by the notion that the Biblical text does state that Ephesian women were not accorded leading or teaching roles over males because of the danger of deception. The models proposed can explain this teaching as "rules" appropriately grounded in "social facts" and "historical information." The cultural forms of the male-female roles herein regulated are not viewed as part of the unchanging substance of the gospel. Rather, these roles reflect the forms of the expression of discipleship in the historical conditions of the first century.*

The models which we have proposed help us to deal with the complex issue of the "historical conditionedness" of the Biblical text. *The scripture writings were recorded to be understood by ancient people who were the contemporaries of the authors. This involves the writers in using language and concepts currently understood by those who were the contemporaries of the Biblical authors.* When Paul writes to Corinth or to Ephesus, he is writing to a people wherein "history" means a record of experience which they knew. When he writes about political and social roles, he will refer to offices and organizational structures familiar in these cities. When Paul speaks about customs and manners, he will utilize the cultural forms understood by his readers. Change in cultural "forms" is the inevitable result of history. In numerous instances, we find that the thought world of the first century is significantly different from that of a western democracy in the late twentieth century.

There is no intent to imply that the Biblical writings are merely "occasional." They were considered "authoritative" and Spirit inspired texts by the original recipients. They were preserved and accepted as "canonical writings" by the church because they were understood as having reference beyond the immediate need which prompted their written form. They were heard from the outset as the word of God. This assertion does not remove the need for our "discerning" today the applicability of the particular and occasional instructions contained therein.

Scholars speak of the Biblical texts as the Word of God expressed in the words of man. As an example, many Christians recognize that the Genesis creation narrative is presented in a simple story “form” understandable to societies in a pre-scientific thought world. This includes the story format which speaks of a calendar week for creation. The language of story can designate a literal day by using the specific statement of “evening and morning” delineating each creation day. Many Christians who have clung steadfastly to the ancient patriarchal forms of male-female relations will readily acknowledge that the days of creation are not to be read as “literal” days of the week of twenty-four hours duration. *It is generally conceded that the presentation of God’s action in creation in a weekly calendar “form” does not require the use of the “form” of a historical calendar week as essential to the truth content being expressed.* In other words, *God’s relation to his creation is not disturbed when the “form” of the literal calendar week is reconceptualized into “ages” or “stages.”*

We must recognize what is being conceded. This is acceptance of the fact that the “cultural forms” understandable to a particular people in a specific time period are not to be construed as part of the “substance” of God’s truth. This is the argument which we have presented concerning the first century form of the hierarchical relation of males and females. Just as God’s relation to his creation can be presented in a human calendar week format without binding the truth content to this cultural form, so likewise, the relation of Christ and his church can be conceptualized in the patriarchal marriage “form” of the ancient world in Ephesians (5:21-33) without binding this pattern of male-female relations to the unchanging substance or truth of the gospel. *Christ’s relation to his church is not disturbed when the patriarchal “form” of the marriage relation is changed by history.* In what we would consider a parallel case, Christ’s relation to his church is not compromised when the cultural forms embodied in the master-slave roles are abolished by historical governments, even though this pattern of relating is used to conceptualize the relation of Christ and his people by Paul.

Let us consider further the matter of the “historical conditionedness” of the Bible. Contemporary New Testament scholarship recognizes what is called the “occasional” nature of much of Scripture. What is meant here is readily understandable by the ordinary reader. It is obvious that Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth is written in response to certain problems that had arisen in the congregation. As Paul discusses some of these specific issues, he refers to the fact that they had written to him about problems and he had learned of divisiveness from the household of Chloe. In other words, the “*occasion*” for this letter was to address some of the concerns about eating meat offered to idols, the matter

of women praying and prophesying in the public assembly, practices in observing the Lord's Supper, arguments about the nature of the resurrection, and the issues surrounding the expression of spiritual gifts. Now, we have some difficulty in understanding aspects of this letter due to its specificity. For example, scholars offer various interpretations of Paul's statement in the eleventh chapter of his letter to the effect that a woman should cover her head "on account of the angels." Recognized scholars admit that this statement is unclear and some even despair that it is any longer understandable to us. Likewise, Paul's reference to the practice of "baptism for the dead" remains obscure.

It is necessary to engage in what is called "historical-critical" inquiry in order to determine the context of all of Paul's instructions including the reference to the necessity of head coverings "on account of the angels" or his reference to "baptism for the dead." We are not assuming that these instructions were unclear to the Corinthians. They were carrying the "context" in their heads. The context, of course, refers to understanding "how the world worked" in first century Corinth; a knowledge which one acquired by living in that time and place. What we mean is exactly the case with us in our understanding even simple instructions in our culture. The philosopher, John Searle,<sup>1</sup> in stating how social facts originate and are sustained, points out that such a simple sentence, as "Bill cut the grass," is understandable because we carry a "context" for understanding in our head. This can be seen by assuming that we also gave the instruction, "Bill cut the cake." We would not expect that Bill, as a native of our culture and language, would take a lawn mower and run it over the cake or take a knife and start slicing the lawn grass. The reason that Bill uses the knife to cut the cake and the lawnmower to cut the grass is not, in one sense, simple. It results from the fact that Bill carries the "context of understanding" in his head, since he grew up in our culture, speaking our language. He understands and follows our instructions properly because he knows "how the world works" in our particular time and place in history. This is an example of what the terms "specificity" and "occasionality" mean with reference to Biblical writings whether we are speaking of Paul's letter to Corinth, Galatia or Thessalonica.

The proposal for separating "*substance*" and "*form*" in this lecture series is, of course, not a new one in Biblical study. However, it is critical to the call for developing "models of change in the expression of our discipleship." The matter of prying apart "substance" and "form" can be illustrated from instruction which is begun in the elementary years of public school. I had the privilege of teaching sixth grade in the public schools of Southern California before returning to Berkeley for further graduate study. One of the exercises in the elementary curriculum was that of training students to ascertain the "subject" or "theme" of a paragraph

which they had read. The students were taught to do a close reading of a paragraph and then to briefly state the “theme” or “subject” of the paragraph. They were specifically instructed to state the “content” or “theme” in their own words. Not surprisingly, even sixth graders can demonstrate that the same “subject” or “theme” of a paragraph can be stated in many different ways using various words. In other words, the “subject” being expressed in a paragraph is not “tied-to” a specific set of words, or, in different terms, the concept expressed in the paragraph can be stated using different words, symbols, and metaphors. When we ask which is the “true” statement of the “subject,” we cannot require all students to use the original authors exact wording nor can we ask that they all use the same wording as their fellow students in their individual statement of the “subject matter.” This is a straightforward exercise in separating the “form” of expression used by the writer of the text from the “subject matter” or “thesis” being expressed.

It would seem that this elementary exercise provides an analogy to what we see in the Biblical text. For instance, the gospel is expressed in John in quite different forms of imagery and words than is found in Matthew. Paul’s presentation of the gospel incorporates and uses still other forms, symbols and metaphors. Despite this diversity in the “form of expression” of the gospel, we contend that there is “one gospel.” The “subject” matter of Scripture can be expressed in widely varied terminology. This is quite a different problem than asking which is “true.” We accept all of the diverse statements as “true” in that they express the once-for-all gospel to different audiences found in varied cultural contexts. Given this situation, how can we “tie” the particular set of terms used in stating the gospel to the Corinthians, for example, to the “once-for-all” content which must be made applicable in different settings across historical time. This is particularly pertinent, since we are unable, despite all of the extensive work in historical-critical research, to ascertain the exact nature of some of the issues discussed with regard to abuses at the Lord’s table, the practices involved in foods offered to idols, the nature of the matter of head covering for women in Corinth, which was a Roman colony situated in an ancient Greek city with an established Jewish community among many other cultural groups. We rightly recognize the “incidental” and “occasional” nature of such issues.

The issue of “form” and “substance” is pertinent to a wide range of problems in Biblical interpretation. One of the criticisms of the Biblical text raised by the noted Continental theologian Rudolf Bultmann<sup>2</sup> was that the New Testament teaches an outmoded three-story universe. Even conservative Biblical scholars tend to follow the lead set a generation ago by Bernard Ramm<sup>3</sup> to the effect that the Biblical language is not intended to teach a scientific view of the world. The language employed is not that

of the technical physicist but rather reflects a description of the world in popular terminology commonly understood. In this regard, scholars speak of ascertaining the “intent” of the Biblical text versus the “incidental” forms used in expressing the subject matter. The Scriptures can speak of a three-tiered universe without binding us to this conceptualization of the world. When Paul, for example, speaks about being caught up into the third heaven, he is using a common model understood by his readers. Surely we do not need to argue that he is teaching us a lesson on the structure of the universe. This is not the “intent” of his “subject” in this particular section of Scripture.

On a related topic, the doctrine of “infallibility” with respect to Biblical teaching is usually seen as referring to the “intent” of what is being asserted in Scripture rather than to the time-conditioned, culturally specific symbols used to express the “subject matter.” The use of particular metaphors from a cultural period, such as the first century, does not negate the “infallibility” of the “content” of scripture. For example, the New Testament refers to the “heart” rather than to the “head and brain” as the seat of thinking. This was acceptable in light of the first-century view, though it would not be accepted as a valid biological understanding today. We would insist that this occurrence of a time-conditioned, culturally specific symbol does not invalidate the “intent” of Scripture teaching. The “intent” of these passages is not to teach “anatomy” and “physiology.” We have no difficulty in separating the outmoded anatomy and physiology or “form” from the “subject matter” and “intent” of these texts. We understand that this “historically-conditioned” expression in the New Testament conveys a readily translatable truth for us today. However, we should recognize and acknowledge that we are making a definitive separation between the “content” of Scripture and the “container” or “form” in which the “subject matter” is being conveyed.<sup>4</sup>

We are calling for developing a “conscious concern” for the application of “models of change” in the forms of our discipleship, whenever and wherever we encounter changed conditions. This has been a neglected teaching. This is not a call for “change” for the sake of novelty. It is a recognition of the principle that we are to have the ultimate goal of “imaging Christ” in the world. This necessitates our concern with “becoming all things to all people” in order to win them to Christ. It will be contended that there are criteria which serve as “controls” for keeping change within the pattern of the Messiah. In contrast, the call for a static, “once-for-all” model of our discipleship has been heavily emphasized. The call for “original, primitive” Christianity is widespread. If you survey the church directory section in the yellow pages of the telephone book in a major city, you will see the concern for the “once-for-all” gospel. You will find references to the “apostolic church,” to the “primitive” church, and to

the “Pentecostal church” originating from Peter’s first sermon. In fact, if you examine the titles of most denominational groups you will realize that their claim to fame is the return to some “original practice” which they feel has been neglected. We are proposing that we develop an “equal concern” for understanding the importance of “models of change” in our discipleship. *Faithfulness to Christ requires both a concern for those aspects of the gospel which are once-for-all, unchangeable, and equal concern for those aspects of the gospel that require us to change our practice in order to be obedient to the “intent” of the Word in the particularities of our historical time.*

The use of the models proposed will involve us in “discernment” (Phil. 1:9-10) in the application of Scripture to our cultural setting. Paul, the master missionary, engaged in differential practice in light of changed conditions. Note, in particular, that his understanding of the “substance” versus the “form” of the gospel allowed him to be “zealous for the Law” in one set of conditions, namely in Jerusalem, where he engaged in purification rites in the Jewish Temple (Acts 21:17-26) at the end of his third mission journey. Again, notice that it permitted him to live as “not under the Law,” when in a different set of conditions in the Gentile world (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Paul’s discernment of the “substance” of the gospel enabled him to “become all things to all people in order to win them to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Our particular concern with male-female roles is a call to change *cultural practice* in the church, *not the “unchanging substance of the gospel.”* We are living in a new historical age wherein political possibilities and thought forms are widely divergent from the ancient Roman world. *In this small slice of history, in a modern western democracy with its technology and its affluence, we now have large numbers of women fully qualified with the broad social experience and relevant education enabling them to competently perform in activities formerly restricted to men.* We are in a new set of cultural conditions. From the “unchanging substance of the gospel” new rules will need to be formulated to meet the changed conditions. The new models proposed do not invalidate the original New Testament practice designed for the application of the gospel to first century conditions. *It is the conditions that change, not the rules.* The rules can be unchanging in their validity, but transitory in their application.

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<sup>1</sup> Searle, John R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press

<sup>2</sup> Bultmann, Rudolf. (1958). *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. New York: Scribner.



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<sup>3</sup> Ramm, Bernard. (1955). *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. The ancient Christian Philosopher, Origen, in the third century made a similar claim that Christian teaching is for the “masses” of mankind and not for the sophisticated palates of pagan philosophers (Elaine Pagels. 1988. *Adam, Even and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, p. 85. ). Compare also Paul’s language to the Corinthians (2:1) to the effect that he did not come proclaiming the gospel in lofty words of wisdom.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of words as containers for ideas is criticized by George Lakhoff and Mark Johnson (*Metaphors We Live By*. 1980). This is considered the “conduit metaphor” in their treatise. We are not implying the static meaning of the content of a word which they specifically criticize. The present argument can admit the metaphoric nature of meaning without disturbing the distinction between “form” and “subject matter.”